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

Executive Summary

Throughout 2026, China used its growing military, technological, economic, and diplomatic power more assertively while seeking to avoid direct confrontation with the United States. Summits between U.S. President Donald J. Trump and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping in May and September 2026 reflected this dual track approach. Beijing embraced "constructive strategic stability" as a framework for managing competition with the United States even as it continued to strengthen its military capabilities, press territorial claims in the Indo-Pacific, support U.S. adversaries, and expand its influence abroad.

China continued to build the military capabilities needed to shift the regional balance in its favor while pressing its interests across the Indo-Pacific. Despite sweeping purges of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) senior leadership, military modernization continued, including advances in amphibious warfare, uncrewed and artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled systems, and nuclear forces. Beijing paired these growing capabilities with a more persistent military and law enforcement presence around Taiwan, increased pressure on Japan, and continued efforts to assert its maritime claims in the South China Sea. China also adjusted the timing and intensity of its activities when confrontation threatened other priorities, underscoring Beijing's effort to advance its regional objectives while limiting the risk of direct conflict.

Beijing used global conflicts to strengthen important partnerships and improve China's international standing while limiting its own exposure to its partners' confrontations with the United States and U.S. allies. China sustained Russia's war effort and Iran's military and economic capacity without becoming directly involved in either conflict. Beijing also expanded engagement with several U.S. allies and partners while portraying itself as a more stable and predictable international actor. China sought to expand BRICS* and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) activities into new areas of security, technology, finance, and governance while deepening strategic infrastructure and security relationships across Africa and Latin America.

*BRICS originated as BRIC, an informal diplomatic grouping established in 2006 by Brazil, Russia, India, and China to promote cooperation among emerging economies and advocate for reforms to international institutions. South Africa joined in 2010, after which the group became known as BRICS. The group now also includes Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia has been invited, but it is not clear if it has joined.

China's greater reach did not mean Beijing could always get other countries to follow its lead. Members of BRICS and the SCO resisted or slowed some Chinese-backed initiatives, while governments across the Indo-Pacific pushed back against Chinese pressure. China's expanding security relationships also did not always give Beijing or its partners the ability to shape events in a crisis. These limits did not substantially alter China's direction. Beijing continued to pursue incremental gains, grow its military power, and advance its technology sector, strategic access, and global influence. With two more Trump-Xi meetings expected before year's end, Beijing will likely continue using "constructive strategic stability" to cement its version of the relationship while steadily strengthening China's position.

Key Findings

- China accelerated its bid to reshape the international order in 2026. Beijing pursued a coercive but controlled strategy, using its growing military, technological, economic, and diplomatic power to strengthen its position relative to the United States while managing the risk of a destabilizing confrontation. China's actions before and after the Trump-Xi summits demonstrated that its version of "constructive strategic stability" does not mean constraining China's broader competition with the United States.
- Even as Beijing sought to manage its diplomatic relationship with Washington, it continued destabilizing activities aimed at the United States, including cyber operations targeting U.S. critical infrastructure, AI-enhanced influence campaigns aimed at the U.S. public, attempts to co-opt U.S. officials, and transnational repression on U.S. soil.
- Xi Jinping concentrated military authority to a degree not seen since the Mao era through sweeping purges of the PLA's senior leadership, placing greater weight on his personal judgment in decisions over whether and how to use force. Despite the upheaval, PLA modernization continued toward its 2027 readiness milestone for a Taiwan contingency.
- China expanded the scale and sophistication of coercive gray zone activities around Taiwan in 2026 while continuing to build military capabilities for a future conflict. Beijing rehearsed blockade operations, practiced mobilizing civilian fishing fleets, and conducted its first-ever "traffic enforcement operation" in waters east of Taiwan, integrating military, law enforcement, and civilian assets to establish a more persistent presence around the island.
- China remained a critical enabler of Russia's war effort and Iran's military capacity in 2026 while carefully avoiding direct involvement in their conflicts. China facilitated more than 90 percent of Russia's imports of sanctioned technology and supplied Iran with drone components and materials

used to make missile fuel while using the growing dependence of both partners to expand its own strategic leverage.

- China's new Ethnic Unity Law extended Beijing's legal claims beyond its borders, creating a statutory basis to target overseas individuals and organizations for activities it deems threatening to "ethnic unity." The provision could create legal and political exposure under Chinese law for U.S. persons and institutions engaged in Taiwan advocacy or Uyghur, Tibetan, and other minority rights work.
- Beijing expanded efforts to build long-term influence and strategic access abroad in 2026. China grew its partnerships, pushed multilateral institutions into new security and governance roles, embedded dual-use infrastructure across Africa and Latin America, and weaponized commercial relationships for political coercion. Beijing also sought to portray itself as a more reliable partner than the United States, but resistance from key partners revealed the limits of its ability to dictate outcomes.

Introduction

In May 2026, President Trump met General Secretary Xi in Beijing, where they announced "constructive strategic stability based on fairness and reciprocity"* as a new framework for bilateral relations. By Xi's September state visit to the United States, China was already moving to define the framework on its own terms and asserting its bottom lines as the operating basis of the new relationship.[1] Yet even as Beijing sought greater stability in its relationship with Washington, it continued conducting destabilizing activities around the world. China expanded gray zone activities and military pressure in the Indo-Pacific, facilitated Russia's war effort, sustained Iran despite U.S. sanctions, and continued cyber, influence, and other activities targeting the United States and others. Neither summit signaled a pause in strategic competition. Beijing's concept of "constructive strategic stability" envisions a managed rivalry bounded by predictability, an arrangement designed to create favorable conditions for long-term competition, not reduce it. By projecting a desire for stability, China seeks to manage U.S. responses and discourage countermeasures as it shapes the international environment in favor of its own terms.

Both leaders expressed their intention to attend upcoming summits hosted in each other's countries in November and December, presaging two more meetings before the end of the year.[2] Such regular leader-level engagement provides Beijing further opportunity to promote its version of "constructive strategic stability" and portray China as a major power on equal footing with the United States. Meanwhile, China continues to employ its military, technological, diplomatic, economic, and informational campaigns in mutually re-

*As the Commission learned through meetings leading up to and during its July 2026 trip to China, Beijing prefers the formulation "constructive strategic stability." U.S. government readouts of bilateral meetings have consistently added the phrase "based on fairness and reciprocity."

inforcing ways to compete with the United States and its allies and partners around the world.

China Leverages Growing Power to Strengthen Its Position Against the United States

In 2026, China sought to translate its growing military, technological, and economic power into strategic leverage to reshape the global security environment while eroding the influence of the United States and its allies and partners. Beijing moved to close military and technological gaps, challenge U.S. influence in international institutions, and press its interests more assertively while calibrating its actions to limit the risk of direct confrontation. This approach reflects China's growing confidence that it can press its advantages more aggressively without provoking a destabilizing conflict that could jeopardize its longer-term objectives.

China Builds Military Capabilities to Shift the Indo-Pacific Balance in Its Favor

Beijing treats military development and hard power as central to strategic competition with the United States. In 2026, Chinese state media emphasized China's military modernization as a core component of "major power strategic competition."[3] This likely reflects Beijing's conviction that closing the capability and combat-effectiveness gaps with the United States is necessary to compete as a rising world power.[4] This priority is evident in China's spending: military expenditure rose an estimated 7.4 percent in 2025—the largest year-over-year increase in ten years—even as real GDP growth remained steady, signaling that Beijing prioritizes sustaining the pace of its military modernization.[5] With the 2027 PLA centenary approaching, official Chinese policy documents have framed 2026 as crucial and called for concentrated efforts to meet the 2027 milestone of achieving accelerated military modernization—a date that coincides with Xi's reported directive for the PLA to be capable of conducting a successful invasion of Taiwan.[6]

Xi believes that taking control of Taiwan is central to Beijing's long-term strategic trajectory and has made it a requirement of his overarching and oft-repeated goal of "national rejuvenation."[7] Xi's order for the PLA to be capable of invading Taiwan by 2027 is fueling aggressive preparation for conflict, visible in China's military development, training, and persistent encroachment around the island.*[8] Beijing's focus on Taiwan is fueling greater gray zone activity and coercive statecraft aimed at deterring outside support, including an aggressive pressure campaign against Japan and more active efforts to stop arms sales to Taipei. (For more information on China's efforts to expand its control over Taiwan and Taiwan's strategic importance to the United States, see Chapter 9, "Taiwan: A Crucial Window for a Critical Partner.")

Beyond its efforts to lay the groundwork for control of Taiwan, China is simultaneously advancing other efforts to become the preeminent military power in the Indo-Pacific. PLA and China Coast Guard (CCG) presence throughout the first island chain expanded

*To be clear, analysts generally agree that the 2027 date is a military "readiness" goal and not a date certain for China to launch a blockade or invasion.

over the past year. China conducted three separate large-scale deployments of naval and coast guard vessels across the region during this period: a record-setting deployment of more than 100 ships in December 2025, another deployment of similar scale in May 2026, and a new record of more than 110 vessels deployed along the first island chain in July 2026.[9]

Figure 1: Record-Breaking PLA and CCG Vessel Deployment Throughout First Island Chain, July 3, 2026



Source: Taiwan National Security Council Secretary-General Joseph Wu (@josephwutw), "#China's massive maritime mobilization along the #1stIslandChain is a clear sign of its expansionism. We've tracked a record high of over 110 #PLAN & #CCG vessels. This bully has too much money to throw around, but none for its own people." X, July 4, 2026, 4:42 a.m. Created for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. Names and boundary representation are not necessarily authoritative.

China's naval activities beyond the first island chain in the past year reflect its far-seas ambition. PLA Navy operations in the Western Pacific—including the forward deployment of an amphibious assault task group during the December 2025 Justice Mission blockade exercise around Taiwan, *Liaoning* aircraft carrier deployment from May to June 2026, and combined naval patrols with Russia in July 2026—demonstrate China's focus on sustaining complex naval operations at greater distances from its shores.[10] Over the past year, China utilized a full range of statecraft to punish U.S. allies and partners that opposed its aggression and sought to uphold regional deterrence, most notably vis-à-vis Japan. By directing its coercive actions at regional countries rather than the U.S. presence, Beijing increases pressure on these countries for their role in the U.S.-led regional security architecture while avoiding confrontation with the United States itself.

