

## CHAPTER 2: U.S.-CHINA SECURITY AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS (YEAR IN REVIEW)

### Executive Summary

Over the past year, China has sought to present itself as a responsible world leader despite engaging in a range of destabilizing activities that have undermined global peace and security. General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping has persisted in challenging U.S. global leadership and asserting China's position on the world stage, including by hosting dozens of world leaders for a Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Tianjin followed by a military parade in Beijing. China has also escalated its use of gray zone tactics—coercive military, economic, and influence operations short of war—against Taiwan, in the South China Sea, and around Japan's Senkaku Islands. Beyond its own borders, Beijing has continued to stoke violence and instability by supplying dual-use goods to Russia and otherwise helping sustain its war against Ukraine, funding Iran and its terrorist proxies in the Middle East, and intensifying cyberattacks on the United States and countries around the world.

China's efforts to undercut U.S. credibility and advance its own interests overseas have also been supported by its approach to domestic governance. Over the past year, China has deepened its anticorruption campaign with the aim of quashing internal dissent, forged ahead with its military modernization efforts, and continued its longstanding efforts to control religious institutions it sees as fueling separatism and undermining Party rule. Considered in the aggregate, these actions reflect Beijing's continued rapid preparations for the possibility of conflict and its systematic efforts to erode U.S. deterrence across the military, economic, technological, cyber, and diplomatic domains.

### Key Findings

- China has used the pretext of a “turbulent” external environment to justify its ongoing campaign to quash internal dissent and

enforce absolute political loyalty to the CCP. Over the past year, China has sharply increased spending on domestic public security, punished officials for disciplinary infractions at record rates, and continued to purge senior military leaders perceived as insufficiently loyal.

- Despite purges of key military leaders, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) significantly advanced its military modernization efforts over the past year—increasing its stockpile of nuclear warheads, introducing new amphibious assault ships and stealth fighter jets, expanding its drone

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deployment capacity, and enhancing its capability to launch an attack on Taiwan with little advance warning. China is increasingly willing to use PLA capabilities to send political messages, as demonstrated by unprecedented naval live-fire exercises conducted in the Tasman Sea off the coast of Australia and New Zealand.

- Beijing has continued its efforts to construct an alternative world order with itself at the center—symbolized most powerfully in 2025 by images of the leaders of Russia, North Korea, Iran, and about 20 other mostly authoritarian countries gathered behind Xi Jinping at a military parade in Beijing commemorating China's victory in World War Two.
- In meetings with leaders from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, China has sought to undermine U.S. credibility and bolster its credentials as a leader of the “Global South” by accusing the United States of disrupting international order while professing its own commitment to free trade, development assistance, and international law—despite often failing to follow through on such promises.
- While claiming to be a source of international stability, China has continued to threaten global security by undertaking gray zone activities in the Indo-Pacific and around the world. China routinely engages in provocative military maneuvers near

Taiwan and in the South and East China Seas, has sabotaged critical undersea communications cables near Taiwan and in the Baltic Sea, and has escalated cyberattacks on the United States.

- China has also fanned the flames of conflict by supplying dual-use goods to sustain Russia's war in Ukraine, funding Iran and its terrorist proxies through purchases of sanctioned Iranian oil, and providing North Korea with diplomatic cover and material support that advances its cyber and weapons programs, thereby complicating global efforts to constrain these countries' destabilizing activities.
- Taken together, these actions form a coordinated strategy to prepare China for the possibility of potential conflict while steadily seeking to erode U.S. deterrence and the resilience of allied security networks.

## Introduction

On May 13, 2025, Xi Jinping delivered a keynote speech in Beijing to an audience of leaders from 33 Latin American and Caribbean countries. In a series of thinly veiled criticisms of the United States, Xi denounced “tariff and trade wars,” “bullying,” and “protectionism.”<sup>1</sup> In contrast, he presented China as a champion of “economic globalization,” a responsible world power committed to providing humanitarian aid, and a principled advocate for upholding “international order.”<sup>2</sup> Similar scenes have played out over the past year in meetings with representatives from virtually every world region.<sup>3</sup> Chinese leaders have sought to undermine the credibility of U.S.

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international leadership and portray Beijing as the “adult in the room,” claiming to restore global stability.<sup>4</sup>

Yet a review of Beijing's domestic policies, military modernization efforts, gray zone activities, and support for malign actors over the past year reveals that Beijing has continued to engage in dangerous and destabilizing activities that have undermined peace and stability worldwide. Beijing often uses lawfare or outright denials in an attempt to mask its malicious activities, presenting itself as a source of global stability even as it undermines the very international order it claims to uphold.

China's Leaders Prioritized Domestic Social Stability in the

## Face of a “Turbulent” External Environment

In his annual New Year address for 2025, Xi Jinping called on the Chinese public to be confident in the face of challenges presented by uncertainties in the external environment and pressure from economic transformation, saying, “We grow in the wind and rain, and we get stronger through hard times.”<sup>5</sup> As the 14th Five-Year Plan entered its final year in 2025, the Party signaled it would stay its course while laying the groundwork for the future. During a symposium launching the planning process, Xi called on Party cadres to “promote beneficial interaction between high-level development and high-quality security through highly efficient governance.”<sup>6</sup> The National Security White Paper released in May reinforced this point, stating that “high-quality development” requires “high-level security” and that “development problems can become security risks,” justifying the necessity of the Party’s “absolute leadership” over economic development.”<sup>7</sup>

### China Warned Its Citizens to Prepare for the Impact of an “Increasingly Complex and Severe International Environment”

Chinese Premier Li Qiang’s address to delegates of the National People’s Congress at the annual Two Sessions meetings in March warned that “an increasingly complex and severe external environment may exert a greater impact on China in areas such as trade, science, and technology,” acknowledging the potential impact of trade disputes and supply chain decoupling.\*<sup>8</sup> Although Premier Li’s speech did not directly address the United States as a challenge, Foreign Minister Wang Yi took a strong tone at a press conference on the sidelines, saying, “No country should fantasize that it can suppress China and maintain good relations with China at the same time” and that China will withstand “any extreme pressure, threats and blackmail.”<sup>9</sup>

No major new stimulus measures or policy shifts emerged from the 2025 Two Sessions, but the government signaled it was doubling down on building self-sufficiency by strengthening domestic industry and ensuring adequate stockpiles of fuel and food, continuing a

\*The “Two Sessions” refers to concurrent meetings held every spring of the National People’s Congress, China’s unicameral legislature, and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, a united front advisory body made up of deputies representing stakeholders from a cross-section of Chinese society.

notable trend from the past several years.<sup>10</sup> The government has appeared increasingly concerned about public perceptions of quality of life and the potential for public dissatisfaction to result in social instability. Persistent weaknesses in youth employment, protests over unpaid wages, and high-profile incidents of mass violence—

amplified by social media—are seen as potential flashpoints for unrest.<sup>11</sup> The Two Sessions Work Report stated that the government needs to strengthen “social conflict resolution and risk prevention efforts,” reflecting the authorities’ determination to maintain grass roots surveillance and control.<sup>12</sup> In November 2024, Xi ordered local governments to “strictly prevent extreme cases” following a car ramming attack that killed 35 people.<sup>13</sup> The Budget Report announced a sharp 7.3 percent increase of the public security budget—up from 1.4 percent the previous year—underscoring the priority placed on strengthening the domestic security apparatus.<sup>14</sup>

The 2025 White Paper, China’s first on national security, promoted Xi’s comprehensive national security concept to both domestic and international audiences. The concept has grown to encompass 20 traditional and non-traditional security fields that support “political security,” defined as the unchallenged rule of the CCP. The White Paper repeated the CCP’s position that this comprehensive national security approach forms the basis for domestic stability and prosperity, which would enable China to act as a stabilizing force in an increasingly turbulent world.<sup>15</sup> Mathieu Duchâtel, Director of International Studies at the Institut Montaigne, suggested this White Paper may be the public-facing counterpart to an update of China’s confidential 2021–2025 National Security Strategy.<sup>16</sup> The White Paper, projecting a righteous and confident tone, justified a higher level of security as necessary for advancing China’s development, condemning the United States for violating its “right to develop” with tariffs and sanctions as well as the U.S. alliance system for “interference in China’s internal affairs.”<sup>17</sup> Throughout the document, China pointed to both its domestic security needs and the turbulent international environment as justifications for its efforts to export its repressive security practices to other countries.

### The Party Launches an Austerity Campaign to Discipline Cadres and Civil Servants

In an effort to curb government waste and improve the Party’s image amid China’s economic downturn, the Central Committee and State Council issued revised austerity regulations in May, ordering officials to control spending on official activities and “lead by example

in living frugally.”<sup>18</sup> In January, Xi delivered a speech to the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), the Party’s anticorruption arm, calling for “constant purification of the cadre ranks,” and it launched a campaign in March to investigate local officials for violations of the Party’s code of conduct, requiring self-criticism sessions on their spending on meals and travel.<sup>19</sup> Christine Wong, Visiting Research Professor at the National University of Singapore, described the campaign as “an admission that money is tight” that intended to demonstrate “that the public sector is sharing the pain” of China’s economic

### The Party Launches an Austerity Campaign to Discipline Cadres and Civil Servants—*Continued*

downturn.<sup>20</sup> However, the government soon backtracked, sending signals that reduced spending could have a negative impact on local businesses.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, during the first half of 2025, the CCDI handed down a higher number of punishments for Party discipline violations for CCP officials and members than it had at a similar time last year; the number had already increased by nearly half from 2023 to 2024.<sup>22</sup> Although a record number of senior officials were investigated in 2024, the majority of the CCDI’s investigations targeted ordinary Party members, most of whom received light punishments.<sup>23</sup> Professor of Government at Claremont McKenna College Minxin Pei suggested that recent campaigns to enforce Party discipline regulations are intended primarily to enforce loyalty within the Party’s rank and file rather than purging enemies or fighting corruption.<sup>24</sup> Viewed along side Xi’s broader domestic security measures, the austerity drive also reinforces the Party’s ability to maintain political cohesion and discipline over money in the event of future external crises.

### China Remained Focused on Ensuring Military Loyalty and Modernization

While projecting an image of Chinese military strength on the world stage, Xi Jinping emphasized two priorities for the PLA during the 2025 Two Sessions: rooting out corruption and deploying advanced technology to improve combat effectiveness. This reflected his intent to build a force that is both politically loyal and operationally capable, consistent with his goal of having a military with the capability to “conduct a successful invasion” of Taiwan.<sup>25</sup> Experts assessed that the

ongoing purges and corruption investigations targeting senior PLA leadership are likely to hinder weapons modernization efforts, create instability within command structures, and erode troop morale—factors that could collectively undermine the PLA’s combat effectiveness in the short term.<sup>26</sup> Some analysts, however, suggest Xi views the shorter-term instability caused by installing more “reliable” commanders as a necessary trade-off to “ensure compliance with his political agenda, set an example, [and] ensure the PLA develops in the direction he intends.”<sup>27</sup> While the anticorruption drive continues to reshape military leadership, it is unlikely to be the decisive factor in determining when Xi might pursue military action against Taiwan.<sup>28</sup> Experts note that the CCP may prioritize broader political objectives over whether the military is fully prepared or domestic conditions are optimal when making that decision.<sup>29</sup>

### The Party Purged More PLA Senior Leaders

The PLA’s anticorruption campaign has widened in scope, reaching new branches of the PLA and deepening in intensity. Recent investigations and the removal of officers from the PLA’s Political Work Department, which oversees the force’s political discipline, signal that Xi views the issue not merely as financial misconduct

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but also as a deeper crisis of political loyalty within the ranks.<sup>30</sup> In June 2024, Xi convened a rare Central Military Commission (CMC) Political Work Conference—the first in a decade—at the historically significant base of Yan’an and stressed the imperative of maintaining Party leadership.\* Xi urged senior officers to “introspect, engage in soul-searching reflections, and make earnest rectifications.”<sup>31</sup>

Between July and December 2023, at least 15 senior military officers and defense industry executives were removed from their posts as part of sweeping corruption investigations, many of them tied to the PLA’s Rocket Force and the Equipment Development Department—branches long seen as vulnerable to graft due to their central role in defense procurement.<sup>32</sup> The campaign continued into 2025 with several high-profile figures coming under scrutiny. In 2025, then-CMC Vice Chairman General He Weidong—touted for his extensive operational experience focused on Taiwan—and the then-director of the CMC’s Political Work Department Admiral Miao Hua—who served as a political commissar between 2014 and 2017—were both placed under investigation.<sup>33</sup> In March 2025, Lieutenant General Tang Yong,

then-deputy secretary of the Military Discipline Commission, a key unit in the PLA's anticorruption apparatus, was dismissed under suspicion of corruption.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, Admiral Dong Jun, China's defense minister who was placed under investigation in late 2024, reappeared at public events in December 2024 and at the SCO meeting in July 2025, suggesting he may have weathered the political storm.<sup>35</sup> In the defense industry, Liu Weidong, deputy general manager of China South Industries Group Corporation—the leading producer of PLA armaments—was also placed under investigation for suspected violations of discipline and law.<sup>36</sup> The breadth of these investigations underscores Xi's determination to enforce political loyalty at every level of the military hierarchy—an effort that, while disruptive in the short term, strengthens the CCP's control over the armed forces given increased risks of potential external conflict.

