
PACIFIC FORUM

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

EDITED BY
ROB YORK
BRAD GLOSSERMAN

JANUARY – APRIL 2021
VOL. 23, NO. 1
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PACIFIC FORUM

Founded in 1975, the Pacific Forum is a non-profit, foreign policy research institute based in Honolulu, Hawaii. The Forum's programs encompass current and emerging political, security, economic and business issues and works to help stimulate cooperative policies in the Asia Pacific region through analysis and dialogue undertaken with the region's leaders in the academic, government, and corporate areas.

The Forum collaborates with a network of more than 30 research institutes around the Pacific Rim, drawing on Asian perspectives and disseminating its projects' findings and recommendations to opinion leaders, governments, and publics throughout the region. We regularly cosponsor conferences with institutes throughout Asia to facilitate nongovernmental institution building as well as to foster cross-fertilization of ideas.

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HONOLULU, HAWAII

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Bilateral relationships in East Asia have long been important to regional peace and stability, but in the post-Cold War environment, these relationships have taken on a new strategic rationale as countries pursue multiple ties, beyond those with the US, to realize complex political, economic, and security interests. How one set of bilateral interests affects a country's other key relations is becoming more fluid and complex, and at the same time is becoming more central to the region's overall strategic compass. *Comparative Connections*, Pacific Forum's triannual e-journal of bilateral relations in the Indo-Pacific, edited by Rob York and Brad Glosserman, with Rob York as senior editor, was created in response to this unique environment. *Comparative Connections* provides timely and insightful analyses on key bilateral relationships in the region, including those involving the US.

We regularly cover the key bilateral relationships that are critical for the region. While we recognize the importance of other states in the region, our intention is to keep the core of the e-journal to a manageable and readable length. Because our project cannot give full attention to each of the relationships in Asia, coverage of US-Southeast Asia and China-Southeast Asia countries consists of a summary of individual bilateral relationships, and may shift focus from country to country as events warrant. Other bilateral relationships may be tracked periodically (such as various bilateral relationships with Australia, India, and Russia) as events dictate. Our Occasional Analyses also periodically cover functional areas of interest.

Our aim is to inform and interpret the significant issues driving political, economic, and security affairs of the US and East Asian relations by an ongoing analysis of events in each key bilateral relationship. The reports, written by a variety of experts in Asian affairs, focus on political/security developments, but economic issues are also addressed. Each essay is accompanied by a chronology of significant events occurring between the states in question during the reporting period. A regional overview section places bilateral relationships in a broader context of regional relations. By providing value-added interpretative analyses, as well as factual accounts of key events, the e-journal illuminates patterns in Asian bilateral relations that may appear as isolated events and better defines the impact bilateral relationships have upon one another and on regional security.

The online version of *Comparative Connections* is available at <https://cc.pacforum.org>.

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CRS/PACIFIC FORUM**

Quadrennially, we write to assure readers that there will be more continuity than change as a new foreign policy team takes office. Globally, this would not be the case this year. In its first few months, the Biden administration made 180-degree turns on issues such as climate change, World Health Organization membership, the role of science in the battle against COVID-19, immigration, and the Iran nuclear agreement. In our region, however, there has been more continuity. The Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy focused on the Quad—the informal but increasingly structured grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the US—and the Biden administration has doubled down on this effort, conducting the first (virtual) Quad summit. It has largely continued the “cooperate when we can but confront when we must” approach toward China. And while Trump appeared to have disdain for US alliances, every national security document from his administration underscored the central role US alliances played in its Asia strategy.

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**BY SHEILA A. SMITH, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS & CHARLES T. MCCLEAN,
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO**

The early months of 2021 offered a full diplomatic agenda for US-Japan relations as a new US administration took office. Joe Biden was sworn in as the 46th president of the United States amid considerable contention. Former President Donald Trump refused to concede defeat, and on Jan. 6, a crowd of his supporters [stormed](#) the US Capitol where Congressional representatives were [certifying the results](#) of the presidential election. The breach of the US Capitol shocked the nation and the world. Yet after his [inauguration](#) on Jan. 20, Biden and his foreign policy team soon got to work on implementing policies that emphasized on US allies and sought to restore US engagement in multilateral coalitions around the globe. The day after the inauguration, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [reached out](#) to his counterpart in Japan, National Security Secretariat Secretary General Kitamura Shigeru, to assure him of the importance the new administration placed on its allies. The COVID-19 pandemic continued to focus the attention of leaders in the United States and Japan, however.

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BY BONNIE S. GLASER, GERMAN MARSHALL FUND OF THE US & HANNAH PRICE, CSIS

In its final days, the Trump administration took more actions to impose costs on China for its objectionable policies and to tie the hands of the incoming Biden team. The first 100 days of President Biden’s administration revealed substantial continuity in policy toward Beijing, with strategic competition remaining the dominant feature of the US-China relationship. Senior Chinese officials delivered speeches that pinned blame entirely on the US for the deterioration in bilateral ties. A round of combative, yet serious, talks took place between senior US and Chinese officials in Anchorage, Alaska. The US added new sanctions on Beijing for undermining Hong Kong’s autonomy. In coordination with its allies, Washington imposed sanctions on Chinese individuals deemed responsible for carrying out genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang. Steps were taken by the US to demonstrate “rock-solid” support for Taiwan in the face of stepped-up Chinese coercion. Cooperation on climate change was launched with John Kerry’s visit to Shanghai to meet with his counterpart Xie Zhenhua, and Xi Jinping’s participation in the US-led Leaders Summit on Climate.

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MASON RICHEY, HANKUK UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES & ROB YORK, PACIFIC FORUM

In the first four months of 2021—the first three and a half of a Biden administration focused on domestic progress and COVID-19 vaccinations—US relations with the Korean Peninsula assumed familiar contours after four years of an unorthodox Trump administration. The US and South Korea quickly reached a military burden-sharing agreement and pledged cooperation in a variety of areas, although the regular differences of opinion lurk under the surface regarding how closely Seoul should work with both North Korea and Japan. The US-China rivalry remains a shadow over the Asia-Pacific security and political economy situation, complicating South Korea’s regional hedging strategy. Finally, North Korea’s nuclear program advanced apace, US and South Korean attempts to open dialogue were rebuffed, and the Biden team’s North Korea policy review will not endear it to Pyongyang.

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BY CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

The Feb. 1 [coup](#) in Myanmar dealt a serious blow to the ASEAN diplomatic order and presented the incoming Biden administration with its first major policy challenge in Southeast Asia. More profoundly, the coup set into motion a political and humanitarian crisis that has pushed Myanmar into an economic free fall. The [imposition](#) of Western sanctions gave China and Russia an opening to strengthen ties with the Tatmadaw. Myanmar was an extreme example of political turmoil, but the instability surrounding Thailand’s anti-regime and anti-monarchy movement [persisted](#) into the new year. In January, Vietnam [embarked](#) upon a more orderly political transition through the 13th National Party Congress, resulting in a leadership structure focused on ensuring stability, both external and internal.

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BY ROBERT SUTTER, GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY & CHIN-HAO HUANG, YALE-NUS COLLEGE

Beijing confidently forecast continued advances in high-priority efforts promoting regional economic integration, ASEAN's prominence as China's leading trade partner, as well as strengthening supply chain connections disrupted by the pandemic and US trade and economic restrictions. Ever-closer cooperation to counter COVID-19 saw Chinese pledges add to its leading position providing more than 60% of international vaccines to Southeast Asian countries. Nevertheless, the unexpected coup and protracted crisis in Myanmar headed the list of important complications. The incoming Biden administration showed no letup in US-led military challenges to China's expansionism in the South China Sea, while strong high-level US government support for the Philippines in the face of China's latest coercive moves supported Manila's unusually vocal protests against the Chinese actions. Beijing also had difficulty countering Biden's strong emphasis on close collaboration with allies and partners, seen notably in the first QUAD summit resulting in a major initiative to provide 1 billion doses of COVID vaccines for Southeast Asia and nearby areas. The effectiveness of Chinese vaccines was now questioned by Chinese as well as foreign specialists and Beijing's domestic demand was growing strongly, slowing donations and sales abroad.

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BY DAVID J. KEEGAN, JOHNS HOPKINS SCHOOL OF ADVANCED INTERNATIONAL STUDIES & KYLE CHURCHMAN, JOHNS HOPKINS SCHOOL OF ADVANCED INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

For the leadership of Taiwan, the significance for Taiwan's relationships with the US and China of the end of the Trump administration and the arrival of the Biden administration formed the defining concern as 2021 began. Taiwan welcomed two steps that the Trump administration took in its waning days: announcing a visit to Taiwan by the US ambassador to the UN (even though it was later cancelled) and repudiating the longstanding Taiwan Contact Guidelines, which was widely seen in Taiwan as overly restrictive. Taiwan's anxieties regarding the Biden administration were quickly allayed, as incoming senior officials repeatedly called US support for Taiwan "rock solid" and issued new far less restrictive Guidelines. Taiwan also benefited from unusually direct expressions of support from Japan and other international partners.

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As in 2019-20, inter-Korean ties remained frozen, other than a rare lawsuit. Revelations that in 2018 Moon Jae-in’s government had pondered building the North a nuclear power plant caused a brief furor. Seoul’s propaganda balloon ban backfired, prompting widespread criticism—but no thanks from Pyongyang, which was also unimpressed by scaled-down US-ROK war games. North Korea tested its first ballistic missile in nearly a year, amid concerns of a new arms race; some analysts deemed the South culpable, too. Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong fired four verbal volleys, mostly insults. Another undetected defector highlighted failings in ROK border security. MOU Lee In-young was ubiquitous and loquacious, but scattergun in the causes he championed. Moon’s government remained reticent, or worse, regarding DPRK human rights abuses. With just a year left in office, and notwithstanding rare criticism of the North by ministers, Moon was expected to double down on engagement despite Pyongyang’s lack of reciprocity.

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BY SCOTT SNYDER, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS & SEE-WON BYUN, SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY

China’s relations with North and South Korea gained momentum in the first four months of 2021. China-North Korea relations were propelled by an exchange of messages between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Chinese President Xi Jinping around North Korea’s successful convening of the Worker’s Party of Korea’s (WPK) Eighth Party Congress, the appointment of former North Korean Trade Minister Ri Ryong Nam as North Korea’s new ambassador to China, and another round of messages in March that emphasized the importance of close relations. In a Jan. 21 Cabinet meeting, South Korean President Moon Jae-in pledged to develop relations with China to new heights, and in a Jan. 26 telephone call with Moon, Xi expressed support for Korean denuclearization and joint development of China-South Korea relations. China and South Korea held consultations on maritime enforcement cooperation, defense lines of communication, health security, and free trade negotiations.

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After several years of seeking to counter each other while insisting that their relations were at a recent best, Tokyo and Beijing became overtly contentious. A major event of the reporting period was China’s passage, and subsequent enforcement, of a law empowering its coast guard to take action, including through the use of force, to defend China’s self-proclaimed sovereignty over the Japanese administered Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. Heretofore reluctant to criticize Beijing over its actions in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu finally did so in April, and pledged to work with the United States to resolve China-Taiwan tensions. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [warned](#) that a continuation of such moves would cause Chinese-Japanese ties to hit bottom and threatened retaliation for any interference on Taiwan. No more was heard about a long-postponed Xi Jinping visit to Japan.

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BY JI-YOUNG LEE, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Unsurprisingly, historical issues proved difficult to disentangle from other foreign policy issues in Japan-South Korea relations, which remained at the “worst level since the normalization” in the first four months of 2021. The Seoul Central District Court’s ruling on Jan. 8 that the Japanese government should pay damages to victims of sexual slavery during World War II set the tone for contentious relations at the beginning of the year. While the Moon Jae-in administration made gestures to mend ties, the Suga administration maintained that South Korea should take concrete measures to roll back the 2018 South Korean Supreme Court ruling on Japanese companies requiring them to compensate wartime forced laborers. Export restrictions levied by Japan against South Korean companies in 2019 remain in place, while [the case](#) is with the World Trade Organization after South Korea reopened a complaint in 2020 that was filed and then suspended in 2019.

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For [Moscow](#) and Beijing, the changing of the guard in the White House in January 2021 meant no reset of ties with Washington. Instead, the newly inaugurated Biden administration turned the screws on both China and Russia by reinvigorating alliances, firming up sanctions, and prioritizing force deployment, particularly to the Indo-Pacific region. In contrast to Biden’s multifaceted diplomatic offensive, China and Russia seemed passive, if not inactive, both in terms of their bilateral ties and their respective relations with the US. Top Russian and Chinese diplomats met in person just once in the first four months of 2021 in the middle of sharply escalated tensions across the Taiwan Strait and in East Ukraine. Meanwhile, Beijing and Moscow waited to see if the transition from Trumpism would lead to a brave new world (“[new concert of powers](#)”), a grave new world of [Kissingerian](#) “[great games](#)” in the era of WMD plus AI, or something in between.

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BY KEI KOGA, NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

Japan-Southeast Asia relations were relatively stable, despite COVID-19, as summarized by three trends: emphasizing multilateral actors; prioritizing enhancement of bilateral relations with two countries (Indonesia and Vietnam); and the synthesis of Japan’s Free and Open Indo Pacific “vision” (FOIP) and ASEAN’s ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Japan and Southeast Asian states managed to achieve tangible cooperation, as illustrated by the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED). Yet, strategic dynamics among Southeast Asia, Japan, and the United States are shifting because of changes in Japanese and US political leadership. Japan, the most reliable partner for Southeast Asia in the Trump era, seemingly faced a relative decline in the importance attached by Southeast Asia because of the United States’ renewed commitment to the region. In the context of this new diplomatic reality, the foremost challenges that Japan and Southeast Asia will likely face in 2021-2022 are Myanmar and ASEAN Centrality in the Indo-Pacific.

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A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
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REGIONAL OVERVIEW

CHANGE IN STYLE, CONTINUITY IN ASIA POLICY

RALPH A. COSSA, PACIFIC FORUM

BRAD GLOSSERMAN, TAMA UNIVERSITY CRS/PACIFIC FORUM

Quadrennially, we write to assure readers that there will be more continuity than change as a new foreign policy team takes office. Globally, this would not be the case this year. In its first few months, the Biden administration made 180-degree turns on issues such as climate change, World Health Organization membership, the role of science in the battle against COVID-19, immigration, and the Iran nuclear agreement. In our region, however, there has been more continuity. The Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy focused on the Quad—the informal but increasingly structured grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the US—and the Biden administration has doubled down on this effort, conducting the first (virtual) Quad summit. It has largely continued the “cooperate when we can but confront when we must” approach toward China. And while Trump appeared to have disdain for US alliances, every national security document from his administration underscored the central role US alliances played in its Asia strategy.

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For all that continuity, there is no mistaking the change in style, however. “America is back; diplomacy is back at the center of our foreign policy,” Biden [trumpeted](#) in his first visit to Foggy Bottom, and the flurry of 2+2 meetings and high-level encounters, including with the Chinese in Alaska, attest to this. As does a marked increase in international favorability ratings, a testament to Biden’s quieter, more predictable, less confrontational style.

Finally, in regional multilateral developments, we would be remiss if we did not mention the (very) small step forward by ASEAN in attempting to deal with the coup in Myanmar.

Personnel is Policy

Anyone who has ever worked in government—any government—knows that [personnel is policy](#): top officials set the tone for and shape the institutions that they head. President Biden’s picks for top foreign and security policy positions—Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, CIA Director William Burns—are longtime friends and associates of the president. They know each other, are comfortable with each other, and should work well together. They’re professionals with considerable experience at the top levels of their departments and organizations. That should reduce, if not eliminate the frictions and infighting that many administrations endure as they get down to business. The absence of behind the scenes drama, typically revealed by leaks, thus far suggests that, at least for now, Team Biden is pulling together.



Figure 1 Vice President Joe Biden and Deputy National Security Advisor Antony Blinken in November 2013. Photo: Jonathan Ernst/Reuters

None of those senior officials are Indo-Asia-Pacific specialists. With one major exception, key Indo-Pacific posts are only being filled as this reporting period comes to a close. Some of that delay is the result of the [refusal](#) of the General Services Administration head to “ascertain” that Biden had won the 2020 election until Nov. 23, a decision that slowed the transition. The one exception is the selection of Kurt Campbell, former assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific (EAP) in the first Obama term, as “[Indo-Pacific coordinator](#)” at the National Security Council, a newly created position that is intended to be the point person for Indo-Pacific policy and a sign of the priority the region assumes for the Biden administration. Campbell is widely credited with being the prime mover behind Obama’s “rebalance,” helping then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton turn the president’s vision into reality. With experience at both the departments of state and defense (in the Bill Clinton administration), Campbell has the knowledge and skill for the whole-of-government wrangling that is the essence of the NSC job. (In the interest of full disclosure, both authors have known Campbell for years and he might even be able to pick us out in a crowd.)

Other key administration posts have been slower to fill. Only at the end of March did Biden [announce](#) the nomination of Ambassador to Vietnam Dan Kritenbrink as assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific. Kritenbrink is a career foreign service officer (FSO), who has served in Beijing and Tokyo, and did stints at the NSC (as senior director for Asia policy) and in the Office of Chinese and Mongolian affairs in Foggy Bottom. In April, Biden [nominated](#) Ely Ratner to serve as assistant secretary of defense for Indo-Pacific security affairs. Ratner is another longtime member of Biden’s inner circle, serving as his deputy national security advisor when he was vice president, a staff member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when Biden was chair, and as a member of Biden’s Senate staff. Prior to his nomination, Ratner directed the Pentagon’s China Task Force, an attempt to figure out where the Department of Defense was on China policy. In short, it is an experienced team that understands the nature of the challenges that the US faces at a time of enhanced strategic competition with China.

While these have traditionally been the most important positions for Indo-Asia-Pacific policy, the scale of “the China challenge,” which crosses multiple domains and includes economic, diplomatic, and technological dimensions, requires a whole-of-government approach. Other government offices will play vital roles in this effort. Two stand out. The first is the head of the Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS), which historically has focused on strategic trade controls, particularly those that address access to parts, components, and knowhow related to weapons of mass destruction. Today it is key to policy regarding access to technology more broadly, especially the critical and emerging technologies that are central to the digital economy, putting it on the front line of the tech competition with China. No nominee for BIS has been named. The second position is the head of the Department of Justice’s National Security Division. This career slot has assumed new significance given the full court legal press against China’s illegal acquisition of intellectual property and the cyberattacks that its hackers have allegedly launched. The Trump administration in November 2018 launched the “China initiative” within the DOJ to spearhead those law enforcement efforts. The head of the NSD and the China Initiative is John Demers, a career assistant attorney general and he is likely to stay in that post.