China Elevates Technology as a Decisive Front in Strategic Competition

China's rhetoric and policy actions over the past year continued to emphasize Xi's view that technology is the central arena of strategic competition and most important source of comprehensive national power.[11] High-level policy directives in 2026 such as the 15th Five-Year Plan made clear that technological self-reliance will continue to be an organizing principle of China's national development.[12] For more than a decade, Xi has sought to enhance China's indigenous innovation capacity to prevent strategic vulnerabilities in critical technology supply chains. The latest policy directives uphold this priority and deepen the integration of national security and technological development.

China is tightening regulations over its domestic technology industries while criticizing foreign measures that constrain its technological development.[13] Although Beijing issued general licenses in December 2025 to mitigate the tension from its aggressive export controls, it continued to restrict U.S. access to rare earth elements and other critical minerals through 2026 while accusing the United States of suppressing China's development.[14] China also tightened state control over the supply chains that technology depends on. New regulations in May 2026, for example, expanded state authority over the critical mineral and rare earth elements industries to reinforce China's leverage against foreign de-risking efforts.[15] (For more information on China's efforts to expand its influence over global commodities markets, see Chapter 6, "The Price of Everything: China's Bid to Reshape Global Commodities Markets.")

As explained in Chapter 1, "U.S.-China Economic and Trade Relations (Year in Review)," Beijing has placed AI at the center of its technology advancement efforts. Beijing seeks to develop and diffuse AI to enhance its comprehensive national power and innovation capacity, especially to expand its international influence and drive military modernization. At the September Trump-Xi summit, the United States and China established the U.S.-China Super Intelligence Dialogue to discuss AI risks and benefits and agreed to a bilateral communication channel for AI incidents.[16] While these mechanisms could improve communication on AI-related national security risks,

further coordination on the trajectory of frontier AI development and AI safety and security remains unlikely in the near term, given Beijing's distrust of U.S. proposals and policies it views as limiting China's technological advancement.[17] China's record on nuclear arms control may offer a useful precedent for its likely approach to AI regulation—outwardly advocating for responsible governance while resisting transparency measures and binding commitments that could constrain its own development.[18]

China's reluctance to accept constraints on its own AI development does not preclude Beijing from seeking a leading role in AI governance initiatives. Rather, China pursues international cooperation on AI insofar as it promotes itself as a world leader in AI governance and augments its international influence, which Beijing can use to popularize its own technology and technical standards. China's establishment of the World AI Cooperation Organization (WAICO) in July 2026—alongside Xi Jinping's first-ever address to the World AI Conference in Shanghai—signals that leadership over the emerging international order for AI has become a priority of China's global governance agenda.[19] China leverages homegrown international forums and AI capacity-building initiatives as vehicles to promote the export of Chinese AI infrastructure, models, and technical standards—a strategy that was on full display at the World AI Conference.[20]

China Used Summit Preparation to Contain Tensions While Sustaining Competitive Pressure

In the months before the May 2026 Trump-Xi meeting, the United States and China largely refrained from public confrontation and cycles of retaliation in anticipation of the summit. Trump and Xi's meeting in South Korea in late October 2025 laid the groundwork for this temporary détente, when the two leaders agreed to a year-long trade truce and eased their reciprocal escalation on tariffs, rare earth minerals, and technology controls.[21] Beijing's interest in a successful summit was evident in December 2025 when it had only a muted response to a record U.S. arms sale to Taiwan. China reportedly warned the United States that the sales could derail the summit but limited China's concrete response to sanctions on U.S. defense firms—a relatively symbolic action likely calculated to keep Xi positioned to press the more consequential goal of shaping future arms sales.[22]

Xi made the Taiwan issue a primary focus of the leaders' May meeting, with China signaling in the leadup to the summit that Taiwan would be a key issue for negotiation.[23] Chinese readouts of the meeting repeatedly emphasized that Taiwan is "the most important issue in U.S.-China relations."[24] President Trump confirmed that he discussed arms sales to Taiwan with Xi "in great detail," marking a departure from the long-held U.S. policy that it would not consult with Beijing on arms sales to Taipei.[25]

The bilateral calm surrounding the summit, however, was a product of deliberate Chinese management rather than genuine strategic restraint. As Xi cultivated an air of stability with the United States during his meeting with President Trump, he framed the relationship in the context of the Thucydides Trap—the theory that war becomes likely when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling

one.[26] By invoking the Thucydides Trap, Xi framed accommodation of China's growing power as necessary to avoid conflict. Beneath the diplomatic surface, Beijing put this strategic logic into practice as it continued pressing its interests on every front while attempting to steer the United States toward accommodation of its growing power.

China Sustains Malign Activities Against the United States Despite Overtones of Stability

China continued to conduct a broad range of malign activities over the past year that undermined U.S. sovereignty and threatened national security. New revelations in 2026 underscored the persistence of Beijing's efforts to co-opt U.S. political figures. Eileen Wang, former mayor of Arcadia, California, pleaded guilty in May 2026 to charges related to her publishing of CCP propaganda at the direction of Chinese handlers.[27] China's transnational repression efforts and united front work on U.S. soil also continued to surface over the past year. Bronx resident and U.S. citizen Lu Jianwang was convicted in May 2026 of acting as an illegal agent of China in connection with his operation of an overseas police station in New York for China's Ministry of Public Security.[28]

Chinese cyber operations targeting U.S. critical infrastructure remain a serious risk to national security. In the past year, U.S. officials and cybersecurity researchers noted persistent threats from Chinese cyber actors such as Volt Typhoon and Salt Typhoon.[29] The U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) released an advisory in April 2026 warning of the growing propensity of Chinese hackers to conduct malicious cyber operations through networks of compromised internet-connected devices, which supports China's goals of feeding its global espionage system and pre-positioning offensive cyber capabilities in critical infrastructure.[30]

China's efforts to shape and undermine the U.S. information environment are growing more sophisticated and more targeted. Threat intelligence researchers documented efforts by a Chinese company with links to the Chinese government to develop AI-enabled influence operations capable of operating at greater scale and sophistication, including systems designed to autonomously identify target audiences, generate tailored content, and more effectively mask inauthentic accounts.[31] U.S.-based threat intelligence reporting in 2026 identified a potential coordinated Chinese information operation to amplify opposition to the construction of AI-related data centers and infrastructure, which may be advancing across both Chinese state media and coordinated inauthentic online accounts.[32] These attempts to incite controversy in legitimate U.S. political debates align with China's broader information manipulation strategy, which focuses on deepening social and political divisions to erode the domestic consensus needed to govern effectively.

China Exploits U.S. Foreign Policy Shifts and Global Conflicts to Advance Its Interests

China leveraged global conflicts in 2026 to strengthen its strategic position and present itself as a stable partner while carefully limiting the risks of direct confrontation with the United States. Beijing used the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, U.S. attacks on Vene-

zuela and Iran, and uncertainty surrounding U.S. policy priorities to enhance the benefits it obtains from its authoritarian partnerships and its broader international influence. By framing itself as a more stabilizing international power than the United States, China aimed to improve its global image and deepen cooperation with several U.S. allies and partners. At the same time, China remained a key enabler of the "Axis of Autocracy"—Russia, Iran, and North Korea—by supporting their military and regional destabilizing activities and helping them evade U.S. and European sanctions regimes. (For more on the "Axis of Autocracy," see the Commission's 2025 Annual Report, Chapter 3, "Axis of Autocracy: China's Revisionist Ambitions with Russia, Iran, and North Korea"; for more on China and Hong Kong's role in sanctions evasion, see the Commission's November 2025 staff paper, "China's Facilitation of Sanctions and Export Control Evasion.")

China Casts Itself as a More Stable Alternative to the United States

China used global conflicts in 2026 to portray itself as a more stable and responsible international actor than the United States, advancing Beijing's broader effort to shape global perceptions in its favor. This effort reflects Beijing's pursuit of "discourse power," or the ability to shape how the world perceives China and its role in the international system. In explaining the CCP's Five-Year Plan outline, state-run *Xinhua News Agency* acknowledged that, despite great progress in its international propaganda, China's global image is still largely "shaped by others" rather than "self-shaped."[33] It identifies discourse power as a near-term priority to secure external influence.[34]

Beijing sought to capitalize on U.S. military actions and economic policies by portraying Washington as a source of instability and China as a more predictable alternative. Chinese foreign policy commentary paired criticisms of U.S. "unilateralism" and "hegemonism"—especially in the context of the U.S. capture of Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro and the U.S. bombing of Iran—with claims that China serves as a regional stabilizer, is committed to peaceful development, and can provide alternative governance frameworks grounded in equality.[35] Chinese state-run media hailed Beijing's resolution efforts in the Cambodia-Thailand ceasefire—for which President Trump also claimed credit—as standing in "stark contrast" to the West's "transactional mediation."[36] Beijing credited the conflict's end to its Asian Security Model, a blueprint for conflict resolution and security specifically aimed at China's neighboring countries.[37]

China sought to elevate its regional image throughout the Iran war by presenting itself as a stabilizing force that took steps to help address the energy security problems created by the conflict. China reportedly cut its oil imports from its average 11.5 million barrels per day down to eight million barrels per day, thus decreasing demand and helping to stabilize oil prices.[38] (For more on China's responses to the Iran war and the Strait of Hormuz closure, see the Commission's report, "Enabling Iran: A Timeline of China's Role During and After Operation Epic Fury.")[39] China initially cut exports of jet fuel to its neighbors to protect its own supply, causing shortages among its neighbors, but it eventually took the opportuni-

ty to present itself as a regional problem solver when countries like Vietnam and Australia appealed for help.[40]

Beijing is also using uncertainty over U.S. policy to develop closer diplomatic, economic, and security ties with U.S. allies and partners. Amid tensions between the United States and many partners over tariffs and ongoing Section 301 investigations, China signed agreements with Spain and Canada and hosted then-UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer for a state visit, which Chinese readouts framed as advancing a long-term, stable, and comprehensive strategic partnership.[41] U.S. allies and partners are still aware, though, of the risks of deepening cooperation with China. As the official UK press release prior to Starmer's visit to China noted, the UK did not intend to "trade economic co-operation for our national security."[42] The engagements nevertheless gave Beijing opportunities to deepen relationships with U.S. allies and partners at a time of heightened uncertainty over Washington's policies, offering important U.S. economic and security partners a tool to hedge against U.S. tariffs. (For more on China's attempt to exploit trade partner concerns about U.S. trade policy in 2026, see Chapter 1, "U.S.-China Economic and Trade Relations (Year in Review).")

