



UNCLASSIFIED

U.S. Seventh Fleet Legal Vigilance Report

Office of the Fleet Judge Advocate

READY, LETHAL, CONFIDENT

January 2026

Quote of the Month:

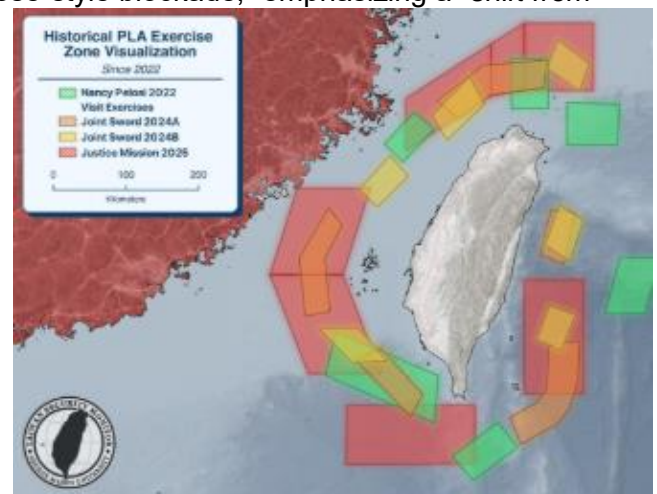
“China leverages its own domestic law and complex and largely baseless arguments regarding international law to attempt to assert its sweeping claims to sovereignty and maritime rights in the South China Sea and justify China Coast Guard and PLAN actions aimed at deterring other South China Sea claimant countries from exercising sovereign rights (where established under the Law of the Sea Convention) or freedom of navigation in waters surrounding disputed features.”

- U.S. Department of War, Military and Security Developments Involving the PRC Annual [Report](#) to Congress, December 2025



(1) The PLA's "Justice Mission 2025" seeks to legitimize force under a veneer of legality (Dec 29-31)

- **Bottom Line:** The PLA's "Justice Mission 2025" exercise featured simulated joint strikes, live fire, and a "noose-style blockade" designed to "choke off" Taiwan's vital supply lines. By leveraging the theme of "justice" coupled with sovereignty-based legal rhetoric, the PLA seeks to legitimize military force as lawful internal enforcement against alleged "separatists" and "criminals."
- **Key Points:**
 - **"Noose-Style Blockade" Concept:** In describing the growing sophistication of PLA operations, a PLA official characterized "Justice Mission 2025" as a "noose-style blockade," emphasizing a "shift from symbolic, isolated demonstrations to an interconnected effort to choke off the island's vital supply lines." This characterization reflects the PLA's [conception of blockade](#) as a continuum of coercion rather than an act of war – untethered from the requirements for blockade under international law, including declaration, notification, impartiality, effectiveness and respect for neutral rights.
 - **Criminalization Narrative:** China's messaging framed Taiwan authorities as "separatists" and "criminals," and issued threats against "external" forces, implying that PLA actions constitute domestic law enforcement. This rhetoric seeks to downgrade what could otherwise be an unlawful use of force into an internal policing action.
 - **Lawfare Implications:** The legal narrative tied to "Justice Mission 2025" aims to normalize the PLA's conception of blockade and to preemptively justify aggression under a veneer of legality.
 - **International Response:** At least 8 nations and the European Union issued statements of condemnation or serious concern. The U.S. State Department said that "China's military activities and rhetoric toward Taiwan and others in the region increase tensions unnecessarily," emphasizing the United States' continued commitment to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.
- **References:**
 - [China's war games sought to undermine global support for Taiwan](#) – Reuters, 7 January 2026
 - [China encircles Taiwan in massive military display](#) – Reuters, 30 December 2025
 - [Decapitation against 'Taiwan independence' criminals one of 4 key words of PLA drills](#) – Global Times, 29 December 2025
 - [Response to China's Military Exercise Near Taiwan](#) – U.S. State Department, 1 January 2026
 - [Taiwan Security Monitor: Data Visualizations](#) – 1 January 2026
 - [Special Report: Surprise PRC Military Exercise Around Taiwan](#) – Institute for the Study of War, 31 December 2025



The views expressed in this Legal Vigilance Report are those of the U.S. Seventh Fleet Legal Office. U.S. Seventh Fleet's Legal Vigilance program is aligned under U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's Counter-Lawfare Center.

