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# MERICS China Security and Risk Tracker

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## Focus Topic: China wades into the Israel-Palestine conflict once more

The Israel-Palestine conflict re-erupted in mid-May, leading to the worst violence and unrest in the region in years. The escalating conflict has caused a growing number of casualties. Beijing initially limited itself to calling for restraint from both parties. It took a clearer stance as the situation escalated.

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi called for an immediate ceasefire at the May 16 United Nations Security Council (UNSC) open debate on 'The Situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian Question.' Wang also asked the UNSC to help de-escalate the situation. He put forward China's four-point proposal, which involved: (1) calling for a ceasefire and for Israel in particular to exercise restraint, (2) calling on the international community to provide humanitarian assistance to Palestine and on Israel to lift the blockade on Gaza, (3) urging the UNSC to take action, (4) providing support for the 'two-state solution' as the "fundamental way forward." Wang also offered to mediate between Israel and Palestine, inviting both sides to "open up dialogue" and "engage in direct talks in China."<sup>1</sup>

### Repackaging an old peace plan

Beijing's offer to mediate between Israel and Palestine is not a new phenomenon. China has been making similar offers and putting forward largely similar proposals to settle the Israel-Palestine conflict for years.

Beijing first appointed a Special Envoy to the Middle East on September 17, 2002. His responsibilities included mediation between Israel and Palestine and urging the two sides to "return to the negotiating table as soon as possible."<sup>2</sup> Given China's longstanding policy of non-interference in the affairs of other countries, the appointment was framed as a response to the two parties' calls for China to play a bigger role in the region due to dissatisfaction with the United States' peace proposals. Against the background of the 9/11 attacks and the emerging global war on terror, Chinese media also linked China's involvement in the region and its own security.<sup>3</sup>

In 2003, China put forward its first Five-Point Proposal on the issue,<sup>4</sup> which was followed by a flurry of regional visits by successive Special Envoys. Since then, China has repeatedly presented similar peace proposals, with slight variations in the number of points. President Xi Jinping introduced a new Four-Point Peace Proposal in May 2013,<sup>5</sup> which became a five-point proposal just a few months later.

The content of these proposals was largely similar to the recently unveiled 2021 four-point plan, although previous versions have explicitly acknowledged that the "legitimate security concerns of Israel should be taken seriously," something that appears to be absent from the most recent plan. Similarly, Wang first presented China as a "sincere mediator for peace" between Israel and Palestine as far back as 2014.<sup>6</sup>

China has already hosted talks between Israel and Palestine. Xi offered to host trilateral talks in July 2017, during a visit to Beijing by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. A peace symposium took place in Beijing in December 2017, attended by eight delegates from Israel and Palestine. They included Hilik Bar, deputy speaker of the Israeli Knesset,

and Ahmed Majdalani, from the Executive Committee of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and seven delegates from China.

The talks were largely unsuccessful, with both sides reportedly unwilling even to hold a joint press conference. The only substantial outcome was a non-binding declaration that called for a 'two-state solution' and recognized China's potentially valuable role in promoting peace talks.<sup>7</sup> The interesting element in these talks was the timing – they took place on the same day that the UN General Assembly censured the United States for its decision to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>

All in all, Beijing's position on the Israel-Palestine issue has remained broadly identical for years. China's leadership has repeated its Four- (initially Five-) Point Peace Proposal at various stages; it has continued to offer mediation but has largely limited its response to rhetoric. The one exception was the December 2017 peace symposium. Wang's speech at the UNSC on May 16 should therefore come as no surprise.

### **Battle of the narratives**

China's involvement in conflicts that do not involve its own core interests generally stems from the desire to preserve stability in countries with which it has close economic ties – typically countries within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – to facilitate trade and investment. The security of Chinese citizens and companies operating there is also a consideration. This, for example, is the case when it comes to China's attempts to seek a more important role in Afghanistan by mediating between the government and the Taliban, or when it comes to Beijing's attempts to mediate between Myanmar and Bangladesh in the Rohingya crisis.