The cumulative effect of these dynamics may be a more favorable international environment for China's discourse interests. A July 2026 Pew Research study found that people in many countries around the world now view China more favorably than the United States, a shift that may, in part, reflect the impact of China's sustained messaging.[43] In the past few years, views of the United States across 20 countries have declined, while views of China have steadily increased. In many countries, the public's overall confidence in General Secretary Xi is higher than it is in President Trump.[44] This shift in public opinion could reduce political constraints for governments seeking to receive investment or engage in security cooperation with China. Increasingly positive perceptions of China, combined with declining perceptions in the United States, could open doors for China to expand its global presence at the cost of U.S. influence.

China Enables Russia's War While Capitalizing on Moscow's Growing Dependence

China's claims of neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine war, always tenuous given the Xi-Putin "no limits partnership," diverged further from its actions over the past year. Although European leaders repeatedly urged China to use its influence to bring Russia to the negotiating table, Beijing responded with generic calls for dialogue rather than applying meaningful pressure on Moscow.[45]

China's actions in 2026 reinforced what Foreign Minister Wang Yi admitted to EU leaders in July 2025: Beijing does not want to see Russia lose to Ukraine.[46] As Foreign Minister Wang told EU High Representative Kaja Kallas, Beijing worries that, should the war end, the United States might then shift all of its attention to China.[47] China continued supplying Russia with technologies and components that sustained its war effort, adding to the billions in advanced machinery and technology China has reportedly supplied to the country since 2022.[48] According to 2026 reports, Chinese companies continued providing Russia with drones and drone com-

ponents through sanctions evasion mechanisms, including transshipment and proxy end user companies, bypassing both Western sanctions and China's own export laws.[49] Despite this, China continued asserting that it "strictly controlled" dual-use military and civilian good exports.[50] According to a report published by the Eastern Human Rights Group and the National Endowment for Democracy, telecommunications networks in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine rely heavily on Chinese equipment, while the yuan has reportedly become the second most used currency in the region, putting China's imprimatur on Moscow's control over occupied areas of Ukraine.[51] More than 90 percent of Russia's imports of sanctioned technology reportedly came through China in 2026, up from approximately 80 percent the previous year.[52] These developments prompted additional U.S., UK, and EU sanctions against Chinese entities and reinforced assessments that Beijing remained Russia's principal external enabler.[53]

Beijing has turned its support for Moscow into strategic leverage, using Russia's growing dependence to advance Chinese interests on more favorable terms. What was once viewed as a near-equal partnership has evolved into an imbalanced and asymmetric relationship.[54] Russian dependence on China has increased across sectors including energy exports, dual-use products, and other technology.*[55] Ongoing delays in the Power of Siberia 2 (PoS-2) gas pipeline project exemplify the increasing asymmetry of the relationship. Though Xi and Putin agreed in concept on the PoS-2 in 2025, China has leveraged its position to drive a hard bargain. Even when Putin visited China in an attempt to close the deal, Xi refused to accept Russia's preferred terms and reportedly pressed for decreased pricing and other demands, leading to claims by some that Putin left Beijing "empty handed."[56] Russia needs the pipeline more than China, and China is willing to wait until the deal swings in its favor.

Russia's Growing Dependence Enables China's Arctic Expansionism

Russia's growing dependence on China since 2022 has given Beijing leverage to expand its Arctic footprint, overcoming Moscow's traditional hesitancy to allow China to deepen its involvement in the region. Beijing pursues a range of economic, energy, scientific, technological, and security interests in the Arctic. As a non-Arctic state, though, its ability to realize many of these objectives depends on cooperation with Arctic countries, particularly Russia.[57] Moscow has long treated the Arctic as a core national interest and sought to maintain its perceived position as the region's leading power.[58] As a result, Russia historically approached cooperation with China cautiously, initially focusing

*China's purchases of Russian and Iranian energy exports have largely been in violation of U.S. and allied sanctions. In early 2026, however, President Trump temporarily eased some U.S. sanctions restrictions on oil from both countries to alleviate energy shortages and price increases caused by the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz. For more on China's sanctions violations, see the Commission's staff paper, "Enabling Iran: A Timeline of China's Role During and After Operation Epic Fury." For more on the temporary ease of sanctions, see Alan Rappeport, "Trump Removes Sanctions on Russia to Help Oil Flow Amid Iran Conflict," *New York Times*, March 12, 2026; Freddie Clayton, "U.S. Eases Iranian Oil Sanctions in Scramble to Contain Energy Prices, Handing Tehran a Boost," NBC News, March 21, 2026.

Russia's Growing Dependence Enables China's Arctic Expansionism—*Continued*

selectively on scientific research and oil and gas projects while seeking to limit Beijing's regional influence.[59] That caution has eroded as Moscow's need for Beijing's economic and political support has deepened.

Russia's growing dependence on China has enabled Beijing to expand its involvement in several areas of Arctic activity. In trade, the Northern Sea Route continues to create new opportunities for Sino-Russian commerce, particularly as Russia seeks alternative markets for its energy exports amid Western sanctions.[60] As an example, in February 2026, the Russian Duma ratified a bilateral agreement designed to facilitate expanded cooperation with China on Arctic natural gas projects.[61] Beyond trade and energy, Russia has expanded cooperation with China in maritime capacity building. Russian institutions such as Admiral Makarov State University of Maritime and Inland Shipping and Maritime State University have started training Chinese sailors in Arctic navigation, helping China develop expertise for operations in polar waters.[62]

China Sustains Iran While Limiting Its Own Exposure to the Conflict

China sustained Iran's military and economy while protecting its own energy and strategic interests. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz has significantly disrupted China's energy supply chains, as 40 percent of its crude oil and 30 percent of its liquefied natural gas travel through the channel.[63] This exposure gives Beijing a strong incentive to press for the restoration of normal navigation, while Iran has raised the prospect of preferential transit fees for Chinese vessels.[64] China has long been a key facilitator of Iran's sanctions and export control evasion, serving as the country's largest trading partner, supplier of dual-use technologies for Iran's economy and weapons, and primary purchaser of Iran's energy exports that keep the regime funded.[65] Throughout the Iran conflict, China continued these activities, reportedly providing Tehran with missile fuel precursors and drone-related dual-use components while continuing to purchase Iran's oil.[66]

China followed its playbook for responding to other international conflicts involving its partners: condemning U.S. actions diplomatically while providing discreet support and refraining from overt involvement.[67] China has maintained a lower-profile role in the Iran war than it has throughout the Russian war against Ukraine, largely limiting its official support for Iran to statements and general calls for de-escalation.[68] Chinese officials called the U.S. and Israeli strikes violations of international law and condemned the killing of Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.[69] In contrast, Beijing has avoided criticizing Iran, generically condemning "indiscriminate attacks against civilians and non-military targets" instead of explicitly calling out Iran's attacks on its Gulf State neighbors.*[70] (For more on

*The war with Iran began amid preparations for the first 2026 Trump-Xi summit, so Beijing's decision not to take a mediation role between the United States and Iran may reflect caution over any potential disruptions to bilateral relations at that time.

how China has sustained and enabled Iran, see the Commission's "China-Iran Fact Sheet: A Short Primer on the Relationship" and "Enabling Iran: A Timeline of China's Role During and After Operation Epic Fury.")

Xi Reassures Kim Jong Un That Engagement With Washington Will Not Come at Pyongyang's Expense

Xi Jinping's first visit to Pyongyang in seven years—coming just weeks after his summit with President Trump—signaled that Beijing intended to preserve its role as North Korea's primary patron regardless of what bilateral engagement with Washington produces.[71] The official statement following the June 8, 2026 meeting stated that "no matter how the international situation changes, the firm position of the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government in highly valuing the traditional China–DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] friendship will not change."[72] One significant motivator for Xi's visit to Pyongyang appears to have been Beijing's concerns over recent deepening economic and security cooperation between Russia and North Korea. Xi's emphasis on the "traditional" nature of China-North Korea relations and reference to the "international situation" underscored his interest in reassuring Pyongyang of Beijing's support while also indicating to Moscow that closer DPRK-Russia relations would not marginalize China.[73]

Beijing prioritized stabilizing relations with Pyongyang over pressing North Korea on its nuclear program by leaving denuclearization off the meeting agenda. Prior to the meeting, North Korea had indicated an unwillingness to discuss denuclearization during Xi's visit.[74] On June 14, North Korea had labeled denuclearization an "irreversibly finalized" matter in response to a South Korea-U.S. reaffirmation of the goal on June 11.[75] Shortly after, a North Korean official published an article that cited North Korea's "continuous development of nuclear force and thorough exercise of its position as a nuclear weapons state" as the only way to "defend peace and security in the Korean peninsula and the region."[76] Beijing did not publicly state whether denuclearization was on the agenda for the Xi-Kim visit or surrounding official meetings. North Korea's statements, however, suggest that the issue was not up for negotiation.

Xi Tightens Party Control While Advancing Military Modernization

Over the past year, Xi Jinping continued to prioritize tightening CCP control, expanding ideological and legal authority over Chinese society, and purging the senior ranks of the PLA—the latter at a scale not seen since the Cultural Revolution. Despite this internal upheaval, China's military modernization has pressed forward, strengthening Beijing's ability to pursue increasingly coercive measures to alter the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific.

Xi Expands Legal and Ideological Control Across Society and the Military as a National Security Imperative

China's January 2026 draft Cybercrime Prevention and Control Law demonstrates Xi's latest effort to transform national security concepts into legal authorities that strengthen CCP control over so-

ciety. The draft law would significantly expand police authority to monitor online activity, compel cooperation from digital platforms, and strengthen mechanisms for identifying and suppressing politically sensitive content.[77] The draft law reflects Xi's view of cyberspace as both a potential threat to regime security and a critical domain for reinforcing ideological conformity and strengthening CCP control.[78] The proposal builds directly on China's 2025 National Security White Paper, which elevated political security above all other priorities and treated economic, technological, cultural, ideological, and ethnic issues as components of regime security. (For more on the CCP's fixation on a broad national security concept to preserve CCP rule, see the Commission's 2024 Annual Report, Chapter 7, "China's New Measures for Control, Mobilization, and Resilience.")