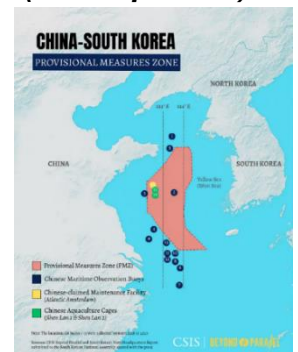


(2) Legal double-standard evident in China’s critique of U.S. Venezuela action (Dec-Present)

- **Bottom Line:** China condemned U.S. actions in Venezuela and against sanctioned vessels as violations of international law, posturing itself as a defender of sovereignty – a stance undermined by Beijing’s selective invocations of international law and its exploitative use of domestic law as pretext for force and coercion.
- **Key Points:**
 - **Recent Evidence of Double-Standard:** China has sharply criticized U.S. actions over the last 30 days, but during the same period, Chinese forces have relied on distorted legal frameworks to justify:
 - **Coercive Actions in the South China Sea:** In blatant disregard for the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal award, Chinese maritime forces employed water cannons and cut the anchor lines of Philippine fishing vessels, resulting in [civilian injuries](#).
 - **Combat Rehearsal in The Taiwan Strait:** The PLA executed “[Justice Mission 2025](#),” a large-scale exercise designed to simulate a “blockade” and intimidate Taiwan through the threat of force.
 - **Intimidation of Regional Rivals:** China has escalated its “[three warfares](#)” against Japan, combining [military coercion](#) with legal-historical [claims](#) to delegitimize Japan’s security posture.
 - **Selective Application of Legal Principles:** These recent events are consistent with China’s broader use of law as an instrument (“[rule by law](#)”) – further evidenced by recent reporting on:
 - **Contradictory Sanctions Policy:** China decries U.S. sanctions as illegitimate, yet recently used its “[Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law](#)” against 20 U.S. defense firms and 10 executives.
 - **Situational Sovereignty Support:** Beijing’s vocal defense of sovereignty is contradicted by its military and diplomatic support for Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a fact documented in the latest U.S. [China Military Power Report](#).
- **References:**
 - [US hegemonic acts seriously violate international law, Venezuela’s sovereignty](#), – Global Times, 3 January 2026
 - [China strongly condemns U.S. use of force against Venezuela](#) – People’s Daily Online, 3 January 2026
 - [China’s position on unilateral sanctions](#) – China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 16 October 2025

(3) China’s structures in the Yellow Sea (West Sea) a form of “creeping sovereignty” (2018 – present)

- **Bottom Line:** Since 2018, China has installed 16 maritime structures in and around the Provisional Measures Zone (PMZ) in the Yellow Sea (West Sea), including observation buoys, aquaculture cages, and a repurposed oil platform with a helipad.
- **Key Points:**
 - **Provisional Measures Zone (PMZ):** Under the 2001 China–Republic of Korea (ROK) Fisheries [Agreement](#), the PMZ is a jointly managed area established to regulate fishing in waters where the two states’ exclusive economic zone (EEZ) claims overlap. The agreement prohibits construction of permanent installations within the PMZ. At least three Chinese-built structures are located inside the PMZ, placing China in apparent violation of the agreement.
 - **Timeline of Recently Reported Events in Yellow Sea (West Sea):**
 - **Feb. 26, 2025:** A China Coast Guard (CCG) ship and three small boats blocked a ROK research vessel from surveying the area near one of the structures.
 - **Sept. 2025:** A ROK research vessel and coast guard escort approached a Chinese aquaculture platform, prompting a [standoff](#) in which CCG vessels tailed the ROK ships for over 15 hours before they withdrew from the PMZ.
 - **Dec. 9, 2025:** ROK authorities reportedly [seized](#) 6 Chinese fishing boats in a crackdown on illegal fishing in the Yellow Sea (West Sea).
 - **Dec. 23, 2025:** ROK President Lee Jae Myung ordered a [stern response](#), such as heavier punishment and bigger fines, to counter Chinese illegal fishing in the ROK EEZ.
 - **Lawfare Implications:** Although described by China as aquaculture-related or civilian infrastructure, the structures are assessed as potentially dual-use, with CSIS noting they may already collect data relevant to



undersea navigation and detection. Their emplacement, backed by sustained presence and enforcement, reflects a broader pattern of incremental consolidation (“creeping sovereignty”) observed in other strategic spaces, including the South China Sea.