However, BRI-zone stability cannot sufficiently explain China's stance towards Israel and Palestine. Although Palestine has reportedly signed a BRI MoU with China, Israel – which counts as one of the more stable countries in the region – has not. The Israeli government has been pursuing deeper economic cooperation with China, yet the relationship remains limited. The Israeli government cannot afford to ignore US concerns about Chinese investment in Israel or potential transfers of technology to China, as its most important ally considers China a strategic rival. Israel therefore tends to consider cooperation with China very carefully. China's response to the Israel-Palestine conflict is largely a geopolitical one.

Beijing's offers to mediate help China burnish its responsible global power credentials by offering an (admittedly vague) alternative path to settle the dispute – in contrast to longstanding US support for Israel. China also hopes to play up its image in the region as a relatively honest broker, lacking the historical baggage of the United States or European countries.

Wang was very clear on this point at the UNSC. He blamed the US for "obstructing" the UNSC to protect its close ally of Israel, after Washington had reportedly blocked a joint UNSC resolution condemning the escalation of the conflict on May 16.<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Zhao Lijian took this criticism a step further by questioning US commitment to the rules-based international order and attacked Washington for "using human rights as a cover" while caring only about the rights of some Muslims – a veiled but

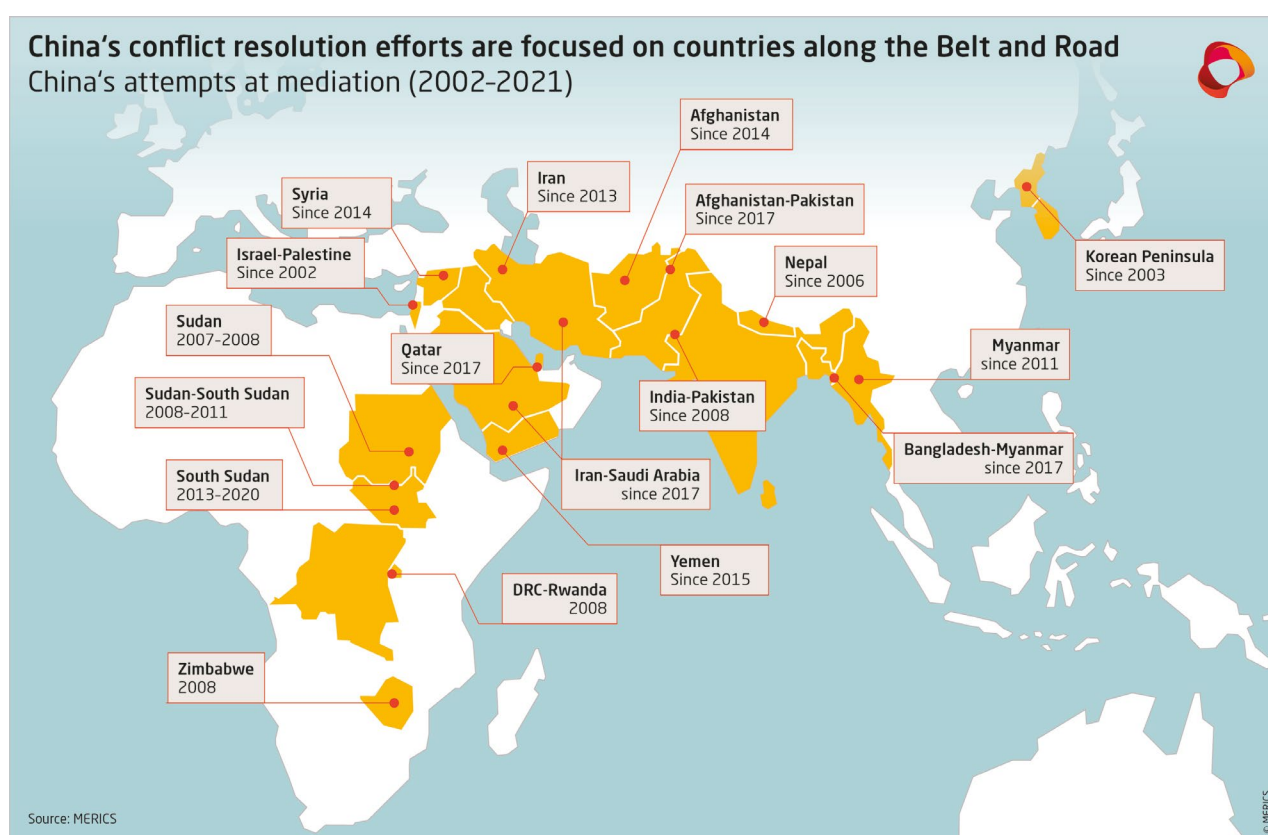
clear reference to US criticism of human rights violations in Xinjiang. He also urged the United States to “shoulder its due responsibility and take an unbiased position” on the Israel-Palestine conflict.<sup>10</sup>