China's New Ethnic Unity Law Extends CCP Control at Home and Abroad

China codified a new ethnic unity policy in March 2026 that more forcefully asserts CCP control over ethnic and religious minorities in China and aims to assimilate all citizens into a Han Chinese-centric ethnic identity. The law, which went into effect on July 1, 2026, calls for the sinicization of religion, the prioritization of Mandarin language in schools, and expanded ideological education aimed at strengthening identification with the Chinese nation and the CCP.[79] The law solidified Xi's shift away from policies that at least ostensibly allowed regional ethnic autonomy toward a policy that prioritizes assimilation into a unitary Han national identity, with especially significant implications for Xinjiang and Tibetan regions.[80] These measures illustrate the Party's impulse to expand societal control as a security imperative and more deeply integrate Party ideology into law.[81]

The Ethnic Unity Law also has implications for China's transnational repression efforts targeting individuals and entities involved in activities Beijing deems to be separatism. The law authorizes legal action against organizations and individuals Beijing determines to have undermined ethnic unity or promoted ethnic separatism, even outside China's borders.[82] The provision could create legal and political exposure under Chinese law for individuals and organizations outside China engaged in Taiwan advocacy or Uyghur, Tibetan, and other minority rights work. The Ethnic Unity Law's extraterritorial provision exemplifies Beijing's use of lawfare to suppress dissent beyond China's borders, creating legal mechanisms to target individuals and organizations for conduct Beijing deems separatist. China's efforts to establish a legal basis for cracking down on dissent abroad raise the risk that Beijing will pressure foreign governments to extradite those it targets, as it has done in hundreds of documented cases involving people from Taiwan transferred to mainland China.*[83]

*The Ethnic Unity Law reflects a trend: Beijing is codifying measures to crack down on any activities it perceives to be separatism to protect what it deems as sovereign territories, even if that requires using transnational repression tactics against overseas Chinese citizens or trying foreign nationals in absentia. The 2020 Hong Kong Security Law, which effectively ended Hong Kong's "one country, two systems" status, criminalized secession movements. In 2024, China's judicial and security authorities published guidance for using existing laws to prosecute "Taiwan independence" supporters in Chinese courts, with criminal penalties up to the death penalty.

Xi Concentrates Military Authority Amid Unprecedented Purges

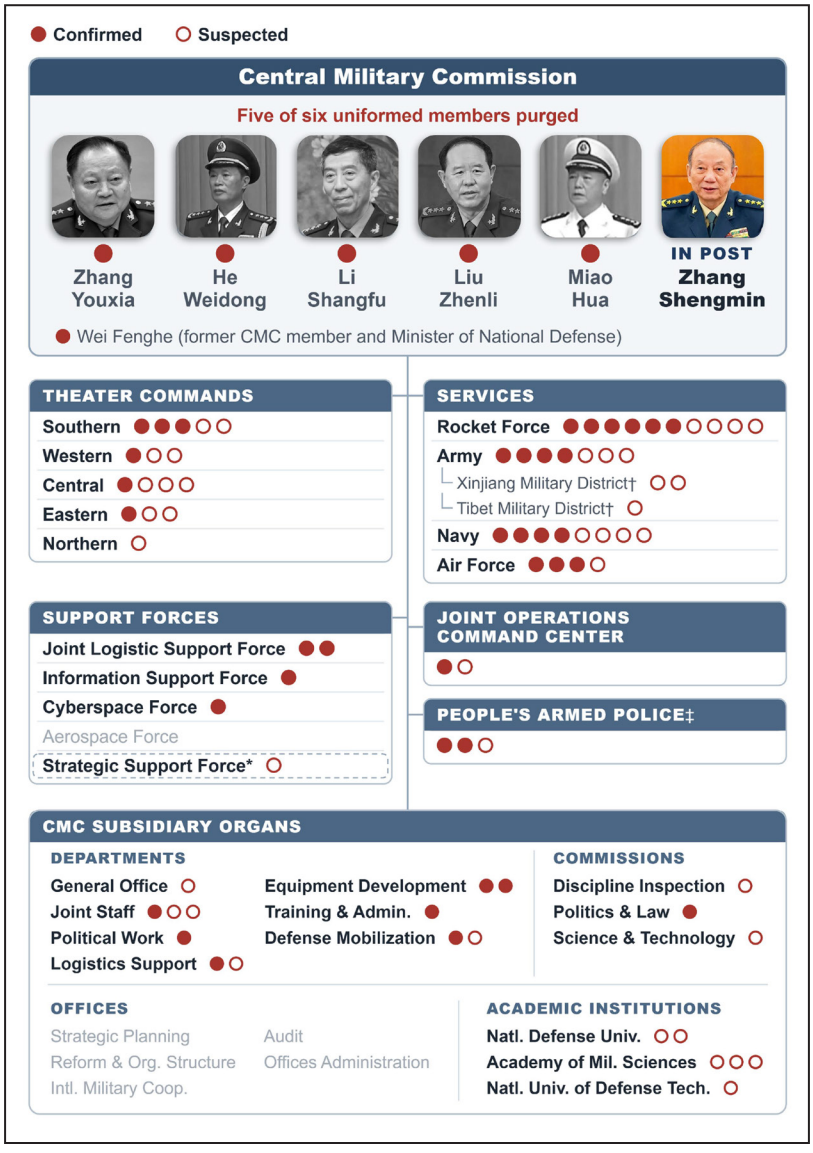
The same impulse—to extend CCP authority over anyone Beijing deems a threat, regardless of borders—drives Xi Jinping's fixation on ensuring a tight grip on the Party itself, where Xi's ongoing anticorruption campaign continues to affect the senior cadres in every corner of the Party-state bureaucracy.[84] In April 2026, China's top disciplinary organs announced an investigation into the once politically influential former Xinjiang Party Secretary and Politburo member Ma Xingrui, underscoring the unusually senior ranks affected by Xi's latest purges.[85]

Xi's consolidation of personal military authority, while introducing short-term institutional uncertainty, likely reflects his conviction that ideological reliability and centralized command are prerequisites for the kind of decisive military action China's strategic objectives may eventually require. No part of the CCP apparatus has been so affected by purges as the military. In August 2026, Xi officially removed two of the most senior remaining members of the Central Military Commission (CMC)—Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia and Joint Staff Department Chief of Staff Liu Zhenli—marking the most significant escalation of Xi's military purges to date.[86] Coming shortly after the purging of Vice Chairman He Weidong and Political Work Department Director Miao Hua in October 2025, Xi's removal of Zhang and Liu leaves Secretary of the Discipline Inspection Commission and new CMC Vice Chairman Zhang Shengmin as the only uniformed member on the CMC, alongside CMC Chairman Xi Jinping himself.[87] Beyond the CMC, Xi's purges have likely targeted the commanders and political commissars of all theater commands and military services, many of which still have vacancies in the highest ranks.[88]

Though most often framed in the context of rooting out corruption, Xi's purge of senior military officials in the past year likely points to a motivation to root out potential dissenters or figures he sees as disloyal. Official Chinese media accused Zhang and Liu of undermining the CMC Chairman Responsibility System—referring to the ultimate authority of CMC Chairman Xi over the military—and ideological unity in the PLA, suggesting their transgressions extended beyond typical graft or corruption and involved perceived threats to Xi's authority.[89] The purges have targeted a notably high number of political commissars or officials involved in political work, underlining the likely ideological motivations behind the purges.

Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, *The Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Gazetted and Takes Immediate Effect*, June 30, 2020; Michael C. Davis and Victoria Tin-bor Hui, "Beijing's National Security Law Brings Mainland Repression to Hong Kong," *Diplomat*, July 03, 2020; China's Supreme People's Procuratorate, *China Issues Judicial Guidelines on Imposing Criminal Punishment on Diehard 'Taiwan Independence' Separatists*, June 21, 2024.

Figure 2: Purges of Senior Officers in the PLA Affect Nearly Every Major Organization



Note: This chart shows the known and suspected purges of PLA officers ranked Lieutenant General/Vice Admiral and above between July 2023 and October 2026. Solid circles indicate officially confirmed disciplinary action: expulsion from the CCP, arrest, or removal from post or from China's national legislature or political advisory body for violations of discipline and law. Hollow circles indicate individuals who are missing from public view, reportedly under investigation, or removed or replaced without a stated disciplinary reason. Affiliation reflects the individual's most recent position, which may predate their purge.

*The Strategic Support Force was dissolved in 2024.

†Administered by the PLA Army, operationally subordinate to the Western Theater Command.

‡The People's Armed Police is a paramilitary force separate from the PLA but answers directly to the CMC.

Source: Various; portraits from Wikimedia Commons, China (press handout).[90]

In the past year, Xi took new measures to strengthen the Party's governance of the military, highlighting his prioritization of achieving complete ideological uniformity in the PLA. Official media and meetings during China's Two Sessions, the concurrent annual meetings of its congress and top political advisory body, had a stronger emphasis on ensuring the PLA's political obedience to Xi's authority compared to recent years.[91] The CMC released new regulations in May 2026 to tighten the political education and supervision of senior military cadres.[92]

Xi's distrust of the military and his related efforts to strengthen political control over the PLA are unlikely to fade in the near term. It is notable that as Xi's 2027 military readiness deadline for Taiwan nears, his purges have continued. Official Chinese media, high-level policy documents, and Xi himself have repeatedly emphasized the necessity of political cohesion and loyalty in the military to ensure combat effectiveness.[93] Political rectification efforts to reinforce Xi's vision of Party control over the PLA are likely to persist in the near term, given the importance Xi places on political conformity for China's ability to win wars.

Xi's increasing concentration of power and the sweeping purges in the top ranks of the PLA introduce new uncertainties over China's military performance and decision-making calculus to launch large-scale operations. The concentration of military authority means decisions over whether and how to use force rest almost entirely on Xi's personal judgment alone, even as the purges create uncertainty about PLA readiness and performance.

The PLA Presses Toward Its Modernization Goals Despite Leadership Upheaval

Political instability in the upper ranks of the PLA has not translated to slower military modernization. Over the past year, Beijing pressed ahead at a rapid pace toward developing its military to strengthen both near-term operational advantages and achieve eventual military superiority over the United States. China's military modernization drive in the past year was especially evident in three key areas: a sustained naval buildup paired with expanding power projection, sealift, and amphibious capabilities; the accelerating development of uncrewed systems; and the push to integrate AI into military systems.

