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China's Foreign Ministry Statements Signal Heightened Concern About U.S. Actions in the 116th Congress

Introduction

With the relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) strained on multiple fronts, the two governments have been publicly trading accusations and engaging in sometimes tit-for-tat moves against each other's interests. Amid all the charges and counter-charges, what issues matter most to each side? In the case of China, the government has been using a traditional tool for diplomatic signaling—rare statements in the name of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—to call attention to a handful of U.S. actions that China appears to view with particular concern.

In the quarter century since 1995, China has issued 27 Foreign Ministry statements. Reflecting the high level of current tension in the U.S.-China relationship, China has issued four of those statements since November 2019, all related to the United States. Three statements condemned laws passed by the 116th Congress related to China's northwest region of Xinjiang and China's Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and one denounced a May 19, 2020, public statement by Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo congratulating Taiwan's president on the start of her second term. Since 1995, China has only once issued four Foreign Ministry statements in a shorter timeframe, in 2016. Since 1995, it has never before issued more than two consecutive Foreign Ministry statements related to a single country. Including a 2018 statement, China has now issued five Foreign Ministry statements in a row related to the United States. The implications of the recent statements are unclear. Some earlier statements preceded sustained Chinese campaigns of military or economic coercion.

Tensions in U.S.-China Relations

The Trump Administration signaled a new, more confrontational approach to relations with China in its December 2017 National Security Strategy, which characterized the United States as being in "great power competition" with both China and Russia. In recent months, the Trump Administration has castigated China for failing to prevent the SARS-CoV-2 virus from exploding into a global pandemic; allegedly stealing U.S. intellectual property; repressing Muslim citizens in its Xinjiang region; and imposing a sweeping national security law on Hong Kong. In May 2020, Secretary Pompeo criticized China's "spiteful" moves to bar Taiwan from attending a virtual meeting of the World Health Assembly, the governing body of the World Health Organization, as an observer. In July 2020, Secretary Pompeo alleged China was using "intimidation to undermine the sovereign rights of Southeast Asian coastal states in the South China Sea." The Administration has also raised security concerns related to the operations of Chinese technology firms.

In an August 12, 2020, interview, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng denounced "U.S. repressive moves against China," which he said had "no legal basis at all." He criticized the United States for imposing increased tariffs on U.S. imports from China, restricting sales of certain components to Chinese telecommunications company Huawei, banning transactions with the parent company of Chinese social media application TikTok, detaining Chinese citizens (for alleged visa fraud), selling arms to Taiwan, sanctioning PRC and Hong Kong government officials, and, in July 2020, ordering the closure of China's Consulate-General in Houston. China responded to the latter move by ordering the closure of the U.S. consulate in the western Chinese city of Chengdu.

China's Recent Foreign Ministry Statements Related to the United States

With its four most recent Foreign Ministry statements, China appears to be signaling particular concern over three recently enacted U.S. laws and Secretary Pompeo's May 2020 statement. China appears to assess that these U.S. actions challenge China's sovereignty in Xinjiang and Hong Kong and over Taiwan. The PRC has never controlled Taiwan, but claims sovereignty over the island democracy and has repeatedly vowed to unify with it, by force if necessary. The statements are listed below.

- A November 28, 2019, Foreign Ministry statement expresses "firm opposition" to enactment of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act (HKHRDA, P.L. 116-76), which authorizes sanctions on those responsible for violating human rights in Hong Kong. The Foreign Ministry statement "reminds" the United States that "Hong Kong is part of China and Hong Kong's affairs are China's internal affairs where no foreign government or force shall interfere." The statement threatens "countermeasures" and says the United States "must bear all consequences."
- A May 20, 2020, Foreign Ministry statement expresses "strong indignation and condemnation" of Secretary Pompeo's congratulatory statement to Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen on the start of her second term. Pompeo is the highest-level U.S. official to have ever issued such a statement; an Obama Administration Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs congratulated Tsai on her first inauguration in 2016. The 2020 Foreign Ministry statement demands that the United States "stop official interactions and moves aimed at upgrading substantive relations with Taiwan" and "stop meddling in China's internal affairs." It warns, "China will take necessary measures" in response, and, "The U.S. side must bear all consequences." (As a condition for establishment of

U.S.-China relations on January 1, 1979, the United States committed to maintaining only unofficial relations with Taiwan. It also acknowledged, but did not affirm, China's position that Taiwan is part of China.)