The one glaring hole is the failure to name any ambassadors. With the exception of Marc Knapper, another career FSO currently serving as principal deputy assistant secretary of State, who has been nominated to be ambassador to Vietnam—a move reportedly in the works at the end of the Trump administration—all other ambassadorial positions in the region (and the world) normally filled by political appointees are empty; in most cases very capable FSOs are serving as charge d'affaires (temporary ambassadors) until nominees are identified. Media reports suggest that names are likely just after we go to press in mid-May. Biden has [said](#) that he wants to reduce the number of political appointees, a percentage that has skyrocketed in recent administrations, although key positions—such as ambassadors to Japan, South Korea, Australia, and China—are likely to continue to be political.

Consistent Rhetoric—and Policy that Matches Up

The Biden administration has been impressively consistent: not only has its campaign rhetoric continued into the administration, but its behavior has matched its language. Candidate Biden praised cooperation and consultation, multilateralism, and alliances. At every opportunity, his administration echoes that line, elevating and prioritizing US alliances and partnerships. Speaking to the Munich Security Conference in February, Biden [told](#) the audience that the US was back and would be working closely with allies and partners “to meet the range of shared challenges we face.” In his “America is back” Foggy Bottom speech he [asserted](#) “American alliances are our greatest asset, and leading with diplomacy means standing shoulder to shoulder with our allies and key partners, once again.” [Testifying](#) to Congress, Secretary of State Blinken reiterated the US commitment to its core alliances and called Japan and South Korea “two of our most important allies.” Defense Secretary Austin is similarly oriented, [noting](#) that the US’ “great alliances, great partnerships” are an asymmetrical advantage that it has over other rivals. Secretary Blinken also [told](#) America’s NATO allies in Brussels in March that “Americans disagree about a few things, but the value of alliances and partnerships is not one of them.” Citing a recent poll by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, he pointed out that “nine in 10 Americans believe that maintaining our alliances is the most effective way to achieve our foreign policy goals.” It’s hard to find many other things that nine in 10 Americans would agree upon nowadays.

Actions Matter ... and are Duly Noted

After several years of steady decline, US popularity ratings have also begun rising internationally with the advent of the new administration. In a recent Morning Consult [poll](#), favorability ratings were up in 13 of 14 countries surveyed. The one outlier, to no one’s surprise, was China. One suspects US ratings there would have declined regardless of who won last November.

The Biden administration has also reassured foreign governments— allies and partners in Asia and elsewhere—that the US retains its capacity to act. The COVID-19 vaccination program—with more than 150 million people

inoculated—and the passage of a \$1.9 trillion COVID relief package are proof that Washington is not paralyzed and can be mobilized.

The political symbolism is important: Paralysis is not the norm. But perhaps more important is the boost that the stimulus will provide to the US and global economy. The OECD (Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, the club of advanced economies) [forecasts](#) that the bill will increase global growth to 5.6% in 2021, a jump of 1.4 percentage points from its December prediction (4.2%). Much of that expansion reflects a substantial rise in US growth estimates, from 3.2% in December to 6.5% in March. If correct, this will be the first time in 45 years that the US economy grows at a rate equal to or faster than that of China. A revving economy helps rehabilitate the US image and the US model, and provides the country with resources for more forward-leaning diplomacy and greater economic engagement.

The Indo-Pacific: America's "Priority Region"

The Indo-Pacific remains a priority. Also in the Munich speech, Biden [reminded](#) a *European audience* that efforts "to secure the peace and defend our shared values and advance our prosperity across the Pacific will be among the most consequential efforts we undertake." His decision to withdraw US forces from Afghanistan, long a goal of his, was also motivated by a [desire](#) to be able to more precisely focus resources on critical security challenges, such as the rise of China. Biden rightly viewed the continuing US military presence as a distraction. That the first overseas trip by Secretaries Blinken and Austin was to Asia, and that Biden's first guest at the White House was Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide hammers home this point. [Speaking](#) at the April 30 Indo-Pacific Command Change of Command, Secretary of Defense Austin, chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mark Milley and both the incoming (Adm. John Aquilino) and outgoing (Adm. Philip Davidson) commanders [cited](#) the Indo-Pacific as "the priority region" for US national security interests. Davidson stressed that "the strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific is not between two nations, it is a contest between liberty—the fundamental idea behind a Free and Open Indo-Pacific—and authoritarianism, and the absence of liberty."



Figure 2 US President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga walk to the White House Rose Garden. Photo: AFP-JJII

Their speeches, and numerous foreign policy pronouncements by Biden and the rest of his team leave little doubt as to what authoritarian power is of primary concern. As should be clear by now, concern that the Biden administration would reverse Trump administration policies that viewed China as a strategic competitor should have dissipated. Biden sees the US engaged in a real race with China for leadership in the Indo-Pacific and eventually globally. While the rhetoric is less sharp and inflammatory, the readiness to stand up to Beijing's revisionism has not diminished. This administration has recognized the need to do so collectively, however, and has made rebuilding and consolidating alliances a first step. Don't underestimate the sequencing of the new team's meetings in Northeast Asia. Blinken and Austin went to Tokyo and Seoul before Blinken and Sullivan sat down with Chinese officials Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi in Anchorage: the messaging is unmistakable.

And then there is the administration's "[interim strategic guidance](#)," a way station as Biden's team prepares its National Security Strategy. It warns of an "increasingly assertive" China, which it labeled "the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system." Secretary of Defense Austin already launched a global posture review of US forces to ensure that they are ready to support foreign policy priorities – the Indo-Pacific, as Biden noted in his Munich remarks, where he also reminded European allies that the China challenge was a global one: "we must prepare together for a long-term strategic competition with China. How the

United States, Europe, and Asia work together to secure the peace and defend our shared values and advance our prosperity across the Pacific will be among the most consequential efforts we undertake.”

(And anyone still worried about the US going soft on China should also remember this: Kurt Campbell was the assistant secretary of state who negotiated the 2012 deal between China and the Philippines that called for the withdrawal of all forces from Scarborough Shoal, reefs in the South China Sea claimed by both governments. Manila’s forces withdrew; those of China did not. Campbell knows well how suspicious of China to be.)

For the US, Asian Multilateralism Now Centers on the Quad

While the Trump administration was largely dismissive of ASEAN-led multilateralism—Trump attended only one East Asia Summit (and left that meeting early) and his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo skipped the last ASEAN Regional Forum meeting—it did embrace multilateral cooperation among the US, Australia, India, and Japan. As outlined in our last [report](#), Pompeo’s last major meeting as secretary was an in-person visit to Japan for the second Quad Foreign Ministers Meeting last October.

President Biden has been quick to signal his own firm support for the Quad, hosting the first-ever (virtual) Quad Summit in early March. In the [Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement](#): “*The Spirit of the Quad*,” the four leaders reaffirmed their shared vision for “a region that is free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion.” In outlining the “defining challenges of our time,” they referenced “the global devastation wrought by COVID-19, the threat of climate change, and security challenges facing the region.” They further defined their “shared challenges, including in cyber space, critical technologies, counterterrorism, quality infrastructure investment, and humanitarian-assistance and disaster-relief as well as maritime domains.” The word China was not mentioned anywhere in the Joint Statement or in the subsequent [Washington Post op-ed](#) they all signed that focused on the history of Quad cooperation, beginning with disaster relief cooperation following the 2004 Boxing Day

tsunami. The four leaders stated that, “in this new age of interconnection and opportunity throughout the Indo-Pacific, we are again summoned to act together in support of a region in need,” noting in particular that “climate change has grown more perilous, new technologies have revolutionized our daily lives, geopolitics have become ever more complex, and a pandemic has devastated the world.”



Figure 3 US President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken attend a virtual Quad meeting with leaders of Japan, India, and Australia. Photo: Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA/Bloomberg

While careful not to cast an anti-China shadow, the Joint Statement did have a familiar ring: “Together, we commit to promoting a free, open rules-based order, rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. We support the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity.” For those in Beijing who saw these words as aimed at them, the proper response should be “if the shoe fits, wear it.”

The Quad is not a formal alliance. It is, as the op-ed in *The Post* maintained, “a flexible group of like-minded partners dedicated to advancing a common vision and to ensuring peace and prosperity.” As such, “(W)e welcome and will seek opportunities to work with all of those who share in those goals. In this, it is important to again note the continuity with US foreign policy. The Quad in important ways is like President George W. Bush’s “coalition of the willing,” that brought together like-minded nations to address shared concerns.

One of the Quad’s most specific initiatives was the decision to “combine our nations’ medical, scientific, financing, manufacturing and

delivery, and development capabilities and establish a vaccine expert working group” focused on “safe and effective vaccine distribution.” They also established a critical- and emerging-technology working group and a climate working group. The Joint Statement also reaffirmed “our commitment to the complete denuclearization of North Korea” and the “necessity of immediate resolution of the issue of Japanese abductees.”

One (Very) Small Step for ASEAN, One (Slightly) Larger Step for Indonesia

ASEAN was specifically mentioned in both the Joint Statement (cited here) and op-ed: “We reaffirm our strong support for ASEAN’s unity and centrality as well as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Full of potential, the Quad looks forward to the future; it seeks to uphold peace and prosperity and strengthen democratic resilience, based on universal values.” If and when the Quad begins to work with those countries will be a key indicator of the grouping’s success and long-term viability.

ASEAN also surfaced in the Quad discussions when the agenda turned to the appalling situation in Myanmar. The Joint Statement emphasized “the urgent need to restore democracy and the priority of strengthening democratic resilience” in Myanmar (aka Burma). International pressure has been growing on ASEAN to get its house in order since the Feb. 1 coup in Myanmar and the slaughter of (mostly) unarmed protestors that has followed.



Figure 4 Indonesian President Joko Widodo attends the ASEAN leaders' summit in Jakarta. Photo: Reuters/Nikkei Asia

ASEAN’s response “[exceeded expectations](#),” or at least those very low expectations of ASEAN members themselves, who anticipated that the consensus-based organization would once

again hide behind the “noninterference in the internal affairs of one another” principle inscribed in ASEAN’s [Charter](#). Enter Indonesia! At President Joko Widodo’s urging, a special ASEAN Summit was held in Jakarta on April 24. To the dismay of many, Myanmar was represented by the coup leader, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, although he was listed not as head of the State Administration Council (SAC), as Myanmar’s military junta now calls itself, but merely as chief of Myanmar’s armed Forces (his pre-coup title). Neither Aung San Suu Kyi nor any representative from the new self-declared National Unity Government (NUG) was invited to attend.

The assembled leaders—Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam were represented by heads of state while Laos, the Philippines, and Thailand sent their foreign ministers—[expressed](#) their “deep concern on the situation in the country, including reports of fatalities and escalation of violence” and “acknowledged ASEAN’s positive and constructive role in facilitating a peaceful solution.” Jokowi (as President Widodo is more commonly known) was less subtle, reportedly [telling](#) the senior general during the Summit that “the situation in Myanmar is unacceptable and should not continue” and that the “violence must be stopped, democracy, stability and peace in Myanmar must be returned immediately.”

To this end, the [Chairman’s Statement](#), issued by current ASEAN Chair Brunei Darussalam, contained a “Five-Point Consensus” as follows:

First, there shall be immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar and all parties shall exercise utmost restraint.

Second, constructive dialogue among all parties concerned shall commence to seek a peaceful solution in the interests of the people.

Third, a special envoy of the ASEAN Chair shall facilitate mediation of the dialogue process, with the assistance of the Secretary-General of ASEAN.

Fourth, ASEAN shall provide humanitarian assistance through the AHA Centre.

Fifth, the special envoy and delegation shall visit Myanmar to meet with all parties concerned.

Reportedly a proposed sixth point, “the immediate release of all political prisoners” failed to make the final cut. The Chairman’s Statement merely mentioned that “(W)e also heard calls for the release of all political prisoners including foreigners.”

At a [press conference](#) after the summit, Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin said that Min Aung Hlaing told ASEAN leaders that he will find a way to solve the problem and agreed that violence must stop. “Our proposals would be accepted, the general in his response did not reject (them),” Muhyiddin said, “This is very encouraging progress.” In discussion of the organization’s noninterference principle, he reportedly said that policy should not lead to inaction if a domestic situation “jeopardizes the peace, security, and stability of ASEAN and the wider region.” He also acknowledged that “(T)here is a tremendous expectation on the part of the international community on how ASEAN is addressing the Myanmar issue. The pressure is increasing.”

the killing won’t stop until the protests stop; this is clearly not what ASEAN had in mind.

After several years of slights, it was anticipated that the US would once again be full and enthusiastic participants in ASEAN-led multilateralism under the Biden administration, which continues to play lip service to the importance of ASEAN [centrality](#). However, it is hard to imagine President Biden going to this fall’s ASEAN-organized East Asia Summit if Senior General Min Aung Hlaing is among the participants; in fact, we would strongly urge him not to attend if this is the case.



Figure 5 People hold signs as they protest against Myanmar’s military in Launglon, Myanmar. Photo: Dawei Watch via Reuters

All well and good, but by the time *Comparative Connections* went to print, no special envoy had yet been named and no delegation had set foot in Myanmar and, most importantly, there had been no cessation of violence.” While Min Aung Hlaing has not disputed the Chairman’s Statement per se, two days after the summit the junta issued a [press release](#) noting ASEAN’s “suggestions,” which it would consider only “after stabilizing the country.” In other words,

REGIONAL CHRONOLOGY

JANUARY – APRIL 2021

Jan. 1, 2021: In a New Year’s Day speech, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen [expresses](#) the need for cross-strait stability and offers talks with Beijing to end confrontation.

Jan. 1, 2021: Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien-Loong and Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin [issue](#) a joint announcement that the agreement between the two countries to construct a high-speed rail between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore is officially terminated.

Jan. 2, 2021: Bipartisan Congressional provision condemning China’s aggression towards India [becomes](#) law, as the US Congress overrides Donald Trump’s veto on the \$740 billion defense policy bill.

Jan. 2, 2021: Hong Kong’s *South China Morning Post* [describes](#) China’s strategy to wear down Japanese resistance to its claim over the Senkaku Islands through repeated air and sea incursions.

Jan. 3, 2021: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [extends](#) an olive branch to the incoming Biden administration, stating that a “new window of hope” is opening.

Jan. 3, 2021: Commenting on Japanese [interest](#) in becoming the sixth eye of the Five Eyes alliance, a research associate at Fudan University’s Center for Japanese Studies opines that Japan is “strong in will but weak in capability,” but will continue to move closer to the alliance.

Jan. 4, 2021: China Securities Regulatory Commission [describes](#) the US government’s order to delist three Chinese telcos from the New York Stock Exchange as politically motivated and in breach of market rules.

Jan. 5, 2021: New York Stock Exchange reverses plans to delist three Chinese state-run telecoms groups to comply with a Trump administration executive order that bars US investors from holding stakes in companies with alleged ties to the Chinese military.

Jan. 5, 2021: Eighth Congress of North Korea’s ruling Workers’ Party opens in Pyongyang, unannounced; this is not reported until Jan. 6.

Jan. 5, 2021: US Ambassador to India Kenneth I Juster [describes](#) the Indo-Pacific as “significant” for US-India relations in a press conference in New Delhi.

Jan. 6, 2021: Members of the US Congress [certify](#) the November election results, while a violent mob of Trump supporters [storms](#) the US Capitol building.

Jan. 6, 2021: Outgoing US President Donald Trump [signs](#) an executive order arguing that “aggressive action” must be taken against eight notable Chinese applications, including Alipay and WeChat Pay.

Jan. 6, 2021: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [issues](#) a statement condemning China’s arrest of more than 50 pro-democracy politicians and activists in Hong Kong.

Jan. 7, 2021: South Korean court [orders](#) Japan to compensate 12 women who were forced to work as so-called “comfort women” in wartime brothels, drawing ire from Tokyo.

Jan. 7, 2021: Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide [declares](#) a second state of emergency due to COVID-19 in four prefectures (Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, and Chiba) through Feb. 7. He [declares](#) a state of emergency for seven more prefectures on Jan. 13.

Jan. 8, 2021: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [examines](#) ties with Seoul, determining to expand foreign relations on the third day of his second Party Congress since ascending to power in 2012.

Jan. 8, 2021: Secretary Pompeo [approves](#) the creation of a new cyber-security and emerging technologies bureau to fight against cyber-security threats, citing threats from North Korea.

Jan. 9, 2021: Social media images of the People's Liberation Army [reveal](#) the first public display of its upgraded PCL-191 long-range multiple launch rocket system (MLRS), capable of firing 370mm rockets 217 miles, or 750mm ballistic missiles 311 miles.

Jan. 11, 2021: US State Department [says](#) that Mike Pompeo has no plans to travel to Taiwan amid Chinese commentary that a visit to Taiwan from the US secretary of state would provoke an “overwhelming” response from Beijing.

Jan. 12, 2021: India [returns](#) a People's Liberation Army soldier who strayed across the disputed Himalayas region.

Jan. 13, 2021: China's new armed reconnaissance drone, the WJ-700, [completes](#) its maiden flight at an undisclosed location.

Jan. 13, 2021: US [bans](#) all imports of cotton and tomato products from China's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, citing growing concerns over widespread use of forced labor.

Jan. 13, 2021: Biden [selects](#) Kurt Campbell to serve as National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific.

Jan. 14, 2021: US Department of Defense [releases](#) names of additional companies added to the list of “Communist Chinese military companies” operating in the US.

Jan. 15, 2021: North Korea [holds](#) a military parade in Pyongyang, displaying its new Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM).

Jan. 15, 2021: Pompeo [announces](#) that the US is sanctioning six PRC and Hong Kong officials after pro-democracy arrests in Hong Kong.

Jan. 15, 2021: Trump administration [announces](#) sanctions on officials of Chinese state-owned enterprises and military and adds Chinese oil giant CNOOC to an economic blacklist, accusing them of using coercion against states with rival claims in the South China Sea.

Jan. 16, 2021: United States [imposes](#) sanctions on six pro-Beijing Hong Kong officials over mass arrests of pro-democracy activists.

Jan. 16, 2021: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi concludes his Southeast Asian tour in the Philippines, [promising](#) its “closest neighbour” half a million doses of COVID-19 vaccines, \$1.34 billion in loan pledges for infrastructure projects, and \$77 million in grants.

Jan. 18, 2021: South Korean President Moon Jae-in [urges](#) President-elect Joe Biden to hold talks with North Korea to build on the progress that President Trump made with leader Kim Jong Un.

Jan. 19, 2021: Beijing [pledges](#) to use its political and economic strengths to contain pro-independence forces in Taiwan, identifying it as a key talk for the Communist Party's centenary year.

Jan. 19, 2021: Secretary Pompeo [declares](#) that China's treatment of Uygurs in Xinjiang constitutes genocide.