The PLA Military Advanced Its Military Capabilities While the PLA has endured instability among its senior leaders, rapid advancements in military capabilities and modernization across domains have continued. The PLA has remained focused on building its capability to fight and win wars against a “strong enemy” like the United States and to enhance its capacity to credibly threaten an invasion of Taiwan. Collectively, these capability gains—paired with political loyalty enforcement—are positioning the PLA to act quickly and decisively in a crisis, shortening warning timelines for U.S. and allied militaries.

- *Nuclear:* China's nuclear weapons and advanced delivery systems pose a direct threat to the U.S. homeland as well as to deployed U.S. and allied forces.<sup>37</sup> The PLA continued to modernize, diversify, and expand its nuclear posture, enhancing its

\*Yan'an is a historically significant symbol, serving as the CCP's revolutionary base from 1936 to 1948 following the Long March. It was also the site of the Yan'an Rectification Movement (1942–1944), where Mao Zedong consolidated his authority as Party leader and emphasized loyalty and ideological unity within the military. Gao Hua, Stacy Mosher, and Guo Jian, *How the Red Sun Rose: The Origins and Development of the Yan'an Rectification Movement, 1930–1945* (Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2018).

nuclear deterrent and second-strike capabilities.<sup>38</sup> China has

constructed around 350 new missile silo fields for its intercontinental ballistic missiles and increased its stockpile of warheads by 20 percent in the past year, significantly expanding its nuclear strike capacity.<sup>39</sup> At the September 2025 parade commemorating China's WWII victory, Beijing for the first time unveiled a "triad" of nuclear-capable missiles that can be launched from land, air, and sea.<sup>40</sup>

- *Space*: China has implemented a long-term, whole-of-government strategy to expand its space capabilities across military, commercial, and civil domains, leveraging state-directed resources to enhance its comprehensive national strength and attempt to surpass the capabilities of the United States. China has continued to rapidly develop space capabilities to support its military operations, expanding its ability to persistently monitor and target U.S. forces globally as well as to enhance its counterspace capacity to degrade, damage, or destroy U.S. space assets. (For more information on Chinese space capabilities, see Chapter 7, "The Final Frontier: China's Ambitions to Dominate Space.")
- *Electronic warfare*: The PLA's electronic warfare (EW) strategy focuses on suppressing, degrading, disrupting, or deceiving adversary systems before and during conflict.<sup>41</sup> In a Taiwan contingency, the PLA would likely target U.S. aircraft carrier groups and space assets to disrupt long-range precision strike capabilities.<sup>42</sup> Recent developments reflect the PLA's push toward "intelligentized" warfare, including the unveiling of a 6G-based EW platform in June 2025 and an artificial intelligence (AI)-powered EW system in July capable of detecting and suppressing U.S. radar signals as far as Guam, the Marshall Islands, and Alaska.<sup>43</sup>
- *Emerging technology*: Echoing Xi's calls to develop and deploy advanced technologies to improve combat effectiveness, PLA authors have stressed the need to maximize combat capabilities by adopting autonomous systems and AI. All PLA services and theater commands now employ unmanned aerial systems for a wide range of missions, including electronic intelligence; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; ground and naval strike; and air-to-air attack.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, in May 2025, the PLA Navy held a simulated drill marking its first operational deployment of an AI-assisted decision-making system. During that drill, the PLA Navy relied on an AI system to ultimately improve the stealth capacity of a guided-missile frigate.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, the PLA expects competitors to rely on AI systems and is developing tactics to counter AI usage, including targeting algorithms, data, and computing capacity.<sup>46</sup>
- *PLA Navy*: The PLA Navy's overall battle force in 2024 included over

370 ships and is projected to increase to 395 ships by 2025 and 435 ships by 2030.<sup>47</sup> In July 2025, the PLA Navy unveiled a new amphibious assault ship that will be a drone carrier.<sup>48</sup> China's new warship, the Type 076 *Sichuan*, is designed to carry troops, helicopters, and drones for missions at sea or near coast-

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lines. Unlike traditional amphibious assault ships, the Type 076 has an advanced launch system, which allows it to operate with fixed-wing aircraft and larger drones.<sup>49</sup>

- *PLA Air Force*: The PLA Air Force is rapidly modernizing its capabilities, with plans to deploy the Chengdu J-36, a next-generation stealth fighter that bears some resemblance to the U.S. F-35, and the Jiu Tian, a so-called “drone mother-ship” that can launch and control large swarms of drones.<sup>50</sup> In addition, the PLA's fighter jets and air-to-air missiles received their first combat use as Pakistani forces successfully flew Chinese-made fighters during a four-day conflict with India.<sup>51</sup> This marks the first known instance of these systems being tested in actual combat, providing the PLA valuable data and potentially boosting the credibility of China's defense exports.<sup>52</sup>

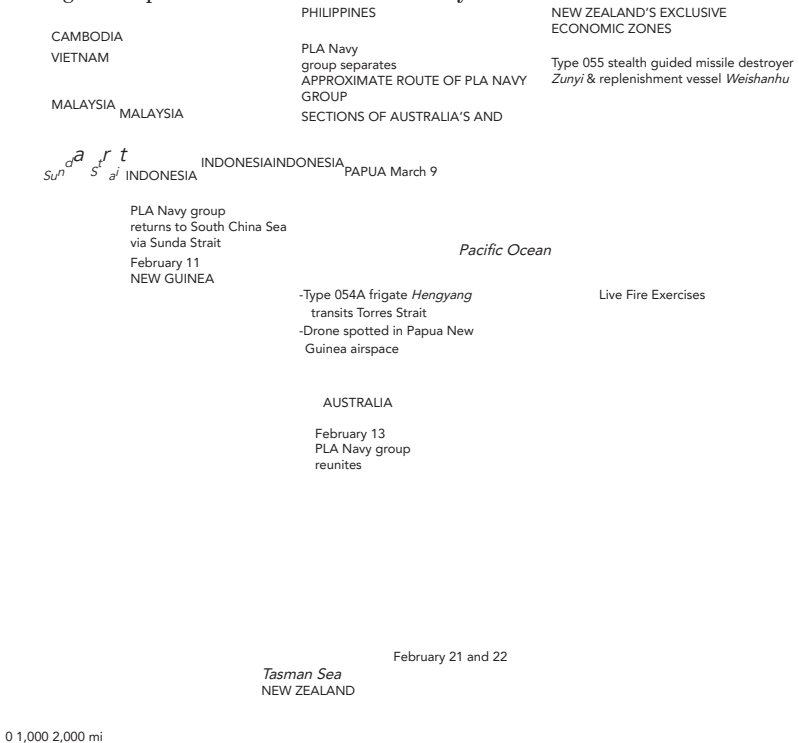
### *PLA Exercises Demonstrated Increased Integration and Aimed to Intimidate*

The PLA's Taiwan-related exercises focused on integrated drills and demonstrated increased capacity to effectively blockade the Taiwan Strait. For the first time, the PLA Navy conducted live fire exercises near Australia and New Zealand, a not-so-subtle threat indicating its ability to project power beyond the second island chain.<sup>53</sup>

- *Strait Thunder exercise*: The PLA's large-scale exercise around Taiwan in April 2025 practiced naval blockade maneuvers and conducted simulated strikes against Taiwan's energy and port facilities.<sup>54</sup> The drills focused on conducting joint force operations—integrating the PLA Ground Force, Air Force, Rocket Force, and Navy capabilities—and encroached further into Taiwan waters than previous exercises, coming within 24 nautical miles of Taiwan's coast, near the edge of its contiguous zone.<sup>55</sup>

- *PLA Navy live-fire exercises in the Tasman Sea*: The PLA Navy conducted unannounced live-fire exercises in the Tasman Sea near Australia and New Zealand to demonstrate naval power and intimidate Australia.<sup>56</sup> The exercise occurred after an unsafe and unprofessional encounter between an Australian maritime patrol plane and a Chinese fighter jet over the South China Sea a week prior.<sup>57</sup> This marked the first live-fire drill the PLA has conducted in the Tasman Sea and showcased its power projection capability beyond the second island chain.<sup>58</sup>

Figure 1: Operational Details of the PLA Navy Tasman Sea Live-Fire Exercise



Note: EEZs are depicted using the standard 200 nautical mile baseline from countries' coast lines.

Source: Various.<sup>59</sup>

- *PLA Navy and Air Force exercises in the East China Sea/Mi yako*

*Strait*: During the October 2024 Joint Sword exercise and again during the April 2025 Strait Thunder exercise, the PLA Navy and Air Force conducted large-scale joint operations transiting the Miyako Strait—the narrow international waterway between Japan’s Okinawa and Miyako Islands.<sup>60</sup> These drills tested the ability to quickly project naval and air power through critical chokepoints near Taiwan and Okinawa.

- *PLA Rocket Force combat exercises*: In February 2025, the PLA Rocket Force conducted intensive, realistic combat exercises designed to enhance the adaptability and interoperability of units.<sup>61</sup> These exercises reflect a growing emphasis on preparing missile units for high-pressure, multi-domain threats and modernizing training methods to simulate real combat situations.<sup>62</sup>

## China Sought to Expand Its Influence around the World

Over the past year, China framed itself as the country best able to promote peace and development globally and has sought to cast the United States as an instigator of global instability while tightening relationships with Russia, Iran, and North Korea—a group that has

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been called the “Axis of Autocracy.”<sup>63</sup> (For an expanded discussion of these relationships, see Chapter 3, “Axis of Autocracy: China’s Revisionist Ambitions with Russia, Iran, and North Korea.”) China has also sought to take advantage of friction between the United States and Europe and other U.S. allies and partners in the wake of tariff negotiations. Building on its Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing has increasingly attempted to leverage its Global Security Initiative (GSI) to move beyond infrastructure diplomacy and increase its security relationships with low- and middle-income countries, frequently offering leaders advanced surveillance and policing systems and enabling authoritarian leaders to strengthen their domestic control. These systems generally rely on technology from providers such as Huawei, which often embed it in critical infrastructure of the host, potentially allowing the Chinese government to access data or disrupt services during geopolitical conflicts.<sup>64</sup>

China Persisted in Destabilizing Gray Zone Activities In addition to

reshaping norms of internationally accepted internal security behavior, China has repeatedly resorted to coercive military, economic, and influence operations short of war—a range of activities often referred to as being in the “gray zone.”<sup>65</sup> According to the U.S. National Intelligence Council, the gray zone is “a realm of international relations between peaceful interstate diplomacy, economic activity, and people-to-people contact on one end of the spectrum and armed conflict on the other.”<sup>66</sup> Gray zone activities are “coercive or subversive actions to achieve objectives at the expense of others in contravention or in the absence of international norms.”<sup>67</sup> Falling below the perceived threshold for military action, China’s gray zone activities have taken place across a range of domains, including military and security, cyber, economic, information, legal, and space.<sup>68</sup>

Table 1: Examples of Recent Chinese Gray Zone Activities

Domain	Examples of Gray Zone Activities
Military and Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The PLA Air Force conducted aggressive intercepts of aircraft in 2025, including setting off flares in front of an Australian surveillance aircraft over the Yellow Sea in February and maneuvers in front of a Japanese surveillance aircraft in July.<sup>69</sup></li> <li>• The PLA entered Taiwan’s air defense identification zone (ADIZ) a staggering 3,075 times in 2024 (an average of nearly three times per day).<sup>70</sup></li> <li>• Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and other China-affiliated vessels have engaged in relentless aggressive actions targeting Philippine Coast Guard activities near the contested Second Thomas Shoal and Sabina Shoal in the South China Sea, including an incident in 2024 where a CCG vessel deliberately rammed a Philippine vessel attempting to resupply the <i>Sierra Madre</i>.<sup>71</sup></li> <li>• In 2024, Chinese government vessels spent a record 355 days out of 366 in the contiguous zone of the Senkaku Islands, with the CCG entering Japanese territorial waters on 42 days.<sup>72</sup></li> <li>• In July 2025, China used one of its warships to point lasers at a German reconnaissance aircraft performing a mission to protect Red Sea shipping.<sup>73</sup></li> </ul>