- **References:**

- [Creeping Sovereignty? China's Structures in the Yellow Sea \(West Sea\)](#), CSIS, 9 December 2025
- [Chinese Platforms in the Yellow's Sea's South Korea-China PMZ](#), CSIS, 23 June 2025
- [Korea-China Standoffs in the PMZ](#), CSIS, 26 October 2025
- [S. Korea, China locked in standoff over China's steel structure in overlapping maritime zone](#), Yonhap News Agency, 18 March 2025
- [China threatened S. Korean research ship near unauthorized structure in Yellow Sea](#), The Chosun Daily, 27 June 2025
- [Six Chinese boats seized for alleged illegal fishing in Korean waters](#), Korea JoongAng Daily, 9 December 2025
- [Chinese Buoys near the South Korea-China PMZ](#), CSIS, 15 December 2025

(4) **China Coast Guard operations near Kinmen challenge Taiwan's maritime jurisdiction (Dec 11-25)**

- **Bottom Line:** China Coast Guard (CCG) incursions into Taiwan's claimed prohibited and restricted waters around Kinmen intensified in December. Beijing frames these operations as “humanitarian” and law enforcement patrols – a narrative designed to delegitimize Taiwan's domestic laws, normalize Chinese jurisdiction, and assert incremental control over Taiwan-administered territory and waters.

- **Key Points:**

- **Uptick in December Activity:** Throughout December, Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration (CGA) reported multiple clustered incursions by CCG vessels into waters near Kinmen, including incidents involving three or more vessels operating together. The CGA responded by dispatching patrol vessels, issuing radio warnings, and escorting CCG vessels out of designated zones.
- **Status of Prohibited and Restricted Waters in Taiwan's Domestic Law:** Under Taiwan's [Act Governing Relations between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area](#), waters surrounding Kinmen, Matsu, and other outlying islands are divided into “prohibited waters” (entry strictly forbidden without authorization) and “restricted waters” (entry subject to approval and enforcement). For Kinmen, specifically:
 - “Prohibited waters” refer to the waters extending approximately 2.2 nautical miles from shore toward China's coastline.
 - “Restricted waters” extend farther, approximately 4.3 nautical miles from Kinmen to the south.
- **China's Humanitarian Policing Narrative:** China asserts that CCG operates near Kinmen to “maintain maritime order” and “ensure the safety of lives and property for fishermen from both sides.” This narrative casts CCG operations as humanitarian law enforcement, while portraying Taiwan's actions as arbitrary or dangerous.
- **China's Denial of Taiwan's Jurisdiction:** Chinese statements explicitly deny the existence of restricted or prohibited waters, asserting that Kinmen waters are “traditional fishing grounds” used since “ancient times” and subject to CCG jurisdiction as an internal matter.
- **Selective Use of “Traditional Fishing Grounds” Rhetoric:** China's reliance on “traditional fishing grounds” rhetoric contrasts with its rejection of traditional fishing rights around Scarborough Reef recognized by the



Source: Mainland Affairs Council, Ministry of National Defense
“Prohibited” and “restricted” waters around the island of Kinmen, (Taiwan Central News Agency)



#Taiwan, #Penghu, #Kinmen, and #Matsu are all parts of China. The waters around Xiamen and Kinmen have since ancient times been a traditional fishing ground for fishermen from both sides of the Straits, and there is no such thing as so-called “restricted or prohibited waters,” Chen Binhua, a spokesperson for the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, said on Saturday, in response to a question about mainland coast guard's recent law enforcement patrols in the waters near Kinmen, which Taiwan regional authorities claimed as “restricted or prohibited waters.”



binding 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal. This inconsistency underscores China's instrumental use of historical fishing narratives as a lawfare tool rather than a principled legal position.

- **Lawfare Implications:** The December uptick in CCG operations near Kinmen aligns with a broader strategy to shape perceptions of legality through incremental jurisdictional erosion: repeated CCG entries, official normalization through "routine patrol" rhetoric, humanitarian justification, and avoidance of military force thresholds. Sustained CCG presence risks de facto normalization of CCG law enforcement authority, potentially weakening Taiwan's jurisdiction around Kinmen and reinforcing the narrative that cross-Strait maritime issues are internal to China.