Jan. 20, 2021: President Biden is [inaugurated](#) in Washington.

Jan. 21, 2021: 13th National Party Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam [opens](#) to select the top leadership of the party as well as choosing members of the Politburo, and to set policy goals for the next five years.

Jan. 21, 2021: Japan [characterizes](#) China's “drawing of territorial sea baselines” as incongruent with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Jan. 22, 2021: Lloyd Austin is [confirmed](#) by the Senate to be secretary of Defense.

Jan. 22, 2021: Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying [calls](#) for the “better angels in US-China relations” to emerge following the inauguration of President Biden.

Jan. 23, 2021: China's top legislative body [passes](#) a law permitting its coastguards to fire on foreign vessels and demolish structures built in disputed waters.

Jan. 23, 2021: State Department [urges](#) Beijing to cease military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan in a press release.

Jan. 24, 2021: Washington [urges](#) Beijing to end its military pressure against Taiwan, hours after Taipei reported a large incursion into its airspace by the mainland Chinese air force.

Jan. 24, 2021: In the first US-Japanese ministerial-level talk since President Biden took office, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [affirms](#) to Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo that the Senkaku Islands fall within the scope of the Japan-US Mutual Security Treaty.

Jan. 25, 2021: Secretary Austin [calls](#) on key Asian allies to work with the US in the Indo-Pacific, signaling his intention to boost defense ties in the region amid US regional competition with China.

Jan. 26, 2021: China and New Zealand complete a review and expansion of their free trade agreement, [eliminating](#) almost all trade tariffs.

Jan. 26, 2021: South Korea's Bank of Korea [announces](#) that South Korea's real gross domestic product fell by 1% in 2020, marking the lowest growth rate in 22 years.

Jan. 26, 2021: US Senate [confirms](#) Antony Blinken as secretary of state.

Jan. 27, 2021: US Special Climate Envoy John Kerry [says](#) at a press conference that the US must deal with China on climate change as a "critical standalone issue," adding that the Biden administration will not trade concessions on human rights and trade for climate cooperation.

Jan. 27, 2021: Head of the Philippine fishers' association [describes](#) China's new law permitting China's coastguard to fire on foreign vessels in disputed waters as a "virtual declaration of war."

Jan. 28, 2021: President Biden [assures](#) Japanese Prime Minister Suga that the US-Japan mutual treaty applies to the disputed Senkaku Islands.

Jan. 28, 2021: Chinese Defense Ministry spokesperson Wu Qian [warns](#) the Biden administration and Taiwan, stating that the pursuit of independence for the self-ruled island "means war."

Jan. 29, 2021: A Pentagon spokesperson [calls](#) Chinese remarks equating Taiwanese independence as "war" as "unfortunate," and reaffirms Washington's commitment to improving the self-ruled island's defense capacity.

Jan. 30, 2021: US [states](#) that Chinese military flights in the past week in the South China Sea fit a pattern of destabilization and aggressive behavior by Beijing, but pose no threat to a US Navy carrier strike group in the region.

Jan. 31, 2021: A World Health Organization team investigating the origins of the coronavirus pandemic [visits](#) a Wuhan seafood market linked to the earliest COVID-19 cases.

Feb. 1, 2021: Taiwan's Defense Ministry [states](#) that Seven People's Liberation Army warplanes and a US reconnaissance aircraft entered Taiwan's air defense identification zone, as tensions across the strait continue to escalate.

Feb. 1, 2021: Myanmar's military [launches](#) a coup, detaining leader Aung San Suu Kyi and a number of other high profile elected officials.

Feb. 2, 2021: Suga [extends](#) the state of emergency to March 7 for 10 prefectures.

Feb. 2, 2021: President Biden [calls](#) on Myanmar's military to relinquish power immediately.

Feb. 3, 2021: Aircraft carrier group USS Nimitz [departs](#) its extended period in the Middle East for the Indo-Pacific region.

Feb. 3, 2021: Tokyo [conveys](#) "strong concerns" to Beijing over China's new coast guard legislation. Tokyo and London's foreign and defense ministers also [express](#) concern about the law.

Feb. 4, 2021: Biden declares "America is back" during first visit to State Department as president: "American leadership must meet this new moment of advancing authoritarianism, including the growing ambitions of China to rival the United States and the determination of Russia to damage and disrupt our democracy."

Feb. 4, 2021: US [announces](#) an extension of the New Strategic Arms Treaty, the last remaining treaty with Russia capping their nuclear arsenals, until 2026, vowing to pursue similar arms agreements with Beijing.

Feb. 5, 2021: Vice-Admiral Aan Kurnia, head of Indonesia's Maritime Security Agency, [warns](#) that China's new coastguard law heightens risk of "spillover conflict" into Indonesia's territorial waters around the Natuna Islands, where two countries have had skirmishes before.

Feb. 6, 2021: China [protests](#) US Navy destroyer USS *John S. McCain*'s freedom of navigation exercise in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands, the first such operation under the Biden administration.

Feb. 8, 2021: Tens of thousands of people in Myanmar [march](#) in protest against the military coup for the second straight day, as a partial restoration of Internet connection flooded Myanmar social media with images and videos of the demonstrations.

Feb. 8, 2021: In a CBS interview [broadcast](#), President Biden describes the US-China rivalry as "extreme competition" rather than conflict, and acknowledges that he is yet to speak to his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping.

Feb. 9, 2021: French nuclear attack submarine *Émeraude* and its naval support ship *Seine* [carry out](#) freedom of navigation in the disputed South China Sea as part of Paris' efforts to challenge Beijing's sweeping claims in the region.

Feb. 9, 2021: Chinese President Xi Jinping [says](#) that China and Vietnam must manage their own maritime disputes and resist outside instigation during a phone call with his Vietnamese counterpart, Nguyen Phu Trong.

Feb. 10, 2021: A confidential UN report [states](#) that North Korea maintained and developed its nuclear and ballistic missile programs throughout 2021 in violation of international sanctions. According to the report, these were partially funded with some \$300 million stolen through cyber hacks.

Feb. 10, 2021: Chinese Defense Ministry spokesperson Wu Qian [states](#) that PLA and Indian troops have "simultaneously" begun disengagement in the disputed border of Pangong Lake in a "planned, orderly manner."

Feb. 10, 2021: Presidents Biden and Xi [engage](#) in their first phone call since Biden's inauguration. Issues pertaining to trade, human rights, the Indo-Pacific region, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang feature throughout the dialogue.

Feb. 11, 2021: *Kyodo* [reports](#) that the Japanese government is hesitant to impose sanctions on Myanmar following the military coup there, fearing that doing so would drive the military closer to China.

Feb. 11, 2021: President Biden [signs](#) Executive Order 14014, which authorizes an initial round of sanctions on top military leaders in Myanmar who were involved in the Feb. 1 coup, among other possible actions.

Feb. 11, 2021: Official negotiations [open](#) on renewal of the US-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), triggering a 180-day countdown in which the agreement must be renewed or terminated.

Feb. 12, 2021: South Korea's new Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [stress](#) close cooperation for the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula during their first phone talks.

Feb. 12, 2021: China [bans](#) the *BBC*'s World News in retaliation to the UK banning the Chinese state-backed broadcaster *CGTN*'s license the previous week.

Feb. 13, 2021: *CGTN* [loses](#) permission to air in Germany, just days after its broadcasting license was revoked in Britain.

Feb. 13, 2021: US military [begins](#) its delayed two-week-long annual Yudh Abhuas exercise with India, which has been reported to be the Biden administration's first move to use its Quad partners to exert pressure on Beijing.

Feb. 14, 2021: TikTok's Chinese owner, ByteDance, [walks](#) away from a deal to sell the video-sharing application's US operations to a group led by Oracle following Donald Trump's departure from the White House.

Feb. 15, 2021: Japan [announces](#) that it will build three transport ships for the Ground Self-Defense Forces designed to supply ammunition, fuel, and provisions to troops stationed on its outlying islands, as part of its efforts to deal with China's military buildup in the region.

Feb. 16, 2021: Jose Santiago Sta. Romana, the Philippines Ambassador to China, [states](#) that China has sought to ease tensions with Manila over its controversial new coastguard law.

Feb. 17, 2021: In a CNN town hall meeting, Biden [says](#) that he told Xi that there would be "repercussions" for China's human rights abuses.

Feb. 17, 2021: Satellite images provided by the Indian Army [show](#) China dismantling dozens of structures and moving vehicles from camps along parts of the disputed Himalayan border.

Feb. 18, 2021: South Korean Minister of Unification Lee In-young [says](#) that North Korea faces a food shortage of over 1.2 million to 1.3 million tons this year due to damage from heavy downpours that happened last year.

Feb. 19, 2021: Biden [addresses](#) the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference, says the US would be working closely with allies and partners "to meet the range of shared challenges we face."

Feb. 19, 2021: South Korean Nuclear Envoy Noh Kyu-duk, acting US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs Sung Kim, and Japanese Director-General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Takehiro Funakoshi [meet](#) virtually to discuss North Korean-related issues.

Feb. 20, 2021: Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and nine ministers [survive](#) a no-confidence motion in parliament following a four-day censure debate. Protests calling for his resignation resume.

Feb. 23, 2021: G7 foreign ministers [issue](#) a statement condemning the violence committed in Myanmar against protestors and calling upon the security forces to exercise "utmost restraint and respect human rights and international law."

Feb. 26, 2021: Japanese Ambassador to South Korea Koichi Aiboshi [meets](#) South Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun and they agree to maintain close communication.

Feb. 27, 2021: South Korea's National Assembly [passes](#) a parliamentary resolution denouncing the military coup in Myanmar.

Feb. 27, 2021: US Defense Department spokesman [says](#) North Korea's continued development of weapons poses a threat to the United States and its allies.

March 1, 2021: President Moon Jae-in [says](#) South Korea is ready to talk with Japan anytime, stating that it would also be helpful to the trilateral partnership with the United States.

March 1, 2021: Suga [lifts](#) the state of emergency in six prefectures (Aichi, Gifu, Osaka, Kyoto, Hyogo, and Fukuoka).

March 2, 2021: ASEAN foreign ministers [urge](#) the Myanmar military to desist from violence during an informal online meeting.

March 2, 2021: Following China's import ban on Taiwanese pineapples, the de facto US and Canadian embassies in Taiwan [praise](#) Taiwan's pineapples on social media.

March 2, 2021: Philippine Defense Undersecretary Raymund Elefante and Indian Ambassador Shambu Kumaran [sign](#) an implementing agreement involving the procurement of defense material and equipment by the Philippines from India including BrahMos cruise missiles.

March 2, 2021: Biden administration [releases](#) the “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” which warns of an “increasingly assertive” China, “the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”

March 3, 2021: China and South Korea [establish](#) two additional military hotlines as an effort to avoid any military miscalculation.

March 5, 2021: Secretary Austin [includes](#) North Korea on the list of threats to the United States and its allies.

March 5, 2021: US [unveils](#) new measures to punish Myanmar’s army for its coup, blocking the ministries of defense and home affairs and top military conglomerates from certain types of trade.

March 6, 2021: US Senate unanimously [approves](#) bill to tighten controls on Chinese-funded Confucius Institutes accused by lawmakers of being propaganda tools.

March 7, 2021: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [delineates](#) Hong Kong and Taiwan “red lines” in its relations with the United States, but says there is room for cooperation in the areas of pandemic control, economic recovery, and climate change.

March 8, 2021: Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Marise Payne [announces](#) Australia’s suspension of its defense cooperation program with Myanmar amid an intensified crackdown on protesters and media by the country’s military.

March 9, 2021: Official news outlet of the Communist Party of China’s Xinjiang region [says](#) unidentified companies have filed a domestic civil lawsuit seeking compensation from Adrian Zenz, a US-based human rights researcher, whose reports have alleged the region’s cotton industry utilizes forced labor.

March 9, 2021: OECD [says](#) a global economic recovery is “in sight” thanks partly to fiscal stimulus in the US and increasing vaccine deployment, despite “uneven” vaccine distribution.

March 10, 2021: Secretary Blinken [refers](#) to South Korea and Japan as “two of our most important allies” during testimony before Congress ahead of his Indo-Pacific tour.

March 10, 2021: Prime Minister Suga and his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi [hold](#) a phone call ahead of the upcoming Quad meeting with the US and Australia, pledging to realize a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”

March 11, 2021: Washington [says](#) it will not ease its sanctions on Iran, including Iranian funds in South Korea, until Iran returns to compliance with the JCPOA.

March 11, 2021: US Navy [sends](#) warship USS John Finn on voyage through the Taiwan Strait, drawing the ire of Beijing. This is the third such voyage under the Biden administration.

March 11, 2021: China’s national legislature [approves](#) resolution drastically altering Hong Kong’s electoral system, expanding the Electoral Committee with 300 Beijing loyalists who will comprise the fifth sector of the 1,500 member body.

March 11, 2021: State Department [condemns](#) the Beijing legislature’s tightening the central government’s control over Hong Kong’s electoral system, deeming the move to be a “direct attack” on the city’s autonomy. A day later, Secretary Blinken also [joins](#) other G7 foreign ministers and the High Representative of the European Union in a joint-statement condemning the changes made to Hong Kong’s electoral laws by China’s National People’s Congress.

March 12, 2021: At a virtual summit of the Quad, the United States, Japan, Australia and India [announce](#) they will provide 1 billion doses of the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine, to be produced in India, to countries of the Indo-Pacific by the end of 2022. The *Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement* [is also released](#), reaffirming a shared vision for “a region that is free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion.”

March 12, 2021: Quad leaders’ *Washington Post* op-ed [is published](#), highlighting the history of the four nations’ cooperation and new challenges for the region that require coordination. China is not mentioned.

March 13, 2021: Ahead of Indo-Pacific tour, Secretary of Defense Austin [calls](#) China “our pacing threat” and vows to strengthen alliances which, he says, give the US “a lot more capability.”

March 13, 2021: A Biden administration official [says](#) North Korea has not responded to the behind-the-scenes Biden administration’s diplomatic outreach since mid-February.

March 14, 2021: Chinese Ambassador to US Cui Tiankai [argues](#) that fears regarding an erosion of democracy in Hong Kong are “unnecessary.”

March 15, 2021: Myanmar’s military [extends](#) “full martial law” to all parts of Yangon following violent protests over the weekend that left 50 people dead.

March 16, 2021: Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi and Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo meet Secretaries Blinken and Austin, [hold](#) a Japan-US Security Consultative Committee (“2+2”) meeting in Tokyo.

March 16, 2021: US Treasury Department [sanctions](#) 24 Chinese and Hong Kong officials over Beijing’s changes to Hong Kong’s electoral system that took place on March 11.

March 16, 2021: Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong [condemns](#) South Korea for military exercises with the United States.

March 16, 2021: NSC Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell [says](#) that the Biden administration will not offer any improvements in the relationship with China until its economic coercion of Australia ceases.

March 17, 2021: Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijan [criticizes](#) Washington and Tokyo for attempting “anti-China encirclement” after officials raised concerns about its “destabilizing behavior” in the region.

March 17, 2021: Asked by a reporter while traveling in Tokyo if the US is considering boycotting the 2022 Beijing Olympics, Secretary Blinken [says](#) President Biden is “listening to the concerns” of many countries and will decide what to do at the appropriate time.

March 17-18, 2021: Blinken and Austin [attend](#) a US-ROK Foreign and Defense Ministerial (2+2) in Seoul. The meeting is hosted by the ROK’s Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and Minister of Defense Suh Wook.

March 18, 2021: North Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui [says](#) North Korea will continue to ignore any contact from the United States unless the US withdraws its hostile policies toward North Korea.

March 18, 2021: President Moon [says](#) South Korea will improve strained ties with Japan to bolster trilateral security cooperation involving the United States during talks with Blinken and Austin.

March 18, 2021: During a trip to Seoul, Secretary Blinken [calls](#) on China to use its influence in Pyongyang to help pressure it into abandoning its nuclear program.

March 18-19, 2021: Chinese Politburo member Yang Jiechi and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [hold](#) meetings with Secretary Blinken and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan in Anchorage, Alaska. In a fiery round of opening statements, Blinken says China is contributing to a “far more violent world” and Chinese officials call the US hypocritical for complaining about human rights abuses given its history of racism.

March 19, 2021: North Korea [says](#) that it will sever diplomatic relations with Malaysia for extraditing its businessman living in Malaysia to the United States.

March 20, 2021: Australian Foreign Minister Payne [states](#) that Australia will not trade away important principles and values simply to restart diplomatic talks with China.

March 21, 2021: Philippine troops [kill](#) a leader of the Abu Sayyaf kidnap-for-ransom group, Majan Sahidjuan, and rescue four Indonesian hostages.

March 22, 2021: 55-year-old businessman Mun Chol Myong, who faces money laundering charges, [becomes](#) the first North Korean citizen ever extradited to the United States.

March 22, 2021: State Department [issues](#) a joint statement with Canada and the United Kingdom opposing China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

March 22, 2021: South Korea's Defense Minister Suh Wook [signals](#) closer military cooperation with Tokyo in a TV interview.

March 22, 2021: Suga lifts the state of emergency in the four remaining prefectures (Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, and Chiba).

March 23, 2021: Philippine Defense Minister Delfin Lorenzana [calls](#) upon the 220 Chinese vessels surrounding Whitsun Reef to withdraw, claiming they are violating the Philippines' rights under international maritime law.

March 23, 2021: North Korea [fires](#) off multiple short-range missiles after denouncing Washington for the joint military exercises with South Korea.

March 23, 2021: Myanmar's ruling military council spokesperson, Zaw Min Tun, [says](#) that the junta is cooperating with five neighboring countries and vows to stamp out "anarchy."

March 23, 2021: US Climate Envoy John Kerry [attends](#) the Ministerial on Climate Action, and meets with China's Special Envoy for Climate Affairs Xie Zhenhua.

March 24, 2021: Addressing NATO headquarters in Brussels, Blinken says "nine in 10 Americans believe that maintaining our alliances is the most effective way to achieve our foreign policy goals."

March 24, 2021: President Biden's nominee to lead USINDOPACOM, Admiral John Aquilino, [says](#) that Beijing's ability to invade Taiwan is "much closer than most think."

March 25, 2021: North Korea [fires](#) at least one unidentified projectile into the East Sea, according to the Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff.

March 25, 2021: South Korea [convenes](#) an emergency National Security Council (NSC) meeting on North Korea's latest projectile launch.

March 26, 2021: Biden nominates Daniel J. Kritenbrink as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

March 26, 2021: World Bank [announces](#) that the economy of Myanmar has contracted by 10% since the Feb. 1 coup. Food prices have doubled, and the cost of fuel has risen by 15%.