Domain	Examples of Gray Zone Activities
Cyber	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Throughout 2025, Chinese cyber actors repeatedly used advanced persistent threats (APTs)—including Volt Typhoon and Salt Typhoon—to infiltrate U.S. critical infrastructure information and operational technology networks, possibly to pre-position for disruptive attacks.<sup>74</sup></li> <li>• In 2024, Taiwan's National Security Bureau reported that Taiwan's Government Service Network received a daily average of 2.4 million attacks—attributing most to China's cyber forces.<sup>75</sup></li> <li>• In 2024, China conducted a cyberattack on Palau's government.<sup>76</sup></li> </ul>
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• China strategically timed trade investigations and tariffs during Taiwan's elections, targeting products from provinces with high Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) support, with the implicit threat of greater punitive action.<sup>77</sup></li> <li>• Chinese authorities opened an investigation into Foxconn shortly after founder Terry Gou announced his candidacy for president, trying to pressure him to drop out to consolidate the Kuomintang (KMT) vote ahead of the 2024 presidency.<sup>78</sup></li> <li>• China threatened to block the sale of Panama ports by CK Hutchison to U.S. investments and directed other Chinese firms to avoid doing any business with related entities until the matter is resolved.<sup>79</sup> • Since December 2023, China has restricted export of numerous critical minerals, several battery and mineral processing technologies, and other critical materials.<sup>80</sup> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• China removed tariffs on all African countries except for Eswatini, which is the only African country that still recognizes Taiwan.<sup>81</sup></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Following the May 2025 India-Pakistan border crisis, China initiated a disinformation campaign to hinder sales of French Rafale aircraft in favor of its own J-35s, using fake social media accounts to propagate AI images of supposed “debris” from the planes that China's weaponry destroyed.<sup>82</sup></li> <li>• In 2024, pro-China online actors used AI-generated news anchors and fake social media accounts with AI-generated profile pictures to sow divisions in the United States on issues such as drug use, immigration, and abortion.<sup>83</sup></li> </ul>

<p>Legal</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• China authorized its coast guard to detain vessels and persons in the waters it claims, seeking to provide a legal basis for the destabilizing activities of its coast guard in the South China Sea.<sup>84</sup> • In early 2025, China launched antimonopoly reviews into U.S. companies including Google and Nvidia and added PVH and Illumina to the unreliable entity list in retaliation for U.S. tariffs and export controls.<sup>85</sup></li> <li>• In 2023, when several undersea cables to Vietnam sustained damage, China's demand that cable repair ships apply for permits to operate in the South China Sea prolonged repairs and resulted in internet slowdowns for eight months.<sup>86</sup></li> <li>• In late 2024, China secretly detained a Vietnamese civilian fishing vessel and crew operating within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) near the contested Spratly Islands.<sup>87</sup></li> <li>• Following the Philippines' arrests of Chinese citizens for surveilling U.S.-Philippine military facilities, China's Ministry of State Security arrested three Filipino nationals in April 2025 and accused them of espionage.<sup>88</sup></li> </ul>
<p>Space</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In 2024, China conducted a series of rendezvous and proximity operations in space, highlighting China's capabilities to disrupt or disable other space assets.<sup>89</sup></li> <li>• In April 2025, a Chinese space satellite company with links to the PLA reportedly provided satellite imagery to the Iranian-backed Houthis to assist in targeting vessels in the Red Sea.<sup>90</sup></li> </ul>

### China's Gray Zone Activities Threaten Global Communications by Cutting Undersea Cables

China has increasingly engaged in undersea cable-cutting activities as a gray zone pressure tactic, and there is mounting evidence that Beijing is developing new cable-cutting technologies for potential wartime use. Undersea cables constitute the backbone of modern global communications infrastructure, carrying an estimated 95 percent of global internet traffic and underpinning financial transactions, government services, commercial activities, and military communications.<sup>91</sup> For over a decade, Chinese scientists at research institutions affiliated with the PLA have actively researched strategies for severing undersea cables, acquiring numerous patents for

technologies designed to cut deep-sea cables more cheaply and efficiently.<sup>92</sup>

In February 2025, Chinese scientists affiliated with the China Ship Scientific Research Center—under U.S. sanctions for acquiring U.S.-origin components to support the PLA—unveiled a new design for an “electric cutting device for deep-sea cables” reportedly capable of severing armored cables at depths of more than 13,000 feet.<sup>93</sup> Analysts have predicted that China would attempt to sever Taiwan’s undersea cables to cripple its communications in an invasion scenario, and in 2021 researchers gained access to a Chinese database of strategic “points of interest” in Taiwan that included numerous undersea cable landing stations.<sup>94</sup>

Chinese vessels have sabotaged critical undersea cables near Taiwan and in the Baltic Sea. Since the beginning of 2025, there have already been two incidents in which Chinese-owned “shadow fleet” vessels cut cables near Taiwan while engaging in highly irregular movement patterns and disguising their identities and locations.<sup>95</sup> In November 2024, a Chinese vessel severed two undersea cables in the Baltic Sea—one connecting Sweden and Lithuania, the other connecting Germany and Finland—after dragging its anchor for more than 100 miles.<sup>96</sup> A Russian sailor was part of the ship’s crew, and European investigators have indicated they believe Russian intelligence agencies instructed the vessel’s Chinese captain to cut the cables.<sup>97</sup> The incident closely resembled a case in October 2023 in which a Chinese vessel with Russian sailors aboard severed the Baltic connector gas pipeline and an undersea cable connecting Finland and Estonia by dragging its anchor.<sup>98</sup> China has also interfered with the process of repairing undersea cables in the South China Sea, and U.S. officials have warned that China could use its cable repair ships to engage in espionage targeting the United States and its allies and partners. On the basis of its unsubstantiated maritime territorial claims, China has demanded that cable repair ships apply for permits to operate in the South China Sea, often causing months-long delays in fixing damaged cables.<sup>99</sup> After several undersea cables serving Vietnam were damaged in 2023, it took eight months to finish repairs

due to China's long delay in granting permits, leading to prolonged internet slowdowns in much of Vietnam.<sup>100</sup> U.S. officials have also expressed concern that Chinese cable repair ships could compro-

China's Gray Zone Activities Threaten Global  
Communications by Cutting Undersea Cables—  
*Continued*

mise the security of U.S. cables in the Pacific by placing taps on undersea cables and conducting reconnaissance on U.S. military communication links under the pretext of conducting repairs.<sup>101</sup> Yet, due to a shortage of cable repair ships, cable owners have few alternatives for fixing cables in the Asia Pacific region.<sup>102</sup> Taken together, these activities illustrate that China is developing both the tools and the operational experience to target global communications infrastructure in a future conflict—posing a direct threat to U.S., allied, and partner connectivity in a crisis.

The United States and China Remain Locked in Strategic Competition

Over the past year, the U.S.-China relationship has remained locked in strategic competition based not only on a direct rivalry but also on a clash of opposing systems. According to the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence's 2025 *Annual Threat Assessment*, Beijing remains deeply suspicious of U.S. intentions and views Washington's measures against China as part of a concerted effort—working across the U.S. government and with U.S. allies and partners—to contain China's development and rise, undermine CCP rule, and prevent the People's Republic of China (PRC) from achieving its aims.<sup>103</sup> Part of China's strategy to resist that effort entails amassing, harnessing, and improving all elements of national power to put Beijing in a "leading position" in the competition between systems. This has meant building a military that is capable of challenging the United States in a regional contingency, projecting power, and securing territory. China has continued to attempt to leverage its state-directed and nationally resourced economy to dominate markets and supply chains, compete with the United States, and position itself as the world's leading economy. (For additional information, see Chapter 9, "Chained to China: Grave Risks from Beijing's Weaponization of Supply Chains.") China also seeks to surpass the United States and become the world leader in advanced technologies, including AI and biotechnology.

There has been inconsistent high-level dialogue between Chinese and U.S. military leadership as China has sought to use its willingness to engage in these discussions to achieve leverage on broader negotiations with the United States. U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth first met his

Chinese counterpart, Defense Minister Admiral Dong Jun, in September 2025, but General John Caine, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the 11 U.S. combatant commanders have yet to meet with their Chinese interlocutors.<sup>104</sup> While the United States and China held an intergovernmental meeting focused on AI in May 2024, neither senior nor working-level military dialogues have addressed AI. Nor has there been dialogue between the two militaries focused on other increasingly significant matters, such as nuclear weapons or space issues. In September 2025, a bipartisan U.S. congressional delegation led by House Armed Services

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Committee Ranking Member Adam Smith—the first U.S. House congressional delegation to visit China since 2019—met with China's Minister of National Defense Dong Jun in Beijing and emphasized the need for more open military-to-military communications.<sup>105</sup> The absence of substantive military-to-military engagement increases the risk of miscalculation, especially as China advances capabilities designed to contest U.S. power in multiple domains.

### *China Leverages a Range of Actors to Pose Cyber Threats to the United States*

China's ongoing cyber activities, from both state and non-state actors, against the United States have contributed to the distrust in the relationship. In its 2025 *Annual Threat Assessment*, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence stated that China “remains the most active and persistent cyber threat to U.S. government, private-sector, and critical infrastructure networks.”<sup>106</sup> A September 2025 *Joint Cybersecurity Advisory*, authored and released by cyber and intelligence agencies from 13 countries, also called out Chinese state-sponsored cyber threat actors that are targeting telecommunications, governments, transportation, lodging, and military infrastructure networks.<sup>107</sup>

Chinese state-sponsored hacker groups like Volt Typhoon, Salt Typhoon, and Silk Typhoon have long targeted U.S. cyber infrastructure and have been linked to different Chinese government entities that have different missions.\*<sup>108</sup> Volt Typhoon has pre-positioned itself on U.S. critical infrastructure to enable the disruption or destruction of critical services in the event of increased geopolitical tension or military conflict with the United States and its allies.<sup>109</sup> In the event China were to invade or blockade the Taiwan Strait, Beijing might use these pre-located assets to attack U.S. power grids, transportation nodes, and water facilities to induce panic and undermine the United States' ability to both mobilize its military and rally public support for Taiwan.<sup>110</sup> As opposed to targeting U.S. infrastructure, Salt Typhoon was a surveillance operation

that gained access to information through almost all U.S. telecommunications companies. China reportedly used this information to acquire access to high-value targets such as then-Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, then-President-elect Donald Trump, and then-Vice President-elect JD Vance's cell phones.<sup>111</sup> As of 2024, Silk Typhoon was focused on using stolen credentials to gain access to networks operated by state and local governments.<sup>112</sup> In July 2025, Microsoft announced that Chinese hackers exploited vulnerabilities in its Share Point platform, a serious security threat as the platform is used by numerous U.S. government agencies and many companies worldwide.<sup>113</sup> Microsoft identified the perpetrators as two Chinese-based hacking groups linked to the Chinese government: Linen Typhoon and Violet Typhoon, who targeted internet-facing SharePoint servers, and another likely China-based actor, Storm-2603, who deployed ransomware.<sup>114</sup>

\*Microsoft gives names to groups engaged in cybersecurity activities based on the country from which the activity originated and the type of activity undertaken. "Typhoon" is used for activities originating in China. The other term—volt, salt, silk, etc.—is used to denote the type of hacking. Devlin Barrett, "What to Know about the Chinese Hackers Who Targeted the 2024 Campaigns," *New York Times*, October 26, 2024.

China is not only relying on government-linked entities to conduct cyber activities but also has developed a new approach in which an office or agency might now employ a private company or companies.<sup>115</sup> By doing so, multiple private companies simultaneously search for vulnerabilities and then sell access to their government customers.<sup>116</sup> This approach creates hundreds of victims as opposed to just a few and makes it difficult to block and definitively ascertain the intended target.<sup>117</sup> In March 2025, for example, the U.S. Department of Justice charged 12 Chinese nationals, including two officers who worked for China's Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and numerous employees of a private company in China, in a wide-ranging international hacking scheme to obtain data at the direction of both the MPS and China's Ministry of State Security.<sup>118</sup> These hackers were allegedly focused on stealing data related to dissidents and critics of China, foreign ministries of governments located in Asia, U.S. federal and state government agencies, and a large religious organization in the United States.<sup>119</sup> These blended state-private cyber operations have expanded China's targeting capacity, have increased operational deniability, and will pose a persistent risk to U.S. security, privacy, and critical infrastructure in a crisis.

