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Economic Coercion from the People's Republic of China

Opportunities and Challenges for the US, Japan, and Taiwan

Understanding the nature of Chinese economic coercion is critical for the U.S., Japan, and Taiwan to coordinate and counter the threat

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The implications of Chinese economic coercion for U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific require further analysis, as well as a better understanding of how the PRC uses its economic leverage to coerce its trading partners. Coordination and cooperation among the U.S., Taiwan, and Japan are needed to deter further instances of economic coercion. This report is the synthesis of the working group discussions convened by the East Asia program of the Stimson Center and additional research that took place before and after the discussions. The working group comprised a small group of U.S., Japanese, and Taiwanese experts, who discussed the role that economic coercion tactics play in mainland China's economic statecraft, the potential countermeasures against them, and how responses can be better coordinated among Taipei, Tokyo, and Washington, DC.

Beijing's use of economic policy tools for coercion has drawn closer attention in Washington amid intensifying strategic competition. The first Trump administration's 2017 *National Security Strategy (NSS)* described mainland China as a "revisionist power" that sought to "displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region." The *National Defense Strategy* that followed shortly after further identified the People's Republic of China (PRC; China) as the United States' top strategic competitor and called out Beijing's "predatory economics" to intimidate its regional neighbors in the South China Sea. Additionally, the idea of debt-trapping or "debt diplomacy" has circulated and raised questions about mainland China's use of economic leverage over countries primarily in the Global South. By financing large infrastructure and investment

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projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, these countries accrue a large amount of debt owed to mainland China. The full implications of such economic leverage are uncertain; however, Beijing's developmental assistance to these regions might have impacted political decisions by certain countries such as Panama, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador to switch their diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC.³ (As of 2025, only 12 countries hold formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan by officially recognizing the "Republic of China" without formally recognizing the PRC.)⁴

In particular, the unpredictability of the current U.S. administration's policy toward the PRC may have a grave impact on the security of Taiwan. In this context, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby's view on the strategic importance of Taiwan had already sparked concerns during his confirmation hearing when he reiterated his previous statement that Taiwan, while very important to the U.S., is "not existential." In addition, further escalation of US-PRC strategic competition — especially with volatile tariff negotiations — can accelerate the decoupling of the two economies. This could potentially make Taiwan more vulnerable to Beijing's attempts to forcefully reunify Taiwan, as the U.S. decreases avenues by which it could exert its own economic pressure on mainland China. To this end, as the United States de-risks from mainland China by severing economic interdependencies and rerouting trade, it is also de-leveraging the possible economic maneuvers that could be made in a contingency.

Given such uncertainty and increases in hostility in the region, it is imperative that the parties that will be most deeply impacted in the event of an attempt for forceful reunification of Taiwan by Beijing — the U.S., Japan, and Taiwan — begin to seriously discuss means of cooperating and coordinating to counter mainland China's attempt to use economic coercion coupled with military pressure to achieve political objectives.

Economic Coercion

This section builds on the policy memo by Dr. Kotaro Shiojiri, then-Japan Visiting Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars at the Stimson Center.⁷

At its core, "economic coercion" is a political term used to describe state actions and behaviors that utilize economic policies and parameters to achieve a certain objective. The G7 defines "economic coercion" as incidents that "seek to exploit economic vulnerabilities and dependencies and undermine the foreign and domestic policies and positions of G7 members as well as partners around the world." The EU defines it as "a situation where a third country attempts to pressure the EU or a Member State into making a particular choice by applying or threatening to apply, measures affecting

trade or investment against the EU or a member state." Recognizing the common characteristics among these definitions, the term "economic coercion" in this paper is used to describe "attempts to weaponize economic dependencies" by forcing the target state(s) to comply and conform.¹⁰

There is both precedent and novelty in economic coercion, which differs from traditional trade policy measures in that the coercive measures target a political outcome that may not have a direct relationship to trade policy. Coercive measures are a long-standing and well-documented element of economic statecraft, which is generally defined as the use of economic incentives and disincentives in the pursuit of foreign policy goals. However, the effects of economic coercion are harder to forecast due to the complex nature of international trade. Therefore, the risk of unintended negative consequences resulting from economic coercion is extremely high, particularly for emerging and developing economies that are not as resilient, robust, or flexible to withstand economic coercion. Additionally, the use of military or other forces as a supplemental coercive tool to economic coercion further complicates and worsens the potential consequences as tensions could escalate to a kinetic conflict.

