



CHINA REFORM MONITOR

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December 13, 2023 **Joshua Eisenman**

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CHINA HOSTS HUNDREDS OF TAIWAN POLITICIANS BEFORE KEY ELECTION

China's Taiwan Affairs Office is sponsoring hundreds of trips to China for Taiwanese politicians ahead of the island's presidential elections, which are slated to take place in January. In particular, Beijing is targeting local politicians and those working in Taiwan's administrative systems. Taiwan's security agencies are investigating more than 400 trips in the past month, including more than 300 borough chiefs and village heads from central Taiwan. Under the arrangement, the individuals selected buy their own airfare, but their on-the-ground expenses, including accommodations, transportation, and meals, are paid for by China. In September, for instance, more than 20 borough chiefs from Taipei and their families joined a trip to Shanghai, and this week a group of politicians from New Taipei City visited. Prosecutors in Kaohsiung said that during the five trips from the region, participants were pressured to "oppose Taiwanese independence." (Reuters, December 1, 2023)

TREASURY CREATES STRIKE FORCE TO STOP CHINA'S FENTANYL

The Treasury Department has established a Counter-Fentanyl Strike Force to mobilize its personnel and intelligence to stop the drug's flow into the U.S. Working with local law enforcement, the task force will analyze the financial flows and bank records of organizations involved in trafficking in order to detect transactions related to smuggling. At his meeting with President Biden in November, Xi Jinping said that China would tell its chemical companies to stop shipping fentanyl precursors to America and would resume sharing trafficking information. "Treasury will use every tool at its disposal to disrupt the ability of drug traffickers to peddle this poison in our country," Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has said. (Associated Press, December 4, 2023)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Fentanyl is the deadliest drug in the U.S., and nearly all of its precursor chemicals come from China. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 71,000 Americans died from fentanyl in 2021, up from almost 58,000 in 2020. The death toll is more than 10 times greater than at the height of the crack epidemic in 1988.]

CHINA HAS HACKED UK NUCLEAR SITE FOR YEARS

For years, Chinese hackers have accessed the UK's most hazardous nuclear site, Sellafield, which spans two square miles on the Cumbrian coast. The site has the world's largest store of plutonium and is a massive dump for nuclear waste from weapons programs and decades of atomic power generation. Staff at Sellafield do not know when its computer networks were first compromised, but they detected embedded sleeper malware in 2015. The hackers have accessed the most confidential material, such as moving schedules for radioactive waste, monitoring for leaks, and checking for fires. For years, Sellafield's leadership failed to alert nuclear regulators regarding the extent of data loss and ongoing risks to its IT system. (*The Guardian*, December 4, 2023)

PLA WARSHIPS DOCK AT CAMBODIA'S NEW NAVAL BASE

For the first time, PLA warships have docked at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base, which is undergoing a Beijing-funded upgrade. Cambodia's Defense Minister, Tea Seiha, together with his father (and predecessor), Tea Banh, visited the two PLA Navy corvettes. They reviewed a row of PLA naval officers, new infrastructure construction, and the project's plans. The warships' arrival coincided with the visit of General He Weidong, vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, to Phnom Penh. He hailed the two countries as "true ironclad friends" and their "high-level cooperation in fields including high-level exchange, mechanism building, joint drills and exercises, and personnel training." Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet, who succeeded his father Hun Sun, thanked the PLA for "modernizing the Cambodian army." Cambodian officials deny that Ream is a PLA naval base, but worries in Washington have persisted. "We have serious concerns about the PRC's plans for exclusive control over portions of Ream Naval Base," a U.S. State Department spokesperson has said. (*CNN*, December 7, 2023)

ITALY BACKS OUT OF THE BRI

Italy has formally withdrawn from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In 2019, despite U.S. concerns about Beijing gaining control over technologies and infrastructure, Italy became the only major Western nation to join the BRI. But a few months before the original agreement was set to automatically renew in March 2024, Rome conveyed its decision to withdraw in a letter to Beijing. Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni had previously expressed her desire to withdraw publicly, citing the lack of benefits for Italy of participation in the sprawling infrastructure and development scheme. Still, Rome has been wary of provoking Beijing's retaliation against Italian companies. "We have every intention of maintaining excellent relations with China even if we are no longer part of the BRI," said an Italian government source. (*Al Jazeera*, December 6, 2023)