### China and Russia Deepened Their Relationship

Over the past year, China and Russia have deepened their strategic alignment to present a united front against the United States. China and

Russia used Xi's visit to Moscow for the 80th anniversary of the end of World War Two to signal the futility of U.S. efforts to drive a wedge between them. Xi referred to Russia as "friends of steel," and the two sides released a joint statement declaring that their partnership is "not constrained by any third party."<sup>120</sup> The statement also reaffirmed mutual support for the other's core interests: Russia endorsed Beijing's claim that Taiwan is an "inseparable part" of China, while China echoed Russia's preferred framing that a resolution to the war in Ukraine must "eliminate the root causes of the crisis."<sup>121</sup>

Military cooperation between the two countries has expanded notably in scope and substance, especially since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. China continues to be a key source of dual-use technology for Russia's war effort, particularly in advanced electronics and components used in Russian military systems. In June 2025, Ukrainian intelligence reported that Chinese components, including motors, servos, solid-state drives, and computing hardware, were found in downed Russian drones.<sup>122</sup> Ukraine's military intelligence also showcased that, in early 2025, approximately 80 percent of critical electronics in Russian drones were traced back to China.<sup>123</sup> Russia has also reportedly deployed the Chinese-made Silent Hunter laser system against Ukrainian targets.<sup>124</sup> In return, Russia has provided China with advanced systems such as Su-35 fighter jets and S-400 air defenses, and it may be sharing submarine technologies to support the development of China's next-generation nuclear-powered Type 096 ballistic missile submarine (SSBN).<sup>125</sup> Ukrainian Intelligence reports further indicate that around 600 Chinese troops will train at Russian military installations in 2025, gaining exposure to combat tactics used against NATO-equipped

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forces.<sup>126</sup> This deepening military cooperation poses significant challenges for the United States and its allies, with China acting as a decisive enabler of Russia's war effort while gaining technology and operational insights relevant to a Taiwan conflict.

Recent joint exercises also highlight the growing geographic scope and ambition of China-Russia cooperation. In November 2024, Chinese and Russian aircraft conducted joint patrols from the Sea of Japan to the East China Sea, entering South Korea's ADIZ without notice, an act seen as testing the readiness of the United States, South Korea, and Japan.<sup>127</sup> These patrols were both symbolically and strategically significant, taking place near disputed areas and sensitive sea lanes.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, in March 2025, China and Russia held a more complex iteration of their Maritime Security Belt naval drill with Iran near Chabahar, involving simulated maritime attacks, antipiracy operations, and possible EW.<sup>129</sup> The British military reported likely intentional Global Positioning System (GPS) jamming in the Strait of Hormuz during the exercise, highlighting the

growing sophistication in electronic operations and a coordinated effort to contest the United States and allied presence in key maritime and airspaces.<sup>130</sup> In September 2024, the CCG and Russia's Border Service conducted a joint patrol in the Bering Sea, reflecting expanded Arctic cooperation as Russia, preoccupied with the war in Ukraine, grows more willing to cede space to China in the region.<sup>131</sup>

Many experts assess that true interoperability between Russian and Chinese forces remains limited, but the sophistication of the bilateral exercises should not be underestimated because they signal growing coordination and pose evolving challenges to regional security.<sup>132</sup> If these trends continue, the increasing scale and complexity of training for combined military operations could raise the likelihood that Russian and Chinese forces are able to operate together more effectively in a future crisis.<sup>133</sup> (For more information on China-Russia bilateral cooperation, see Chapter 3, "Axis of Autocracy: China's Revisionist Ambitions with Russia, Iran, and North Korea.")

#### China Focused on Expanding Influence in the Indo-Pacific Region

China has attempted to present itself as a more reliable economic and security partner for countries in the Indo-Pacific while blaming the United States for creating economic uncertainty and inflaming geopolitical tensions in the region. Nevertheless, China has intensified destabilizing activities throughout the Indo-Pacific, including escalating its military pressure on Taiwan, sustaining strong-arm tactics in the South and East China Seas, increasing gray zone military activities near Japan's Senkaku Islands, and providing diplomatic cover for and support to North Korea's provocative activities. These actions collectively aim to weaken allied cohesion, constrain U.S. access, and normalize PLA presence in contested areas.

#### *China Increased Military Pressure and Attempted to Sow Divisions in Taiwan's Society*

China has further escalated its military pressure campaign against Taiwan with each passing year. PLA aircraft have entered Taiwan's ADIZ with increasing frequency over the past year, and on

April 1–2, 2025, the PLA conducted the Strait Thunder-2025A military exercises encircling Taiwan.<sup>134</sup> While these exercises were similar in scope to previous Chinese military drills around Taiwan, they placed greater emphasis on occupying key maritime chokepoints.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, the PLA has stepped up unannounced large-scale military drills near Taiwan, including exercises in December 2024 that involved 90 ships across an area stretching from the East China Sea to the South China Sea—China's largest military drills near Taiwan in almost 30 years.<sup>136</sup> In

light of China's near-constant training activities and military maneuvers near Taiwan, U.S. and Taiwan military officials have warned that the PLA could now implement a blockade "in a matter of hours" and would potentially need only

"minimal conversion time" prior to an attack on Taiwan.<sup>137</sup> China has also sought to exacerbate political divisions in Taiwan by intensifying its violent rhetoric targeting Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)-led government while simultaneously stepping up efforts to co-opt opposition leaders, business interests, and youth groups in Taiwan with promises of material benefits. Chinese officials and state-run media outlets have used increasingly urgent language implying that Taiwan President Lai Ching-te's supposed support for "Taiwan independence" could justify a Chinese invasion. An April 2025 commentary in the *People's Daily* accused President Lai of promoting "Taiwan independence" and stated that "Taiwan independence means war," articulating a potential justification for invading Taiwan and blaming it on President Lai.<sup>138</sup> Other Chinese official statements and media reports have declared that Taiwan separatists would have their "bodies smashed to pieces and their bones ground to powder" and accused President Lai of treating the people of Taiwan like "cannon fodder."<sup>139</sup> At the same time, Beijing has also made a more concerted effort over the past year to co-opt elements of Taiwan's society that it perceives as friendly to its agenda. In February 2025, Beijing introduced the new concept of "shaping the inevitable reunification of the motherland," which calls for allowing "Taiwan compatriots" to share the "fruits of Chinese-style modernization and development" by supporting Taiwan business people in China and creating opportunities for youth from Taiwan to develop careers in China.<sup>140</sup> Beijing has also supported visits to China by Taiwan opposition leaders and youth groups, which often include visits to historical and cultural sites designed to inculcate a sense of Chinese identity.<sup>141</sup> (For more on China's relations with Taiwan, see Chapter 11, "Taiwan.")

### *China Persisted in Illegal and Aggressive Activities in the South China Sea*

Over the past year, Chinese vessels have undertaken aggressive and illegal behaviors intended to assert Beijing's unsubstantiated claims over virtually the entire South China Sea. After a CCG vessel deliberately rammed a Philippine vessel in June 2024 that had been attempting to resupply the *Sierra Madre* outpost on Second Thomas Shoal—which is inside the Philippines' EEZ—and severely injured a Filipino sailor, China took some limited steps to de-escalate tensions at the shoal, possibly to avoid triggering a potential U.S. intervention under the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Trea-

ty.<sup>142</sup> While Philippine forces were able to conduct eight consecutive successful resupply missions to Second Thomas Shoal as of May 2025, China persisted with aggressive and destabilizing actions in the South China Sea.<sup>143</sup> These included a near miss in February when a Chinese helicopter performing dangerous maneuvers nearly collided with a Philippine government-owned plane, an April incident where the CCG planted a Chinese flag on Sandy Cay to assert sovereignty over the unoccupied sandbar, and a series of intrusions into the Philippines' EEZ by Chinese research vessels.<sup>144</sup>

China also ramped up the scale and aggression of its forces around Scarborough Shoal as the Philippines began a program to assert the rights of its fishermen within its EEZ.<sup>145</sup> Chinese aggressive actions reached a new level on August 11, 2025, when a CCG ship collided at high speed with a PLA Navy destroyer while pursuing a Philippine Coast Guard ship near the shoal.<sup>146</sup> The Philippines believes the CCG was attempting to ram its ship and released footage from the incident, which appeared to show significant damage to the CCG ship.<sup>147</sup> Beijing did not officially acknowledge the crash or disclose casualties, instead only making a statement that blamed the Philippines for China's ships colliding with each other.<sup>148</sup> China broadened its efforts in the following months, including by declaring Scarborough Shoal a nature preserve, a new gray zone tactic intended to justify intensified control of the area.<sup>149</sup> China's aggressive tactics to assert its control over the South China Sea create unpredictable risks, highlighting the need for a collective code of conduct among ASEAN nations, which China has continued to thwart.<sup>150</sup>

### *China Presented Itself as a More Reliable Partner than the United States in Southeast Asia*

Beijing views Southeast Asia as a central battleground in its strategic competition with the United States that could help determine the regional and global balance of power between the two countries. Since the beginning of 2025, China's outreach to Southeast Asian countries has focused on exploiting changes to U.S. trade policy and foreign aid to present itself as the more reliable partner for regional countries' development ambitions. Xi highlighted the high diplomatic priority he places on Southeast Asia by making his first overseas trip of 2025 to Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia on April 14–18.<sup>151</sup> The CCP's official English-language newspaper, *China Daily*, described Xi's trip as an attempt to "provid[e] more certainty for regional economic development amid the chaos brought by the United States' launch of a tariff war."<sup>152</sup> Drawing an implicit contrast with the United States, Xi placed particular emphasis on China's continued commitment to development aid during his trip to the region,

promising “high-quality development cooperation” in Malaysia, “projects to improve people’s livelihood” in Vietnam, and greater “development assistance” in Cambodia.<sup>153</sup> While Beijing has not significantly increased the overall amount of aid it provides to Southeast Asia, it has selectively backfilled a small number of programs affected by U.S. foreign aid reforms where it calculates that it can gain maximum political benefit at minimal cost—such as funding demining activities in Cambodia and providing greater quantities of aid than the United States to support emergency relief efforts

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after the March 2025 earthquake in Burma (Myanmar).<sup>154</sup> China has also sought to exploit cuts to U.S. international media programs in Southeast Asia by flooding shortwave radio frequencies previously used by Radio Free Asia with content from Chinese state-run radio programs.<sup>155</sup> (For more on China’s expansion of influence in Southeast Asia, see Chapter 4, “Crossroads of Competition: China and Southeast Asia.”)

### *China Viewed the Pacific Island Nations as Critical to Its Goals*

In 2025, China continued to extend its influence across the Pacific Islands, recognizing the critical role they play in the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. China held the Third China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in person in Xiamen in May, hosting representatives from 11 countries.<sup>156</sup> The joint statement acknowledged the Pacific Island countries’ strategic priorities, such as development assistance and management of Pacific Ocean resources and nuclear nonproliferation, and offered China’s support for the region’s climate response to the extent of its capabilities.<sup>157</sup> China pledged \$2 million toward cooperation on climate change and announced a maritime initiative designed to strengthen regional maritime safety governance, train maritime officials and seafarers, and modernize Pacific Island countries’ maritime law enforcement equipment.<sup>158</sup> Pacific Island officials were given a tour of an advanced CCG ship on the sidelines of the Foreign Ministers’ Meeting.<sup>159</sup> China is prepared to send its first coast guard ships to the region, having registered ships with the regional fisheries inspection commission allowing it to board and conduct inspections of fishing vessels.<sup>160</sup>

The United States, Australia, and New Zealand have become increasingly concerned about China’s growing presence and influence, including suspicions over China’s construction of potential dual-use facilities in countries like the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu that could serve the PLA’s power projection goals. Pacific Island countries are determined to maintain a neutral stance; in July, Fiji’s president stated that the country would oppose a Chinese base anywhere in the region.<sup>161</sup> While denying it intends to establish any

military facilities, China continued to make inroads in the region in 2025. It signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement with the Cook Islands that included deep-sea mining exploration provisions, causing concern in New Zealand due to its free association relationship with the country.<sup>162</sup> Australia has pushed back on China's expansion of security partnerships in the region, signing its own deals across the region in late 2024 designed to counter Chinese influence.<sup>163</sup> (For more on the expansion of Chinese influence in the Pacific Island countries, see Chapter 5, "Small Islands, Big Stakes: China's Playbook the Pacific Islands.")