The Israel-Palestine conflict has therefore become another element in the broader US-China geopolitical competition and battle of narratives.

### China’s peace calls are intentionally limited

Despite its rhetoric, China’s offers to mediate, providing an alternative to the US-led peace process, have yielded no results so far. The Four-Point Plan has proven to be a non-starter over the last few years and there is little indication that Beijing intends to modify its approach to the conflict.

Exhibit 1



This is in keeping with China’s approach to mediation in general, which has long focused on high-profile activities and rhetoric, without taking on a more active and involved role. This strategy enables China to present itself as a responsible global actor to a wider global public. Beijing can take credit - domestically and internationally – for trying to solve conflicts, while avoiding any backlash if its efforts are unsuccessful. As an added benefit, it helps drive the Chinese leadership’s narrative that it is a global defender of multilateralism, free trade, peace and stability in the face of an increasingly destabilizing United States.

The chances of China stepping in to turn its rhetoric into action and put forward any more concrete (and actionable) proposals to de-escalate tensions or start of peace talks

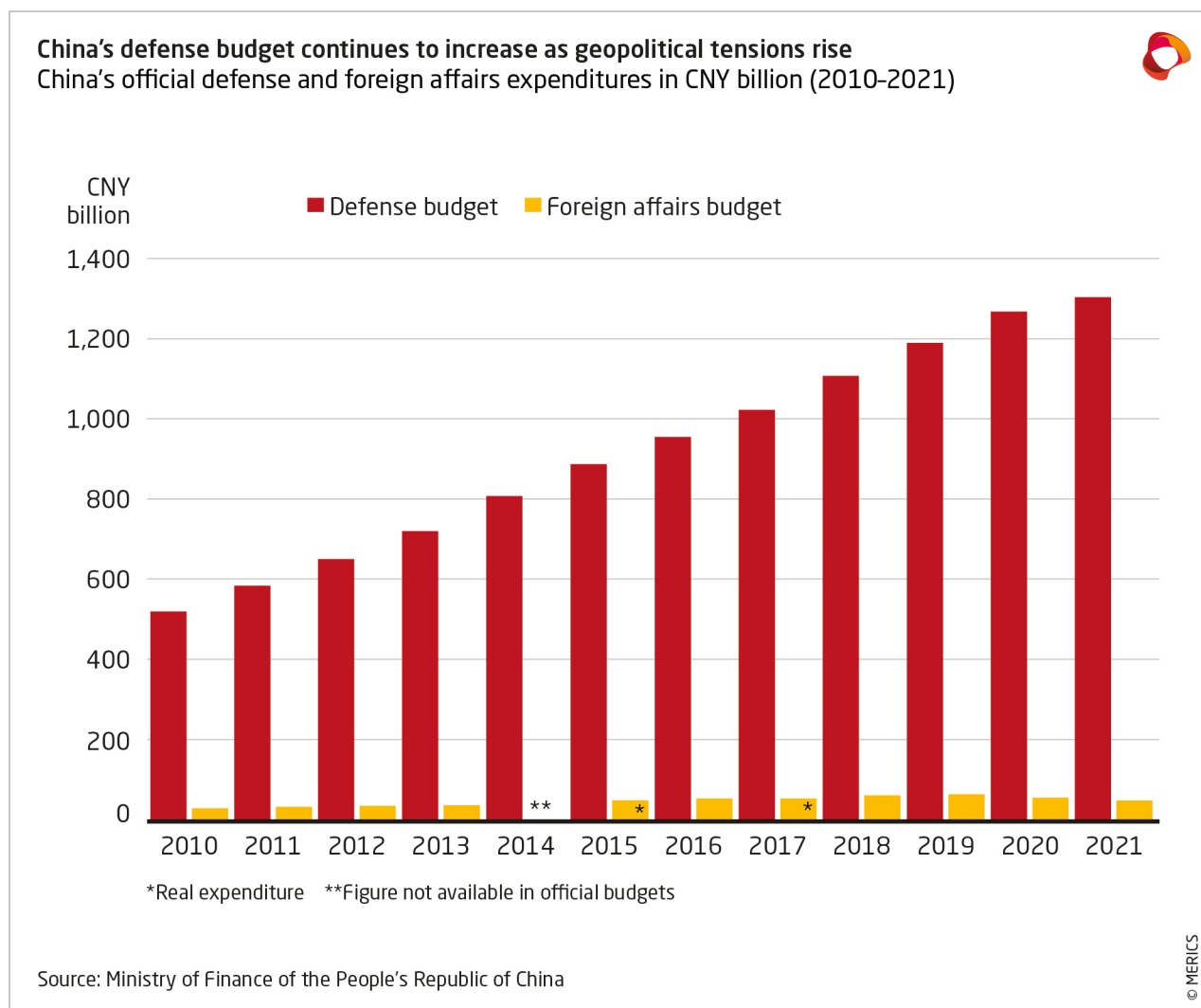
between Israel and Palestine remain slight. Beijing is neither willing nor able to take on the United States’ responsibilities at this stage; it has no wish to be drawn into a complex, politically charged dispute with which it has little or no experience.

## FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY

### The Two Sessions approves the 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, confirms policy priorities

China’s annual ‘Two Sessions’ legislative meeting (March 4-11) approved two major policy blueprints for the coming years, as