- **References:**

- [Taiwan patrol vessels monitor Chinese coast guard in Kinmen waters](#) – Focus Taiwan, 25 December 2025
- [China Coast Guard vessels again enter restricted waters near Kinmen](#) – Central News Agency, 25 December 2025
- [China says coast guard patrols near Kinmen are lawful law-enforcement activities](#) – People's Daily Online, 26 December 2025
- [Taiwan accuses China of repeated incursions into Kinmen restricted waters](#) – RFA, 3 March 2025

(5) China publicizes "humanitarian" aid to a Filipino fisherman, drawing Philippine Coast Guard criticism (Dec 24)

- **Bottom Line:** Chinese officials and state media highlighted a PLA Navy destroyer providing aid (water and crackers) to a Filipino fisherman, framing the episode as humanitarian assistance under international law. A Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) spokesperson rebutted China's legal and factual framing, noting that it obscures a broader pattern of unlawful behavior by China's maritime forces in the Philippine EEZ.

- **Key Points:**

- **Legal Considerations:** International law establishes an obligation to render assistance to persons in distress at sea and to coordinate through the responsible coastal state's search and rescue authorities (UNCLOS Art. 98 and Search and Rescue Convention Chapter 3).
- **Lawfare Function:** By spotlighting a humanitarian vignette, Beijing seeks to portray its maritime forces as responsible actors – diverting attention from their repeated use of water cannons and other coercive measures. This messaging appears designed to perform legal compliance for narrative effect, while implicitly reinforcing China's excessive maritime claims in the Philippine EEZ.
- **Philippine Coast Guard Rebuttal:** A PCG spokesperson, Commodore Jay Tarriela, publicly rejected China's account of the incident, noting that:
 - The PLA Navy vessel provided aid but did not notify Philippine authorities of the fisherman's condition or location, raising the specter of non-compliance with international legal obligations;
 - The fisherman was not adrift for three days, as claimed in Chinese statements, but was moored to a floating aggregate device awaiting retrieval by the PCG; and
 - Chinese statements exaggerated distress and omitted context to inflate the PLA Navy's perceived humanitarian role.
- **Civilian-Centered Narrative Manipulation:** This episode reveals China's weaponization of civilian welfare to shape legal narratives, alternating between portraying fishermen as victims to project legitimacy or as armed provocateurs to justify coercion. Update #4 (Kinmen incursions) above and #8 (Sabina Shoal incident) below similarly exemplify this tactic.
- **Contrast – Recent Seventh Fleet Rescue:** On 1 Jan 26, U.S. Seventh Fleet forces rescued three Filipino fishermen in distress in the South China Sea. Unlike the PLA Navy episode, the U.S. Navy:
 - Recovered the fishermen aboard ship and provided medical evaluation;
 - Immediately notified and coordinated with Philippine authorities; and
 - Returned the fishermen safely to the Philippines.



- **References:**

- [China warship gives aid to Filipino fisherman, PCG responds](#) – Global Times, 25 December 2025
- [Statement by PCG Spokesperson Commodore Jay Tarriela on PLAN interaction with Filipino fisherman](#) – Philippine Coast Guard (via X), 26 December 2025
- [U.S. Navy rescues three Filipino fishermen in the South China Sea](#) – U.S. Seventh Fleet Press Release, 1 January 2026

(6) Annual U.S. ‘China Military Power Report’ spotlights China’s lawfare strategy (Dec 23)

- **Bottom Line:** The War Department’s annual report on *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* (known as the China Military Power Report or CMPR) assesses that Beijing treats the “legal domain” as a battlespace, using domestic legislation and selective invocation of international law to advance territorial and maritime claims.