China Continues Its Naval Expansion with a Focus on Amphibious Capabilities

China's navy continued to grow in both size and reach over the past year, advancing a long-term effort to become the preeminent maritime power in the Indo-Pacific. Official Chinese reporting documented at least ten new surface combatants operating with the PLA Navy over the past year, including six guided-missile destroyers and four guided-missile frigates, extending a years-long buildup of its surface combatant fleet.*[94] Backed by the world's largest shipbuilding industry, China's sustained expansion poses a growing long-term

*This count includes vessels identified in Chinese reporting during the review period as newly commissioned or recently entering service as well as new vessels documented conducting operational training. Precise commissioning dates are not publicly confirmed for all vessels.

challenge to U.S. efforts to maintain a favorable balance of power in the region.

China's continued progress on developing aircraft carriers underscores its determination to build a true blue-water navy. China's third aircraft carrier, *Fujian*, entered service in November 2025—the first of its kind to be indigenously designed.[95] Throughout 2026, satellite imagery showed steady progress on the construction of China's fourth aircraft carrier, which is likely to be nuclear-powered, marking a significant step toward sustaining longer-range deployments.[96] The relatively fast progress on the so-called Type 004 aircraft carrier in 2026—compared with the United States' 12-year-long construction of its last commissioned aircraft carrier—reflects China's determination to produce six more aircraft carriers by 2035, supporting Beijing's far-seas power projection ambitions and strengthening its ability to conduct anti-access/area denial operations in the Western Pacific.[97]

Alongside its naval expansion, China has enhanced amphibious lift capabilities necessary for an invasion of Taiwan, much of it through the militarization of civilian vessels. A Reuters ship-tracking investigation from November 2025 documented civilian roll-on roll-off (RORO) vessels and deck cargo ships' participation in a series of amphibious landing exercises earlier that year.[98] Japanese news outlet *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported in January 2026 that the PLA had begun deploying militarized civilian cargo ships alongside its fleet of newly constructed Landing Platform Utility (LPU) "jack-up barges" to simulate amphibious landings in environments that resemble Taiwan's coastal geography.[99]

China Expands the Role of Uncrewed Systems in Warfare

Over the past year, China further integrated uncrewed systems into PLA force structure and operational concepts, underscoring the growing prominence of drones in PLA conceptions of modern warfare. China's 15th Five-Year Plan explicitly called for the need to accelerate the adoption of intelligent uncrewed systems and countermeasure capabilities, illustrating the growing prominence of drone warfare in Chinese conceptions of the future of war and elevating drone technology as a core priority for China's military development through 2030.[100]

In 2026, China showcased its adoption of several new drone platforms, including the Atlas AI-enabled drone swarm system; autonomous uncrewed underwater vehicles (UUVs) for mine-clearing and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and the Jiutian drone mothership, which can deploy and coordinate swarms of smaller aerial drones.[101] China likely believes its adoption of uncrewed systems across all domains will strengthen the PLA's ability to conduct complex operations with enhanced battlefield awareness, operational reach, force survivability, precision strike capabilities, logistics and resupply, saturation warfare, and more. UUVs and autonomous systems may prove to be China's most disruptive long-term undersea capability, enabling it to leverage scale, persistence, and distributed sensing to complicate U.S. operations and impose disproportionate costs. (For more information about China's development of undersea drones, see Chapter 5, "Active Intercept: China's Efforts to Narrow U.S. Undersea Advantage.")

China Accelerates Its Pursuit of AI-Enabled Military Capabilities

China's focus on autonomous drones is one facet of a broader transformation toward what the PLA calls "intelligentized warfare," which refers to the integration of AI into military systems, including weapons systems, kill chains, command and control, and logistics.[102] In the past year, China has advanced its adoption of intelligentized military systems, reflected in official discourse, systems development, and training. PLA exercises in the past year have featured the use of crewed-uncrewed teaming, AI-enabled target recognition and firepower allocation, and intelligent command decision-support systems.[103]

China is seeking to evade U.S. export controls to gain the most advanced semiconductors that underpin its intelligentization drive. Researchers from the Center for Security and Emerging Technology assessed in April 2026 that the PLA is actively soliciting Nvidia's advanced chips to develop its AI-enabled military capabilities, based on PLA procurement documents from the past several years.[104] China is also seeking to expand access to military-relevant data. PLA researchers have highlighted shortages of sufficiently diverse real-world training data for unmanned systems as a constraint on developing robust perception capabilities.[105] Data on Russian drone performance in Ukraine could provide valuable insights for China's equipment development, with Chinese manufacturers providing Beijing a potential channel for obtaining that information.[106] (For more information about China's pursuit of large-scale data to support its military intelligentization efforts, see Chapter 7, "Collect, Steal, Buy, Fuse, Monetize: How China Is Turning Data into Assets and Ammunition.")

China Expands Its Nuclear Deterrent While Resisting Constraints on Its Strategic Capabilities

China continued to expand its nuclear arsenal faster than any other country in 2026.[107] Beijing portrays its growing arsenal as a defensive response to an increasingly hostile security environment, but its simultaneous rejection of arms control negotiations and continued modernization suggest it views nuclear expansion as an important component of long-term strategic competition with the United States.

Arsenal growth: The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) assessed in December 2025 that China is on track to produce 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030.[108] The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute estimated in June 2026 that China's stock of nuclear warheads stands at approximately 620.[109] Beijing continued efforts to portray itself as a responsible nuclear power despite its rapid arsenal expansion. China released its first arms control white paper in over two decades in November 2025, which emphasized its defensive nuclear doctrine and non-aggressive posture while justifying its capability development against what it deemed as growing threats to its security from antagonistic U.S. behavior.[110]

China Expands Its Nuclear Deterrent While Resisting Constraints on Its Strategic Capabilities—*Continued*

Resistance to arms control: Following the expiration of the U.S.-Russia New START Treaty in February 2026, China rejected calls to enter formal multilateral nuclear arms control negotiations, even as it engaged in preliminary discussions with the United States.[111] Beijing's position leaves it greater flexibility to continue expanding and modernizing its nuclear forces.

Improving readiness: Beyond expanding its arsenal, China is improving the readiness of its land-based nuclear forces. DOD assessed in December 2025 that China has likely loaded more than 100 DF-31 class intercontinental ballistic missiles at its three silo fields, demonstrating a trend toward strengthening readiness posture and early warning counterstrike capability.[112] Satellite imagery in May 2026 showed sprawling construction of launch pads near China's nuclear missile silos in the northwestern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, illustrating sustained efforts to enhance the operability of its land-based nuclear arsenal.[113]

China Normalizes Aggressive and Coercive Activities in the Indo-Pacific

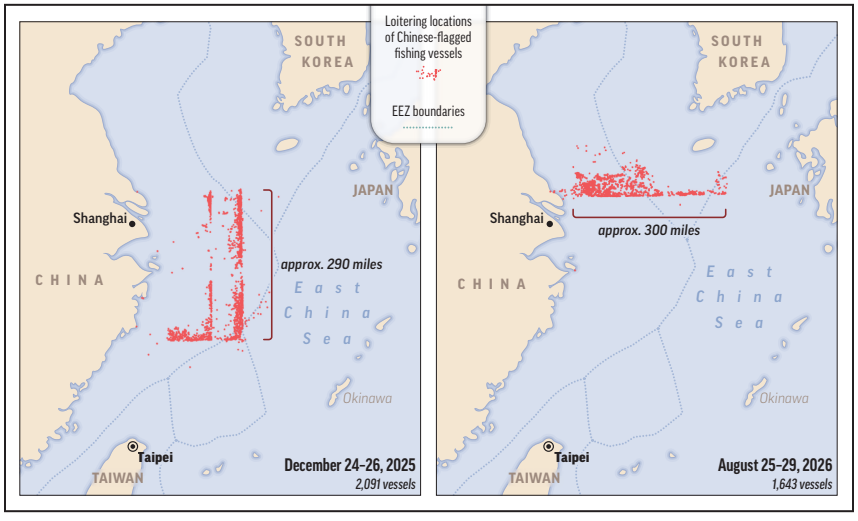
China intensified efforts to shape the Indo-Pacific security environment in its favor in 2026, from rehearsing a blockade of Taiwan to using economic and gray zone coercion against Japan amid Tokyo's efforts to bolster defense capabilities. At the same time, China presented itself as a regional stabilizer, mediator, and leader. Beyond the first island chain, China continued expanding its ability to sustain military activities, project its model of security governance, and increase its infrastructure footprint in competition with other actors in the region.

China Crosses New Operational Thresholds Around Taiwan

China's gray zone campaign against Taiwan intensified in 2026 on two simultaneous tracks: honing military capabilities for a potential contingency while pressuring Taiwan's population toward accommodation. On the military track, China crossed new operational thresholds. From December 29–30, 2025, the PLA conducted a large-scale exercise named Justice Mission-2025 that focused on "blockading key ports and territory" and continued to encircle Taiwan, as seen in previous PLA Joint Sword exercises held in 2023 and 2024.[114] (For more on the PLA Justice Mission-2025 exercise, see Chapter 9, "Taiwan: A Crucial Window for a Critical Partner.") In January 2026, a PLA surveillance drone flew over Taiwan's Pratas Island in the South China Sea, marking the first known incursion of a PLA surveillance drone into Taiwan's airspace.[115] In addition to PLA activity, China demonstrated its capacity to mobilize civilian vessels at a scale that could support a blockade against Taiwan and complicate the maneuvering of other military forces in the region.[116] In December 2025, just days before the PLA's Justice Mission-2025 exercise, approximately 2,091 Chinese fishing vessels organized into

cordon formations in the East China Sea near Taiwan.[117] Chinese fishing vessels were observed conducting similarly large maritime formations on a near-monthly basis from December 2025 to August 2026.[118] (See Figure 3: Chinese Fishing Vessels Form Maritime Barriers in East China Sea.) The amassing of civilian vessel formations could pose challenges for the maneuverability of U.S. and allied forces, potentially obstructing access to Taiwan during a conflict and complicating rules of engagement.*[119]

Figure 3: Chinese Fishing Vessels Form Maritime Barriers in East China Sea



Note: The map on the left shows the formation of Chinese fishing vessels into two parallel reverse 'L' shapes stretching approximately 290 miles long on December 24–26, 2025. In subsequent months, Chinese fishing vessels conducted a series of formations: January 10–13, about 1,409 vessels formed a north-south (vertical) line; March 1–3, about 723 vessels formed almost two north-south (vertical) lines; April 2–4, about 983 vessels formed a north-south (vertical) line. The map on the right shows the formation of Chinese fishing vessels in an east-west (horizontal) line approximately 300 miles long on August 25–29. IngeniSPACE, which conducts daily monitoring of PLA irregular warfare activities, provided additional data on the loitering Chinese fishing vessels to the Commission. The *New York Times* reported that some fishing boats participated in previous maritime militia activities. However, "China does not publish the names of most vessels in its maritime militia, making it difficult to identify the status of the boats involved."