well as the regular plans that are always reviewed during the annual joint meetings of the National People’s Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). The two blueprints were the 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan (2021-25) for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035.

Exhibit 2



China’s leadership used the ‘Two Sessions’ to present itself as self-confident and assertive in face of difficult conditions internationally. Yet national security remains high on the agenda. The 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan notes “profound and complex changes” to the

international environment. At a side-meeting with People's Liberation Army (PLA) representatives, Xi also remarked that "instability and uncertainty have increased significantly," so the entire army should build up its capabilities and combat-readiness. Shortly afterwards, he visited a People's Armed Police (PAP) unit in Fujian province, where he reiterated this message by calling on the military to focus on "preparing for war." To support these efforts, NPC delegates also approved an increase in military spending of 6.8 percent.

At the 'Two Sessions,' the leadership presented plans for continuity in both defense and foreign policy over the next five years. The Five-Year Plan recommitted China to well-known targets and policy propositions. They included military modernization to improve combat readiness; increased central government control over Hong Kong; peaceful reunification with Taiwan (without renouncing the use of force); further promotion of the BRI; and the reform of the global governance system.

China's geopolitical ambitions have prompted an international backlash. To prevent the formation of coalitions to confront China's rise, the central theme of Beijing's diplomacy is likely to remain that of presenting China as a responsible power committed to multilateralism.