### *China Supported, but Remained Wary of, North Korea's Activities*

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping held a rare meeting on the sidelines of China's September 2025 military parade, their first encounter since 2019, where they pledged closer coop-

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eration between the two countries.<sup>164</sup> This show of unity occurred as North Korea and Russia deepened their military relations amid the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.<sup>165</sup> Although Beijing has officially distanced itself from North Korea's reported troop deployment to Russia, with Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian calling it a matter between two sovereign states and saying China had no knowledge of the specifics of Russian-North Korean military cooperation, signs of unease have surfaced.<sup>166</sup> Experts warn that deeper military alignment between Pyongyang and Moscow could undermine Beijing's longstanding influence over North Korea.<sup>167</sup> This concern was further compounded in March 2025, when China met with South Korea and Japan for the first trilateral economic dialogue between the three countries in five years.<sup>168</sup> Topics discussed included regional trade, North Korea's nuclear proliferation, the Ukraine war, and growing North Korea-Russia military ties,

heightening Pyongyang's suspicions toward China.<sup>169</sup> In spite of China's frustration with North Korea, it continues to provide diplomatic cover for Pyongyang's missile tests and acts of aggression, often downplaying or dismissing international evidence implicating North Korea. Following North Korea's intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test in October 2024, which set a record for distance flown, China refused to condemn Pyongyang's actions, in siding with Russia in opposing a U.S.-led statement at the UN Security Council.<sup>170</sup> In addition, Chinese-based networks have helped Pyongyang circumvent international sanctions by facilitating access to restricted revenue streams, materials, and technology for its ballistic missile and cyber programs. In December 2024, the U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned several Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) financial entities found

operating in China, including Korea Mandal Credit Bank and Korea Daesong Bank.<sup>171</sup> Moreover, in January 2025, Chinese company Liaoning China Trade Industry Co., Ltd. was sanctioned for supplying Department 53, a North Korean weapons-trading entity under the Ministry of National Defense, with equipment such as computers, graphics cards, and network gear used to support the regime’s overseas information technology (IT) operations.<sup>172</sup> Further investigation uncovered a shadow network of 35 PRC-based companies affiliated with Liaoning China Trade that appear to provide material support to Department 53’s operations and facilitate revenue generation.<sup>173</sup> Together, these actions illustrate how China’s tacit and sometimes direct support enables North Korea to advance its weapons programs and evade international accountability, complicating global efforts to curb the regime’s destabilizing behavior. (For more information on China-North Korea cooperation, see Chapter 3, “Axis of Autocracy: China’s Revisionist Ambitions with Russia, Iran, and North Korea.”)

#### *China Endeavored to Draw Japan and South Korea Closer*

China has attempted to use trade tensions to drive a wedge between the United States and its two East Asian allies, Japan and South Korea, seeking to draw both closer to Beijing.<sup>174</sup> (For more information on China’s trade relations with Japan and South Korea, see Chapter 1, “U.S.-China Economic and Trade Relations (Year in Review).”)

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Even after the initial April 2025 announcement of tariffs and the July 2025 tariff threat, Japan remained focused on reaching a deal with the United States instead of developing a comprehensive trilateral response with China and South Korea, eventually reaching a trade framework before the end of July.<sup>175</sup> Aside from avoiding the political and security risk that a trilateral response might carry, Japan is wary of siding too closely with China, given its history of economic coercion.<sup>176</sup> While Japan’s prime minister resigned in September 2025, analysts believe Japan will continue to view China as a strategic competitor regardless of who is appointed next prime minister.<sup>177</sup>

Even as China has attempted to draw Japan closer, it has simultaneously undertaken antagonistic activities around Japan’s Senkaku Islands to further its claims to the islands.<sup>178</sup> In 2024, 1,351 Chinese government vessels spent a record 355 days—out of a possible 366—in the contiguous zone of the Senkakus.<sup>179</sup> Even more provocatively, the CCG entered Japanese territorial waters on 42 days over the course of 2024 (the same number as in 2023).<sup>180</sup> As noted above, in March 2025, four CCG vessels entered the territorial waters and—in a first—a helicopter took off from one of the ships, entering Japanese airspace.<sup>181</sup> While experts have debated China’s intentions in taking these aggressive

actions, it is clear China is building operational capabilities to more forcefully assert its expansive regional claims and signal a threat to its neighbors.<sup>182</sup>

South Korea is interested in reaching a deal with the United States rather than forming a trilateral response to the U.S. tariffs, and it is wary of the risks such a response might carry.<sup>183</sup> Additionally, South Korea's domestic population does not view China favorably after Beijing leveled economic measures against South Korea following the deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on the peninsula in 2017.<sup>184</sup> Still, South Korea's new president, Lee Jae-myung, is pursuing a pragmatic approach to foreign policy and stated that he seeks to improve ties with China and pursue greater economic, security, and cultural cooperation.<sup>185</sup> A closer relationship is especially important to China to reduce exposure to the U.S. technological decoupling.<sup>186</sup>

China Advanced Strategic Influence across South and Central Asia

### *India and China De-escalate Tensions at the Border and Beyond*

Throughout 2025, high-level meetings took place between China and India as both sought to de-escalate tensions.<sup>187</sup> The contested Line of Actual Control (LAC) between China and India has been a point of bilateral tension since the Galwan Valley clash in June 2020.<sup>188</sup> When Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and General Secretary Xi met in October 2024, they agreed to establish a patrolling schedule at the Depsang and Demchok passes along the LAC, advancing Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar's vision for "disengagement" of both countries' frontier forces.<sup>189</sup> However, despite years of bilateral crisis communication mechanisms, this agreement was only established after high-level talks and did not address other hotly disputed border areas

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as Arunachal Pradesh, which China calls "South Tibet."<sup>190</sup> While the October 2024 China-India border patrolling agreement yielded a short-term thaw in tensions, both sides continued militarizing the border in early 2025, building new airbases and shoring up positions along the LAC and near Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>191</sup> Chinese and Indian government readouts of foreign ministry and leader-level meetings took slightly different tones, with China appearing more optimistic, which was not the first time the two walked away from a bilateral engagement with divergent interpretations.<sup>192</sup>

Prime Minister Modi's attendance at the 2025 SCO summit held in Tianjin, China—his first time in China since the 2020 clash—drew attention amid tensions in India's tariff negotiations with the United States.<sup>193</sup> Xi and Modi held a private side meeting during which the two

committed to build upon the agreement that China's Foreign Minister Wang and his Indian counterpart Foreign Minister Jaishankar had made earlier in August.<sup>194</sup> India and China agreed to conduct more high-level dialogue, work toward a border de-escalation agreement, expand economic cooperation, reopen flights between countries, and extend allowances for Indian citizens to go on pilgrimage into Tibetan regions into 2026, demonstrating both leaders' interest in taking steps away from decoupling and toward rapprochement.<sup>195</sup> As of September 2025, though, the terms of economic cooperation or border resolution agreements were largely conceptual, with few specifics or follow-ups announced by either side. Fundamentally, there has been an asymmetry in the degrees to which China and India prioritize establishing a long-term solution to the border dispute. China leverages high-level, well-publicized dialogues to reach partial resolutions—hoping to open the door for bilateral cooperation on trade and other areas by compartmentalizing the border issue without sacrificing its core interests.<sup>196</sup> In recent years, the Indian government has increasingly recognized the seriousness of the threat posed by China at the border—and that it is not merely “acne on the face,” especially as China's military has strengthened.<sup>197</sup> India wants a sustainable solution to the border issues that is not seen as a concession and that assuages domestic political pressure to stand up to China, which it views as key to moving forward with China across a range of potential arenas for cooperation, including trade.<sup>198</sup> It remains to be seen whether China's and India's 2025 commitments are a short-term function of India's desire to hedge against tumult in trade negotiations with the United States or are a long-term shift toward normalization in bilateral relations.<sup>199</sup>

### *China Opportunistically Used Pakistan's Military Crisis to Test and Promote Its Own Defense Capabilities*

China's role in the May 7–10, 2025, clash between Pakistan's and India's militaries drew global attention as Pakistan's military relied upon Chinese weaponry and reportedly leveraged Chinese intelligence.<sup>200</sup>

During the clash, triggered by India's response to a deadly insurgent attack that killed 26 civilians in its contested Jammu and Kashmir region, both countries attacked targets farther into one another's territories than at any time in 50 years.<sup>201</sup> The Indian Army claimed China helped Pakistan with “live inputs” on Indian military

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positions throughout the crisis and effectively used the conflict as a testing ground for its own military capabilities; Pakistan denied these allegations, and China neither confirmed nor denied its degree of involvement.<sup>202</sup>

China expanded its military cooperation with Pakistan in 2025,

compounding its own security tensions with India. In November and December 2024, China and Pakistan held the three-week Warrior-VIII counterterrorism drills, and in February 2025, China's navy participated in Pakistan's multinational AMAN drills, highlighting China's and Pakistan's growing defense cooperation. India's commentators viewed the drills as losses in their relationship with China and as direct security threats to its territorial positions.<sup>203</sup>

Pakistan's military success over India in its four-day clash showcased Chinese weaponry. While characterization of this conflict as a "proxy war" may overstate China's role as an instigator, Beijing opportunistically leveraged the conflict to test and advertise the sophistication of its weapons, useful in the contexts of its ongoing border tensions with India and its expanding defense industry goals. As Pakistan's largest defense supplier, China provided approximately 82 percent of the country's arms imports from 2019 to 2023.<sup>204</sup> This clash was the first time China's modern weapons systems, including the HQ-9 air defense system, PL-15 air-to-air missiles, and J-10 fighter aircraft were used in active combat, serving as a real-world field experiment.<sup>205</sup> China reportedly offered to sell 40 J-35 fifth-generation fighter jets, KJ-500 aircraft, and ballistic missile defense systems to Pakistan in June 2025.<sup>206</sup> That same month, Pakistan announced a 20 percent increase in its 2025–2026 defense budget, raising planned expenditures to \$9 billion despite an overall budget decrease.<sup>207</sup>

In the weeks after the conflict, Chinese embassies hailed the successes of its systems in the India-Pakistan clash, seeking to bolster weapons sales. Pakistan's use of Chinese weapons to down French Rafale fighter jets used by India also became a particular selling point for Chinese Embassy defense sales efforts despite the fact that only three jets flown by India's military were reportedly downed and all may not have been Rafales.<sup>208</sup> According to French intelligence, China initiated a disinformation campaign to hinder sales of French Rafales in favor of its own J-35s, and it used fake social media accounts to propagate AI and video game images of supposed "debris" from the planes China's weaponry destroyed.<sup>209</sup> Chinese Embassy officials convinced Indonesia to halt a purchase of Rafale jets already in process, furthering China's inroads into other regional actors' military procurements.<sup>210</sup>

### *China Deepened Relationships in Central Asia*

With Russia preoccupied with its war in Ukraine, China has deepened links with Central Asia to advance its interests through economic integration, infrastructure, and security cooperation.<sup>211</sup> Although Russia has long dominated the region, formerly part of the Soviet Union, China has surpassed Russia as Central Asia's primary economic partner. As tariffs and conflicts destabilize China's other supply chains, Central Asian countries remain valuable partners for

China due to their strategic location and increasing willingness to

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partner for trade and transshipment.<sup>212</sup> In the first five months of 2025, China's trade with the five Central Asian countries increased by 10.4 percent year-over-year.<sup>213</sup> At the second China-Central Asia Summit in June 2025—held in Kazakhstan and attended by Xi—the leaders agreed to build on existing agricultural partnerships, such as further development of end-to-end cotton production that could aid China in evading U.S. forced labor export bans on the Xinjiang region.<sup>214</sup> All five countries attended the SCO meeting held in Tianjin, China, in late August–early September 2025. While larger partners like India and Russia dominated the agenda, key areas of common interest to Central Asia, like counterterrorism (see below), were in the final declaration.<sup>215</sup>

China is also using infrastructure projects and security partnerships to expand its market access and deepen its influence across the region. The “Middle Corridor” trade route through Central Asia is a strategic priority for China, since the “Northern Corridor” through Russia and sea routes through the Suez Canal pose security challenges.<sup>216</sup> To expand access, China has both initiated new infrastructure projects during the June 2025 China-Central Asia Summit and doubled down on existing agreements.<sup>217</sup>

China also sought to deepen its security relationships in the region under the banner of the GSI as both sides strive to counter the “three evils”: terrorism, separatism, and extremism.<sup>218</sup> Central Asia has been an increasing target of Beijing's military partnerships and diplomatic dialogue, which have been welcomed by Central Asian countries.<sup>219</sup> The PLA is building military installations and developing its regional presence in the name of counterterrorism.<sup>220</sup> Existing installations like the counterterrorism military facility in Tajikistan, near the Afghan border, also serve as key hubs for the PLA to monitor the region and gather intelligence.<sup>221</sup> More such installations are already planned: Xi promised to continue support to Central Asia's military and law enforcement modernization at the 2025 China-Central Asia Summit.<sup>222</sup>

China Continued Building Relationships in the Middle East

*China Sought to Balance Ties to Iran with Other Regional Partners*

China and Iran continue to forge a strategic, though nuanced, partnership as part of the broader “Axis of Autocracy.” (See Chapter 3, “Axis of Autocracy: China's Revisionist Ambitions with Russia, Iran, and North Korea” for a more extensive analysis of the China-Iran relationship.) Underscoring this alignment, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian attended both the SCO summit hosted by China in late