- A June 18, 2020, Foreign Ministry statement expresses “strong indignation and firm opposition” to enactment of the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-145), which authorizes sanctions on those responsible for human rights abuses in Xinjiang. The ministry statement urges the United States to “stop using this Xinjiang-related Act to harm China’s interests and interfere in China’s internal affairs.” Otherwise, “China will respond resolutely, and the United States must bear all the consequences arising therefrom.”
- A July 15, 2020, Foreign Ministry statement “firmly opposes and strongly condemns” enactment of the Hong Kong Autonomy Act (P.L. 116-149), which authorizes sanctions on foreign persons responsible for reducing Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy and on foreign financial institutions that conduct transactions with such persons. The statement urges the United States not to enforce the act and to “stop interfering in Hong Kong and other internal affairs of China in any way.” It warns, “In order to safeguard its legitimate interests, China will make necessary response and sanction the relevant individuals and entities of the United States.”

Foreign Ministry Statements in Context

Between 1995 and October 2019, China issued five other Foreign Ministry statements related to the United States:

- on May 23, 1995, expressing “great indignation” over the U.S. decision to allow Taiwan’s then-president, Lee Teng-hui, to make a private visit to the United States;
- on March 25, 1999, expressing “deep worry” over the “U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s” (NATO’s) aerial bombing of Kosovo;
- on March 20, 2003, expressing “serious concern” over the U.S. invasion of Iraq;
- on July 8, 2016, expressing “strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition” to deployment of U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile defense systems in South Korea; and
- on June 12, 2018, unusually expressing “a high level of appreciation” for a summit meeting between the U.S. and North Korean leaders.

In Chinese foreign policy, the only diplomatic statement more authoritative than a Foreign Ministry statement is a statement issued in the name of the PRC government. Since 1995, China has issued seven such statements (excluding joint statements with other countries). Four relate to China’s territorial claims and one to a U.S. action.

- A 1995 PRC government statement pledged not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against Kazakhstan or any other non-nuclear weapons state or nuclear-free

zone. A 1996 PRC government statement announced a Chinese moratorium on nuclear testing.

- Another 1996 PRC government statement announced baselines for China’s claimed territorial sea around parts of China’s coast and around the disputed Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. A 2012 statement declared baselines around the disputed Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, known in China as the Diaoyu Dao.
- A 1999 PRC government statement expressed “utmost indignation and stern condemnation” over the U.S. bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade during NATO operations in the then-Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.
- A 2013 PRC government statement announced China’s establishment of an East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone.
- A 2016 PRC government statement detailed China’s “territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea.”

Chinese Actions Responding to U.S. Moves

Responding to implementation of the three U.S. laws that are the subject of the recent Foreign Ministry statements, China has three times announced “sanctions” on U.S. targets, on December 2, 2019, and on July 13 and August 10, 2020. China has not explained what its own sanctions entail. China has targeted for sanctions one Trump Administration official (the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom), five U.S. Senators, one U.S. Representative, the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China, and five U.S. non-governmental entities and their heads. The entities are the National Endowment for Democracy and two of its core grantees, plus advocacy organizations Human Rights Watch and Freedom House. After enactment of the HKHRDA, China also said it would “suspend reviewing requests of U.S. military vessels and aircraft” to visit Hong Kong. China has not announced moves explicitly tied to Secretary Pompeo’s statement. In response to the July 9, 2020, U.S. notification of a planned upgrade to Taiwan’s Patriot surface-to-air missiles, however, China announced unspecified sanctions against U.S. defense firm Lockheed Martin.

It is not clear whether China plans additional steps. The 2016 Foreign Ministry statement opposing THAAD deployment in South Korea preceded an 18-month-long PRC campaign of coercion against select South Korean economic interests, most prominently the China operations of South Korea’s Lotte Group and South Korea’s cultural exports to China. In 1995, the Foreign Ministry statement about then-Taiwan President Lee’s planned visit to the United States preceded a 10-month PRC campaign of military coercion against Taiwan, during which China conducted military exercises and missile tests in the waters near Taiwan, eventually prompting the United States to dispatch two aircraft carriers to the region.

Susan V. Lawrence, Specialist in Asian Affairs

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