- **Key Points:**

- **Lawfare as an Operational Tool:** The CMPR identifies lawfare as a component of the PLA’s political warfare toolkit used to shape the operating environment, influence perceptions of legitimacy, and justify coercive actions below the threshold of armed conflict.
- **Domestic Law as Justification for Enforcement:** The report highlights China’s reliance on domestic law and implementing regulations (e.g., China Coast Guard Law and Regulation #3) to assert jurisdiction across its sweeping maritime claims.
- **Rejection of Adverse International Legal Rulings:** The CMPR reiterates that China continues to reject the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal award that invalidated its “dashed-line” claim in the South China Sea. Rather than engaging with the ruling, Beijing has doubled down on domestic legal enforcement and selective interpretations of international law, using coast guard patrols, maritime regulations, and administrative actions to impose its preferred legal order on the water.
- **Targeting Other States’ Legal Initiatives:** The report notes that China actively criticizes and challenges the legal actions of other states, including the Philippines’ Maritime Zones Act and archipelagic sea legislation. Beijing characterizes such measures as “illegal” or destabilizing, while portraying its own domestic laws as legitimate exercises of sovereignty.
- **Law as a “Domain”:** The CMPR identifies the “legal domain” as a contested operational space in which China is pursuing a systematic lawfare strategy to reshape maritime governance norms, constrain other states’ legal options, and justify coercive enforcement activities short of war.

- **References:**

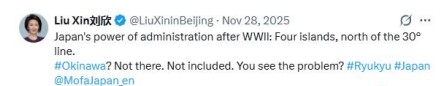
- [Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2025](#) – U.S. Department of War, 23 December 2025
- [South China Sea Arbitration Award of 12 July 2016](#) – Permanent Court of Arbitration
- [Philippines’ Maritime Zones Act \(Republic Act No. 12064\)](#) – Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines
- [TACAID: China Coast Guard Regulation #3](#) – USINDOPACOM, 30 May 2024

(7) China intensifies “Three Warfares” campaign Against Japan (Dec)

- **Bottom Line:** Drawing on PLA doctrine, *The Diplomat* reported on Beijing’s intensifying “Three Warfares” (public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, legal warfare) campaign against Japan following PM Takaichi’s November remarks on a Taiwan contingency.

- **Key Points:**

- **Campaign Continuation (December):** Beijing sustained and expanded its campaign into December, introducing several notable developments.
- **Ryukyus Narrative:** Chinese state and affiliated media increasingly assert that the Ryukyu Islands’ legal status is “undetermined,” directly challenging Japan’s sovereignty by attempting to inject legal ambiguity where there is none under international law.



- **Post–World War II Order Framing:** Chinese messaging increasingly portrays Japan as an unreformed aggressor whose security posture allegedly violates the post-WWII international order. This framing casts China as a defender of historical justice while delegitimizing Japan’s contemporary legal and security roles.
- **Operational Example – Radar Lock-Ons:** On 8 December, PLA J-15 fighters illuminated Japanese F-15s with targeting radar while the Japanese aircraft were conducting lawful operations in international airspace. This tactic exploits the edges of the use-of-force spectrum, reinforcing narrative pressure through military signaling. The incident drew criticism from multiple states, including the United States.
- **Assessment:** Collectively, these actions reflect an integrated “Three Warfares” campaign in which legal narratives, historical revisionism, and military intimidation reinforce one another, testing legal boundaries in the air and maritime domains while complicating lawful self-defense responses.
- **References:**
 - [China Intensifies ‘Three Warfares’ Targeting Japan Over Takaichi’s Taiwan Remarks](#) – The Diplomat, 5 December 2025
 - [China and Japan are in a war of words over Taiwan – what happens next?](#) – The Guardian, 17 November 2025
 - [Lock-on incident shows China will continue to test Japan](#), Japan Times, 12 December 2025
 - [Chinese Fighters Lock Radar on Japanese Fighters Monitoring PLAN Carrier Strike Group in Philippine Sea](#), USNI News, 8 December 2025
 - [US backs Japan in dispute with China over radar incident](#), Reuters, 10 December 2025
 - [What insights can today’s Ryukyu studies in China offer into historical memory and contemporary interpretations?](#) – Global Times, 3 December 2025
 - [China’s foreign ministry accuses Japan of challenging the post-WWII international order](#), China MFA, 19 December 2025

(8) China targets Philippine fishermen with water cannons and anchor-line cutting (12 Dec)