Source: ingeniSPACE; "Global Fishing Watch," *Global Fishing Watch*. Created for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. Names and boundary representation are not necessarily authoritative.

In June 2026, China conducted an interagency "special maritime traffic enforcement operation" in international waters east of Taiwan, issuing direct commands to foreign commercial vessels and asserting a legal right to operate law enforcement vessels in the area as a part of Beijing's "offshore governance model."[120] Vessels also conducted activities beyond the scope of law enforcement, including seabed mapping.[121] These activities reflect Beijing's deliberate

*If coastal fishing vessels provide an "effective contribution to military action or directly participate in hostilities," they lose protected status under international law and become an auxiliary naval force. Under the Law of Armed Conflict, coastal fishing vessels supporting a Chinese blockade or other military operations against Taiwan would likely make them legitimate military targets. U.S. Army 8th Theater Sustainment Command, "Beijing's Maritime Militia Rehearsing Blockade Tactics, Analysts Say," *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, May 6, 2026; U.S. Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, *The Law of Armed Conflict*, §IX.D.

efforts to institutionalize a growing presence around Taiwan while rehearsing the operational concepts that a contingency would likely require. (For more on China's pressure campaign against Taiwan, see Chapter 9, "Taiwan: A Crucial Window for a Critical Partner.")

Beijing Intensifies Pressure Campaign and Gray Zone Activities Aimed at Japan

China escalated a multifaceted pressure campaign against Japan, combining diplomatic, economic, and gray zone tactics, following a November 2025 statement from Japan's newly elected Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi. In response to a question during a parliamentary session, Takaichi said an attack against Taiwan "could constitute a survival-threatening situation," which under Japanese security law could permit the use of Japan's Self Defense Forces in response to a Taiwan contingency.[122] Beijing called the statement "severely inconsistent" with the Japanese government's prior policies on regional defense engagement, seeing it as a potential escalation in Tokyo's willingness to provide military support.[123] Chinese government officials lodged diplomatic protests and directed personal attacks at Prime Minister Takaichi, including a notable X post by China's consul general in Osaka that reposted Takaichi's November speech with the caption "the dirty neck that stuck itself out must be cut off without a moment's hesitation."[124] Beijing also launched new export controls on 40 Japanese entities with ties to Japan's military, and it added 20 entities to the watch list.[125] The list includes major Japanese defense companies and contractors, aerospace entities, and institutions like Japan's National Defense Academy.[126]

China conducted aggressive gray zone activities directed at Japan over the past year. The CCG repeatedly carried out "rights-protection" patrols and maritime law enforcement activities around the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands, which China and Taiwan also both claim. Other Chinese vessels engaged in unauthorized activities in Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ).*[127]

Many of Beijing's gray zone operations around Taiwan were also meant to send a signal to Japan. The December 2025 and January 2026 Chinese fishing boat blockade exercises discussed above, which demonstrated China's maritime abilities in a conflict with Taiwan, also served as a signal to Tokyo.[128] Beijing likely aimed to normalize its maritime presence east of Taiwan to reinforce both its contested regional claims and its strategic position around Taiwan. On July 4, China for the first time labeled its maritime activities east of Taiwan as "routine," an intentional rhetorical shift that Chinese state-run media explicitly highlighted and linked to Japan's criticism of Chinese activities near Taiwan and in the East China Sea.[129] By characterizing these activities as routine and lawful, Beijing aimed to challenge Japan's maritime jurisdiction in the area. Later that month, Chinese and Russian naval ships jointly sailed into Japan's EEZ near Okinotori Island, Japan's southernmost territory, where a Chinese destroyer fired its machine guns during an exercise—mark-

*The CCG has regularly challenged Japan's claimed contiguous zone and territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands, seeking to normalize its growing presence and aggressive activities. For more on CCG presence near the Senkaku Islands, see Takahashi Kosuke, "China Coast Guard Presence Near Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Reaches Record High in 2025," *Diplomat*, January 6, 2026.

ing the first known case of a foreign live-fire exercise inside Japan's EEZ.[130] China argued the exercise was legal because it does not recognize Okinotori as anything more than a rock, not an island; under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a rock is not entitled to an EEZ—unlike an island.[131] Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Minoru Kihara also noted that the live-fire exercises posed serious risks to nearby vessels.[132]

China Sustains Its Aggressive South China Sea Gray Zone Campaign Against the Philippines

China continued its aggressive actions in the South China Sea toward the Philippines, a U.S. mutual defense treaty ally. From January to June, the Philippines filed 27 diplomatic complaints against China for its incursions in the West Philippine Sea.[133] On July 20, CCG crew and Philippine Navy personnel physically clashed at Second Thomas Shoal, with the two sides presenting conflicting accounts of who initiated the confrontation.[134] The U.S. Department of State condemned "China's dangerous and aggressive actions against Philippine navy personnel."[135] The two sides clashed again a few days later at Scarborough Shoal when 15 CCG and Chinese "maritime militia" boats patrolled and used water cannons to spray a Philippine vessel, which was reportedly bringing fuel and food to Filipino fishing boats.[136] The rapid escalation into physical confrontations of both encounters, as well as a third clash in the month of July, demonstrated the ongoing risk that China's attempts to intimidate the Philippines could trigger a broader crisis.

China also targeted the Philippines' maritime claims. In May 2026, China placed a "semi-permanent" structure at the disputed Scarborough Shoal.[137] Shortly after, Japan and the Philippines announced they would officially enter talks to delineate their EEZs and continental shelf.[138] China objected to the talks, calling them "completely illegal and void."[139] Beijing has consistently refused to recognize the 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Award, which found no legal basis under UNCLOS for major elements of China's South China Sea claims, including the "nine-dash line."[140] In July 2026, after the United States and 13 other countries reaffirmed the 2016 ruling in a joint statement, Beijing released its own statement reiterating its sovereignty claims over South China Sea islands, features, and waters.[141] Though the structure China placed at Scarborough Shoal measured only about 388 square feet, its placement marked a new step in China's assertion of claims over the Shoal and sparked concerns in the Philippines that China could attempt to establish a more permanent outpost, as it has on contested features in the Spratly Islands.[142]

Beijing Selectively Engages with New Delhi While Pressing Territorial Claims and Indian Ocean Influence

China sought to ease tensions with India in 2026 while continuing to press its territorial claims along the disputed border and expanding its strategic presence in the Indian Ocean. Beijing and New Delhi built on their 2024 and 2025 leader-level dialogues through confidence-building measures like reopening flights and pilgrimage travel, easing restrictions for Chinese investment in India, and

avoiding direct border confrontation.[143] Beijing simultaneously reinforced its sovereignty claims over contested areas—including most of India's state of Arunachal Pradesh—through political statements, dual-use infrastructure buildup near contested borders, and military activities.[144] China has also begun transposing its South China Sea playbook to the Indian Ocean by aiming to normalize its maritime presence through exploratory vessels and by asserting the right to rename sites with new Mandarin names. China seeks to expand its influence across the region to erode India's regional leadership and pave the way for future economic and military access.[145]

For India, significant distrust toward China endures, and stability at the border is still seen as a prerequisite for substantive cooperation with China.[146] In the wake of India and Pakistan's May 2025 conflict, during which China reportedly provided support to Pakistan on multiple fronts, the Indian government has continued taking measures to build up and recalibrate its military posture.[147] While cooperation between India and China will likely continue to expand in limited lanes of mutual interest, their territorial disputes will continue to hinder the growth of a true partnership. China's dual-track approach with India—pursuing economic normalization while pressing territorial claims and expanding into the Indian Ocean—applies the same coercive-but-controlled logic as discussed in a later chapter in this Report. Beijing uses one track to preserve productive engagement and another to advance contested interests. (For more on China's complex relationship with India, see Chapter 3, "China's Other Front: India and the Future of U.S. Strategy in the Indo-Pacific.")

Regional Diplomacy and Coercion Advance China's Security Agenda

China sought to strengthen its regional influence in 2026 by pairing diplomatic engagement with continued coercive pressure on neighboring states. As the Philippines assumed the ASEAN chairmanship, China sought to portray itself as a constructive partner on South China Sea issues, proclaiming an intent to support dialogue, regional cooperation, and progress toward developing a code of conduct for the South China Sea.[148] China's position was particularly ironic. As discussed in last year's Annual Report, China has repeatedly obstructed progress toward a Code of Conduct for years. (For more on China's activities in Southeast Asia, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 4, "Crossroads of Competition: China and Southeast Asia," in *2025 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2025, 210–211.) China has used partners such as Cambodia and Burma to thwart regional dialogue and cooperation that China views as opposed to its interests, and China has aimed some of its most aggressive gray zone coercion measures at the Philippines in the South China Sea.*

*China also sanctioned Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr. Beijing took offense when the secretary reaffirmed the 2016 South China Sea arbitral ruling, which did not favor China's interests, and criticized China for disregarding it at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. For more, see Jim Gomez, "Philippines Protests China's Sanctions Against Its Defense Chief as 'an Unfriendly Act,'" *Associated Press*, June 12, 2026; China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 外交部发言人宣布中方对菲律宾国防部长特奥多罗及其亲属实施制裁 [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Announced That China Is Imposing Sanctions on Philippine Defense Secretary Teodoro and His Family], June 11, 2026. *https://web.archive.org/web/20260618144249/https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/202606/t20260611_11942746.shtml*; Gilberto Teodoro Jr., "23rd Asia Secu-

China Expands Overseas Basing with Joint Air Facility in Laos

In September 2026, China announced the inauguration of the China-Laos Joint Logistics and Training Center and the China-Laos Friendship Aviation Academy at Ban Keun Airport in Laos, marking its third overseas military base.*[149] China's Ministry of Defense stated that the facility will be jointly operated by both countries and will help strengthen the training of Laos' air force pilots.[150] The China-Laos base appears to be an air-oriented analogue to the China-Cambodia Joint Logistics and Training Center at Ream Naval Base, which China described in similar terms.[151] Each joint base followed an expansion of bilateral cooperation and technical assistance from China to the host country, ranging from defense and security support to trade, investment, and infrastructure development.[152] China likely funded construction of the Laos base through foreign assistance grants, as it did at Ream.[153] The similarities between the two facilities indicate a pattern in which Beijing provides training and other forms of capacity-building for host countries to expand its military footprint overseas.

