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CHINA

AI Focus on Chinese Military

In a series of [articles published](#) in early April in *Study Times*, a key Communist Party paper, People's Liberation Army (PLA) experts argued that [Artificial Intelligence \(AI\)-driven navy and space combat capabilities](#) will be crucial to win future wars. The researchers identified that artificial intelligence was priority for new combat forces. Further, as there is clear shift to AI-powered military systems, they would play a crucial role in changing the nature of modern warfare. The authors also discussed the role of massive drone networks in assessing the situational awareness during sea battles and that AI integrated drones could upend traditional naval warfare theories. It was opined that electromagnetic, cyber and aerospace will be [new realms of military struggle](#).

Chinese Reorganisation of the PLA

On April 19, Beijing declared establishment of a [new branch in the PLA](#), called the Information Support Force (ISF). According to *PLA Daily*, the decision to [establish ISF](#) was taken by the Central Military Commission (CMC) and President Xi Jinping to strengthen overall national defense, to construct a new type of structure of services and accelerate national defence and military modernisation. While presenting a flag to the force at its establishment ceremony, Xi declared that the ISF will be [a strategic branch of the military](#) and will play a crucial role in

setting up the network information system to advance high-quality military development and competitiveness in modern warfare. [Observers note](#) that the ISF will be responsible “for handling network information systems, communication systems and network defense...tasks previously performed by the Information Communications Base”. Reportedly, the first commander of the ISF is Lt. Gen. Bi Yi, previously deputy commander of the SSF.

JAPAN

Japan's Participation in Multilateral Drills in South, East China Seas

On April 8, the Philippines' military [announced](#) that it had participated in a four-power joint naval exercise with vessels from the United States (US) Navy, the Royal Australian Navy and the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Forces (JMSDF). The four-nation drill was held within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and involved communications exercises, division tactics and other drills. The Philippines Navy frigate BRP *Antonio Luna* was joined by the US Navy's littoral combat ship USS *Mobile*, Royal Australian Navy frigate HMAS *Warramunga* and the JMSDF destroyer JS *Akebono* for the exercise. After the completion of the exercise, the Philippines military issued a statement asserting the exercises reflected the participating countries' “commitment to strengthen regional and international cooperation in support of a free and open

Indo-Pacific”. A [statement](#) issued by all four participants a day before the exercises stated that the naval drills intended to “uphold the right to freedom of navigation and overflight and respect for maritime rights under international law”. The joint drills attained double significance as they coincided with the first US-Japan-Philippines trilateral meeting in Washington DC, where leaders of the US and Japan declared their public support for Philippines in its ongoing clash with the Chinese navy in the Second Thomas Shoal area of the South China Sea.

On April 12, as Prime Minister Fumio Kishida was visiting Washington DC as part of his state visit to the US, the navies of the US, Japan and the Republic of Korea [conducted](#) a two-day joint exercise in the East China Sea. The exercise involved a US Navy carrier strike group centred on the aircraft carrier USS *Theodore Roosevelt* in addition to the destroyers USS *Daniel Inouye*, USS *Howard* and USS *Russell*, while the JMSDF was represented by the destroyer JS *Ariake*. The Republic of Korea Navy (ROKN) despatched the destroyer ROKS *Seoae Ryu Seong-Ryong* to the exercises. Over two days, the vessels conducted various tactical exercises such as maritime interdiction and anti-submarine warfare as well as a PHOTOEX (photo exercise) for public consumption. The JMSDF in its official [statement](#) listed that the objective of participation in the exercise was to strengthen JMSDF’s tactical

capability as well as cooperation with the US and ROK navies, but North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile threat, as well as China’s growing assertiveness, can also be offered as primary factors behind the exercise.

TAIWAN

Taiwan’s Military Modernisation

Towards the end of April 2024, it was reported in Taiwanese media that Taiwan’s Navy received the first batch of six corvettes, equipped with “16 [Sea Sword II air-defense missiles](#), four [Hsiung Feng III supersonic anti-ship missiles](#), and eight [Hsiung Feng II anti-ship missiles](#).” Further, the Navy is set to receive another batch of corvettes, which are likely to be built by 2026. The corvettes of this batch will have “eight [Hsiung Feng III missiles](#) and four [Hsiung Feng II missiles](#).” In a separate development [President Joe Biden signed a US\\$95.34 billion foreign aid bill into law](#). This law has a provision for military aid for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan. A broad break up this aid is as follows: Taiwan and other allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region will receive \$8.12 billion out of which \$2 billion will go to Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program for Taiwan and other allies and partners, and \$1.9 billion will be utilised for replenish their defense articles and services. The remaining amount will be used for beefing up the U.S. military presence in the region; for example, \$3.3 billion on submarine

infrastructure, US\$542 million on U.S. military capabilities, and \$133 million on the development of artillery and vital munitions.

KOREAN PENINSULA

South Korea's Defence Diplomacy

In a major development, South Korea signed its first [defense agreement](#) with Romania during President Klaus Iohannis' visit to Seoul. The agreement signed on April 23, includes collaboration on military education, training, strategic dialogues, and defense issues. It also establishes an exchange program for military attachés between the two countries. This was followed by signing of another significant agreement between South Korea and Poland, where Poland agreed to purchase [72 Chunmoo rocket artillery](#) launchers and missiles from South Korea. A large portion of these systems will be manufactured in Poland. Prior to these agreements, South Korea and the United States held their [24th Korea-US Integrated Defense Dialogue \(KIDD\)](#) on April 11. The discussions focused on three key areas: strengthening deterrence against North Korea, modernizing the alliance through scientific and technological cooperation, and building regional security cooperation with allies. Both sides confirmed that the KIDD serves as the primary platform for reviewing progress on joint initiatives outlined in the US-ROK Alliance Defense Vision.

North Korea Sends Delegation to Iran

On April 24, North Korea sent its most [senior delegation to Iran](#) in five years, sparking worries in the US. The US fears that recent arms sales between the two nations may be fuelling conflicts in the Middle East, including the war in Ukraine. North Korea's state media confirmed that the visit was led by External Economic Relations Minister Yun Jong Ho. This follows Minister Yun's recent trip to Russia, highlighting his role in managing trade relations with sanctioned nations.

While details remain unclear, the visit reignited concerns about ongoing military cooperation between North Korea and Iran, both of whom are under US sanctions. South Korea recently raised concerns about renewed collaboration between Pyongyang and Tehran, suggesting that North Korea may have assisted Iran in recent attacks on Israel. South Korea also previously linked North Korean weapons to the Gaza conflict involving Hamas. However, no recent specific arms transfers between North Korea and Iran have been confirmed by officials on either side.