- **Bottom Line:** The CCG and maritime militia water cannoned and cut the anchor lines of Philippine fishing vessels near Sabina (Escoda) Shoal, causing injuries to civilians. Beijing’s account of the incident seeks to narrow civilian legal protections, normalize coercion against noncombatants, and legitimize the use of forceful “rights protection” measures under a distorted legal framework.
- **Key Points:**
 - **Civilian Targets:** The targeted vessels were small wooden fishing boats, not Philippine Coast Guard or military resupply platforms, marking an escalation in gray zone tactics that “endangered Filipinos fishing for their livelihoods,” according to the U.S. Department of State.
 - **Narrative Manipulation and Legal Framing:** Following the incident, China paired familiar claims of “indisputable sovereignty” and “rights protection” with allegations that Philippine fishermen were armed with knives and acting provocatively. China characterized the actions of its maritime forces as lawful “control measures” and legitimate maritime law-enforcement. However, the incident occurred within the Philippine exclusive economic zone, where China has no lawful claim and the Philippines enjoys exclusive sovereign rights to resources, as affirmed by the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal.
 - **Civilian Status Erosion:** Branding civilian fishermen as quasi-militarized actors is a lawfare tactic intended to dilute civilian protections under international law and create legal ambiguity around aggressive action against non-state actors in China’s claimed waters.
 - **International Response:** The United States and other nations, including Australia, Canada, Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom publicly condemned China’s actions and voiced support for the Philippines.



Philippine Coast Guard personnel treat wounded Filipino fishermen inside a PCG vessel after an incident with the Chinese coastguard close to Sabina Shoal in the South China Sea on Dec. 12, 2025.
Credit: X/Jay Tarriela

- **References:**

- [Condemning China's Water-Cannoning of Filipino Fishers](#) – U.S. State Department, 15 December 2025
- [Philippines protests China's actions that injured Filipino fishermen in South China Sea](#) – Reuters, 15 December 2025
- [China accuses Philippines of 'premeditated' provocations near Sabina Shoal](#) – South China Morning Post, 15 December 2025
- [Int'l community slams China's water cannon attack on Filipino fishermen](#) – Manila Bulletin, 15 December 2015

(9) New U.S. Taiwan Assurance Implementation Act institutionalizes Taiwan engagement policy (Dec 2)

- **Bottom Line:** On 2 December 2025, the U.S. President signed the Taiwan Assurance Implementation Act into law. The law mandates periodic review of U.S. policy guidance for engagement with Taiwan.
- **Key Points:**
 - **Taiwan Assurance Implementation Act:** The law directs the U.S. Department of State to review and reissue its guidelines for relations with Taiwan no less than every five years – ensuring a legal basis for continuity in Taiwan engagement policy consistent with the [Taiwan Relations Act](#). Taiwan authorities welcomed the legislation as a significant step in affirming closer ties.
 - **Subsequent Arms Sale:** Shortly after the Act was signed, the United States approved a \$11 billion arms sale to Taiwan, including HIMARS rocket systems, howitzers, Javelin anti-tank missiles, Altius loitering munition drones and parts for other equipment. This action, justified under the Taiwan Relations Act, serves as a practical implementation of the close ties affirmed by the new law.
 - **China's Reaction:** Beijing condemned both the law and the subsequent arms sale, asserting they violate the “One China principle” and infringe upon Chinese sovereignty. China's Foreign Ministry stated that these actions undermine regional stability and embolden “separatist forces,” framing them as illegitimate interference.
 - **Lawfare Implications:** The Act and the follow-on arms sale add statutory and material durability to U.S.-Taiwan policy. China's objections to both demonstrate its use of legal narratives – centered on sovereignty and non-interference – to contest lawful U.S. foreign policy and security assistance.
- **References:**
 - [Taiwan cheered, China upset after Trump signs new Taiwan legislation into law](#) – Reuters, 3 December 2025
 - [Presidential Office thanks US President Trump for signing Taiwan Assurance Implementation Act](#) – Office of the President, Taiwan, 3 December 2025
 - [US defense policy act fuels Taiwan tensions](#) – China Daily, 25 December 2025
 - [Text of Taiwan Assurance Implementation Act \(H.R.1512\)](#) – Congress.gov
 - [New NDAA ratifies US military aid to Taiwan, joint training](#) – Taipei Times, 8 December 2025
 - [US announces \\$11 billion arms package for Taiwan, largest ever](#) – Reuters, 19 December 2025