March 26, 2021: United States and Taiwan [further strengthen](#) maritime security ties, signing a coastguard agreement suggested to counter growing "gray zone" threats from mainland China.

March 26, 2021: United States [condemns](#) North Korea's ballistic missile launches as "destabilizing" actions violating UN Security Council resolutions.

March 26, 2021: Two suicide bombers believed to be members of an Islamist militant group [detonate](#) an explosive device outside a Catholic church, killing themselves and wounding 19 others.

March 27, 2021: China [announces](#) sanctions on US and Canadian individuals and entities in retaliation for imposing sanctions on Chinese persons and entities in Xinjiang.

March 27, 2021: Iran and China [sign](#) a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement addressing a wide variety of economic issues, including oil and mining, the promotion of industrial activity in Iran, as well as transportation and agricultural collaborations.

March 28, 2021: Blinken [says](#) China's retaliatory sanctions in the growing dispute of Beijing's treatment of Uyghurs are "baseless" and would only draw further attention to the "genocide" in Xinjiang.

March 29, 2021: In her first week in office, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai [says](#) that a trade meeting between China and the United States will take place "when the time is right."

March 29, 2021: United States [suspends](#) its trade pact with Myanmar in response to the military junta's killing of over 100 democracy protesters over the weekend.

March 30, 2021: sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un [criticizes](#) South Korean President Moon Jae-in for his speech, mocking him as a "parrot" that repeats the United States' "gangster-like logic."

March 30, 2021: Xi [urges](#) Sri Lanka to continue work with Beijing to develop the controversial Hambantota port, which sits along the main waterways of Asia and Europe.

March 31, 2021: US Department of State [releases](#) 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights, within which China's humanitarian practices in Xinjiang are classified as "[g]enocide and crimes against humanity."

March 31, 2021: US Acting Assistant Secretary of State Lisa Peterson [says](#) the US will hold North Korea accountable for its "egregious" human rights violations.

March 31, 2021: Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu [announces](#) that Tokyo will halt any new aid in Myanmar in response to the coup orchestrated by the military junta.

April 1, 2021: Philippine military [says](#) that it has documented illegal man-made structures on Union Banks in the South China Sea's Spratly Islands, near areas where hundreds of Chinese vessels massed last month.

April 2, 2021: Myanmar anti-coup protests [hold](#) candle-lit protests and urge "guerilla strike" tactics, as internet blackout widens.

April 3, 2021: In a joint statement after a day of talks, representatives from the United States, South Korea, and Japan [agree](#) to work together to maintain pressure on North Korea to abandon its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

April 3, 2021: Ten of Myanmar's major rebel groups [express](#) their support for the country's anti-coup activists.

April 4, 2021: Australia's newly appointed Defense Minister Peter Dutton [expresses](#) his intention to work closely with the US and other allies in maintaining peace in the region.

April 5, 2021: A report on North Korean Sports Ministry website DPRK Korea [states](#) that the North Korean Olympic Committee "decided not to participate in the 32nd Olympic Games in order to protect players from the world public health crisis caused by COVID-19," dealing a blow to both South Korean and Japanese hopes for a diplomatic breakthrough with the North at the Games.

April 5, 2021: South Korea's Defense Ministry [rejects](#) Japan's renewed territorial claims over the country's easternmost islets of Dokdo, saying Seoul does not even have to repeat explanations on the matter.

April 5, 2021: Japan [sends](#) its naval destroyer JS *Suzutsuki* to "gather information and monitor the movements" of China's carrier group, which was spotted passing the waterway between Okinawa and Miyako Island.

April 6, 2021: China's Foreign Ministry [requests](#) Manila to "stop hyping up" the fleet of Chinese vessels moored in Whitsun Reef in the disputed South China Sea.

April 7, 2021: State Department spokesman Ned Price [acknowledges](#) that the Biden administration is considering a boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.

April 8, 2021: US [sends](#) the USS Makin Island amphibious-ready group (ARG) to the disputed water of the South China Sea, bolstering Washington's presence amid heightened tensions between Manila and Beijing regarding the presence of Chinese fishing vessels in Whitsun Reef.

April 9, 2021: Indo-Pacific Command [moves](#) the US carrier strike group USS Theodore Roosevelt and the amphibious ready group USS Makin Island into the South China Sea, partly in response to the presence of Chinese vessels off Whitsun Reef, a perceived threat against the maritime security of the Philippines.

April 9, 2021: Iran [releases](#) a South Korean-flagged tanker that it seized amid a dispute over billions in frozen oil funds.

April 9, 2021: US issues [new](#) contact guidance for US government interactions with Taiwan counterparts, though the details remain classified.

April 10, 2021: Myanmar's ruling military junta [announce](#) that 19 people have been sentenced to death for killing an associate of an army captain and that anti-coup protests are dwindling.

April 11, 2021: Local media reports in Myanmar [state](#) that at least 82 people were killed in one day in a crackdown by Myanmar security forces on pro-democracy protesters.

April 12, 2021: Philippines armed forces [begin](#) two week joint exercises with hundreds of US soldiers amid growing tensions with Beijing in the South China Sea.

April 12, 2021: Blinken [blames](#) China's failure to provide access to global health experts for making the COVID-19 pandemic worse than it had to be.

April 12, 2021: Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian [expresses](#) Beijing's "deep concerns" with Japan over its planned disposal of treated radioactive water from the damaged Fukushima nuclear plant into the ocean. South Korea's Foreign Ministry likewise [expresses](#) "grave concerns" over Japan's decision.

April 13, 2021: According to Taiwan's Defence Ministry, China's People's Liberation Army [flew](#) 25 warplanes into Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ), its largest incursion yet as tension in the Taiwan Strait continues to escalate.

April 13, 2021: Chinese Premier Li Keqiang [holds](#) virtual dialogue with board chairmen and CEOs from the US-China Business Council and over 20 US multinational companies.

April 14, 2021: Former US Senator Chris Dodd and Deputy Secretaries of State Richard Armitage and James Steinberg [travel](#) to Taiwan at Joe Biden's request, in a "personal signal" of the president's commitment to the Chinese-claimed island.

April 14, 2021: An annual report by the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence [lists](#) China at the top of its national security threats, warning of Beijing's efforts to realize "an epochal geopolitical shift."

April 15, 2021: General Bipin Rawat, the Chief of Defence Staff of the Indian Army [says](#) that China tried to wage an "undeclared war" against India through cyberattacks.

April 16, 2021: Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister, Wu Jianghao, [summons](#) Japanese ambassador Hideo Tarumi over Tokyo's controversial decision to release more than 1 million tons of treated water from the Fukushima nuclear plant into the ocean.

April 17, 2021: In a joint statement after a meeting, President Biden and Prime Minister Suga [call](#) for "peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and reaffirm their commitment to countering China's "intimidation" in the East and South China seas.

April 17, 2021: US Climate Envoy John Kerry and China Special Envoy for Climate Change Xie Zhenhua [issue](#) a joint statement addressing the Climate Crisis.

April 17, 2021: US Treasury Department [determines](#) that Vietnam has tripped the threshold for currency manipulation but does not formally declare Hanoi a currency manipulator.

April 18, 2021: In a joint statement following Special Envoy Kerry's visit to Shanghai, Washington and Beijing [express](#) their commitment to working together to uphold the Paris Agreement on climate change.

April 19, 2021: China's People's Liberation Army [reportedly](#) deploys an advanced long-range rocket launcher to the Himalayas, in a move to reinforce China's border defense and act as a deterrent to India.

April 20, 2021: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte [says](#) that he is prepared to send military ships in the South China Sea to stake a claim over oil and mineral resources in the disputed section of the strategic waterway.

April 21, 2021: Biden [nominates](#) Ely Ratner for Assistant Secretary of Defense, Indo-Pacific Security Affairs.

April 21, 2021: US Senate Foreign Relations Committee [passes](#) the *Strategic Competition Act*.

April 21, 2021: President Moon [urges](#) the United States to restart dialogue with North Korea at an early date during an interview with *The New York Times*.

April 21, 2021: Chinese Foreign Ministry [confirms](#) that President Xi will attend the US-hosted Earth Day climate change summit.

April 21, 2021: Seoul Central District Court [rejects](#) a compensation claim against the Japanese government by 20 individuals including survivors of wartime sex slavery, citing sovereign immunity.

April 22, 2021: Xi Jinping [delivers](#) remarks at the US-led Leaders Summit on Climate.

April 22, 2021: Beijing [says](#) that it will “respond firmly and forcefully” if Canberra refuses to reverse its decision to cancel two deals agreed between China and the Australian state of Victoria.

April 23, 2021: Suga [declares](#) a third state of emergency in Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, and Hyogo due to a surge in COVID-19 cases.

April 23, 2021: Chinese embassy in London [condemns](#) the British parliament for passing a motion declaring that Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in China’s Xinjiang region “are suffering crimes against humanity and genocide.”

April 23, 2021: A North Korean defector group [plans](#) to send thousands of leaflets to North Korea, despite a recently enacted ban on leafletting.

April 24, 2021: ASEAN leaders [gather](#) in Jakarta in the first physical summit to try to bring an end to the violence and instability in Myanmar following the Feb. 1 military coup. The [Chairman’s Statement](#) include a “Five-Point Consensus” to resolve the conflict, including “immediate cessation” of violence.

April 24, 2021: Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin [says](#) that Min Aung Hlaing, commander of Myanmar’s armed forces, told ASEAN leaders that he agreed that violence in his country must stop.

April 25, 2021: At a defense and security consultation, Chinese and Vietnamese officials [agree](#) to work together to improve trust amid regional tensions regarding their territorial claims in the South China Sea.

April 26, 2021: Myanmar’s junta [releases](#) a statement that it will consider ASEAN’s “suggestions” in Jakarta after “stabilizing the country.”

April 26, 2021: Following Australian Defence Minister Peter Dutton’s remark that conflict with China over Taiwan could not be “discounted,” Beijing [releases](#) a statement imploring Australia to recognize the “one-China principle.”

April 27, 2021: A Morning Consult poll [shows](#) the US’ favorability ratings to be up in 13 out of 14 countries since Biden’s inauguration, with China the lone exception.

April 27, 2021: Japan’s 2021 edition of its annual Diplomatic Bluebook [highlights](#) ‘strong concerns’ regarding China’s military expansion.

April 28, 2021: In a speech to a joint session of Congress, Biden [states](#) that the US is in competition with China “to win the 21st century.”

April 28, 2021: Britain’s Royal Navy [announces](#) it will send a strike group, led by HMS Queen Elizabeth, to the Indo-Pacific next week, as it seeks to expand its presence in the region.

April 29, 2021: Taiwan [commissions](#) the first of a fleet of coast guard ships that can be converted into warships to bolster the defense of Taipei-controlled islands in the South China Sea.

April 30, 2021: State Department [calls](#) for Taiwan to be allowed to participate in the upcoming World Health Assembly.

April 30, 2021: United Nations Development Program [issues](#) a report warning that turmoil and violence in Myanmar has doubled the number of people in poverty, and could force half the population into poverty by early 2022, if the situation continues unchecked. Since the coup, 11% of the population has been pushed into poverty.

April 30, 2021: Reports of the Biden administration's completed policy review on North Korea [circulate](#), indicating a new path on addressing North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Few details are revealed, however.

April 30, 2021: At the Indo-Pacific Command Change of Command, Secretary of Defense Austin, chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mark Milley and both the incoming and outgoing commanders [cite](#) the Indo-Pacific as "the priority region" for US national security interests.

May 11, 2021: Biden reportedly [picks](#) Rahm Emanuel, the former Chicago mayor and chief of staff to President Obama, as ambassador to Japan.

Regional chronology by Pacific Forum Research Intern Tom Connolly.



COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

US-JAPAN RELATIONS

SUGA AND BIDEN OFF TO A GOOD START

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The early months of 2021 offered a full diplomatic agenda for US-Japan relations as a new US administration took office. Joe Biden was sworn in as the 46th president of the United States amid considerable contention. Former President Donald Trump refused to concede defeat, and on Jan. 6, a crowd of his supporters [stormed](#) the US Capitol where Congressional representatives were [certifying the results](#) of the presidential election. The breach of the US Capitol shocked the nation and the world. Yet after his [inauguration](#) on Jan. 20, Biden and his foreign policy team soon got to work on implementing policies that emphasized on US allies and sought to restore US engagement in multilateral coalitions around the globe. The day after the inauguration, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [reached out](#) to his counterpart in Japan, National Security Secretariat Secretary General Kitamura Shigeru, to assure him of the importance the new administration placed on its allies. The COVID-19 pandemic continued to focus the attention of leaders in the United States and Japan, however.

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Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide faced rising numbers of infections, declaring a [second state of emergency](#) in January, which was lifted in March, and then a [third state of emergency](#) at the end of April. As the number of cases surged, Suga suffered from public frustration over the government's handling of the pandemic response. Moreover, the Suga Cabinet had been slow to approve vaccinations, waiting until Japanese clinical trials were conducted before beginning negotiations with Pfizer and other pharmaceutical companies for supplying vaccines to the Japanese public. The Tokyo Olympics also loomed large for the Suga Cabinet. Public opinion in Japan was increasingly negative toward the idea of hosting the Olympics, and yet the government continued to emphasize the importance of hosting the Games. Suga, who [entered office](#) last September with an impressively high approval rating of 74%, saw his approval fall as low as 33% in some polls in January ([Mainichi](#), [Asahi](#)) before rebounding slightly to 40-44% in April ([NHK](#), [Asahi](#)).



Figure 1 US President Joe Biden speaks as he holds a joint news conference with Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga in the Rose Garden at the White House in Washington, U.S., April 16, 2021. Photo: Reuters/Tom Brenner

The US-Japan alliance thus focused on navigating the leadership transition in Washington. A new foreign policy team came into office, with many familiar faces from the Obama era. Despite the pandemic, Washington and Tokyo were still trying to manage the growing assertiveness of China in the vicinity of Japan and across the Indo-Pacific. Within the first few months, the Biden administration made it clear that the Indo-Pacific was a foreign policy priority, and Japan an increasingly critical partner in shaping its agenda in the region. In April, Suga became the first head of state to visit Washington, DC, demonstrating the new focus

on Asian allies and on the primacy of the US-Japan partnership.

Biden's Team Gets to Work

While Trump's efforts at obstructing the presidential transition spilled well into January, Biden wasted no time in sharing his planned nominations for key positions on his foreign policy team. On Nov. 24, just 17 days after the Associated Press and other major networks [declared](#) Biden the winner of the US presidential election, Biden [announced](#) Antony Blinken as secretary of state and Jake Sullivan as national security advisor. Two weeks later, Biden [announced](#) Lloyd Austin as his secretary of defense.

All three men have worked closely with Biden in the past. Blinken first worked for the president nearly 20 years ago when he was a foreign policy advisor to then Senator Biden on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Blinken went on to serve as national security advisor to Vice President Biden (2009-2013), deputy national security advisor to President Obama (2013-2015), and deputy secretary of State (2015-2017). Sullivan likewise has a long history with the president. After serving as director of policy planning in the State Department (2011-2013), Sullivan succeeded Blinken as national security advisor to Vice President Biden (2013-2014). Biden similarly got to know the defense secretary-to-be well when Austin was commander of United States Central Command (2013-2016), and Austin was the commanding officer of Biden's late son, Beau.

Thus, in addition to their personal ties to the president, Blinken, Sullivan, and Austin bring deep experience in Washington policymaking to the table, and they are familiar to many in Asia. On Jan. 13, Biden further signaled his administration's intention to focus on Asia when he announced that Kurt Campbell would fill the newly created position of National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific. Campbell has experience in both the departments of defense and state, having worked on the Futenma relocation plan as deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asia and the Pacific in the Clinton administration, and on the Asia pivot as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in the Obama administration.

With the key members of his foreign policy team in place, Biden's outreach to Asia has proceeded quickly from the transition period through his first few months as president. Biden and Suga [spoke](#) by telephone on Nov. 12, just five days after the election was called, and [again](#) on Jan. 28, just eight days after Biden's inauguration. Since entering office, Biden's team has been in [close coordination](#) with their counterparts in Tokyo and other regional allies to orchestrate a flurry of diplomatic meetings throughout the winter and spring, culminating in the [summit meeting](#) between Suga and Biden on April 16.



Figure 2 US President Joe Biden hosted Japanese Prime Minister Suga for his first foreign leader visit. Photo: [Twitter/@WhiteHouse](#)

China's Increasing Activism

As the US leadership transition took place, Beijing continued to challenge the interests of the United States and Japan. From the imposition of a National Security Law in Hong Kong to the growing repression in Xinjiang, US observers became increasingly alarmed at the acceleration of China's crackdown internally. Moreover, China's maritime and air forces grew ever more active in the vicinity of Japan. In January and February, the Japanese government reported considerable activity in and around the Senkaku Islands. At a news conference on March 1, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato Katsunobu shared that Chinese Coast Guard ships had been spotted entering the contiguous zone near the Senkakus on [26 of 28 days in February](#), including six instances where these ships crossed into Japan's territorial waters and five cases where they approached Japanese fishing boats.

But it was PLA activities in and around Taiwan that drew the attention of Washington and Tokyo. Increasingly large deployments of PLA

Air Forces crossed into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), signaling greater Chinese willingness to demonstrate its military power vis-à-vis Taiwan. Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense reported that Chinese aircraft had violated its ADIZ on [more than half of the days](#) in the first four months of 2021 and [more than 380 times](#) in 2020. The largest such incursion came on April 12, when 25 military aircraft [breached](#) Taiwanese airspace, just days before the Suga-Biden summit in Washington.

Japan's Ministry of Defense chronicled these intrusions closely as well, and increasingly Japanese political leaders spoke publicly about their concerns over how Washington would react. For example, in December, the parliamentary vice minister of defense, Nakayama Yasuhide, called on the incoming Biden administration to make its policy toward Taiwan clear in an interview with *Reuters*. Stating his belief that Taiwan would be a "[red line in Asia](#)," Nakayama urged the Biden administration to "be strong" and make its policy clear so that Japan would know what to do.

China's use of economic leverage to coerce its trading partners continued to worry policymakers in both Tokyo and Washington. The Chinese government [imposed trade sanctions](#) on imports from Australia in 2020 after Canberra had [called for a WHO investigation](#) of the origins of COVID-19. Beijing imposed tariffs on barley, beef, coal, cotton, wine, and other imports from Australia, costing Australia approximately [\\$3 billion in lost exports](#) in 2020. In a speech at NATO headquarters in Brussels on March 24, Blinken called out "[China's blatant economic coercion](#)" as a threat not only to Australia, but for all democratic nations. Yet, Beijing suggested it would treat the European Union in a similar fashion if it did not proceed with the joint investment agreement the two concluded in principle last December.