## **DEFENSE DIPLOMACY AND PARTNERSHIPS**

### **China resumes defense diplomacy to reaffirm ties with friendly countries**

With the Covid-19 pandemic deemed under control domestically, China's defense diplomacy picked up again from February. Top officials embarked on official trips to shore up relationships with friends and allies in the face of growing international pressure.

Defense Minister Wei Fenghe visited Hungary, Serbia, Greece and North Macedonia in late March. The trip was a clear attempt to strengthen ties with some of China's closest European friends, three of whom are also NATO members. The visit took place against a background of growing Europe-China tensions, after announcements that several European countries plan to send naval vessels to the Indo-Pacific, and sanctions imposed by both the EU and China on March 22.

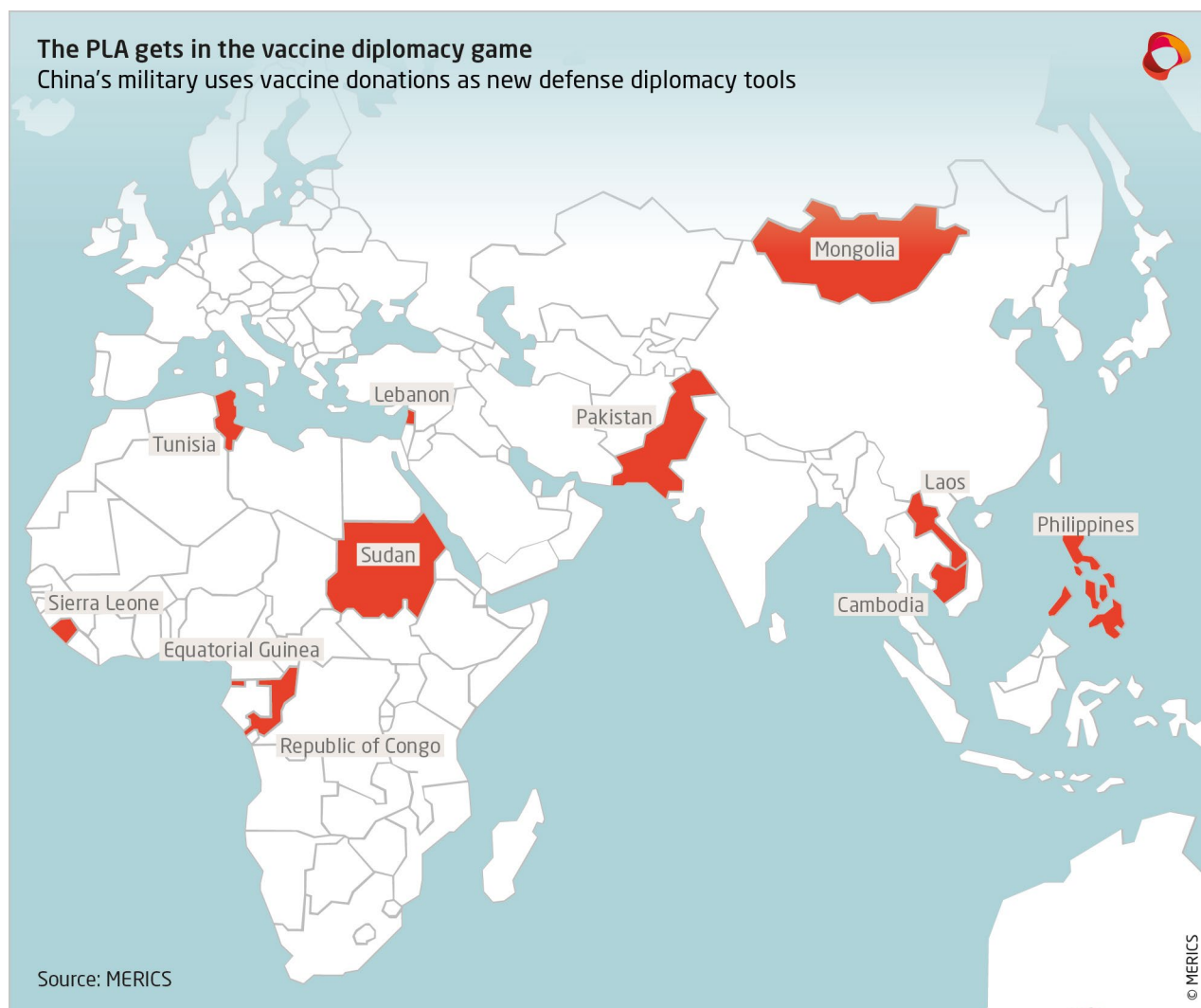
Wei's second trip, at the end of April, took him to Vietnam, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka amid ongoing tensions with India and the growing institutionalization of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or 'Quad', between India, the United States, Australia and Japan.