PRC ECONOMIC COERCION

Instances of economic coercion used by the PRC, particularly coupled with military and diplomatic pressure, have been on the rise in recent years. ^{12,13} According to reports by the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), ¹⁴ there have been more than 100 cases of the PRC employing coercive measures in the past decade.

Indeed, the PRC has showcased its economic power by financing large-scale development assistance and infrastructure projects around the world. However, Beijing has also exhibited its expanding military power, most acutely in the Indo-Pacific region. Countries in the Indo-Pacific struggle to counter increasing pressure from China, as Beijing has used its military and paramilitary forces more overtly to assert territorial claims in the East and South China Seas. ¹⁵ For instance, Japan has long faced increasingly aggressive movements by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and the China Coast Guard (CCG), particularly since 2011 in the East China Sea, including Beijing's unilateral designation of its own Air-Defense Identification Zone in 2013. ¹⁶ Similarly, despite President Xi Jinping's pledge in 2015 to *not* militarize reclaimed islands in the South China Sea, the PRC has continued militarization efforts there as it has increased the pace of harassment against the coast guard and fishing vessels of the other claimant countries. ¹⁷

Amid these developments, the PRC has considerably ramped up its military activities near Taiwan in the last few years. ¹⁸ Such activity includes large-scale combined maneuvers, especially by the PLAN and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) near Taiwan. In 2022,

following then House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, the PLA conducted major military exercises that were apparently intended to intimidate Taiwan, including multiple ballistic missile launches by the PLA Rocket Force. Beijing also conducted a military drill in response to Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen's meeting with then House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in August 2023. In October 2024, the PLA held military exercise Joint Sword 2024 B, which simulated a blockade around Taiwan. Then in April 2025, the PLA conducted a two-day military drill near Taiwan dubbed Strait Thunder4 2025 A. Coupled with Taiwan's decreasing number of official diplomatic partners around the world, particularly among the countries in the Global South that have benefited from mainland China's substantial development assistance and business investments, China's recent behavior raises concern that its aggressive use of economic policy tools might begin to further impact international support for a democratic Taiwan.

Japan has also been the target of mainland China's coercive economic and military measures in the past. For instance, a Chinese fishing boat collided with two Japanese Coast Guard vessels in the East China Sea on September 7, 2010. Japanese authorities arrested and detained the Chinese captain of the fishing boat.²³

As tensions between mainland China and Japan rose, Chinese customs officials halted the processing of the rare earth shipments from PRC. Beijing also detained four Japanese businessmen, claiming that they took pictures of military sites without approval from relevant authorities. These measures continued until Japan announced that it would release the captain of the fishing boat on September 24, 2010. Other examples include, but are not limited to, the import ban imposed on bananas and pineapples against the Philippines in 2012; import suspensions or delays of wine and other goods against Australia in 2017 and 2020; and a customs blockage against Lithuanian exports in 2021.²⁴ These are all examples of Beijing using non-transparent and coercive economic tools to pursue political outcomes.²⁵

Economic coercion enacted by the PRC is generally reactive and punitive in nature. Mainland China tends to employ economic coercion — especially coupled with military pressure — in response to unwanted behavior from another country, rather than proactively attempting to compel a country to do something. For example, mainland China regularly instills import bans on certain produce from Taiwan and holds military exercises near the island, when Beijing has deemed some action from Taiwanese authorities to be unacceptable. However, China does not generally use economic leverage to induce a specific action (e.g., to coerce Japan to increase imports from mainland China) — but certainly has in a few instances. In this way, the PRC's economic coercion can be forecasted to occur following a behavior that crosses one of Beijing's declared "red lines." When the PRC uses economic tools to punish perceived violations of its red lines, it is not only seeking to change the behavior of the target

actor but also sending a message to other actors that might otherwise be tempted to take similar actions.

China's trading partners that criticize Beijing's policies, or do not support Beijing's "core interests" — for example, strict adherence to the "One China Principle," or acceptance of Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea and the East China Sea — have faced unilateral pressures that include sanctions, embargos, pressure on the target countries' nationals residing in mainland China, and so on. ²⁷

Additionally, Beijing's efforts to expand its influence against other countries by leveraging its status as the world's major economic power have been facilitated by corporate entities that promote trade with — and investments in — the targeted countries.²⁸ This is evident in select countries' decisions to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC as a result of sustained investment from Beijing in those countries.