Rising tensions between Beijing and the Western nations grew even more as the Biden administration along with the European Union, United Kingdom, and Canada announced on March 22 that they would [sanction](#) Chinese individuals for their role in the repression in Xinjiang. Relations with China thus became more tense as the Biden administration [aligned itself with other nations](#) on human rights violations within China. Japan notably did not

join in these sanctions, or in earlier ones concerning Hong Kong, although Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu [raised Japan's concerns](#) in his meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on April 5.

China's growing military activism was the highlight of the testimony on Capitol Hill of outgoing US Indo-Pacific Commander Adm. Philip Davidson. On March 9 in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Davidson said that Chinese activities in the region had "[grown increasingly confrontational](#)." Moreover, Davidson noted that he believed that China was increasingly demonstrating its intention to take military action against Taiwan. Across the region, Davidson's assessment of Chinese capabilities was headline news. Especially noteworthy was his comment that he believed China would move militarily against Taiwan, saying "the threat is manifest during this decade, in fact [in the next six years](#)."

The Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Rollout

The Biden administration's concerted diplomatic push with Japan and its other allies in the Indo-Pacific highlighted the president's call for greater US global engagement and investment, but it also revealed the deepening worry in the region about China's growing assertiveness. The strategic outlook of Tokyo and Washington, in particular, converged in the effort to accelerate cooperation among the Quad.

On Feb. 18, Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Motegi [participated](#) with their Quad counterparts in a US-Japan-Australia-India foreign ministers' meeting by telephone. The call paved the way for the first [Quad leaders' summit](#) on March 12, with Biden, Suga, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi all joining via videoconference. Elevating the Quad discussions to the leader level significantly raised the profile of the group, and the meeting led to several [concrete deliverables](#). In their [joint statement](#), the four leaders agreed to expand COVID-19 vaccine production and distribution; establish working groups on the pandemic, climate change, and emerging technologies; promote a "free, open rules-based order" in the Indo-Pacific; and hold an in-person leaders' summit by the end of 2021. Speaking with reporters at a briefing at the White House after the meeting, National Security Advisor Sullivan

said "The Quad ... at the end of today, is now a [critical part of the architecture](#) of the Indo-Pacific."



Figure 3 Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga speaks while a monitor displays US President Joe Biden, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the virtual Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Photo: Kiyoshi Ota/Bloomberg

The Biden administration followed up on the Quad summit by sending Secretaries Blinken and Austin to Tokyo, and then Seoul, in their first overseas trips since taking office. On March 16, the two joined Foreign Minister Motegi and Minister of Defense Kishi Nobuo for a Japan-US Security Consultative Committee ("2+2") meeting in Tokyo. In a first for these meetings, the two governments singled out China in their [joint statement](#) and expressed "serious concerns" about its destabilizing behavior and growing maritime assertiveness, including specific mentions of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and the human rights situations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.



Figure 4 US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin bumps elbows with Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi following a Tokyo press conference. Photo: Pool via Kyodo

The [joint statement](#) from the 2+2 talks in Seoul similarly highlighted the importance of regional security and Korea-US-Japan trilateral cooperation, although it focused more on North Korea and did not explicitly mention China. Building on these talks, on April 2, National Security Advisor Sullivan hosted National Security Secretariat Secretary General Kitamura and Korea's National Security Advisor Suh Hoon in Annapolis for the first ever US-Japan-Korea Trilateral National Security Advisors' Dialogue. The three officials [discussed](#) stability on the Korean Peninsula and shared support for a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The surge of US diplomatic activity in Asia was largely welcomed by its allies in the region, who have worried about the extent to which the United States, Japan, India, Australia, and South Korea are aligned in their priorities vis-à-vis China. The concerted effort by Biden officials in their first few months in office appears to have gone a long way toward signaling that the new administration places great importance on the region, and on a coalitional approach to the challenges posed by China as well as global problems such as the pandemic and climate change.

Chinese reactions to the flurry of US diplomacy, by contrast, were much less enthusiastic. In their first face-to-face meeting on March 18-19 in Anchorage, Alaska, senior officials on both sides offered unusually terse public remarks. Secretary Blinken opened by saying the US side planned to discuss its "[deep concerns](#)" with Chinese actions, "including in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, cyber-attacks on the United States, [and] economic coercion of our allies," which Blinken said "threaten the rules-based order that maintains global stability." Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister Yang Jiechi [responded](#) with a long speech criticizing US democracy, treatment of minorities, and foreign policy, saying "the United States uses its military force and financial hegemony to carry out long-arm jurisdiction and suppress other countries." While both sides later said there were [some productive elements to the discussions](#), the animosity displayed in the public remarks suggested there is a long road ahead to improving US-China relations.

The Biden-Suga Summit

Japan's importance to the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific approach resulted

in the [visit](#) of Prime Minister Suga to Washington, DC on April 15-18. As the first in-person head of state to visit Biden, Suga brought his own agenda in addition to a reaffirmation of the goals set forth in the March 2+2 meeting.

In an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal*, Suga [laid out his vision](#) for Japan's economic recovery and his hopes for focusing on "green policies and digital transformation." These goals were reflected in the [US-Japan Competitiveness and Resilience \(CoRe\) Partnership](#), one of the two initiatives discussed in the [joint statement](#), in which the two leaders committed to investing a combined \$4.5 billion to "strengthen competitiveness in the digital field ... including 5G and next-generation mobile networks." Similarly, a [US-Japan Climate Partnership on Ambition, Decarbonization, and Clean Energy](#) was also identified as a priority initiative, reflecting President Biden's hope for renewing a global climate change effort.

But attention focused less on the US-Japan agenda for accelerating bilateral scientific and environmental cooperation. Instead, what the US president and Japanese prime minister said about Taiwan [created quite a stir](#), particularly dominating headlines in the Japanese press. For the first time since President Richard Nixon and Prime Minister Sato Eisaku noted Japan's security was linked to the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan in their [1969 Joint Communiqué](#), Biden and Suga included reference to US and Japanese interests in Taiwan. In a paragraph noting their concerns over Chinese behavior, including human rights and maritime challenges, Biden and Suga referenced their desire to "underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues." The language was not new; US and Japanese leaders had frequently noted this shared interest in peace across the Taiwan Strait.

But the inclusion of Taiwan in a leaders' statement, nonetheless, led many in Japan and the United States to [wonder aloud what this might mean](#) for the potential for the use of force by Beijing. The US debate reflects [serious divisions](#) about both the nature of the challenge for US policy as well as the assessment of [whether Beijing might use military force](#). On April 28, a [provocative piece](#) in *Foreign Affairs* magazine suggested that defending Taiwan against China was not in US interests and Washington should step back. In contrast,

National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Campbell said in an interview with *Nikkei* on May 5 that the long-held US policy of strategic ambiguity “provides ... the [best pathway towards maintaining peace and stability](#).”

Domestic politics will, of course, shape whatever US-Japan diplomatic agenda emerges. Perhaps more interesting than the choice of diplomatic language in Washington, representatives of both Biden and Suga chose that same week in April to demonstrate Japanese and US interests in Taiwan and its vicinity. On April 15, at the request of Biden, former Sen. Chris Dodd traveled to Taipei to meet with President Tsai Ing-wen accompanied by two former deputy secretaries of states, Richard Armitage of the Bush administration and James Steinberg of the Obama administration. Tsai, in her public comments at the meeting with the US delegation, noted: “We are [very willing to work with like-minded countries](#), including the United States, to jointly safeguard the peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific and deter adventurous manoeuvres and provocations.”

Meanwhile, on April 17, Japan’s Defense Minister Kishi visited Yonaguni Island, the closest island in the Ryukyu chain to Taiwan. His Twitter account noted his trip, with a [photo](#) of the defense minister looking across the 110 kilometers of sea between the island and Taiwan. Kishi visited the Ground Self-Defense Forces stationed there, a not-so-subtle signal of how Japan’s defense interests would be intimately linked should armed conflict occur in and around Taiwan, and said afterward that “strengthening the defense system in the southwestern region is an [extremely important issue](#).” By early May, Japanese media reported that the Ministry of Defense was working to [update defense capabilities](#) throughout Japan’s southwestern islands.

Conclusion

2021 began with a busy agenda for US-Japan diplomatic cooperation. The agenda was full but calling out China for its recent behavior dominated early statements of alliance objectives. The Biden administration’s new foreign and security policy team quickly joined Tokyo, as well as other allies, in defining its Indo-Pacific approach to cope with this strategic competition. In rapid succession, the president’s Quad meeting, Cabinet-level

consultations in person in Tokyo and Seoul, and invitation to Suga to be the first leader to meet with Biden demonstrated how closely coordinated the US and Japanese efforts to build a coalition of like-minded regional partners would be.

Lingering just below the surface, however, is the equally important effort by the Biden administration to rebuild confidence in US-Japan-ROK trilateral consultations. After reaching out to his counterparts within days of assuming office, National Security Advisor Sullivan [invited](#) Japanese and South Korean national security advisors to a meeting in Annapolis on April 2. On April 29, military leaders from the trilateral nations [gathered](#) in Honolulu to discuss the military balance in the Indo-Pacific, and intelligence chiefs are expected to meet in the near future. On May 5, a brief meeting between Japanese and South Korean foreign ministers with Secretary Blinken was [held](#) in London on the sidelines of the G7 meeting. President Moon Jae-in is expected to visit Washington, DC in May, suggesting that an emphasis on allied coordination on peninsular security remains a priority of US policymakers.

Prospects for US-Japan consultations over the remainder of 2021 are good and will likely focus on several priorities. First, a second 2+2 is expected to follow up on Japan’s defense concerns and on the implementation of the US Pacific Deterrence Initiative, passed into law by Congress in December. Second, the working groups established at the Quad Leaders’ Meeting should begin to reveal the contours of Quad cooperation on regional COVID-19 vaccinations, climate change, technological innovation, and supply chain resilience. Third, Japan’s election looms large. Suga’s management of the COVID-19 pandemic has been closely scrutinized, and an extension of a third state of emergency has many in Japan frustrated. The Tokyo Olympics this summer will continue to be a [source of criticism](#) and a recent [series of by-elections](#) gave Japan’s opposition some hope that they may put a dent in the LDP’s electoral chances.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-JAPAN RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2021

Jan. 6, 2021: Members of the US Congress meet to [certify](#) the November election results, but a violent mob of Trump supporters [storms](#) the US Capitol building.

Jan. 7, 2021: Suga [declares](#) a second state of emergency due to COVID-19 in four prefectures (Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, and Chiba) through Feb. 7.

Jan. 12, 2021: Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi [publish](#) article in *Foreign Affairs* on the US role in Asia.

Jan. 13, 2021: Biden [appoints](#) Campbell as deputy assistant to the President and coordinator for Indo-Pacific affairs on the National Security Council.

Jan. 13, 2021: Suga [declares](#) a state of emergency for seven more prefectures (Osaka, Hyogo, Kyoto, Gifu, Aichi, Fukuoka, and Tochigi) through Feb. 7.

Jan. 19, 2021: Biden [appoints](#) Ely Ratner principal adviser on China in the Department of Defense.

Jan. 20, 2021: Joe Biden is [inaugurated](#) as the 46th US president.

Jan. 20, 2021: Biden announces the US will [rejoin](#) the Paris Climate Agreement.

Jan. 20, 2021: Biden [restores](#) US ties with the World Health Organization.

Jan. 20, 2021: Avril Haines is [confirmed](#) by the Senate to be Director of National Intelligence.

Jan. 21, 2021: National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and National Security Secretariat Secretary General Kitamura Shigeru [speak](#) by telephone.

Jan. 22, 2021: Lloyd Austin is [confirmed](#) by the Senate to be secretary of Defense.

Jan. 22, 2021: China [passes](#) Coast Guard Law authorizing its coast guard to use force in defense of Chinese territorial claims.

Jan. 23, 2021: Biden [publishes](#) article in *Foreign Affairs* on US foreign policy.

Jan. 25, 2021: Janet Yellen is [confirmed](#) by the Senate to be secretary of the Treasury.

Jan. 26, 2021: Antony Blinken is [confirmed](#) by the Senate to be secretary of State.

Jan. 26, 2021: Foreign Minister Motegi and Secretary of State Blinken [speak](#) by telephone.

Jan. 28, 2021: Biden and Suga [speak](#) by telephone.

Feb. 2, 2021: Alejandro Mayorkas is [confirmed](#) by Senate to be secretary of Homeland Security.

Feb. 2, 2021: Suga [extends](#) the state of emergency to March 7 for 10 prefectures.

Feb. 11, 2021: Secretary of State Blinken and Foreign Minister Motegi [speak](#) by telephone.

Feb. 18, 2021: FM Motegi, Secretary Blinken, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Marise Payne, and Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar [speak](#) by telephone in a meeting of the Quad foreign ministers.

Feb. 18, 2021: Acting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Sung Kim, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Funakoshi Takehiro, and Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Noh Kyu-duk [hold](#) US-Japan-Korea meeting on North Korea.

Feb. 19, 2021: The United States officially [rejoins](#) the Paris Climate Agreement.

Feb. 23, 2021: G7 Foreign Ministers [release](#) a joint statement on the situation in Burma.

March 1, 2021: Suga [lifts](#) the state of emergency in six prefectures (Aichi, Gifu, Osaka, Kyoto, Hyogo, and Fukuoka).

March 2, 2021: Biden [publishes](#) the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance.

March 3, 2021: Secretary Blinken [gives a speech](#) outlining the Biden administration's vision for US foreign policy.

March 10, 2021: Secretary Blinken and NSA Sullivan [meet](#) China's Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi and State Councilor Wang Yi in Anchorage, Alaska. [Remarks](#) are released on March 18.

March 12, 2021: Suga, Biden, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi [hold](#) first Japan-US-Australia-India ("Quad") video conference. [Joint Statement](#)

March 12, 2021: Acting Assistant Secretary of State Sung Kim and Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs David Helvey [give a briefing](#) ahead of the secretaries' trip to Japan and Korea.

March 15-17, 2021: Secretaries Blinken and Austin [travel](#) to Japan for the Japan-US Security Consultative Committee ("2+2") meeting in Tokyo.

March 15, 2021: Secretary Blinken holds virtual meetings with Japanese [business leaders](#) and [women entrepreneurs](#).

March 16, 2021: Secretaries Blinken and Austin [meet](#) with Suga before the 2+2 meeting.

March 16, 2021: FM Motegi, DM Kishi Nobuo, Secretaries Blinken, and Defense Austin [hold](#) a Japan-US Security Consultative Committee ("2+2") meeting in Tokyo. [Joint Statement](#), [Press Conference](#)

March 17, 2021: Secretary Blinken gives interviews to [TV Asahi](#) and [Nippon TV](#).

March 17, 2021: Katherine Tai is [confirmed](#) by the Senate to be US Trade Representative.

March 20, 2021: Secretary of Defense Austin [meets](#) Indian Defense Minister Raksha Mantra Shri Rajnath Singh in New Delhi.

March 22, 2021: Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control [announces](#) sanctions on two Chinese officials in response to the human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

March 22, 2021: Suga lifts the state of emergency in the four remaining prefectures (Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, and Chiba).

March 23, 2021: FM Motegi and US Trade Representative Tai [speak](#) by telephone.

April 2, 2021: NSA Sullivan, National Security Secretariat Secretary General Kitamura, and Korea's National Security Advisor Suh Hoon [hold](#) first US-Japan-Korea Trilateral National Security Advisors' Dialogue in Annapolis, Maryland.

April 3, 2021: Chinese aircraft carrier and five escort vessels [pass by](#) Okinawa en route to the Pacific.

April 12, 2021: China [sends](#) 25 warplanes into Taiwan's air defense identification zone.

April 14, 2021: Suga [publishes](#) an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal*.

April 15-18, 2021: Suga [visits](#) the United States to meet with Biden.

April 16, 2021: Biden and Suga [hold](#) a US-Japan summit meeting in Washington, DC. [Joint Statement](#), [Fact Sheet on Competitiveness and Resilience \(CoRe\) Partnership](#), [Fact Sheet on Climate Partnership](#)

April 19, 2021: Biden [expands](#) COVID-19 vaccine eligibility to all adults in the United States.

April 21, 2021: Biden [nominates](#) Ely Ratner to be assistant secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs.

April 23, 2021: Suga [declares](#) a third state of emergency in Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, and Hyogo due to a surge in COVID-19 cases.

April 29, 2021: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley [meets](#) Chief of Staff Joint Staff Gen. Yamazaki Koji and Chairman of the Republic of Korea Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Won-in Choul in Honolulu.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

US-CHINA RELATIONS

CONTINUITY PREVAILS IN BIDEN'S FIRST 100 DAYS

BONNIE S. GLASER, GERMAN MARSHALL FUND OF THE US
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In its final days, the Trump administration took more actions to impose costs on China for its objectionable policies and to tie the hands of the incoming Biden team. The first 100 days of President Biden's administration revealed substantial continuity in policy toward Beijing, with strategic competition remaining the dominant feature of the US-China relationship. Senior Chinese officials delivered speeches that pinned blame entirely on the US for the deterioration in bilateral ties. A round of combative, yet serious, talks took place between senior US and Chinese officials in Anchorage, Alaska. The US added new sanctions on Beijing for undermining Hong Kong's autonomy. In coordination with its allies, Washington imposed sanctions on Chinese individuals deemed responsible for carrying out genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang. Steps were taken by the US to demonstrate "rock-solid" support for Taiwan in the face of stepped-up Chinese coercion. Cooperation on climate change was launched with John Kerry's visit to Shanghai to meet with his counterpart Xie Zhenhua, and Xi Jinping's participation in the US-led Leaders Summit on Climate.

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Early Signals of Intentions

As the contours of President Joe Biden's policy toward China emerged in the first 100 days of his administration, the continuities with the Trump administration were considerable. In his confirmation hearing, soon-to-be Secretary of State Antony Blinken [stated](#) that "There is no doubt that [China] poses the most significant challenge of any nation-state in the world to the United States." He maintained that Trump's tough approach to China was right, but the tactics were wrong. Five weeks after being sworn in, Blinken [declared](#) in his first major speech that the US relationship with China would "be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be. The common denominator is the need to engage China from a position of strength."

The Interim National Security Strategy Guidance [released](#) in early March confirmed that the Biden team would prioritize reinvigorating the United States and its democracy, strengthening alliances and partnerships around the world, re-engaging in international institutions, and standing up to American ideals and values abroad. It set out an agenda that is aimed at enabling the US "to prevail in strategic competition with China or any other nation."

Beijing expected that the US-China relationship would continue to be fraught after the Trump administration's departure, but nevertheless hoped that bilateral ties could be stabilized, and cooperation increased. In speeches and press conferences, senior Chinese officials said that China stood ready to improve ties, but demanded that the US respect China's core interests, stop interfering in Beijing's internal affairs, and change a raft of allegedly misguided policies toward China.