Nine countries in the Middle East and Africa got top-level visits. Politburo member Yang Jiechi covered Qatar, Uganda, Zambia and Kuwait in late February, and foreign minister Wang went to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain at the end of March. These visits underscored the importance of the region to China, as well as Beijing's efforts to present itself as a responsible and honest broker and an alternative to the United States.

Shortly before leaving for the Middle East, Wang also hosted his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, in Guilin. Showcasing a united front, both countries heavily criticized Western

interference in their own internal affairs and accused Europe and the United States of “imposing their own rules on everyone else”.

Exhibit 3



The PLA, meanwhile, continues to gradually ramp up its participation in joint drills with foreign militaries, which were paused by the Covid-19 pandemic. On its way back from deployment in the Gulf of Aden, the PLA Navy's 36<sup>th</sup> escort task force participated in the Pakistan-organized Aman-21 multinational drill (along with Russian and US forces) and conducted a joint drill with Singapore's navy.

Military-to-military vaccine donations have continued to be used as defense diplomacy tools. Over 10 countries received PLA-donated vaccines between February and April. Although the number of donated doses remains small, they contribute to the goal of generating goodwill among recipient nations' political elites and armed forces.

## POWER PROJECTION AND TERRITORIAL DISPUTES

### China continues to step up power projection in its neighborhood

China has continued its power projection activities in its neighborhood. Pressure on Taiwan, especially, continued unabated as Beijing responded to what it calls “collusion” between Taipei and Washington. PLA aircraft violated Taiwan’s air defense identification zone on 57 days between February and April. Beijing also sent an aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, to conduct exercises near the island.

Taiwanese foreign minister Joseph Wu said in an interview that these events “seem to be preparing for their final military assault against Taiwan” and that Taiwan “will defend [itself] to the very end.” Tension in the region thus continues to increase, despite US warnings that it would be a “serious mistake” for anyone to try to change the status quo in the Western Pacific by force.

The situation remained equally tense in the East and South China Seas. Since the passage of China’s new Coast Guard Law, which for the first time permits China’s Coast Guard (CCG) to fire against foreign vessels, the CCG has become increasingly active near the Senkaku Islands. Japan has responded by lodging diplomatic protests against incursions into its territorial waters.

Relations with the Philippines have also suffered over the last few months. Over 200 Chinese fishing boats, many of them reportedly part of China’s maritime militia, massed at the Philippine-controlled Whitsun Reef from early March. Despite Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s general reluctance to challenge China’s policies – something he has previously described as “pointless” – this action triggered a strong response from Manila.