August 2025 and Beijing's subsequent military parade in early September, signaling Tehran's desire to strengthen its ties with Beijing.<sup>223</sup> Evidence of the limits in the relationship, however, were evident after the June 2025 U.S. strikes on Iran's nuclear facility.<sup>224</sup> China's Foreign Ministry stated that the actions taken by the United States "violate the purposes and principles of the U.N. Charter and international law, and have exacerbated tensions in the Middle East."<sup>225</sup> China also joined Russia and Pakistan in proposing that the UN Security Council adopt a resolution calling for a ceasefire in the Middle East.<sup>226</sup> Still, beyond these rhetorical efforts,

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China did not take any additional concrete steps to assist Iran, such as sending materiel support following the strike.<sup>227</sup> This response is emblematic of the limits of this partnership. China maintains ties to Iran and supports it through economic and military means in large part due to Beijing's energy needs. However, actions taken by China are tempered, frequently holding Iran at arm's length so as not to jeopardize other interests.<sup>228</sup> Even though Iran is one of the most heavily sanctioned countries in the world, China maintains a robust trade and investment relationship with Tehran, which provided crucial revenue that enables Iran's destabilizing regional activity. Tehran estimated that about 45 percent of the government budget for 2025–2026 would come from oil and gas sales and would be the single biggest source of government revenue.<sup>229</sup> China purchases approximately 90 percent of Iran's exported oil, often at discounted rate, making it a significant contributor to Tehran's total government revenue.<sup>230</sup> However, China also imports crude oil from Saudi Arabia and Iraq and conducts far more trade with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) than with Iran.<sup>231</sup> As such, China has little incentive to prioritize relations with Iran over Gulf state partners. Perhaps informed by this dynamic, in a dispute over three islands in the Persian Gulf based on historic claims by both Iran and the UAE, China sided with the UAE.<sup>232</sup> In June 2024, the Iranian foreign minister summoned China's ambassador to Iran and protested Beijing's support. Rather than revising its position, China called for the UAE and Iran to resolve their dispute peacefully.<sup>233</sup>

Due to sanctions imposed on Iran, China provides Tehran with military support through discreet cooperation. In January 2025, Iranian vessels docked in China were loaded with an estimated 1,000 tons of sodium perchlorate, a precursor used in missile propellant—enough to fuel approximately 260 missiles.<sup>234</sup> In June 2025, it was reported that Iran ordered from China thousands of tons of ammonium perchlorate, a critical component for ballistic missiles. While China's Foreign Ministry claimed it was unaware of the transaction, the recurrence and scale of

these activities indicate enforcement gaps, limited oversight, or tacit approval.<sup>235</sup> China also supports Iran by providing access to BeiDou, China's global navigation satellite system, for Iranian military purposes.<sup>236</sup> Along similar lines, in May 2025, a Chinese space satellite company with links to the PLA reportedly provided satellite imagery to the Iranian-backed Houthis to assist in targeting vessels in the Red Sea.<sup>237</sup>

### *Gulf Countries Served as Investors and Markets for Chinese Technology*

China's relations with Gulf countries remain highly focused on bilateral investment, particularly in high-technology and new energy industries.<sup>238</sup>

The United States has become increasingly concerned about potential technology transfer to Beijing, given the increased collaboration between U.S. and Gulf countries on AI and continued expansion of bilateral investment and the entrance of Chinese companies into the region.<sup>239</sup> China has been courting investment from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states into its high-tech industries, with the region's sovereign wealth funds playing a major role. While

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acknowledging U.S. concerns, players like Qatar's sovereign wealth fund have stated they cannot overlook investment into Chinese AI.<sup>240</sup> Chinese firms have been making joint venture deals across the region, with Huawei continuing to make inroads into cloud computing and smart city sectors and additional deals signed by new energy, automobile, and petrochemical companies.<sup>241</sup> Multiple Chinese robotaxi companies have signed agreements to operate in Gulf states, as has Meituan's delivery drone service Keeta.<sup>242</sup> These agreements not only make the region the first place where Chinese and U.S. driverless taxis will directly compete but also further embeds Chinese technology into the region's logistics sector.<sup>243</sup>

### *China Aimed to Expand Security, Trade, Economic, and Diplomatic Influence across the African Continent*

#### *The PLA Conducted Its Largest Military Exercises on the Continent to Date*

China expanded its security cooperation efforts and influence across Africa through joint exercises, military training sponsorships, and other activities under the GSI framework. Going into 2025, Beijing had already signaled its desire to be a major regional security actor through the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Beijing Action Plan (2025–2027), which promised more security commitments than prior plans for the region.<sup>244</sup> In August 2024, China sent its largest army and navy deployments to the region to date for military exercises with

Tanzania and Mozambique.<sup>245</sup> In spring 2025, China held its Eagles of Civilization air force drill with Egyptian counterparts, marking China's largest air force deployment on the continent.<sup>246</sup> China is already Africa's biggest arms supplier and provides foreign military assistance to countries throughout the continent.<sup>247</sup> It trains approximately 2,000 African soldiers each year via its professional military education programs and has promised to continue these through 2027.<sup>248</sup> These programs include in-country training as well as courses in China, and they play an integral part in Beijing's strategy to shore up regional party-to-party political support among African leaders and militaries.<sup>249</sup>

### *Beijing Opportunistically Leveraged Its Investments to Capitalize on U.S. Aid Reductions*

At the 2025 FOCAC, China promised to backfill areas where U.S. foreign aid or tariffs left gaps for African leaders.<sup>250</sup> Though positive perceptions of both Chinese and the U.S. economic and political influence have generally outweighed negative perceptions in the region, China has leveraged changes in U.S. policy toward the region as a tool of influence operations and competition.<sup>251</sup> In the months leading up to the June 2025 FOCAC meeting, Chinese diplomats in numerous African countries used social media and the press to share their plans to offset the impact of U.S. aid withdrawals and new tariffs. They claimed China would expand access to its markets and lower its own duties and launched a "charm offensive" to boost China's favorability across the continent.<sup>252</sup> At a ministerial meeting in Beijing alongside the FOCAC, China officially announced it would remove all tariffs for the 53 African countries with whom it

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holds diplomatic relations, excluding Eswatini for its continued recognition of Taiwan.\*<sup>253</sup>

China may not actually have the political will or capacity to replace gaps in aid funding. Foreign Minister Wang's remarks surrounding the 2025 FOCAC reiterated China's messaging that it is a fellow developing country that seeks mutual partnerships while avoiding promises for substantive increases in aid spending.<sup>254</sup> Against the backdrop of China's enduring domestic economic challenges and its own interests in building out critical industries across the African continent, China is unlikely to pursue a policy that creates long term backfills of foreign aid.<sup>255</sup>

### *China's Critical Mineral Mines Have Negatively Impacted Local Populations*

Over the past year, China has sought to maintain its dominant position in critical mineral supply chains in Africa. Chinese companies and

state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are heavily invested across Africa's critical minerals mining operations, which largely export the minerals back to China for processing and use in its production of various manufactured products.<sup>256</sup> Since higher-value processing and manufacturing happens in China, these mining operations yield little benefit for local economies.<sup>257</sup> In addition, the low environmental and safety standards of many Chinese mining companies can threaten the health and safety of local residents.<sup>258</sup> For example, on February 18, 2025, a dam containing waste from a mine owned by a subsidiary of SOE China Nonferrous Metals Industry Group collapsed.<sup>259</sup> Chemicals from the mine poured into the Kafue River, Zambia's most important waterway, contaminating it with a cocktail of cyanide, arsenic, copper, zinc, lead, chromium, and cadmium, immediately necessitating the shutoff of water supply to 700,000 people and polluting the water source used by 60 percent of the area's 20 million residents.<sup>260</sup> As of September, the Chinese SOE had not finished paying out damages to the local population or addressed the long-term impacts of its contamination. The Zambian government pressed China for aid in cleaning up the disaster and for additional, external assessments to fully understand the extent of impact.<sup>261</sup>

China is also investing in infrastructure to connect critical mineral mining sites to ports. Mining is one of the most energy-intensive industries and involves transporting bulk commodities.<sup>262</sup> Many mineral-rich African countries are energy poor and have sparse, poorly maintained railways and roads, so developing mines requires investments in energy and transportation infrastructure.<sup>263</sup> China's mining strategy has often involved building critical infrastructure in mineral-rich parts of Africa.<sup>264</sup> In September 2025, China's state owned China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation signed a \$1.4 billion agreement with Tanzania and Zambia to revive the Tazara corridor, a railway that will traverse Tanzania and Zambia

\*Eswatini is the only African country to maintain recognition for Taiwan. China excludes Eswatini from benefits like the zero-tariff status but has been deepening its economic ties with the country. Chinese nationals are increasingly moving to Eswatini, seeking to undermine Taiwan's position in the long term. The only other African territory to recognize Taiwan is Somaliland. For more, see Cebelihle Mbuyisa, "Chinese Roots Deepen in Africa's Last Taiwan Holdout," *Semafor*, September 10, 2024 and Moustafa Ahmad, "A Tale of Two Recognized and Unrecognized Republics," *China-Global South Project*, January 29, 2025.

to connect copper mining areas with the eastern port in Dar es Salaam.<sup>265</sup> This effort comes on the heels of a U.S.-EU partnership agreement with Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Zambia to launch the Lobito Corridor project, a multi-billion-dollar initiative to connect the copper-rich mining region of those countries to the Lobito

Port in Angola on the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>266</sup>

### *China Leveraged Space Diplomacy to Further Its Critical Interests in African Partnerships*

China is also pursuing African space partnerships with an eye toward bolstering support for its long-term security interests and space development goals.<sup>267</sup> Beijing leverages collaborations through its International Lunar Research Station, satellite infrastructure investments, and people-to-people exchanges as incentives for African countries to become technologically dependent and diplomatically aligned with itself.<sup>268</sup> China has developed partnerships and projects with at least 23 African countries.<sup>269</sup> This year, the African Union established the Africa Space Agency near the Chinese-funded satellite manufacturing facility in Egypt, creating a strategic hub likely to enhance China-Africa space collaboration.<sup>270</sup> China also maintains ground stations in Ethiopia and Namibia capable of global surveillance and has partnered with several African countries to utilize its own launch infrastructure to send satellites into orbit.<sup>271</sup> (For more information on Chinese global space activities, see Chapter 7, “The Final Frontier: China’s Ambitions to Dominate Space.”)

### *Transnational Crime Syndicates Linked to China Expanded Illicit Activities in Africa*

While Beijing has touted itself as an economic and security partner for African countries, it has done little to stem the continued expansion of Chinese crime syndicates throughout the region—which have increasingly used African countries as bases for illicit activities ranging from online scamming to illegal mining and logging. According to an April 2025 UN report, over the past two years, some of the transnational crime syndicates behind scam centers in Southeast Asia have begun expanding into Africa.<sup>272</sup> (For more information on China’s connections to scam centers, see text and Appendix of Chapter 4, “Crossroads of Competition: China and Southeast Asia.”) Since the beginning of 2024, authorities have uncovered scam operations linked to Chinese nationals in Zambia, Angola, Namibia, and Nigeria.<sup>273</sup> For example, in December 2024 and January 2025, Nigeria’s Economic and Financial Crimes Commission arrested 177 Chinese nationals who were allegedly operating scam compounds in which they had trained local Nigerians to carry out so-called “pig butchering” scams.<sup>274</sup> In addition to the spread of online scamming, China’s voracious appetite for gold—part of its broader efforts to insulate its economy against potential U.S. sanctions—has also driven Chinese transnational criminal groups to expand involvement in illicit gold mining in at least ten African countries.<sup>275</sup> In Ghana, the top exporter of gold in Africa, dozens of Chinese nationals have been arrested for illegal gold mining thus far in

2025, and Ghanaian law makers have accused the Chinese government of being “complicit” in the problem.<sup>276</sup> Due to high Chinese demand for rosewood furniture

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and China’s lax monitoring of imported timber, Chinese crime syndicates have also increased their illegal logging of rosewood trees in countries such as Ghana and Nigeria—a multi-billion-dollar criminal industry that has caused environmental degradation, fueled corruption, and helped finance militia groups and violent insurgents.<sup>277</sup>