Yang Jiechi, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo member and director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs, [delivered](#) these messages in a speech to the National Committee on US-China Relations on Feb. 1, just 10 days after Biden's inauguration. He decried the US judgment of China as a major strategic competitor and urged the Biden administration to abandon the "outdated mentality of zero-sum, major power rivalry."



Figure 1 Chinese politburo member Yang Jiechi speaking at the China-U.S. talks in Anchorage, Alaska, in the U.S. Photo: Liu Jie/Xinhua

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [communicated](#) similar points in a speech to the Lanting Forum in Beijing on Feb. 22. Arguing that the Trump administration was the "root cause" of the deterioration in US-China relations, he said it was necessary to "right the wrongs" and understand China "as it is." In between those two speeches, Blinken and Yang held their first phone call on Feb. 5. According to brief readouts, the tone was decidedly negative, and the content consisted of a pithy exchange of talking points.

President Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping held their first phone call on Feb. 10. Scheduled to take place just ahead of China's Lunar New Year holiday, the call was intended to convey US goodwill, but it wasn't lost on Beijing that Biden had previously spoken to more than a dozen other heads of state, including Russian President Vladimir Putin. The White House [readout](#) of the call highlighted the US president's emphasis on concerns about "Chinese coercive and unfair economic practices, crackdown in Hong Kong, human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and increasingly assertive actions in the region, including toward Taiwan."

The Chinese Foreign Ministry's [readout](#) suggested that Xi stressed the need to return to cooperation. Picking up on Biden's call for the US to seize possibilities, he expressed hope that "the possibilities will now point toward an improvement of China-US relations." Xi explicitly proposed that the two countries re-establish their various dialogue mechanisms.

Anchorage Talks

Biden's White House spokesman Jen Psaki [told](#) a briefing in February that the US would ensure it was in "lockstep" with its allies before engaging with Beijing. After the phone calls between Blinken and Yang, and between Biden and Xi, there were no concrete plans for a bilateral meeting. The idea of holding a round of talks arose as the US prepared for the first-ever leader-level Quad summit on March 12 and the visit by Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to Japan and Korea for "2+2" meetings with their counterparts. US officials concluded that these successful engagements would position the US to hold a dialogue with China from a position of strength.

The meeting took place in Anchorage, Alaska, approximately halfway between Beijing and Washington, on March 18. Senior officials on both sides included Secretary of State Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan as well as Yang Jiechi and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.



Figure 2 U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan meet with Chinese officials in Anchorage, Alaska. Photo: U.S. Department of State

With the cameras rolling, Blinken opened the first round with a brief but blunt statement that noted his intention to raise US concerns about Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, cyberattacks on the United States, and economic coercion of US allies. These actions, Blinken stated, "threaten the rules-based order that maintains global stability." Yang provided a lengthy and fiery riposte that lasted about 16 minutes. He defended Chinese policies, but also criticized US policies, both at home and abroad. The entire [exchange](#) lasted over an hour, including the consecutive translation.

After the media departed, the two delegations apparently got down to business and worked through the list of issues on the agenda. Their discussions continued the following day. In a brief meeting with the press after the talks concluded, Blinken [said](#) that the US side achieved its goals of conveying shared US and allied concerns with the Chinese side about Chinese behavior and laying out "very clearly" US policies, priorities, and worldview.

Although there were many areas of disagreement, the US and Chinese delegations agreed that their countries' interests intersect on Iran, North Korea, Afghanistan, and climate change. In the Chinese side's briefing to the media, Yang [described](#) what he termed the "China-US high-level strategic dialogue" as candid, constructive, and helpful. He called for both countries to handle the bilateral relationship in the spirit of nonconflict, nonconfrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation, so as to move forward the bilateral relationship on a sound and stable track.

Technology and Trade Tensions Persist

The Trump administration, in its waning days, took several actions aimed at increasing pressure on Beijing on the technology front to promote the decoupling of the US and Chinese economies and curb the flow of technology to the Chinese military. A spat with the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) was sparked on Jan. 4 when the Exchange [reversed](#) a plan to delist three Chinese state-run telecom companies due to their failure to comply with a late-2020 Trump administration executive order that barred US investors from holding stakes in companies with alleged ties to the People's Liberation Army. An intervention by Secretary of Treasury Steve Mnuchin proved successful when the following day, the NYSE [reversed](#) its decision and said it would proceed to delist three Chinese telecom companies.

On Jan. 5, President Trump signed an [Executive Order](#) banning transactions with eight software apps, including Alipay, one of China's largest virtual payment platforms. The Order charged that the pace and pervasiveness of the spread in the United States of certain connected mobile and desktop applications and other software developed or controlled by persons in the People's Republic of China ... continue to threaten the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States.

Just over a week later, the Department of Commerce [added](#) Skyrizon to its Military End-User list and China National Offshore Oil Corporation to its Entity List, stating that both “threaten US national security.” That same day, the Department of Defense [added](#) several firms to its list of “Communist Chinese military companies” operating in the United States.

The Biden administration signaled early that it would need time to review the numerous actions taken against China by the Trump administration, especially the steps taken to combat Chinese technology threats. On Jan. 26, the Treasury Department [delayed](#) a Trump administration decision to ban Americans from investing in companies with suspected ties to the Chinese military, which was set to go into effect on Jan. 28, 2021. The decision was postponed to May 27.

Nevertheless, the Biden administration said it was resolved to compete with China for the leading position in the technologies of the 21st century. In the [Interim National Security Strategic Guidance](#), the Biden White House pledged to sustain America’s innovation edge and criticized China’s trade practices:

When the Chinese government’s behavior directly threatens our interests and values, we will answer Beijing’s challenge. We will confront unfair and illegal trade practices, cyber theft, and coercive economic practices that hurt American workers, undercut our advanced and emerging technologies.

Washington maintained the Trump administration’s commitment to exposing Chinese corporate influence in the United States when the Federal Communications Commission [identified](#) five Chinese companies as a threat to national security on March 12. Days later, the Commerce Department [served](#) subpoenas to multiple Chinese companies that provide information and communications technology and services in the US. In addition, the Securities and Exchange Commission [issued](#) its final interim amendments to the Holding Foreign Companies Accountable Act (signed into law under the Trump administration), which mandates that companies disclose their associations with the CCP.

The Biden administration also constrained China’s technological advances by [adding](#) seven Chinese supercomputing companies to the Department of Commerce’s blacklist on the

grounds that the firms were “involved with building supercomputers used by China’s military actors, its destabilizing military modernization efforts, and/or weapons of mass destruction programs.”

In his April 28 address to a Joint Session of Congress, Biden [sounded a clarion call](#) for the US to do what is necessary to compete successfully with China: “We’re in a competition with China and other countries to win the 21st century,” the president stated. “China and other countries are closing in fast. We have to develop and dominate the products and technologies of the future, the advanced batteries, biotechnology, computer chips.”

On the trade front, Biden officials opted to keep tariffs in place for the time being as well as the “Phase One” trade deal in which China agreed to make large purchases of US products, including soybeans, oil and gas, and other goods. During her confirmation hearing, US Trade Representative nominee Katherine Tai [stated](#): “I know firsthand how critically important it is that we have a strategic and coherent plan for holding China accountable to its promises.” According to the [Peterson Institute for International Economics](#), Chinese purchases in 2020 fell more than 40% short of the target for that year. Although Tai expressed a willingness to negotiate with China, USTR was mum regarding plans for trade talks.

On various occasions, Beijing expressed its desire for a mutually beneficial trade and economic relationship with the US, even as it trumpeted its “dual circulation policy” that in essence seeks to increase the world’s dependence on the Chinese market while reducing Chinese dependence on foreign markets. Addressing the National Committee on US-China Relations, Chinese Politburo Member Yang Jiechi [insisted](#) that “China will always welcome US business investment in China,” and called on both sides “to provide a fair, open and non-discriminatory environment for each other’s companies.”

In his Lanting Forum [speech](#), Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called for the US to “remove unreasonable tariffs on Chinese goods, lift its unilateral sanctions on Chinese companies ... and abandon irrational suppression of China’s technological progress, so as to create necessary conditions for China-US cooperation.”

Speaking to US business leaders on April 13, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang [reiterated](#) China's desire to remain economically tied to the US. "Decoupling does no good to either side and will hurt the world," he asserted. Li entreated the business tycoons to help "promote cooperation by making a bigger pie of common interests and safeguard the safety and stability of the industrial and supply chains."



Figure 3 Chinese Premier Li Keqiang speaking at a virtual dialogue with U.S. business leaders. Photo: Xinhua/Pang Xinglei

Biden Sustains Pressure as Beijing Tightens Control Over Hong Kong

As Beijing continued to implement policies that stripped Hongkongers of their democratic rights and more tightly integrated Hong Kong into China's authoritarian system, the United States responded with sharp condemnations and sanctions. In early January, as the Trump administration counted down its final weeks in office, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [denounced](#) the arrest of over 50 politicians and prodemocracy advocates by local authorities in Hong Kong.

A few days later, the US designated six PRC and Hong Kong officials deemed responsible for undermining Hong Kong's freedoms and democratic processes pursuant to President Trump's Executive Order on Hong Kong Normalization. Announcing the new sanctions, Pompeo [called](#) on the PRC and Hong Kong authorities to immediately release individuals targeted under the National Security Law for exercising rights and freedoms guaranteed under the Basic Law and the Sino-British Joint Declaration.

In a parting shot at the Trump administration, China declared that it was imposing reciprocal sanctions on outgoing senior US executive branch officials, members of Congress, and

non-governmental organizations, as well as their immediate family members. China's Foreign Ministry spokesman [decried](#) US interference in Hong Kong's affairs, warning Washington to "not proceed farther down this erroneous and dangerous path."

Beijing knew, however, that the Biden administration was unlikely to change course in its policy toward Hong Kong. After the arrest of the prodemocracy advocates in early January, Antony Blinken, Biden's pick for secretary of state, [tweeted](#) that "The Biden-Harris administration will stand with the people of Hong Kong and against Beijing's crackdown on democracy."

In his lengthy phone call with Xi in February, Biden [raised](#) concerns about China's crackdown in Hong Kong, and pledged to stand up for human rights and fundamental freedom. He followed that up with action on March 11 in response to the decision by China's National People's Congress (NPC) to change Hong Kong's electoral system in ways that would further limit political participation and democratic representation. The NPC decision was accompanied by a statement by Premier Li Keqiang that its aim was to uphold the principle of "patriots governing Hong Kong." Blinken [issued](#) a statement condemning Beijing's "continuing assault on democratic institutions in Hong Kong." The next day, the foreign ministers of the G7 [released](#) a joint statement expressing "grave concerns" about China's erosion of Hong Kong's electoral system and the mass arrests of pro-democracy activists and politicians.

To demonstrate the willingness of the Biden administration to impose costs on China for its behavior, on March 16 the US added new sanctions against two dozen Chinese officials it claimed had reduced Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy. Under the Trump administration, the 24 individuals had been banned from visiting the US and had their assets within US jurisdiction frozen. The new measures subjected foreign financial institutions to US sanctions if they knowingly conducted business with the designated officials.

The timing of the new sanctions—only days before senior US and Chinese officials were due to meet in Alaska—was undoubtedly intended to underscore the Biden administration's resolve to continue the Trump administration's tough stance on China.

The following month the US demonstrated again that it would sustain pressure on Beijing by calling out its policies and actions to snuff out democracy in Hong Kong. On April 16, Blinken [condemned](#) the sentencing of seven prodemocracy leaders “for doing nothing more than exercising protected rights and fundamental freedoms.”

Biden Administration Signals “Rock Solid” Support for Taiwan

The final act of the Trump administration in its policy toward Taiwan was rolled out on Jan. 9: longstanding restrictions on official interactions between the United States and Taiwan—known as the “contact guidance” -- were eliminated. The decision was [announced](#) by Mike Pompeo, who claimed that the self-imposed restrictions had been put in place “in an attempt to appease the Communist regime in Beijing.”

In what would have been a potentially consequential policy decision, Pompeo also announced that US Ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Craft would travel to Taipei, but only a few days later, the visit was abruptly canceled, without explanation. Unable to fly to Taiwan to deliver her message of support, Craft made a statement in the UN General Assembly Hall, calling for the world to oppose China’s efforts to isolate Taiwan and exclude it from the international community.

The Biden team lost no time in showing its support for Taiwan. Senior Biden administration officials arranged for a formal invitation to be issued to Bi-khim Hsiao, Taiwan’s de-facto ambassador to Washington, to attend Joe Biden’s inauguration. On Jan. 23 and 24, Beijing displayed its ire by flying nuclear-capable bombers and fighter jets into Taiwan’s air defense identification zone.

The US State Department voiced concern about Chinese intimidation in a [statement](#), which specifically urged Beijing to halt its pressure against Taiwan and engage in meaningful dialogue with the island’s democratically elected representatives. The statement reiterated US commitment to the Three Communiqués, the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), and the Six Assurances. “Our commitment to Taiwan is rock-solid,” the statement asserted, using a phrase that is likely to become part of the Biden administration’s mantra for its Taiwan policy.

At the meeting between senior US and Chinese officials in Anchorage, the Chinese side [called](#) for the US to stop official exchanges and military contacts with as well as arms sales to Taiwan, and cease helping Taipei expand its participation in international organizations. They also urged the US to abide by the “one-China principle,” to not send “wrong signals” to those supporting Taiwan independence, and to not cross China’s bottom line.

After those discussions, some US officials signaled growing worry that China might use force against Taiwan. One senior US official [told](#) the *Financial Times* that China appeared to be “more impatient and more prepared to test the limits and flirt with the idea of unification.” The official suggested that Xi Jinping might take more risks to make progress toward unification to bolster his legitimacy and solidify his legacy.

Reflecting greater concern about the potential for Chinese use of force against Taiwan, Blinken issued a warning in an interview on “Meet the Press” on April 9. Asked if the US is prepared to defend Taiwan militarily, Blinken reaffirmed US commitments under the TRA to make sure that Taiwan has the ability to defend itself and to sustain peace and security in the Western Pacific. He then [cautioned](#) that “it would be a serious mistake for anyone to try to change the existing status quo by force.”



Figure 4 Taiwan Air Force personnel standing guard. Photo: Ritchie B Tongo/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

The same day, the State Department issued new contact guidance for US government interactions with counterparts from Taiwan. While the details were kept classified, the official [statement](#) maintained that the new guidelines liberalize contacts, but remain consistent with the US “one-China Policy.” Explaining the intent of the change in policy, US officials said that rather than hamper contacts between US officials and officials from Taiwan,

the Biden administration hopes to encourage more engagement.

In another action to demonstrate its support for Taiwan and strengthen deterrence, Biden dispatched former Senator Chris Dodd and former deputy secretaries of State Richard Armitage and James Steinberg to Taiwan in mid-April to mark the 42nd anniversary of the TRA. According to one official, the “unofficial delegation” was [intended](#) as a “personal signal of the president’s commitment to Taiwan’s democracy. China viewed the visit as inconsistent with the US “one-China” policy. Its foreign ministry spokesman [warned](#) the US “to avoid further grave damage to China-US relations and peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.”

A few days later, Biden hosted Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide at the White House. In their [Joint Statement](#), the two leaders “underscore[d] the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encourage[d] the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues. It marked the first inclusion of Taiwan in a joint US-Japan Leaders Statement since 1969.

Between Jan. 1 and April 30, the US Navy conducted four transits through the Taiwan Strait. USN destroyers sailed through the Strait on Feb. 4, Feb. 24, May 10, and April 7. Statements issued by the US Navy asserted that the sailings were part of the US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Friction Over Xinjiang Intensifies

One of the final actions of the Trump administration against China was taken on Jan. 13 when the US [announced](#) a ban on the import of cotton and tomatoes from China’s Xinjiang province. The ban claimed such products were made with forced labor and further stated, “[US Customs and Border Protection] will not tolerate the Chinese government’s exploitation of modern slavery to import goods into the United States.” This action was not insignificant: the US [imported](#) an estimated \$9 billion in cotton and \$10 billion in tomatoes from China in 2020.

To pressure the next administration to maintain the Xinjiang boycott, Secretary of State Pompeo [stated](#) on Fox News on his last day in office that China had “committed genocide and crimes against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs.” It marked the first time that the Trump

administration had accused China of genocide in Xinjiang.

Upon taking office, Biden administration officials quickly echoed that position, which was unsurprising since the team had [labeled](#) Chinese atrocities in Xinjiang as genocide during the presidential campaign. On his first full day at the State Department, Blinken [stated](#): “My judgment remains that genocide was committed against the Uighurs and that hasn’t changed.” That assessment was later adopted officially in the State Department’s annual Country Reports on Human Rights, [released](#) on March 31.

On March 22, the US imposed [sanctions](#) on two Chinese government officials for their connection with human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Demonstrating that the US wasn’t alone in opposing Beijing’s policies, the action was coordinated with the United Kingdom, the European Union, and Canada, which [announced](#) their own sanctions on China that same day.

Washington’s actions in coordination with other leading Western countries prompted Beijing to launch a major counterattack. On Feb. 22, Wang Yi [called](#) for the US to “stop undermining China’s sovereignty and security on internal affairs concerning ... Xinjiang.” In response to the sanctions, China called for [boycotts](#) of Western brands (including Nike, H&M, Adidas, and Burberry) that prohibited the use of cotton created in Xinjiang, and imposed sanctions of its own on US and Canadian officials, as well as British and EU politicians and organizations.



Figure 5 Cotton workers in China’s Xinjiang region. Photo: AFP-Getty Images file via NBC News

China’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson [insisted](#) that relevant parties “stop political manipulation on Xinjiang-related issues, stop interfering in China’s internal affairs in any form and refrain from going further down the

wrong path. Otherwise, they will get their fingers burnt.” In a speech to the Council on Foreign Affairs on April 23, Wang Yi, [stated](#) that “genocide and forced labor are big lies fabricated for political motives on matters related to China’s Xinjiang.”

The US remained cautious, however, when talking publicly about whether the Biden administration would seek to use the 2022 Beijing Olympics as a lever to compel China to alter its policies in Xinjiang. Asked by a reporter whether the US was considering a boycott, Secretary of State Blinken [said](#) that President Biden is “listening to the concerns” of many countries and will decide what to do at the appropriate time.

Testing Cooperation: Iran and Climate Change

With the inauguration of President Biden, the potential for cooperation between the US and China resurfaced, though both sides recognize that there are only a few areas where their interests converge sufficiently to work together. The first sign of possible cooperation came in early February, when Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu [held](#) a phone conversation with US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley on the Iranian nuclear issue.