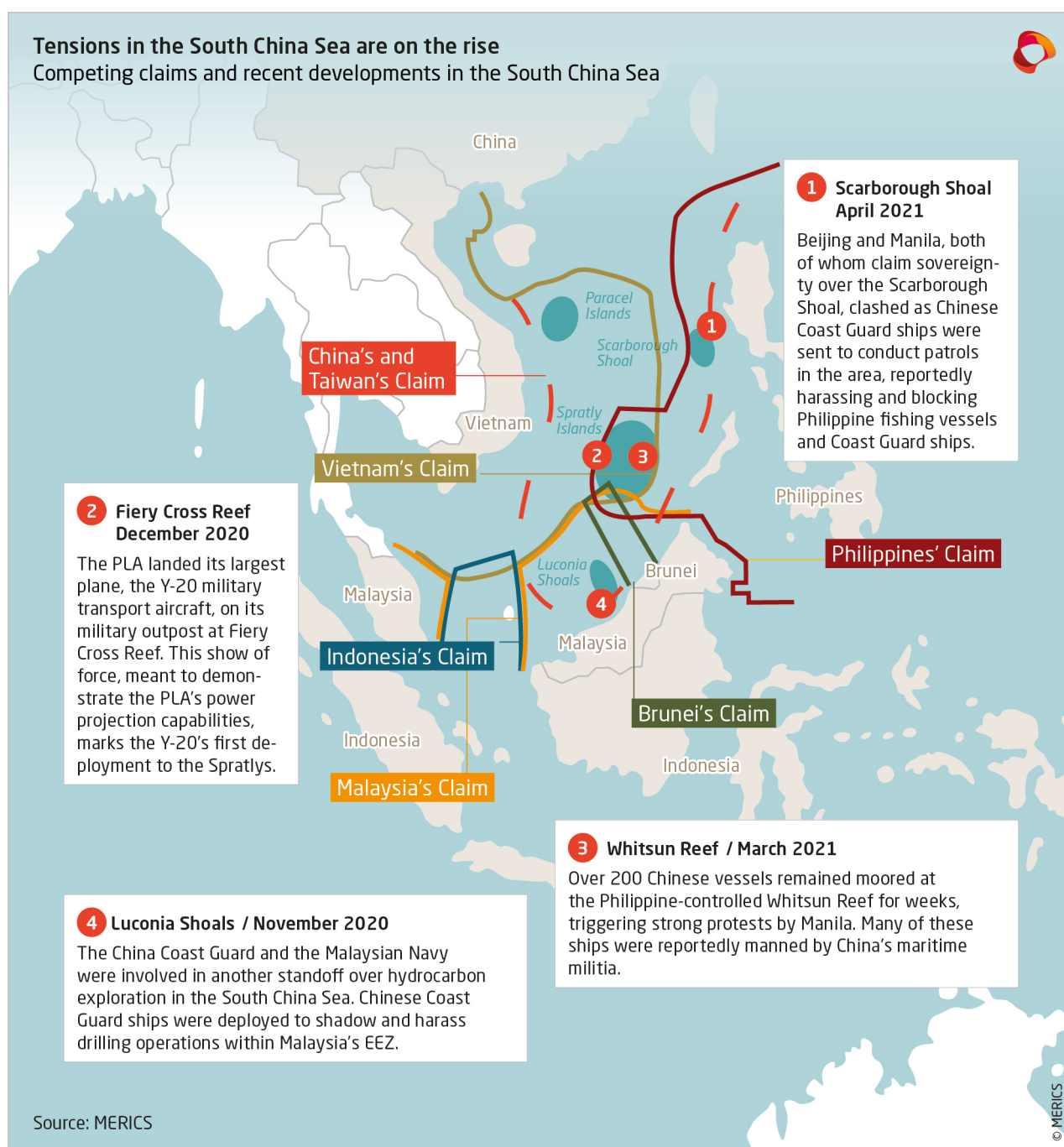
The Philippines filed a diplomatic protest over the “swarming and threatening” presence of Chinese vessels, adding it would not be blinded by China’s vaccine donations when it comes to defending national sovereignty.

The Line of Actual Control at the China-India border is one of the few places where the situation improved over the last few months. Both sides have started to disengage in the Pangong Tso area, as agreed upon on February 10.

China has maintained its steady involvement in UN peacekeeping operations. China’s total deployment hovered around the 2,500 personnel mark between February and April, as it has since 2017. The PLA Navy also continued its counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, deploying its 37<sup>th</sup> escort task force to the region in January.