China Continues to Compete for Influence and Infrastructure Access Across the Indo-Pacific

China continued competing for influence and strategic access across the broader Indo-Pacific in 2026, using infrastructure development to expand its access to the region while aiming to limit the strategic options of regional countries and U.S. allies and partners. Beijing further developed potential dual-use ports and connectivity projects, which could advance both its commercial and military interests.[154] Following Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's May 2026 visit to Beijing, the two countries released a joint statement announcing a "new broad consensus" to develop Gwadar Port as a "regional connectivity hub."[155] During Xi's June 2026 meeting with Burmese President Min Aung Hlaing, the two similarly issued a joint statement stating their commitment to promoting cooperation and implementation on the Kyaukphyu Port and other China-Myanmar Economic Corridor initiatives.[156]

China directly competed for infrastructure development access and influence in the Pacific Islands region. In May 2026, Vanuatu approved a new strategic cooperation agreement with China—the "Namele Agreement"—while approving updates to the existing "Nakamal" security and development pact with Australia.[157] China closely mirrored Australia's agreement, then aimed to get Vanuatu's signature amid Australia-Vanuatu negotiations.[158] Australia also raised concerns over whether the new Chinese agreement might

rity Summit—The Shangri-La Dialogue," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, Singapore, May 31, 2026.

*China's other overseas bases are the PLA Support Base in Djibouti, inaugurated in 2017, and the China-Cambodia Joint Logistics and Training Center at Ream Naval Base, inaugurated in 2025. This count does not include China's military outposts in the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, which sit on contested territory.

give China critical infrastructure access.[159] The original terms of the Australian pact would have required Vanuatu to seek Australian consultation on critical infrastructure projects, potentially constraining future opportunities for Chinese infrastructure investment and security access.[160] In the end, Vanuatu agreed to partnerships with both countries.[161] China has been directly competing with Australia in other Pacific Islands countries like the Solomon Islands, where Beijing and Canberra have competing police training programs.[162]

China Continues to Exploit the Spread of Scam Centers to Expand Its Overseas Security Influence

China-linked scam centers are spreading beyond Southeast Asia, opening new doors for Beijing to expand its overseas law enforcement presence. Chinese criminal organizations have responded to crackdowns in Southeast Asia by shifting operations into the Pacific Islands, South Asia, the Middle East, and West Africa.[163] As of March 2025, about 26 percent of individuals trafficked into scam centers were sent to compounds outside of Southeast Asia.[164] Beijing has previously exploited the spread of these criminal networks by pressing affected governments to deepen police and security cooperation with China.[165] Though framed as assistance against transnational crime, such arrangements can deepen Beijing's access to and influence over foreign security institutions through relationship building, training, equipment, surveillance technology, and joint law enforcement activities.[166]

The globalization of scam centers is allowing Beijing to expand this model into strategically important countries. In Palau, which officially recognizes Taiwan and hosts important U.S. military facilities, Chinese criminal networks established scam operations despite government efforts to suppress them.[167] Across Africa, China has used scam center investigations to propose deeper police cooperation, including increased law enforcement coordination with Angola, Namibia, Zambia, and Nigeria. This "inside out" strategy allows Beijing to expand its security influence to generate strategic access and leverage without the challenges that would result from an overt military presence. (For more on China's involvement in scam centers, see the 2025 Commission Spotlight, "China's Exploitation of Scam Centers in Southeast Asia" and the 2026 update, "Protecting Americans from China-Linked Scam Centers: An Update on Emerging Trends.")

China Uses a Wide-Ranging Toolkit to Project Power on the International Stage

In 2026, China continued its multifaceted strategy to reshape the international order according to its own interests through technology exports, multilateral organizations, diplomatic initiatives, and investment strategies. Across international institutions such as BRICS, the SCO, and the UN, Beijing sought to shape international norms and governance structures in ways that align with its vision of a multipolar world order. Importantly, Beijing pushed BRICS and

the SCO to take on new roles in areas such as security cooperation, development finance, and emerging technology.[168] Meanwhile, China expanded dual-use infrastructure across strategic regions, creating avenues for intelligence collection, disruption of U.S. supply chains, and potential future military access.

However, events this year also underscored the limits of Beijing's influence within these institutions, as member states resisted efforts to join initiatives that disproportionately benefit Beijing or are perceived as a counterweight to the United States. Chinese security partnerships likewise did not always translate into effective strategic support. In Venezuela, years of Chinese defense cooperation did not prevent the U.S. operation that captured Nicolás Maduro.

China Pushes BRICS and the SCO into New Roles Despite Member Resistance

China sought to use BRICS in 2026 to advance its vision of a more multipolar world order, but its efforts also exposed limits in the grouping's cohesion.[169] Building on the trilateral Maritime Security Belt exercises that China, Russia, and Iran have conducted since 2019, Beijing branded the Will for Peace naval exercise under BRICS Plus in January 2026, seeking to normalize security cooperation under the organization's banner and advance China's vision of an alternative security order.[170] Reflecting that objective, a senior Russian official said the exercise would "harness the potential of BRICS" to help establish a "multipolar world order on the oceans" as a counterweight to Western influence.[171] At the September 2026 BRICS Summit in India, Xi Jinping noted that "the trend towards a multipolar world is unstoppable" and called on the organization to "steer the international order in a direction that is more just."[172]

China's use of BRICS in 2026 revealed both Beijing's ambition and its limits. Despite Beijing's efforts to leverage the organization as a vehicle for legitimizing security cooperation with Russia and Iran, the Will for Peace exercise exposed longstanding divisions within BRICS, reinforcing the reality that the grouping remains far less cohesive than Beijing's messaging suggests.[173] South Africa's president reportedly downgraded Iran from a participant to an observer, while South Africa's Democratic Alliance Party raised concerns that the drill was being used to challenge the international rules-based order.[174] Meanwhile, founding member India refused to participate in the drill, framing it as an ad hoc "South African initiative" rather than an "institutionalized BRICS activity."[175] The episode mirrors a consistent pattern of division among BRICS members on efforts that are principally driven by China and Russia to position the bloc as a strategic counterweight to U.S.-led institutions.*

China is also broadening the SCO's traditional mandate of combating terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism toward emerging technology, development finance, and governance initiatives.[176] During the September 2025 SCO Summit in Tianjin, Xi

*BRICS countries have disagreed in the past on primarily Chinese- and Russian-led efforts, including de-dollarization, BRICS expansion, and Ukraine war UN votes. See Anjana Pasricha, "India Not Pursuing Shared BRICS Currency, Analysts Say," *Voice of America*, December 8, 2024; Carien du Plessis, Anait Miridzhanian, and Bhargav Acharya, "BRICS Welcomes New Members in Push to Reshuffle World Order," *Reuters*, August 24, 2023; Jordan McLean and Luanda Mpungose, "BRICS and the Russia-Ukraine War: A Global Rebalance?" *South African Institute of International Affairs*, September 19, 2022.

announced the establishment of the SCO Development Bank that would promote lending in regional currency—an initiative Russia had blocked for decades.[177] Russia's eventual support for the establishment of the bank marks Beijing's growing influence within the organization.[178] Xi announced a new Global Governance Initiative at the September 2025 "SCO Plus" meeting, calling on the organization to reform the global governance system and underscoring Beijing's intentions to promote an alternative international order.[179] The September 2026 SCO Summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, further reinforced China's influence within the grouping. Most notably, Xi pledged to implement 100 scientific and cooperation projects over the next three years.[180] Nevertheless, the SCO remains a loose, consensus-based forum and has had a limited record of providing meaningful support when members face acute security crises.[181] For example, a unified front in support of Russia's war in Ukraine did not emerge during recent SCO summits.[182] The SCO offers China a platform to advance its norms internationally, but it is not a cohesive alternative to Western multilateral institutions.

China leveraged its position at the UN in 2026 to deflect responsibility from Iran and portray the United States as a source of instability. On April 6, 2026, China and Russia jointly vetoed a UN Security Council resolution led by Bahrain and backed by the United States to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, blocking an international response to Iranian actions.[183] During a UN Security Council Emergency Meeting in May following a drone attack launched from Iraqi territory but suspected to have been carried out by Iranian proxies against the United Arab Emirates' Barakah nuclear power plant, China shifted responsibility away from Iran again while characterizing U.S. and Israeli military actions as the root cause of the conflict.[184] China also abstained from a UN resolution condemning Iran's attacks against multiple Gulf states, instead backing a Russian-proposed alternative that avoided assigning responsibility to Iran for the attacks it carried out.[185] These actions continue a well-documented pattern of China leveraging its veto power on the UN Security Council to help its partners evade accountability while shaping the international narrative according to Beijing's interests.*

China Embeds Military and Technology Networks Across Africa to Deepen Strategic Ties

China continued to leverage security cooperation and technology partnerships in 2026 to embed its presence across African states and position itself as an alternative to the United States. China is deepening security cooperation across Africa by expanding military education and operational engagement with the continent's armed forces. China's 2025–2027 Forum on China–Africa Cooperation plan aims to train 6,000 African military personnel, invite 500 junior officers to visit China, and train 1,000 police and law enforcement personnel by 2027.[186] During a high-level visit to South Africa in June 2026, Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun agreed to strengthen cooperation through communication, training, and exchanges.[187]

*China has repeatedly coordinated its veto use with Russia on the UN Security Council, including joining Moscow in ten vetoes on Syria since 2011 and jointly vetoing a 2022 resolution on additional sanctions against North Korea. See Paul Romita, "Living with the Veto," *Security Council Report*, March 23, 2026.