The next day, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Tehran and signed a 25-year trade and security cooperation agreement. On the eve of Wang’s departure for Iran, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman [called](#) for the US to “take substantive measures to lift its unilateral sanctions on Iran” and for Iran “to resume reciprocal compliance with its nuclear commitments.”

In April, US officials participated in virtual talks with counterparts from France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Russia, Iran, and China to attempt to make progress toward a return to the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran. While blaming the setbacks on the US for withdrawing from the deal during the Trump administration, Beijing also said that it welcomed Washington’s return to the talks.

Cooperation also appeared promising on climate change. One week after Biden’s inauguration, US Climate Envoy John Kerry said that working with China on climate change should be compartmentalized from areas of bilateral competition. “Climate is a critical stand-alone issue that we have to deal on,” Kerry [said](#),

insisting that there would be no tradeoffs made with other issues such as intellectual property theft or the South China Sea.

In March, Kerry attended a virtual climate conference chaired by China’s Special Envoy for Climate Affairs Xie Zhenhua. The US decision to join the annual meeting of the Ministerial on Climate Action marked the Biden administration’s re-engagement on climate matters and marked the first engagement between Kerry and Xie.

Ahead of President Biden’s Leaders’ Summit on Climate in the third week of April, Kerry visited Shanghai for two days to discuss climate-related issues with Xie Zhenhua. Following their discussions, the two special envoys released a [joint statement](#) which affirmed the two countries’ commitment to working together and with other countries to strengthen implementation of the Paris Agreement. They also committed their countries to take other actions to address the climate crisis.

Xi Jinping, Joe Biden, and 38 leaders from other countries delivered speeches to the Leaders’ Summit on April 22. Biden pledged that the US would cut greenhouse gas emissions in half from 2005 levels by 2030. Xi avoided making concrete targets but said that China would “strictly control” coal-fired power plants in its current five-year plan and “phase down” such plants over the following five years.

Xie Zhenhua said that the US and China may [establish](#) a joint working group on climate change in the near future and revealed that both countries had agreed to unveil their plans to achieve carbon neutrality before the COP26 Glasgow summit in November.

What’s to Come?

The first 100 days of the Biden administration reaffirmed the centrality of strategic competition in the US-China relationship, but overall US strategy toward China is not yet fully formed. A number of policy reviews are still being conducted by the Biden team, including on technology, trade, and defense. Nominees for key positions responsible for policy toward China have not yet been confirmed. Nominations have not yet been made for the post of ambassador to China and the important job of the head of the Commerce Department’s Bureau of Industry and Security, which oversees exports of critical US technology to China. A

review of risks to critical supply chains and a DoD task force on China are both set to conclude early June.

China's calendar of important events will be full for the next two years. In July, China will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. In February 2022, Beijing is scheduled to host the XXIV Olympic Winter Games. Later in the fall, China will hold the 20th Party Congress that will mark the end of Xi Jinping's second term in power and the unprecedented start of his third term.

Both countries are digging in for a prolonged contest, but it remains to be seen how the relationship will play out over the next four years. Will the US and China be able to effectively cooperate on climate change, Iran, North Korea, or other issues? Will bilateral dialogues be launched to address differences on trade, and to manage security competition? Will Xi and Biden hold a summit later this year or early next year? The coming months are likely to provide answers to these important questions.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-CHINA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2021

Jan. 5, 2021: New York Stock Exchange [reverses](#) plans to delist three Chinese state-run telecoms groups to comply with a Trump administration executive order that bars US investors from holding stakes in companies with alleged ties to the Chinese military.

Jan. 5, 2021: US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin [calls](#) NYSE president Stacey Cunningham to say that he disagreed with the exchange's decision to reverse course on the Chinese Telecom delisting.

Jan. 5, 2021: US President Donald Trump [signs](#) an executive order banning transactions with eight Chinese software applications, including Ant Group's Alipay.

Jan. 6, 2021: NYSE reverses decision and again [announces](#) plan to delist the Chinese state-run telecoms.

Jan. 6, 2021: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [issues](#) statement condemning China's arrest of more than 50 prodemocracy politicians and activists. The statement includes an announcement that US Ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Craft will visit Taiwan.

Jan. 9, 2021: China's Ministry of Commerce [issues](#) new rules requiring companies to report if they have been "prohibited or restricted by foreign legislation and other measures from engaging in normal economic, trade and related activities," in an effort to fight back against commercial bans from the US.

Jan. 9, 2021: Secretary Pompeo [announces](#) removal of restrictions on official interactions between the US and Taiwan.

Jan. 13, 2021: US abruptly [cancels](#) Ambassador Craft's upcoming trip to Taiwan.

Jan. 13, 2021: US [announces](#) a ban on the import of cotton and tomatoes from China's Xinjiang province, alleging some products are made with "slave labor."

Jan. 13, 2021: US Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues [participates](#) in a virtual meeting with the Dalai Lama.

Jan. 14, 2021: US Commerce Department [adds](#) China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) to the Entity List and Skyrizon to the Military End-User List, stating that both "threaten US national security."

Jan. 14, 2021: US Department of Defense [releases](#) names of additional companies added to the list of "Communist Chinese military companies" operating in the US.

Jan. 14, 2021: Secretary Pompeo [delivers](#) a press statement entitled "Protecting and Preserving a Free and Open South China Sea."

Jan. 15, 2021: Pompeo [delivers](#) press statement urging the WHO to conduct a thorough investigation of the origin of COVID-19.

Jan. 15, 2021: Pompeo [announces](#) that the US is sanctioning six PRC and Hong Kong officials after pro-democracy arrests in Hong Kong.

Jan. 18, 2021: China [announces](#) the imposition of reciprocal sanctions on US individuals in retaliation for the US imposition of sanctions against six PRC and Hong Kong officials, as well as [sanctioning](#) US officials who have "performed badly on the Taiwan question."

Jan. 19, 2021: Pompeo [determines](#) that China has "committed genocide and crimes against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs."

Jan. 20, 2021: Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs [announces](#) sanctions against Trump administration officials including Secretary Pompeo and National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien.

Jan. 23, 2021: US State Department [urges](#) Beijing to cease military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan in a press release.

Jan. 26, 2021: US Treasury Department [delays](#) implementation of a Trump administration ban on Americans investing in companies with suspected ties to the Chinese military from Jan. 28 to May 27, which had been imposed by Donald Trump after he lost the presidential election.

Jan. 27, 2021: US Special Climate Envoy John Kerry [says](#) at a press conference that the US must deal with China on climate change as a “critical standalone issue,” adding that the Biden administration will not trade concessions on human rights and trade for climate cooperation.

Jan. 28, 2021: US-China Economic and Security Review Commission [holds](#) a hearing titled “US-China Relations at the Chinese Communist Party’s Centennial.”

Jan. 29, 2021: Jake Sullivan, national security advisor to President Biden, [comments](#) on the US-China relationship, while participating in the US Institute of Peace’s *Passing the Baton* event.

Feb. 1, 2021: Yang Jiechi, Politburo member and director of the Office of the Central Committee for Foreign Affairs, [gives](#) a speech on US-China relations and prospects for the future at the invitation of the National Committee on US-China Relations.

Feb. 4, 2021: US 7th Fleet Destroyer the USS *John S. McCain* [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait.

Feb. 5, 2021: USS *John S. McCain* [conducts](#) Freedom of Navigation Operation in the South China Sea.

Feb. 5, 2021: US Secretary of State Anthony Blinkin [speaks](#) by phone with China’s Director of the Office of the Central Commission of Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi.

Feb. 9, 2021: USS *Theodore Roosevelt* and Nimitz Carrier Strike Groups [conduct](#) dual carrier operations in the South China Sea.

Feb. 10, 2021: President Biden [announces](#) formation of a Department of Defense China Task Force to provide a baseline assessment of department policies, programs, and processes in regard to the challenge that China poses.

Feb. 10, 2021: President Biden [speaks](#) by phone with President Xi Jinping of China.

Feb. 10, 2021: US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley and China Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu [hold](#) phone conversation, at the former’s request, to exchange views on the Iranian nuclear issue.

Feb. 17, 2021: USS *Russell*, a destroyer of the US 7th Fleet, [conducts](#) a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea.

Feb. 18, 2021: US-China Economic and Security Review Commission [holds](#) hearing on deterring PRC aggression toward Taiwan.

Feb. 19, 2021: Biden [asserts](#) that the US and Europe, along with allies in the Indo-Pacific region, must prepare for “long-term strategic competition with China,” while participating in the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference.

Feb. 22, 2021: China State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi [calls](#) for the US to lift trade restrictions, stop “smearing” the Chinese Communist Party and China’s political system, stop supporting “separatist forces” in Taiwan, and stop interfering in China’s internal affairs in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong.

Feb. 22, 2021: US delegation to the World Trade Organization (WTO) [reiterates](#) its position that the US’s new origin marking requirement for Hong Kong is not subject to adjudication by the WTO as it is a matter of national security for the US.

Feb. 24, 2021: USS *Curtis Wilbur*, an Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer, [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait as part of the US’s “commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

March 1, 2021: Office of the United States Trade Representative [issues](#) its “2021 Trade Policy Agenda and 2020 Annual Report,” in which it makes the “widespread human rights abuses of the Chinese Government’s forced labor program” Xinjiang a top priority.

March 3, 2021: Biden [releases](#) Interim National Security Strategic Guidance that emphasizes the growing US-China rivalry and the strategic challenges posed by an increasingly assertive China.

March 7, 2021: Wang Yi [warns](#) the US to not cross red lines on the one-China Principle.

March 10, 2021: USS *John Finn*, an Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer, [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait as part of the US's "commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific."

March 11, 2021: Secretary Blinken [issues](#) a press statement condemning China's assault on Hong Kong's democratic institutions and basic law.

March 12, 2021: US Federal Communications Commission's Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau [designates](#) five Chinese companies as posing a threat to national security.

March 12, 2021: Secretary Blinken [joins](#) G7 foreign ministers and the High Representative of the European Union in a joint statement condemning changes made to Hong Kong's electoral laws by China's National People's Congress.

March 14, 2021: US and Japan issue a 2+2 [statement](#) which says that "China's behavior, where inconsistent with the existing international order, presents political, economic, military, and technological challenges to the US-Japan Alliance and to the international community."

March 16, 2021: Treasury Department [sanctions](#) 24 Chinese and Hong Kong officials over Beijing's changes to Hong Kong's electoral system that took place on March 11.

March 17, 2021: State Department [issues](#) an updated report on the Hong Kong Autonomy Act to take the changes into account that were made to Hong Kong's electoral system on March 11.

March 17, 2021: US Commerce Department [serves](#) subpoenas on multiple Chinese companies that provide information and communications technology and services (ICTS) in the US.

March 17, 2021: Asked by a reporter while in Tokyo if the US is considering boycotting the 2022 Beijing Olympics, Secretary Blinken [says](#) President Biden is "listening to the concerns" of many countries and will decide what to do at the appropriate time.

March 17, 2021: Senate Foreign Relations Committee holds a [hearing](#) on "Advancing Effective US Policy for Strategic Competition with China in the Twenty-First Century."

March 18-19, 2021: Chinese Politburo member Yang Jiechi and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [hold](#) meetings with Secretary Blinken and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan in Anchorage, Alaska.

March 22, 2021: Treasury Department, Office of Foreign Assets Control [adds](#) two Chinese nationals to their Specially Designated Nationals List in a set of Myanmar-related sanctions.

March 22, 2021: Treasury Department, Office of Foreign Assets Control [sanctions](#) two current Chinese government officials for their connection with human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

March 22, 2021: State Department [issues](#) a joint statement with Canada and the United Kingdom opposing China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

March 23, 2021: US Climate Envoy John Kerry [attends](#) the Ministerial on Climate Action, and meets with China's Special Envoy for Climate Affairs Xie Zhenhua.

March 24, 2021: US Securities and Exchange Commission [issues](#) interim final amendments to implement the Holding Foreign Companies Accountable Act which, in part, explicitly mandates that companies disclose their association with the Chinese Communist Party.

March 24, 2021: Blinken [gives](#) a speech at the NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, titled "Reaffirming and Reimagining America's Alliances," which, in part, focuses on China.

March 25, 2021: Biden makes extensive [remarks](#) on China during his first formal news conference.

March 26, 2021: China [calls](#) for boycotts of Western brands that prohibited the use of cotton created in Xinjiang.

March 27, 2021: China [announces](#) sanctions on US and Canadian individuals and entities in retaliation for imposing sanctions on Chinese persons and entities in Xinjiang. The Americans sanctioned include the Chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Gayle Manchin, and USCIRF Vice Chair Tony Perkins.

March 27, 2021: In a formal press statement, Secretary Blinken [condemns](#) PRC sanctions on US officials as “baseless.”

March 29, 2021: US Ambassador to Palau, John Hennessey-Niland, [visits](#) Taiwan as part of a delegation from Palau.

March 30, 2021: Department of State [releases](#) the 2020 Report on Human Rights, which makes official the Biden administration's charge that China is committing genocide against Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

March 31, 2021: US Department of State [issues](#) the 2021 Hong Kong Policy Act Report, which certifies that Hong Kong does not warrant treatment under US law in the same manner as US laws were applied to Hong Kong before July 1, 1997.

April 4, 2021: USS *Theodore Roosevelt* Carrier Strike Group [enters](#) the South China Sea to “conduct routine operations.”

April 7, 2021: US 7th Fleet Destroyer, the USS *John S. McCain*, [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait.

April 8, 2021: US Department of Commerce [applies](#) export controls on seven Chinese entities for aiding PLA weapons development.

April 9, 2021: US Press Secretary Jen Psaki [states](#) that Chinese actions around Taiwan are “potentially destabilizing.”

April 9, 2021: US issues [new](#) contact guidance for US government interactions with Taiwan counterparts, though the details remain classified.

April 11, 2021: Speaking on “Meet the Press,” Secretary Blinken [reaffirms](#) the Taiwan Relations Act and states “it would be a serious mistake for anyone to try to change the existing status quo by force.”

April 13, 2021: Former Senator Chris Dodd and former Deputy Secretaries of State Richard Armitage and James Steinberg [travel](#) to Taiwan at the request of President Biden.

April 13, 2021: US Office of the Director of National Intelligence [issues](#) the “2021 Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community” wherein it notes that “China increasingly is a near-peer competitor, challenging the United States in multiple arenas—especially economically, militarily, and technologically—and is pushing to change global norms.”

April 13, 2021: Chinese Premier Li Keqiang [holds](#) virtual dialogue with board chairmen and CEOs from the US-China Business Council and over 20 US multinational companies.

April 14, 2021: Climate Envoy Kerry [meets](#) China’s Special Envoy for Climate Affairs Xie Zhenhua in Shanghai to discuss the potential for US-China climate cooperation.

April 15, 2021: US-China Economic and Security Review Commission [holds](#) a hearing on “An Assessment of the CCP’s Economic Ambitions, Plans, and Metrics of Success.”

April 16, 2021: US and Japan [issue](#) a Joint Leaders’ Statement, in which they outline joint objections to China’s actions in the East China Sea, South China Sea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang.

April 16, 2021: Blinken [condemns](#) the sentencing of seven prodemocracy leaders in Hong Kong.

April 17, 2021: Kerry and China Special Envoy for Climate Change Xie Zhenhua [issue](#) a joint statement addressing the Climate Crisis.

April 21, 2021: US Senate Foreign Relations Committee [passes](#) the *Strategic Competition Act*.

April 22, 2021: Xi Jinping [delivers](#) remarks at the US-led Leaders Summit on Climate.

April 22, 2021: US Federal Communications Commission [institutes](#) new sponsorship identification requirements for foreign government-provided programming, and specifically lists the Chinese government as being involved in media disinformation.

April 28, 2021: In a speech to a joint session of Congress, Biden [states](#) that the US is in competition with China “to win the 21st century.”

April 30, 2021: US State Department [calls](#) for Taiwan to be allowed to participate in the upcoming World Health Assembly.

Chronology by CSIS Research Interns Benjamin Parker and Tyler Hayward

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

US-KOREA RELATIONS

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

MASON RICHEY, HANKUK UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES
ROB YORK, PACIFIC FORUM

In the first four months of 2021—the first three and a half of a Biden administration focused on domestic progress and COVID-19 vaccinations—US relations with the Korean Peninsula assumed familiar contours after four years of an unorthodox Trump administration. The US and South Korea quickly reached a military burden-sharing agreement and pledged cooperation in a variety of areas, although the regular differences of opinion lurk under the surface regarding how closely Seoul should work with both North Korea and Japan. The US-China rivalry remains a shadow over the Asia-Pacific security and political economy situation, complicating South Korea's regional hedging strategy. Finally, North Korea's nuclear program advanced apace, US and South Korean attempts to open dialogue were rebuffed, and the Biden team's North Korea policy review will not endear it to Pyongyang.

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The NK Policy Review: A Thousand Movements Scarce One Purpose Gain

The Biden administration piqued the interest of Korean Peninsula watchers early on by portending a policy review regarding North Korea. Secretary of State-nominee Antony Blinken [vowed](#) as much during his confirmation hearing in January, while hinting that the Biden approach to the peninsula would be paired with improved relations with allies. Along the way, State Department sources [said](#) the North Korean nuclear issue would be a priority for the new administration.



Figure 1 US Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong in Seoul, South Korea on March 17, 2021. Photo: State Department/Ron Przysucha/Public Domain

Information about the review came in a trickle in subsequent months, with senior US officials [offering](#) occasional reminders that it was underway, but sharing vague details on when and offering even less about what it would contain. At the end of April, officials [said](#) the review's release was imminent, and though at the time of writing it has not been released, details [circulated](#) in the press on the last day of the reporting period.

If the April 30 *Washington Post* report is to be believed—and it probably can be, as the paper is hardly a fierce critic of the administration and the details look to have arrived in its possession on purpose—Biden's approach to the Korean Peninsula will attempt to split the difference between the “strategic patience” of the Obama years and the Trump administration approach of direct talks in the hopes of achieving a grand bargain. Officials *The Post* spoke to used the terms “calibrated” and “practical” and said that the plans had already been discussed with regional allies, as well as members of Congress.

On the one hand, long-time peninsula watchers can be heartened that the Biden administration will neither take the Obama team's passive approach—“strategic patience” as “doing the minimum and running out the clock”—nor will they set unrealistic goals such as a “grand bargain” within one term, as Biden's predecessor did (though they [say](#) denuclearization remains at the center of US policy). North Korea explicitly rejected CVID even before Kim Jong Un met Donald Trump, and details [revealed](#) since the failed Hanoi summit indicate that Kim felt confident he could get away with keeping much of his nuclear program and still get significant sanctions reduction. The Biden administration's emphasis on multilateralism will also be welcomed; it is [highlighting](#) US-South Korea-Japan cooperation to form a united front, rather than seeing rifts emerge due to contentious burden-sharing talks with Seoul or allowing the two allies to drift apart. Just before *The Post*'s revelations, Biden himself [said](#) that he would work with allies to address threats from North Korea through “diplomacy” and “stern deterrence.”