Table 1. Past Examples of Economic Coercion

Year	Countries/regions	Details of economic coercion	Target countries/regions
1973	OPEC	Significant oil price increase	Crude oil-importing countries
1977	United Nations member countries	Arms embargo	South Africa
1991	United Nations member countries	Arms embargo	Yugoslavia
2010	China	Salmon import ban	Norway
2010	China	Rare earth export ban	Japan, etc.
2012	China	Enhanced quarantine for bananas	Philippines
2016	China	Boycott of South Korean products	South Korea
2019	China	Rapeseed import ban	Canada
2020	China	Import restrictions on coal, wine, etc.	Australia

2021	China	Pineapple import ban	Taiwan
2022	European countries, Japan, etc.	Ban on semiconductor and other exports, oil embargo, exclusion from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT), etc.	Russia
2023	China	Ban on Japanese seafood imports	Japan

(Source: Nakagawa, Junji. "How to Address Economic Coercion: China's ban on Japanese seafood imports violates international law" Research Institute of Economic, Trade and Industry, 2023 https://www.rieti.go.jp/en/papers/contribution/nakagawa-junji/03.html).

Table 1 shows a sample of past instances of economic coercion against oil-importing countries, as well as South Africa, Yugoslavia, and Russia. All of these examples of coercion were executed by a group of countries against a behavior that they considered to represent a violation of international laws and norms, such as mass-killing of minority groups, racial discrimination (South African apartheid), and military invasion of a sovereign state. On the other hand, the examples of PRC's economic coercion against various countries demonstrate that such measures are deployed by the PRC when the country trips one of several political red lines. These red lines include, but are not limited to, issues such as PRC's territorial integrity (including territorial disputes that PRC is raising against other countries), the government's legitimacy, national security, economic security, and the safety of Chinese citizens.²⁹

Secondly, the PRC's coercive economic measures often target specific sectors of the targeted country's economy in which Beijing enjoys an asymmetric advantage. Beijing may target imported or exported goods or services on which the country is especially dependent, or exploit other vulnerabilities in the targeted country's economy, including supply chains, infrastructure, or their general dependence on their access to mainland China's market and investments.³⁰

In addition, the PRC's use of economic coercion is usually informal, and is often used in combination with additional non-economic measures. For example, in the case of the PRC's utilization of economic coercion against Japan in 2010, Beijing placed a temporary pause on processing PRC's export of rare earth materials to Japan, rather than placing an official embargo. This measure was combined with PRC authorities detaining Japanese businessmen.

Although the real impact of PRC economic coercion is debatable — some have made convincing arguments that economic coercion rarely leads to specific concessions and generates limited macroeconomic effects — the significance of a so-called "chilling effect" tends to be overlooked. This effect is evident in targeted governments' decisions not to pursue certain courses of action out of a fear of provoking retaliation, which is usually difficult to measure or assess because such internal debates are rarely made public and may be influenced by third-party countries or companies.³¹ This is one reason why focusing on upholding free-trade principles and the rule of law and then responding to coercive measures on an ad-hoc basis may be insufficient as an approach, especially in terms of protecting smaller economies.³²

Searching for Effective Countermeasures

Identifying effective ways to counter economic coercion can be challenging. Deterrence theory offers several types of deterrence, some of which may provide useful frames of reference:³³

DENIAL VS. PUNISHMENT

Deterrence by denial seeks to achieve deterrence by ensuring the action is unlikely to succeed and thereby persuading the aggressor that the action is not worth pursuing. In contrast, deterrence by punishment seeks to deter an aggressive action by threatening severe penalties if an attack occurs, thereby raising the cost of action through fear of unacceptable consequences. The typical example of an effort to pursue deterrence by denial is a military build-up, while credible threats of punishment — such as severe military escalation or economic sanctions — can be examples of the latter.³⁴ In the context of economic coercion, policies to promote deterrence by denial may include identifying and reducing asymmetric dependencies on trade with states engaging in economic coercion. Such policies could also include building resilience by deepening economic ties with allies and partners and creating institutional mechanisms to support targets of economic coercion, through, for example, subsidizing or increasing purchases of affected goods and services.³⁵ On the other hand, deterrence by punishment can include measures such as issuing official statements calling out and condemning coercive measures, or imposing new or additional retaliatory diplomatic or economic sanctions and trade barriers, such as tariffs, travel and tourism restrictions, or outright bans on certain exports.³⁶