### *China Stymied Taiwan and U.S. Influence in Africa*

Beijing successfully pressured two African governments into taking new measures to hinder Taiwan’s access to the region. Amid renewed calls in Taiwan and the United States for Somaliland’s independence, China backed Somalia’s sovereignty claims to counter the emergence of a democratic foothold with proximity to the Gulf of Aden and its Djibouti base.<sup>278</sup> Somaliland declared its independence in 1991 and has a stronger economy than neighboring Somalia.<sup>279</sup> While it has not been recognized by the UN and most governments, it has official relations with Taiwan. Despite efforts from China to deter their relationship, Taiwan and Somaliland signed a landmark deal in July 2025 that included a coast guard cooperation agreement.<sup>280</sup> Reporting has speculated that the Trump Administration might officially recognize Somaliland, and Senator Ted Cruz has called on the Administration to recognize the region as a country.<sup>281</sup> China, on the other hand, sent Special Envoy to the Horn of Africa Xue Bing to Mogadishu to reaffirm Somalia’s claims over the territory and convinced Mogadishu to refuse visas or border access to Taiwan’s citizens.<sup>282</sup> In August 2025, China’s Embassy in Somalia condemned Senator Cruz’s Somaliland recognition proposal and the analogies drawn to Taiwan, reiterating the importance of sovereignty in international law and calling Taiwan “an inalienable part of China’s territory.”<sup>283</sup>

In October 2024, the South African government announced that, to avoid “mischaracterization” of its relationship with Taiwan, it would downgrade the “Taiwan Liaison Office” in the capital, Pretoria, to a “Taipei Commercial Office” in Johannesburg.<sup>284</sup> Pretoria claimed the change reflected “the non-political and non-diplomatic nature of the relationship between the Republic of South Africa and Taiwan.”<sup>285</sup> Taiwan’s government blamed Chinese pressure and claimed that Taiwan is “an inalienable part of China” in a joint statement with their CCP counterparts.<sup>286</sup> In July 2025, Pretoria solidified the Taipei Commercial Office name change with an official statement, which Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned, saying it would respond with

countermeasures.<sup>287</sup> In September, Taiwan officially announced restrictions on semiconductor exports to South Africa, which is the first time Taiwan has used export controls to counter China's coercion to date.<sup>288</sup> While Pretoria and Taipei will likely continue to engage on areas of mutual interests, the significant downgrade demonstrated Beijing's continued pressure campaign to isolate Taiwan in Africa.<sup>289</sup>

### China Sought to Undermine the United States throughout Latin America and the Caribbean

China has continued its efforts to undermine U.S. credibility and build Beijing's influence in Latin America and the Caribbean by

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sowing doubt about U.S. intentions toward the region and presenting itself as a champion of the "Global South." Chinese leaders continue to place high priority on cultivating ties with Latin American countries. After Foreign Minister Wang visited the region in January 2024, Xi conducted state visits to Peru and Brazil in November 2024.<sup>290</sup>

Chinese officials have also been increasingly vocal in presenting China as a more reliable partner than the United States for the region's development aspirations. In March 2025, Foreign Minister Wang stated, "The people of Latin America want to build their own homes—not someone else's backyard."<sup>291</sup> Drawing an implied contrast with the United States, Wang added that China "respects the wishes of Latin American people" and provides a "reliable choice" for the region's "rejuvenation."<sup>292</sup> In April 2025, China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian accused the United States of "engaging in extortion and coercion" in the region and called on Washington to "do more to make tangible contributions to the development of Latin American and Caribbean countries instead of spending time sowing divisions."<sup>293</sup>

Beijing has also asserted that China and the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean are all part of the "Global South" to legitimize its presence in the region.<sup>294</sup> In particular, China has cultivated closer ties with Brazil by claiming that the two countries can jointly represent the "voice of the Global South" on issues such as Russia's war in Ukraine.<sup>295</sup> During Xi's state visit to Brazil in November 2024, the two sides agreed to elevate their relationship to a "community with a shared future" and vowed to "defend the common interests of Global South countries" by opposing "confrontation" and "hegemony"—a thinly veiled criticism of the United States.<sup>296</sup>

*China Used the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States Forum to Expand Relationships*

China used the occasion of the triennial China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) Forum, held in Beijing in May 2025, to expand its economic and security influence in the region. Delegates approved a China-CELAC Action Plan for 2025–2027 in which Beijing committed to provide \$9 billion in credit to CELAC countries over the next three years and to launch 300 “small and beautiful” aid projects focused on improving “people’s livelihood.”<sup>297</sup> Building on the same playbook Beijing has used to expand its security footprint in other regions, China used this year’s China-CELAC Forum to secure agreements to increase non-traditional security cooperation through joint counterterrorism activities, a cybersecurity liaison, and joint efforts to combat transnational crime. The China-CELAC Action Plan also included agreements to expand use of China’s BeiDou satellite navigation system in the region.<sup>298</sup> Beijing further promised to invite 500 scholars and journalists to attend training programs in China and provide 3,500 government scholarships for Latin American students to study in China.<sup>299</sup> Analysts have argued that the Action Plan was “designed to embed China across the entire spectrum of governance, economics, and society in the Western Hemisphere.”<sup>300</sup>

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### *Beijing Pursued Control of Strategic Ports in Latin America*

China has 37 port projects in Latin America and the Caribbean, providing China with the potential capability “to disrupt U.S. trade, monitor naval activity, or enable coercive or covert operations in a future crisis.”<sup>301</sup> During his November 2024 trip to Peru, Xi participated in the inauguration of Chancay Port, a deep-water Peruvian port constructed with \$1.3 billion in Chinese investment.<sup>302</sup> General Laura Richardson, then-Commander of the U.S. Southern Command, warned that Chancay Port was a potential dual-use facility that could “absolutely” be used by the PLA Navy.<sup>303</sup> Beijing has also objected to a proposed deal for Hong Kong firm CK Hutchison to sell its controlling stake in two ports near the Panama Canal to the U.S. investment company BlackRock.<sup>304</sup> In response to Beijing’s complaints, the Chinese state-owned shipping conglomerate COSCO is reportedly seeking a 20–30 percent stake in the deal, which CK Hutchison has indicated is unlikely to be finalized this year.<sup>305</sup> Analysts have argued that if China blocked or fundamentally reshaped the deal, it would confirm U.S. suspicions about the geostrategic priority Beijing places on these ports.<sup>306</sup> (For more information on the Chinese government blocking CK Hutchison’s sale of the Panama ports, see Chapter 12, “Hong Kong.”)

### *China’s Relations with Europe Remained Tense*

China did not make serious efforts to use the U.S.-Europe trade

dispute to improve relations with the EU and attempt to split it from the United States. Instead it took advantage of European supply chain dependencies to adopt a hardline stance in trade negotiations with EU countries.<sup>307</sup> While China made some friendly gestures early in the year, such as lifting sanctions on EU Parliament members who criticized the human rights crisis in Xinjiang, relations with the EU deteriorated throughout 2025, largely over China's support for Russia's war in Ukraine.<sup>308</sup> In a statement to the G7 in June, EU President Ursula von der Leyen described China as engaging in "a pattern of dominance, dependency and blackmail."<sup>309</sup>

China's role as a decisive enabler of Russia's war against Ukraine remains a major obstacle to rapprochement with Europe. At the Shangri-La Dialogue in May 2025, French President Emmanuel Macron stated that the war in Ukraine was a warning for what could happen to Taiwan and the Philippines. He suggested NATO increase engagement with countries in Asia if China did not prevent North Korean troops from entering the war, prompting the Chinese Foreign Ministry to condemn the statements.\*<sup>310</sup> In July, Foreign Minister Wang reportedly told senior EU officials that China could not afford a Russian loss in Ukraine because it would allow the United States to turn its attention to China.<sup>311</sup> Soon after, the EU sanctioned Chinese banks for facilitating sales to the Russian military for the first time despite Chinese threats of retaliation.<sup>312</sup> In a symbolic move, China sanctioned two Lithuanian banks in response,

\*Some individual countries have increased their engagement with Asia in response to Chinese actions, with Lithuania and the Philippines signing an agreement on defense cooperation to deter Chinese and Russian aggression. Jim Gomez, "Lithuania and Philippines Sign a Pact to Build an Alliance against Aggression," *Associated Press*, June 30, 2025.

targeting a small EU country with which it has a history of strained relations due to its support for Taiwan.<sup>313</sup> Amid these sanctions, China enacted rare earth export controls and retaliatory import restrictions on certain EU products, compounding concerns as Chinese products surged into European markets.<sup>314</sup>

Several diplomatic, economic, and security incidents have also heightened concerns over Chinese activities. The Czech Republic accused the Chinese Embassy in Prague of plotting to cause a collision involving the Taiwan vice president's car during her 2024 visit and cyberattacks against the Czech Foreign Ministry, which resulted in condemnations from the EU.<sup>315</sup> In March, Belgian prosecutors raided Huawei's Brussels headquarters as part of an investigation into a bribery and influence campaign conducted in the European Parliament.<sup>316</sup> In July, Germany accused China of targeting one of its reconnaissance aircraft with a laser during an EU mission to protect shipping in the Red

Sea, an allegation Beijing denied.<sup>317</sup> In August, China cut off communication with Czech Prime Minister Petr Pavel after he met with the Dalai Lama.<sup>318</sup>

These events led to low expectations for the July 2025 EU-China Summit that, despite marking 50 years of EU-China relations, was scaled back to one day instead of the originally planned two at China's request.<sup>319</sup> As expected, the two sides did not achieve any breakthroughs at the summit; they issued a joint statement on climate change with no new commitments, and the EU announced it had made an agreement with China to create a mechanism to ease bottlenecks in rare earth exports.<sup>320</sup>

### China Pursued Wide-Ranging Activities in the Arctic

China is pursuing a multifaceted approach in the Arctic to advance its economic, energy, technological, scientific, and security interests. China's relationship with Russia is central to advancing these objectives. In the past, cooperation between China and Russia in the Arctic was limited to the development of oil and gas projects.<sup>321</sup> This was due, in part, to Russia believing that a larger Chinese presence in the region would weaken what Moscow perceives as its preeminent position. However, as Russia has become increasingly isolated from the West due to the war in Ukraine, Moscow has acquiesced to increased regional cooperation with China in recent years, hoping to unlock the Arctic's economic potential and relieve some of the pressure imposed by sanctions.

As part of its Polar Silk Road initiative, China is focused on developing the Northern Sea Route (NSR) to advance its economic and energy interests. The NSR—a shipping route along the Arctic coast of Russia—cuts the distance required to travel between Europe and northwestern Asia by 40 percent.<sup>322</sup> As ice in the region continues to melt, the NSR is increasingly navigable. In 2024, China provided Russia with a range of goods via the NSR, including chemical products, construction equipment and materials, passenger cars, auto parts, clothing, and footwear while importing commodities such as iron ore and fertilizer.<sup>323</sup> However, the vast majority of shipments along the NSR move from Russia to

China, carrying energy exports, including crude oil and liquified natural gas (LNG).

In late 2024, China and Russia established the bilateral Subcommittee on Cooperation on the Northern Sea Route to foster greater collaboration in developing the NSR through a range of objectives, including

construction in the Arctic and vessel technology, both of which advance China's energy and technological interests.<sup>324</sup> For China, construction in the Arctic is closely linked to supporting its energy interests. In the past, China's National Petroleum Corporation, its Silk Road Fund, and other state-owned oil corporations have assisted Russia in constructing oil and LNG projects, sometimes taking a financial stake.<sup>325</sup> Presently, China and Russia are discussing China's involvement in other LNG projects, though the exact location or locations have not been disclosed.<sup>326</sup> Although Russia has been reluctant to share sensitive polar technologies with China, during a 2024 state visit, the two countries vowed to strengthen cooperation in polar shipbuilding and ship technology; Russia will likely need China's assistance to construct up to 70 icebreakers as it seeks to quadruple cargo volume on the NSR by 2030.<sup>327</sup> Simultaneously, China continues to improve its ability to produce a range of ships that can navigate the Arctic, and Chinese shipping companies are currently in talks with Russian companies to develop five container ships capable of year-round operations in the Arctic.<sup>328</sup> China is also pursuing scientific research in the Arctic, which advances its ambition to become a science superpower.<sup>329</sup> China relies on a number of research vessels to explore the Arctic, and in late 2024 the Institute of Deep-Sea Science and Engineering of the Chinese Academy of Sciences launched the multifunctional ship, *Tan Suo San Hao*.<sup>330</sup> The ship can launch submersibles to deep-sea areas, and China plans to use the ship to conduct crew dives to the seafloor of the Arctic.<sup>331</sup> This ship will contribute to the ongoing research, including climate research and data collection related to local marine and meteorological conditions.<sup>332</sup> As part of the Polar Silk Road, China has partnered with several Nordic countries and pursued scientifically focused projects, such as the proposal by China's Polar Research Institute to purchase or lease an airport in Finland for Arctic research flights.<sup>333</sup> Experts, however, including those in the U.S. Department of Defense, have expressed concerns about the "dual-use" risks posed by China's scientific Arctic activities. During its Arctic research expeditions, China

has tested polar-capable fixed-wing aircraft and unmanned underwater vehicles.<sup>334</sup> Additionally, the PLA could use the information collected on Arctic environments and the deployed sensors to spy on NATO assets in the region.<sup>335</sup> In March 2025, the head of Iceland's National Police Commissioner declared that China's Iceland Arctic Research Observatory, a project launched in 2012, has dual-use purposes and might be used for espionage.<sup>336</sup>

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## China Attempted to Leverage International Institutions to Assert Its National Security Agenda

### China Saw International Organizations as Arenas to Advance Its Own Interests

China extended its influence within the UN and affiliated international organizations.\* In April 2025, China convened an informal Security Council meeting on “the impact of unilateralism and bullying practices on international relations” aimed at condemning the United States, saying it “gravely violated international trade rules... and triggered severe shocks and turbulence in the world economy.”<sup>337</sup> As the UN faces funding challenges and undergoes reorganization, China is leveraging shifts to increase its influence over decision-making and expand its staff footprint across the UN system. China has used its dues to exercise leverage over the organization, such as when it refused to release funds to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) over its approval of Japan's release of nuclear wastewater in 2023.<sup>338</sup> As it seeks to make undersea mining commercially viable, China is advancing its influence in the International Seabed Authority (ISA); China wishes to have the ISA set rules for mining in international waters while preventing it from gaining an ability to enforce regulations.<sup>339</sup> China also targets standards-setting bodies like the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), placing a large number of Chinese nationals on the technical committees that set standards and regulatory frameworks for global communications networks. (For more on China's efforts to influence the ITU, see Chapter 7, “The Final Frontier: China's Ambitions to Dominate Space.”)