Exhibit 4



## GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION

### Beijing pushes back against growing international coordination on China

Like-minded allies have stepped up cooperation to coordinate responses to China. Since US President Joe Biden took office on January 20, the United States and European leaders have held multiple exchanges and discussions on China, including at NATO.

These efforts acquired added momentum after the EU imposed sanctions for human rights abuses in Xinjiang on four Chinese officials and a section of the Xinjiang Public Security

Bureau, in a move coordinated with the US, the UK and Canada. China's immediate and asymmetric escalation pushed the EU into closer coordination with Washington.

The European Parliament put the EU-China Comprehensive Investment Agreement on ice. A new transatlantic dialogue on China was launched, led by the EU's High Representative Josep Borrell and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Europe and the United States are also seeking a stronger presence and more collaboration with like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific. China was a major focus at the first Quad leaders' meeting on March 12, and the May 5 meeting of G7 foreign and development ministers, which included Australia, India, and South Korea as guests.

Meanwhile, the newly-released conclusions on an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific called for the EU to be more active in the region, including militarily. In tandem with the strategy report, a number of European countries announced naval missions to the Indo-Pacific. They included France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK.

Beijing has not stood by during these moves towards greater coordination. Substantial effort has gone into smoothing friction with Europe and keeping friendly countries on board. In February, Xi presided over the latest 17+1 summit for the first time. And China repeatedly reached out to German chancellor Angela Merkel and French president Emmanuel Macron, seeking to bring EU-China ties back on track.

Berlin and Paris have each signaled their willingness to repair the relationship. Nonetheless, the European Commission seems to be taking a different path, warning of China's "authoritarian shift," and "fundamental divergences" between the EU and China on economic, human rights and global governance issues.

China's leadership has maintained a defiant tone throughout these events, warning that it will not accept any challenges to China's political system or the CCP's hold on power. China's official media has pushed the view that the United States is forcing Europe to become more confrontational. Media coverage has seized on the concept of European 'strategic autonomy' to encourage Europe to break free from the United States and make its own decisions in relations with Beijing.

As Xi said during his call with Merkel on April 7, he hopes that "the EU will make *the right judgment* independently and truly achieve strategic autonomy."

## LOOKING FORWARD: WHAT TO WATCH IN THE MONTHS AHEAD

- **June 11-13:** The G7 summit will take place in Cornwall, UK, and will also include Australia, India, South Korea and South Africa as guest countries. The discussions are expected to include China's global ambitions, with a particular focus on their impact on the rules-based international order.
- **June 14:** The first NATO summit under the Biden presidency is expected to discuss the NATO 2030 reflection paper's conclusions on relations with Beijing, moving further towards the Alliance developing a new approach to China. Other issues on the agenda include Russia's aggressive actions; terrorism; cyberattacks; emerging and disruptive technologies; and the security impact of climate change.

- **July:** The CCP will celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a series of events and activities. Although no military parade is expected, the party has announced that Xi will deliver an important speech at a “grand gathering” of CCP officials, which is likely to yield further insights into China’s policy goals and priorities for the next few years.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1223631.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.china.org.cn/english/NM-e/48288.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.china.org.cn/english/international/44706.htm>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/gjhdq\\_665435/dqzzywt\\_665451/2633\\_665453/2639\\_665461/t22826.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/dqzzywt_665451/2633_665453/2639_665461/t22826.shtml)

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjwb\\_663304/zzjg\\_663340/xybfs\\_663590/gjlb\\_663594/2868\\_663726/2870\\_663730/t1037823.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjwb_663304/zzjg_663340/xybfs_663590/gjlb_663594/2868_663726/2870_663730/t1037823.shtml)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1180306.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1180306.shtml)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjbxw/t1522095.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1522095.shtml)

<sup>8</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/US/haley-hints-us-pull-financial-support/story?id=51930124>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-says-u-s-blocked-joint-u-n-statement-on-mideast-11621199977>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1876623.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1876623.shtml)

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