China worked to normalize its military presence in Africa through exercises, defense cooperation, and port calls. In 2026, China led the Will for Peace naval exercise—hosted by South Africa—in January and the Eagles of Civilization joint air force exercise with Egypt between August and September. This adds to China's two large-scale exercises held with African nations in 2024 and 2025.[188] In December 2025, Egypt's state-owned Arab Organization for Industrialization and China's North Industries Corporation signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) at the Egypt Defense Expo to produce tactical uncrewed aerial systems.[189] In October 2025, the PLA's 48th Navy Escort Task Group deployed to the Gulf of Aden and waters off of Somalia for escort operations.[190] China's guided missile destroyer *Baotou*, attached to the 47th Escort Task Group, made a five-day technical port call in Mombasa, Kenya, after which it conducted a passage-and-maneuver exercise with the Kenyan military.[191] This marked the first Chinese naval visit to Kenya in nearly six years and contributed to the estimated 15 port calls conducted by the PLA Navy to African countries between 2024 and 2025.[192] In addition, data published in March 2026 show that China was the largest supplier of major arms to Sub-Saharan Africa in 2021–2025, supplying 23 states during that period and accounting for 22 percent of the region's imports.[193] China's defense engagements in Africa create a more normalized PLA presence in the region while increasing the PLA's operational familiarity with African ports and partner militaries.

Chinese Technology Infrastructure Creates Military and Intelligence Risks Across Africa

China is expanding strategic space, digital, and telecommunications infrastructure across Africa, positioning Chinese firms inside critical information networks with potential intelligence and military significance. In the space sector, Algeria launched the Al-Sat-3A remote sensing satellite in January 2026, which was developed in partnership between the Algerian Space Agency and China Great Wall Industry Corporation. The satellite reportedly provides high-resolution observation for strengthening Algeria's geospatial intelligence capabilities.[194] In November 2025, Windhoek, Namibia, received a satellite ground station from China aimed at strengthening the country's space science capabilities.[195] The Windhoek facility is capable of receiving and processing remote sensing data from satellites.[196]

China is also increasing the sophistication of its existing satellite ground station network in Africa. Beijing is expanding Africa's space capabilities through the China-Africa Cooperation Centre on Satellite Remote Sensing Application group, which operates across 16 African nations and has built 14 cloud-based platform nodes across the continent.[197] The Chinese-operated ground station in Swakopmund, Namibia, first established in 2001 to support China's manned spaceflight program, continues to be operated by the satellite launch, tracking, and control department of China's PLA Aerospace Force.[198] Swakopmund is an important node that supports China's global network of telemetry, tracking, and command facilities.[199] Satellite imagery dated October 2025 from the Center

for Strategic and International Studies shows a new installation of an antenna at the Swakopmund facility.[200] Together with China's ground station in Windhoek, the expansion provides additional links to a distributed ground segment network capable of receiving data from satellites passing over southern Africa.[201] These capabilities help China close geographic gaps in its global telemetry, tracking, and command networks that can support both civilian and military operations.[202]

Chinese technology companies are expanding into African government cloud, AI, telecommunications, and surveillance systems, increasing intelligence and coercive risks for African nations. A March 2026 report by the Institute of Development Studies found that 11 African governments spent at least $2 billion on AI-enabled public-space surveillance technology, with Chinese companies accounting for the largest share of the contract value.[203] Researchers found that governments used some of these systems to monitor political opponents and journalists, showing how China is exporting its authoritarian governance model through commercial relationships.[204] U.S. officials continue to warn governments that Huawei poses national security risks because Chinese laws can require firms to cooperate with Beijing's intelligence and security services.[205] In 2026, Huawei deepened its penetration of the digital systems that process government, commercial, and citizens' data in Africa, potentially giving Beijing new intelligence and coercive advantages.[206] Huawei expanded its government and telecom partnerships across Africa in 2026, signing MOUs with the Smart Zambia Institute, MTN Group (Africa's largest mobile network operator), and the AXIAN Telecom conglomerate. Collectively, these MOUs focused on training information communication technology professionals, introducing AI-supported services in government systems, and pursuing co-investments in national AI data centers.[207]

China Pursues Strategic Influence in Latin America Through Commercial and Security Partnerships

China is expanding its influence in Latin America through overlapping economic, technological, political, and security relationships. Some of these relationships create long-term dependencies and give Beijing additional means to pressure governments when their policies conflict with Chinese interests. As in Africa, China is investing in ostensibly commercial infrastructure and technology in Latin America that it could leverage for political, military, and intelligence purposes. (This is detailed in Chapter 4, "China's Predatory Diplomacy in Latin America: Broken Promises, Harmful Practices.") China demonstrated its willingness to use political and economic pressure to maintain access to its Latin American ports. After Panama's Supreme Court annulled Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison's canal-adjacent port concessions in January 2026, Chinese authorities and state-owned firms reportedly responded with shipping disruptions, increased detentions of Panama-flagged vessels at Chinese ports, and an international political pressure campaign to persuade foreign firms operating Panama's ports to withdraw.[208] China's aggressive response to Panama's legal ruling indicates the importance it places on influence over strategic ports.

China's investments in strategic port and space infrastructure in Latin America, while primarily civilian, could also support Beijing's military and intelligence objectives. There are 37 ports in the region where Chinese state-owned enterprises and private firms have been the main investors or continue to be administrators, and the U.S. Southern Command has identified 23 Chinese port projects that could be leveraged by China's military during conflict to disrupt U.S. supply chains or military operations while serving as intelligence collection assets during peacetime.[209] In addition, China has established a network of 11 space facilities in Latin America that could enhance Beijing's space domain awareness by providing data links to its satellite networks.[210]

China is also leveraging the region's internal security challenges to expand its commercial and security footprint in Latin America. Chinese companies like Huawei, ZTE, and Dahua have supplied or donated surveillance technology equipment to at least 35 cities across the region.[211] Xi Jinping's 2025 China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) speech, the 2025 Policy Paper, and the China-CELAC Action Plan call for expanded cooperation on addressing drug trafficking, money laundering, illegal mining, wildlife trafficking, human smuggling, and other forms of transnational crime.[212] Meanwhile, Beijing is deepening its influence in the region's police and security institutions through law enforcement cooperation programs under the Global Public Security Cooperation Forum, which brings the region's police officers to China.[213] Ironically, Beijing presents itself as a partner capable of addressing Latin America's security challenges despite the major role China-linked actors play in exacerbating organized crime, drug trafficking, and illegal resource extraction.*

Venezuela became an unplanned test case for China's security partnership model in Latin America. Despite years of defense cooperation, extensive Chinese arms sales, and political support, Beijing's partnership did not deter or disrupt the U.S. military's Operation Absolute Resolve, which resulted in the capture of former Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro.[214] Venezuela had become the largest recipient of Chinese military equipment in Latin America, accounting for 85.8 percent of China's regional arms transfers from 2010 to 2020.[215] Yet, Venezuela's air defense and radar systems,

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*Chinese companies remain the dominant suppliers of precursor chemicals used in synthetic drug production that supports Latin America's cartels, while Chinese money laundering organizations facilitate cartel finances through underground banking networks. Chinese state-owned enterprises are directly implicated in illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing activity along the region's coasts, and other Chinese-linked activities in illegal mining and logging fuel environmental degradation and corruption. For further discussion of China's activities in Latin America in this Report, see Chapter 4, "China's Predatory Diplomacy in Latin America: Broken Promises, Harmful Practices;" U.S. House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition between the United States and Chinese Communist Party, *The CCP's Role in the Fentanyl Crisis*, April 2024, 25; Juan Delgado, "Peru Under Pressure: Illegal Mining, Illicit Exports, and China's Role in Expanding Criminal Supply Chains," *Diálogo Américas*, April 30, 2026; U.S. House Select Committee on Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, *China's Global Fishing Offensive*, January 15, 2026, 1, 5; Adam Rouselle, "China–Cartel Nexus: The Liquidity Architecture Transforming the Global Drug Economy," *New Lines Institute*, December 19, 2025; United States Treasury Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, *FinCEN Advisory on the Use of Chinese Money Laundering Networks by Mexico-Based Transnational Criminal Organizations to Launder Illicit Proceeds*, August 28, 2025; Leland Lazarus and Alexander Gocso, "Triads, Snakeheads, and Flying Money: The Underworld of Chinese Criminal Networks in Latin America and the Caribbean," *Florida International University Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy*, 2023.

procured from China and Russia, apparently failed to provide effective warning during the operation, and none of the more than 150 U.S. aircraft involved were lost.[216] The raid also occurred only hours after a Chinese special envoy met with Maduro, suggesting Beijing's intelligence apparatus had little advance warning of the operation.[217] In the coming years, it will be worth watching if the episode causes other potential Chinese partners to question the operational effectiveness of Chinese defense systems, the value of Beijing's intelligence cooperation, and the practical security benefits that partners relying heavily on Chinese systems and cooperation may be able to expect in a crisis. (For further discussion of China's activities in Latin America, see Chapter 4, "China's Predatory Diplomacy in Latin America: Broken Promises, Harmful Practices.")

Beijing's Version of Constructive Strategic Stability in Action

China's actions in 2026 demonstrated what "constructive strategic stability" means to General Secretary Xi in practice. Despite reframing the bilateral relationship at the U.S.-China summit, Beijing showed no signs of slowing its efforts to undermine U.S. interests, instead aiming to manage risks while continuing to strengthen its position relative to the United States. Rather than signaling a desire to reduce bilateral competition, Beijing's emphasis on "stability" and willingness to engage with the United States likely signals its interest in avoiding a direct confrontation that could challenge China's rise.

Beijing employed military, technological, economic, diplomatic, and informational tools in mutually reinforcing ways. Beijing also showed its willingness to adjust its tactics based on circumstances. In the Western Pacific, China judged that its interests would be served by escalating its gray zone tactics, lawfare, and coercive actions. As a result, China expanded aggressive military and law enforcement activities near Japan and Taiwan and in contested waters in the South China Sea. In contrast, when China perceived that confrontation would interfere with broader objectives, it modified its approach. China sustained Iran without directly entering its conflict with the United States, managed friction with Washington ahead of the Trump-Xi summit, and expanded economic engagement with U.S. allies. In each case, Beijing moderated how it pursued its objectives to reflect its assessment of circumstances.

China's efforts were not always successful. Resistance within BRICS limited some of Beijing's ambitions, partners and competitors alike pushed back on Chinese pressure, and China's expanding security relationships did not always translate into meaningful security benefits for its partners. Beijing nevertheless appears willing to accept partial gains and setbacks while steadily building military capabilities, technological advantages, economic leverage, institutional influence, and strategic access. In this context, Beijing views "constructive strategic stability" not as a pause in competition with the United States but as a way of managing that competition so it can continue to apply pressure, exploit opportunities, accumulate influence, and seek long-term advantage. For Beijing, incremental gains still advance its longer-term effort to reshape the international order in its favor.

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