DIRECT VS. EXTENDED

In a conventional military sense, direct deterrence refers to a country's attempt to deter others from posing a direct threat to its territory and its citizens. Extended deterrence, however, is a country's similar attempt to discourage others from threatening the security and safety of not only the country itself but also its allies and partners.³⁷ Discussed in the context of economic coercion, direct deterrence can suggest the measures that a country will take in order not to become the target of economic coercive behavior by other countries. These measures could include the diversification of trading partners and the prevention of overreliance on a small group of countries for imports, investments, trade, and/or development and financial assistance. On the other hand, extended deterrence in the context of economic coercion can mean major economic powers, whether acting unilaterally or collectively with countries that maintain shared interests, working to ensure that allies and partners that are more vulnerable to economic coercion will not fall victim to such measures by working to prevent — or mitigate — the impact of economic coercion to the greatest extent possible.

GENERAL DETERRENCE VS. IMMEDIATE DETERRENCE

The difference between "general" deterrence and "immediate" deterrence is whether it is meant for the long term or short term. Put simply, general deterrence points to a country's long-term efforts, taken even in the absence of crisis, with the purpose of preventing others from taking hostile actions for a sustained period of time.³⁸ In contrast, immediate deterrence is intended to prevent specific "clear and present" threats from developing in the near term. From the lens of economic coercion, the former may refer to efforts that are similar to the measures discussed as part of "deterrence by denial," including establishing a network and/or institutional framework that will allow vulnerable countries to deflect or better absorb the worst impacts of economic coercion. On the other hand, measures considered to be "immediate deterrence" can include unilateral or collective response mechanisms (similar to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty), in which the threat or imposition of economic coercion would trigger a collective response of some kind.³⁹

None of these approaches are without risk. Rather than lowering tensions, they could lead to an escalation of tensions and other unintended consequences. However, given that countering economic coercion likely requires sustained efforts, effective countermeasures against economic coercion need to include the following elements.

First, an effective economic coercion countermeasure needs to be coordinated among the key stakeholders. These stakeholders include both those that can be vulnerable to economic coercion — particularly countries in the Global South, for example — and those who are interested in helping mitigate the impact of economic coercion. Without

prior coordination among the stakeholders, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to effectively respond to economic coercion after coercive measures have taken place.

Secondly, effective countermeasures against economic coercion need leadership by major economic powers that can play a coordinating role among the stakeholders. Of course, such a leadership role does not have to be played by any single country. The leading role can be played by a group of major economic powers. By reaching agreement on a definition or means of determining if economic coercion has taken place (perhaps by developing a list of coercive measures to be deterred or resisted) and agreeing upon appropriate punitive countermeasures of varying severity against prospective acts of economic coercion, like-minded countries can attempt to deter the PRC's attempts at coercion and more effectively respond, deflect, and mitigate the negative impact of such actions if and when they occur.

Most importantly, in order to create an environment that is conducive for collective action against economic coercion, building habits of cooperation between advanced economies and developing countries is critical. In this sense, the efforts to counter economic coercion may have to be multi-faceted. Multinational forums such as the G20 can serve as useful venues for advanced and developing economies to work together to identify areas that require risk mitigation against economic coercion.

Challenges

Even if stakeholder countries can reach agreement that economic coercion requires credible countermeasures, developing a framework that enables them to take practical actions to deter or respond to economic coercion is not easy. Reaching a common understanding of the list of countermeasures alone requires careful and complicated consultation among countries, which maintain diverse economic structures, industrial sectors, and vulnerabilities. In other words, economic coercion affects countries in different ways, which makes it difficult for countries to agree on how to respond to specific acts of economic coercion and how to determine which specific countermeasures should be implemented.

Moreover, reaching a common understanding of when to respond is even more challenging. For instance, in a recent crisis simulation that focused on US-Japan-Australia trilateral response in simultaneous crises across the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula, participants revealed meaningful divergences among the three countries in their willingness to respond to the acts of economic coercion by the PRC. ⁴⁰ This was primarily because each country had different economic relationships with the PRC, particularly different levels of dependence on economic relations with the PRC.

This led to divergent degrees of tolerance among the three countries regarding the PRC's coercive economic measures (e.g., delays in processing certain exports from mainland China), thereby affecting their willingness to implement different countermeasures and their perspective on when to use them.