Following the United States' withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO), China announced an additional \$500 million donation to the WHO in May 2025, becoming its new top donor, raising its profile on global health policy, and creating potential for additional staff appointments for Chinese nationals.<sup>340</sup> Beijing has also become the top donor for the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, using it both to advance its preferred cul

tural narratives and to influence the development of guidelines on AI.<sup>341</sup>

### *China and Russia Cooperated in BRICS*

China and Russia have leveraged the BRICS platform to strengthen diplomatic alignment and advance alternative international norms. At the October 2024 BRICS summit hosted by Russia, Beijing and the Kremlin emphasized their shared interest in circumventing sanctions and reducing dependence on the U.S. dollar, including pursuing an alternative payment system to SWIFT.<sup>342</sup> Russia framed the summit as demonstrating that it was not internationally isolat-

\*In addition to its principle and subsidiary organs, the UN is part of a broader system made up of the UN itself as well as various funds, programs, and specialized agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization; World Health Organization; World Bank; and UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, among others. The Commission tracks Chinese officials appointed to senior positions within the UN system. "The United Nations System," *United Nations*.

[https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_system\\_chart.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_system_chart.pdf), U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *PRC in International Organizations*, May 16, 2025.

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ed. China echoed diplomatic support for Russia during the meeting, with General Secretary Xi stating that the world is undergoing "profound changes unseen in a century" and emphasizing deepening "comprehensive strategic coordination" with Russia.<sup>343</sup> The summit provided a platform for China and Russia to project unity and advocate for expanding the bloc to amplify their influence, particularly among developing countries. They claimed the bloc's January 2024 expansion to include Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the UAE signaled a strategic shift toward amplifying the voices of countries seeking to challenge the dominance of Western powers in global governance, aligning with China and Russia's broader efforts to reshape international norms and governance structures.<sup>344</sup> This year, at the July 2025 BRICS meeting held in Brazil, neither Xi nor Russian President Vladimir Putin attended in person, with Xi sending Premier Li while Putin avoided travel due to the International Criminal Court arrest warrant.<sup>345</sup> (For more information on China, Russia, and Iran's collaboration in multilateral institutions, see Chapter 3, "Axis of Autocracy: China's Revisionist Ambitions with Russia, Iran, and North Korea.")

### *China Used the SCO to Collaborate on Advanced Technologies*

On August 31, 2025, Xi hosted more than 20 world leaders, including Russian President Putin and Indian Prime Minister Modi, at the SCO summit in Tianjin, using the occasion to outline his vision of transforming the bloc into a platform to bypass Western economic and technological institutions.<sup>346</sup> During the summit, Xi positioned himself as a champion of multilateralism and sovereign equality, highlighting technology, economic cooperation, and development as the SCO's new

priorities.<sup>347</sup>

The summit also showcased China's, Russia's, and India's increased willingness to compromise and present a unified front.<sup>348</sup> The three countries signed on to a declaration condemning the U.S. and Israeli bombing of Iran and the "actions that have led to... a catastrophic humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip," marking the first time India criticized U.S. support for Israel.<sup>349</sup> The declaration also condemned the 2025 Pahalgam terrorist attack that India attributes to Pakistan, a symbolically important gesture for India, which had refused to sign a June 2025 SCO statement because it omitted reference to the attacks.<sup>350</sup>

Xi also introduced the Global Governance Initiative during the SCO summit, aimed at positioning China as a leading voice for developing countries and as an alternative to U.S.-backed governance frameworks.<sup>351</sup> Though still nascent, Beijing's concept paper indicates ambitions to shape global norms and standards—particularly in emerging technologies such as AI, cyberspace, and outer space—where rules remain under development.<sup>352</sup>

Earlier in May 2025, China hosted the China-SCO AI Cooperation Forum in Tianjin, aimed at deepening collaboration on AI applications and governance among member states.<sup>353</sup> Beijing framed the forum as an effort to "promote inclusive global growth and help bridge the global digital divide."<sup>354</sup> A key outcome was the announcement of the Construction Plan for the China-SCO AI Application Cooperation Center, which invites SCO member states to jointly establish

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a platform for AI development.<sup>355</sup> The plan outlined objectives such as talent cultivation, enhanced industrial cooperation, and expanded access to open source AI services.<sup>356</sup> By promoting technical cooperation under the SCO framework, China seeks to position itself as a global leader in emerging technologies and to strengthen its appeal to developing countries—particularly those looking for alternatives to U.S. and Western technology ecosystems.

### China Continued to Interfere in Religious Institutions to Advance Its Agenda

In 2025, China persisted in interfering in religious institutions to further its domestic and international political agenda: China intends to counter what its 2025 National Security White Paper characterizes as "external security pressure" from "Western anti-China forces" on Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and other issues China regards as its "internal affairs." In addition, China's interference in religious institutions shows its domestic audience that the CCP will maintain total domestic control under the banner of security.<sup>357</sup>

## *China Poised for Dispute over Tibet and the Dalai Lama's Succession*

The 14th Dalai Lama celebrated his 90th birthday on July 6, 2025, and announced plans for his eventual succession: the institution of the Dalai Lama will continue and the Dalai Lama's office, the Gaden Phodrang Trust in Dharamshala, India, will have "sole authority to recognize the future reincarnation" without interference.<sup>358</sup> The Dalai Lama's succession is poised to become a dispute between China and actors who have committed to back the Tibetan-selected successor, including the United States; China has already declared its own measures to appoint a "Dalai Lama" within mainland China's borders.<sup>359</sup> There will likely be two "successors"—one selected by the Tibetan Buddhist Gaden Phodrang Trust and one by the Chinese government.\*<sup>360</sup> China is already seeking to counter support for the Tibetan selection of the Dalai Lama's successor, calling on foreign governments not to support or participate in the what it deems "anti-China" activities.<sup>361</sup> Following U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's statement supporting Tibetans' "ability to freely choose and venerate religious leaders without interference," China's Foreign Ministry stated that the United States is in "no position" to point fingers at China on matters regarding Tibet.<sup>362</sup> When India's Prime Minister Modi wished the 14th Dalai Lama a happy birthday and a senior Indian minister affirmed that the Dalai Lama's trust has

\*The CCP-controlled Panchen Lama will be a key player in China's attempts to validate their Dalai Lama succession appointee. In May 1995, the current Dalai Lama recognized six-year-old Gedhun Choekyi Nyima as the reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama, the highest Tibetan religious and political figure who stayed in Tibet after the CCP took over in the 1950s. Days after his selection, the CCP arrested the young 11th Panchen Lama and his family, and they have not been seen since. The Party proceeded to install a different Tibetan child, Gyaltsen Norbu, to be its Panchen Lama and has kept him under close guard outside of Tibet ever since, only parading him around Tibetan regions for official events and meetings. The Panchen Lama traditionally plays a significant role in Dalai Lama succession processes, so Beijing will seek to use Norbu to select a Dalai Lama that the CCP controls. Protecting Tibetan Religious Rights: Addressing China's Reincarnation Policies, *International Tibet Network*, August 2025, 8–9; Laurie Chen and Krishna N. Das, "The two Panchen Lamas: China's role in Tibet and the clash with the Dalai Lama," *Reuters*, July 4, 2025; "China/Tibet: Panchen Lama Forcibly Disappeared for 30 Years," *Human Rights Watch*, May 15, 2025; Tenzin Dickyi and Tenzin Pema, "The story of one of Buddhism's most revered figures, long missing, explained," *Radio Free Asia*, April 4, 2025.

sole authority to identify the 15th Dalai Lama, China made official complaints to the Indian government, urging it to avoid support for the 14th Dalai Lama's "anti-China separatist activities under the guise of religion."<sup>363</sup>

The search for and selection of the 15th Dalai Lama will have implications on the international stage. China has already taken coercive economic and diplomatic measures to stop support for Tibetan Buddhist succession processes and Tibetan activities in neighboring countries like Mongolia and Nepal.<sup>364</sup> Against the backdrop of existing tensions, the

reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama, which will be decided near China and India's contested border by the exile community living in India's borders, will likely be a point of contention between the two neighbors.<sup>365</sup> Both China and U.S. partners and allies will have to grapple with the issue as it continues to emerge in international forums.

### *China Tried to Undermine the Vatican's Relations with Taiwan and Authority over the Chinese Catholic Church*

The Vatican has long maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and China has long tried to convince the Vatican to switch recognition to China. Pope Leo XIV's May 2025 inauguration gave rise to speculation on whether his papacy will shift the Vatican further toward China and away from Taiwan.<sup>366</sup> The Vatican did not welcome Taiwan's President to the May 2025 inaugural Mass, instead only inviting former Vice President Chen Chien-jen to attend Pope Leo XIV's inauguration; Chen had also represented Taiwan at Pope Francis' funeral earlier in the spring.<sup>367</sup> President Lai's absence was notable; Taiwan's sitting presidents have attended former papal events, and the Holy See and Taiwan have maintained bilateral relations and reciprocal representative offices since the Republic of China established its government in Taipei.<sup>368</sup> Though neither Taipei nor the Vatican confirmed whether Lai received an invitation, Taiwan's demonstrated interest in presidential attendance implies that Beijing's pressure impacted the Holy See's decision.<sup>369</sup>

In 2025, China used the occasion of a newly inaugurated Pope to pursue two initiatives with the Vatican: to extend its interference over the selection of Catholic bishops in China and to pressure the Vatican to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China. Though China and the Vatican do not have diplomatic relations, they have a 2018 agreement establishing a tenuous process of collaboration over the selection of Catholic bishops in China.\* Over the years, China has pushed the limits of the agreement or entirely ignored it. In spring 2025, China exploited the death of Pope Francis to violate the agreement again, appointing two bishops without Vatican approval in the period between the funeral of Pope Francis and the inauguration of Pope Leo XIV.<sup>370</sup> On June 11, 2025, however, Beijing agreed to recognize Pope Leo XIV's selection of a formerly

\*Typically, the Vatican selects Catholic bishops through a complex and discreet process centered around religious tradition and papal authority without interference from any foreign government. For more context on the history of Vatican-China relations and how the two came to terms of cooperation on bishop appointments, see Chad de Guzman, "What to Know about the Vatican's Relationship with China—and What the Next Pope Means for It," *Time*, April 25, 2025; Bing X, "China, Vatican Extend Controversial Deal on Appointment of Bishops," *Radio Free Asia*, October 10, 2023; Collin Vogt, "Faith Fact: How does the Vatican appoint a bishop?" *Catholic Echo*, May 1, 2025.

"clandestine" bishop in a reversal of the typical structure where the

Vatican approves Beijing's proposed candidates.<sup>371</sup> The challenge of balancing unity and religious freedom for China's Catholic population was clearly front of mind for Pope Leo XIV as he used his first public speech to express his hope that Catholics in China would persist in "the midst of trials," signaling his commitment to keeping Chinese Catholic churches in the Vatican's fold.<sup>372</sup>

In seeking to undermine and control the leadership of both the Dalai Lama and the Pope, Beijing is sending a clear signal to its domestic audience that it will take proactive measures to interfere in religious institutions well beyond its borders. China's actions underscore that it views the Sinicization of religion as a core internal affair and will continue to aggressively interfere in these institutions at home and abroad. These efforts aim to preempt external influence, reinforce Party dominance, and ensure that all religious and political activity within its territory remains firmly under CCP authority.

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