Most importantly, the unpredictability that current U.S. economic policy brings — not only to its relationship with its allies and partners but also with its strategic competitors, including the PRC — makes the coordination of countermeasures even more challenging. As the Trump administration pursues an "America First" foreign policy agenda, Washington risks alienating its allies and partners not only with its hardline stance on reciprocal tariffs but also by doubling down on pushing its allies and partners to be less dependent on the U.S. for national and regional security requirements. Furthermore, the Trump administration continues to show disdain for multilateral organizations and dialogue forums. The U.S., which remains the world's largest economy, seems to be less willing to play a leading role in working with likeminded countries to develop a framework to counter economic coercion, including by the PRC.

Implications for US-Japan-Taiwan Cooperation

As the US-PRC strategic competition intensifies over both defense and trade, it will become more imperative for the United States to ensure its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific are not susceptible to the PRC's economic coercion. Mainland China's willingness to flex its economic muscles to increase pressure vis-à-vis Taiwan is highlighted by its strategic use of overseas investment in infrastructure projects in Latin America, Pacific Island nations, and Africa, resulting in countries in these regions deciding to sever diplomatic relations with Taipei.

The PRC's use of economic coercion undermined U.S. and allied interests in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, further isolating Taiwan and jeopardizing international principles of free trade, freedom of navigation, and open sea lines of communication. It is thus critical to find constructive ways in which the U.S., Taiwan, and Japan can better mitigate the harmful effects of the PRC's economic coercion, especially at a time when leadership is lacking, not only in the Indo-Pacific region but also in the broader international community.

First and foremost, it is important to maintain open channels for unofficial dialogue among the U.S., Taiwan, and Japan on a wide range of policy areas, including international economic policy. The Trump administration did not make this effort any easier by taking a hardline stance in tariff negotiations with Japan and Taiwan. However, given the large amount of investment that both Taipei and Tokyo committed

to make in the United States as a part of their respective tariff negotiations, there are other ways for Japan and Taiwan to continue to engage the Trump administration on economic issues as the U.S. continues to pursue a bilateral tariff agreement with PRC.

On responding to economic coercion from the PRC, the U.S., Taiwan, and Japan should start by assessing their respective vulnerabilities should the PRC attempt to apply coercive economic measures against them over cross-Strait issues. This can either be done through working-level consultations or by utilizing Track 2 dialogues. Only by gaining a better understanding of each party's respective economic vulnerabilities vis-à-vis the PRC can a serious discussion begin on the types of PRC actions that merit a collective response from all three — and the specific countermeasures that all three can agree on. This consultation can also foster common approaches to mitigate the impact of coercive economic actions by the PRC should such actions target only one of the three, and so on. Given the tendency of the PRC to use economic coercion in response to perceived violations of its red lines, there is potential for the U.S., Taiwan, and Japan to build consensus on appropriate countermeasures in advance.

Finally, as the U.S., Taiwan, and Japan continue their consultations, it is also important for the U.S. and Japan to facilitate consultations on the role that the other parts of the world — Europe, in particular — can play in mitigating the risk of the PRC resorting to economic coercion against Taiwan. Considering that the switch of diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC among countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Islands seems to be influenced by the fact that all of these countries have been the recipients of large development assistance or investment in their infrastructure projects by the PRC, it is important for countries with greater economic capacity — Europe, Australia, and the Republic of Korea, for example — to diversity their economic relationships in order to reduce their economic dependence on the PRC, and thus, mitigate the risk of economic coercion. By promoting consultation over how to collectively counter cases of economic coercion, the U.S. and Japan can raise awareness of the negative impacts of economic coercion by the PRC in the broader international community, thereby raising the reputational cost if the PRC resorts to such measures.

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- ³⁷ Mazarr, "Understanding Deterrence."
- ³⁸ Mazarr, "Understanding Deterrence."
- ³⁹ See, e.g., Andres Fogh Rasmussen, "Counter Chinese Bullying by 'Economic Article Five," *Foreign Policy*, March 28, 2023, accessed August 12, 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/28/democracy-summit-china-bullying-economic-article-5-nato-sanctions/; see also Bonnie Glaser, "Time for Collective Pushback Against China's Economic Coercion," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, January 13, 2021, accessed August 12, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/time-collective-pushback-against-chinas-economic-coercion.
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