On the other hand, the opaque reveal of the policy review does not offer any hints to the two primary obstacles to dealing diplomatically with North Korea's nuclear weapons. First, North Korea's reaction has been predictably [hostile](#), and there is great skepticism that Pyongyang is interested in negotiations that implicate a roadmap even gesturing at denuclearization as a long-term goal, much less negotiations that place that objective front and center. Second, *The Post* reported that the “specifics of the proposal Washington will put forward remain unclear,” and by “specifics” one should understand the quid pro quo. There is no hint of what the US is willing to concede in terms of sanctions relief, and what it would expect in return. That may change by the time Biden's team goes public with details of the proposal, but it may not, reflecting just how few options Washington has for addressing the North Korean nuclear issue comprehensively. Attempting to pressure the regime into giving up (or even reducing) its nuclear and missile arsenal have foundered, and Trump's administration was not the first to fail at convincing them to trade it away. Efforts to persuade the North to even cap its program tend to fail or fall apart after the deal, and the administration [already admits](#) that the North

has responded to its initial overtures with the silent treatment.

Taking a multilateral approach to the North remains easier said than done. Long contentious relations between Japan and South Korea slipped to their worst point in decades under the Trump administration, a deterioration Biden's team seems determined to ameliorate through [direct intervention](#). Perhaps aware of the new administration's priorities, Seoul has [said—more than once](#)—that it stands ready to talk with Japan and support the trilateral partnership. All three parties seem to [agree](#) on the need to start work on resolving the problem.

But despite initial niceties between Seoul and Tokyo, familiar fissures remain. Seemingly [annual flare-ups](#) between the two over small islets both countries claim as their own threaten to halt any momentum before it really begins. This reporting period also saw a new point of contention—Japan's decision to release water from Fukushima, site of the 2011 nuclear crisis, into the sea, prompting Seoul to [express](#) “grave concerns.” While Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide has thus far been on [the same page](#) as Biden and discussed ways Tokyo can assist in the process, North Korea has [slammed](#) these suggestions, issuing reminders of how Japan colonized the peninsula from 1910–1945. This is not mere rhetoric; the North is surely aware that Washington wants closer ties between Seoul and Tokyo and would therefore seek to remind the South Korean public of the historical reasons for their distrust of Tokyo.

Furthermore, the Moon Jae-in administration in Seoul appears committed to the approach it has maintained throughout its tenure: seeking to build deeper ties with the North and encourage the US to negotiate with the North directly. This can be seen in [statements](#) by Unification Minister Lee In-young that the peace process should resume in the first half of 2021, and in Moon's *New York Times* [interview](#) where he called for face-to-face talks at an early date. Probably aware that Biden and his supporters would appreciate the contrast, Moon criticized the Trump administration's tentative approach to reaching a deal (as opposed to hosting a summit), which failed at making any progress toward rolling back the North Korean nuclear program. He expressed wishes that Biden would “go down as a historic president that [sic] has achieved substantive and irreversible progress

for the complete denuclearization and peace settlement on the Korean Peninsula.”

For all his disappointment with Trump, Moon warned Biden not to veer wildly from the path that began in Singapore in 2018, when Trump and Kim agreed to broad principles for peace and denuclearization. “I believe that if we build on what President Trump has left, we will see this effort come to fruition under Biden's leadership,” Moon told the *NYT*. However, while Biden has not expressed outright opposition to direct talks with the Pyongyang regime, Washington's view of such talks has tended to place a higher priority than Moon's on not rewarding “bad behavior” such as missile tests (more on that in a later section). Tensions between Washington and Seoul seem more likely if it becomes clear that the North's bad behavior will not subside.

Finally, what was once considered an essential step in a multilateral approach to the North—engaging Beijing—is far less likely now than it was four years ago. While the US has long been frustrated with the PRC's tentative approach to encouraging denuclearization, the [bottoming out](#) of US-PRC ties in the Trump years, and the continuity (thus far) between Trump and Biden, puts the two sides further from cooperation on the subject than ever before. The US has made at least [perfunctory efforts](#) at getting Beijing to be more proactive at achieving denuclearization on the peninsula—the PRC's ostensible goal—and Chinese President Xi Jinping has [expressed](#) a theoretical interest in being part of the process—but this all looks a lot like rhetoric.

In short, a multilateral solution to North Korean proliferation is a sensible goal, but if it were an easy one, one of Biden's predecessors would have achieved it.

US-SK: The Strong Connections, Nice Dependencies

The January–April period in US–South Korea relations started with a bang, as South Korea (and everyone else) watched the US political system melt down in a [riotous insurrection](#) scarcely imaginable five years ago. [Koreans](#) are not the only ones wondering about the reliability of the US—many Americans are similarly troubled by the failure of the country's foundational institutions. The US domestic political paroxysm was, for South Korea, the denouement of a difficult four years of the Trump presidency. But the other side of the

Capitol crackup is that the election that precipitated it did produce a president who—although he may fail to unite the US in this regard—repudiates much of what Trump represents. This is true domestically and in foreign policy, as Biden’s administration has promised to make America’s alliances great again.

Thus the resolution to US political turmoil—President Joe Biden’s inauguration, Trump’s second impeachment—[offers a doorway](#) for a renewal of US-South Korea relations, both in spirit and policy. And make no mistake, even beyond the domestic situation in the US, there are problems in the relationship. But like a committed, mature couple having a rough patch in middle age, the US and South Korea are working to fix their issues.

Starting Off on the Right Foot

The effort began even during the Biden campaign, which frequently [invoked the value of working with US allies](#), in contrast to the Trump administration’s domineering, combative approach, which South Korea experienced on numerous occasions. In [January confirmation hearings](#), Secretary of State nominee Antony Blinken repeated the positive message on alliances, with due attention paid to South Korea and its concerns. The same was the case for Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in [initial discussions](#) with their respective counterparts, Defense Minister Suh Wook and National Security Advisor Suh Hoon. The rest of Biden’s Asia and Korean Peninsula team at the [National Security Council](#), [State Department](#), and [Pentagon](#) is pro-alliance and pro-South Korea. Seoul added to the bonhomie with [rapid post-inauguration calls](#) for high-level US-South Korea meetings and a [new task force](#) to strengthen policy coordination and communication with the Biden administration.

Although the Biden campaign unsettled the Moon Jae-in government by occasionally omitting North Korea from its top foreign policy priorities, in early February Secretary Blinken shed some light on [potential US policy](#) on North Korean denuclearization, and discussed the launch of a comprehensive North Korea policy review. The word denuclearization—as opposed to, say, engagement or peace—may not have been music to Moon’s ears, but it indicated that Biden’s team was puzzling through how to approach Pyongyang. Doubtless this was also a

major topic of discussion during a [constructive Feb. 4 Biden telephone call with Moon](#), one of the first world leaders to have the honor, underscoring the importance of Asia, and especially Korea, to the US.

February was a month for the laying of groundwork for US-South Korea alliance policy in a number of areas. The overarching mission was [preparing a visit](#) to South Korea—part of a swing through Asia—by a US delegation including Secretaries Blinken and Austin, slated to meet their counterparts in mid-March. Within that 2+2 meeting framework, North Korea policy was a preparatory agenda item, with Seoul [desiring](#) to keep it on the front burner even as the US was working through its policy review. Both sides made the [expected rhetorical](#) gestures, with South Korean and US diplomats and security officials pledging coordination on issues related to Pyongyang. This was on display in a first [phone call](#) between Blinken and his new foreign minister counterpart, Chung Eui-yong, who replaced Kang Kyung-hwa. To be sure, Washington and Seoul accented different areas of interest, with the US emphasizing [denuclearization](#) and US-South Korea-Japan [trilateral cooperation](#), neither of which are at the top of Seoul’s wish-list for dealing with North Korea. The Moon administration made more mention of [South-North confidence-building](#) and the desire to return as quickly as practicable to [economic cooperation](#) with North Korea, which requires [sanctions relief](#) the US finds premature.

[Finishing negotiations](#) on a long-simmering troop burden-sharing agreement—the Special Measures Agreement (SMA)—was a second key preparatory task in February for the March Blinken-Austin visit to South Korea. Numerous discussions throughout the month put the US in position to [announce in early March](#) that the SMA agreement—with a modest but meaningful increase in South Korea’s payments—was [nearly ready](#) to be officially signed. Also on the list of items to discuss in February was a green light from Washington to allow Seoul to release \$8 million in [frozen Iranian funds](#) to get Tehran to free a seized South Korean tanker. This issue was [less successfully concluded](#), as discussions continued through the 2+2 meetings in March (the ship was [released](#) in April).

The leadup to the March 2+2 coincided with US-South Korea combined military exercises, which were [again downscaled](#) due to COVID-19

concerns. This state of affairs accords with the perceived interests of the Moon administration. On the one hand, it [argues](#) that less robust exercises creates more room for diplomacy with North Korea, even if there is [some risk](#) to alliance joint military readiness. On the other, Seoul recognizes that downscaled combined military exercises delay wartime OPCON transfer, a desideratum for the Blue House.

Down to Business

Aside from the bilateral subjects, a number of other regional and global issues were on the table in early March, prior to the Blinken–Austin visit. They included advance coordination on positions at a [Biden-hosted climate summit](#) for world leaders in April and multilateral efforts to fight COVID-19 and produce/distribute vaccines. Other areas of Washington–Seoul coordination were tenuous—such as finding common ground on China policy and, a subset of that, South Korea’s intentions toward the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).



Figure 2 US President Joe Biden with Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry at the virtual Leaders Summit on Climate. Photo: White House/Adam Schultz/Public Domain

The Quad held a leader-level meeting on March 12, shortly before the US–South Korea 2+2, with a [consensus emerging](#) that the Quad is (a) directed toward countering China, and (b) desirous of opening up to ad hoc cooperation with nonpermanent members (a format referred to as Quad Plus). This puts Seoul [ill-at-ease](#), as it has assiduously worked to remain strategically hedged as concerns US–China rivalry, especially considering economic fallout from the 2017 THAAD dispute with Beijing. To make matters more piquant, North Korean denuclearization made it into the Quad summit [joint statement](#), which likely concerned the Moon administration. Blinken and Sullivan were

also scheduled to have ([what turned out to be combative](#)) meetings in Alaska with their Chinese counterparts after Blinken’s departure from Seoul. Beforehand Blinken and his team would have been interested in getting on the same page with Foreign Minister Chung and the Blue House, a strain on relations insofar as the US approach is in tension with the Moon administration’s strategy of trying to remain relatively [ambiguous and noncommittal](#) with respect to confronting China.

The US 2+2 delegation, led by Blinken and Austin, arrived in mid-March. The first US–South Korea 2+2 since 2016 was [apparently a qualified success](#), but [stiff body language and differing viewpoints](#) contrasted with the fluid US–Japan 2+2 held just prior in Tokyo. The US and South Korean delegations made progress on numerous issues, and [undergirded](#) alliance cooperation. Importantly they [initialed](#) the SMA, and the US made good on its promise to consult with South Korean leaders about North Korea policy, including the policy review (ongoing at the time). Moon even made [promising statements](#) on trilateral US–South Korea–Japan cooperation (and later [dispatched NSA Suh](#) to Washington for trilateral NSA meetings with US and Japanese counterparts). But the talks showed both countries [still apart](#) on approaches to North Korea, the wartime OPCON transfer schedule, China policy, and the Quad.

Public diplomacy issues also overshadowed the event. On the day of arrival of the US delegation, Seoul City caused a diplomatic kerfuffle by [launching](#) an ill-conceived, xenophobic mandatory COVID-19 testing policy for all foreign workers, which was retracted in humiliating fashion after vociferous and public protest by embassies and foreign chambers of commerce, including those of the US. More tragically, during the Blinken–Austin visit in Seoul, a [mass shooting](#) in Atlanta, Georgia claimed the lives of several Asian-Americans, including ethnic Koreans, which led to a somber statement by Secretary Blinken.

Déjà Vu, All Over Again...

Predictably, North Korea did not let US–South Korea discussions go unobserved, duly firing [short-range ballistic missiles](#) and [cruise missiles](#) into the sea in late March. These launches do not change anything on the peninsula, but they create headaches for Seoul and Washington, both severally and as alliance partners. They definitely do not make diplomacy

easier. Correlation is not causation, but Seoul surely noticed that Washington's Pyongyang rhetoric increased a notch in the aftermath of the launches, as the Biden administration publicly [condemned](#) the short-range projectiles as UNSCR violations (which President Trump conspicuously failed to do), [reiterated](#) denuclearization as the US' overriding North Korea policy objective (telegraphing conclusions from the policy review), and [returned to criticizing](#) North Korea's awful human rights record (which Trump also largely failed to do). The cherry on the sundae was a Biden-Suga statement that even used the dreaded term "[CVID](#)" (complete, verifiable, irreversible, dismantlement/denuclearization) to describe shared US and Japanese objectives for nuclear negotiations with North Korea. This formulation is not the preferred nomenclature for the Moon administration, and the fact that it was employed at a Biden-Suga in-person bilateral summit surely produced an amalgam of envy and irritation in the Blue House (as an addendum, the Blue House is probably far from thrilled that the G7 foreign ministers meeting has recently [called for](#) the North to abandon its WMD and ballistic missile programs in a "complete, verifiable and irreversible" manner).



Figure 3 G7 foreign ministers pose for a photo in London before their meeting. Photo: Ben Stansall/Pool via Reuters

Also predictably, the Moon administration went into overdrive to [schedule an in-person bilateral summit](#) with Biden, which has now been set for May 21. There will be plenty to discuss, notably the North Korea policy review and its implications for US-South Korea diplomacy with Pyongyang. Some new topics—the possibility of a [COVID-19 vaccine swap](#), [preparations for the G7](#) (which Moon will attend as a guest), [US Congressional hearings](#) on South Korea's anti-North Korea leaflet law, [climate change](#)—will accompany recurring issues related to China,

the Quad, and US-South Korea-Japan trilateral cooperation.

US-NK: Aspiring to be Angels, Men Rebel

Before the North Korea policy review rollout there was little reason for optimism about the positive development of ties between Washington and Pyongyang. Due apparently to COVID-19 worries, North Korea was still officially in a self-imposed quarantine with the rest of the world, even China. This isolation has caused major economic setbacks for an already spectacularly mismanaged country. In any event, the North remained silent in the face of external [outreach](#), and to the extent that it sent messages to the outside world, it was usually (as [it did](#) at its January Party Congress) to inform them that its self-reliant quest to strengthen its defenses would continue. Later that month, the North [held](#) a military parade in Pyongyang, displaying its new submarine-launched ballistic missile, and its ambassador to Geneva Han Tae Song [said](#) Pyongyang would continue building up its war deterrent capabilities to defend itself and open a "genuine era of peace with eternally no wars."

The North indicated that it considered measures to strengthen its defenses more fruitful than direct talks with the US. As noted above, in March White House officials said the North had been unresponsive to requests for dialogue, a situation [reiterated](#) by Press Secretary Jen Psaki soon after. Right on cue, Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong spoke up, [lambasting](#) South Korea for military exercises with the United States, and suggesting that such actions would keep Biden's administration "from getting a good night's sleep" for the next four years (soon after, she would [criticize](#) Moon as a "parrot" that repeats the US' "gangster-like logic"). Two days later, First Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui [said](#) North Korea would ignore any contact from the United States unless the US withdraws its "hostile policies"—a common refrain by the North toward Washington, over the [protestations](#) of US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, that US outreach is aimed at "solutions," not hostility.

March also saw the unwelcome return of a familiar development on the Korean Peninsula: missile tests and the resulting condemnation and backlash. It began on March 23, when North Korea [fired](#) multiple short-range missiles after denouncing Washington for its joint military exercises with South Korea, its first missile tests

in about a year. On the 25th, it [launched](#) at least one unidentified projectile into the East Sea, according to the Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff. Washington [condemned](#) these actions on March 26 as “destabilizing” actions violating UNSCRs, to which North Korea responded by [accusing](#) Biden of a “provocation” and warned that the US will face “something not good” if such “thoughtless remarks” continue. For good measure, North Korea appeared undeterred by the invocation of the UNSC, which it [accused](#) of violating its sovereignty and applying a “double standard” for the recent missile test. On March 27 Seoul and Washington appeared in agreement, as director of North Korea policy at the South Korean Defense Ministry Cho Yong-geun and US Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Affairs David Helvey [expressed](#) deep concerns over North Korea’s missile launches.



Figure 4 Image of one of the reportedly launched ballistic missiles, released by North Korea’s Korean Central News Agency. Photo: KCNA via Reuters

The impasse over proliferation continued through the early months of Biden’s presidency, and it looks as though there is little prospect of it ending. Secretary of Defense [Lloyd Austin](#) and a [Defense Department](#) spokesperson, as well as the US [Indo-Pacific Command](#) ([more than once](#)), highlighted the threat that North Korea’s proliferation poses to the US and its allies. And there were signs that North Korea’s program continues to evolve in both familiar and unforeseen ways: in March, IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi [said](#) North Korea has been showing signs of operating a steam plant at a plutonium reprocessing facility, a “deeply regrettable” development in violation of UNSC resolutions. In April, the Korea Institute for Defense Analysis said that North Korea [is likely to](#) conduct more test launches of its Iskander-variant ballistic missiles to replace old Scud missiles with advanced solid-fuel designs,

which experts say would make them more difficult to detect. A Congressional report released in April said the North [seeks](#) to develop capabilities to degrade US missile defense systems deployed in the region, not long after the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington said that North Korea [continues](#) working on the submersible missile test barge at its Nampo shipyard, suggesting that it could be preparing for a subsurface ballistic missile test launch.

Other developments in this tense bilateral relationship during this reporting period included:

- The January [approval](#), by outgoing Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, of a new cyber-security and emerging technologies bureau to fight cyber-security threats, citing those from North Korea. The Bureau of Cyberspace Security and Emerging Technologies was prompted by “the challenges to US national security presented by China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and other cyber and emerging technology competitors and adversaries,” the State Department said.
- A US federal district court [ordering](#), in February, North Korea to pay over \$2.3 billion in damages to the crew and family of the USS *Pueblo*, a US naval vessel captured in 1968. All but one of the 83 crew members captured by the North (one died) were imprisoned and tortured for 11 months before being released. The suit was brought by the surviving 49 crew members and their families.
- A rather unprecedented incident in March, in which Malaysia agreed to the extradition of a North Korean national to the US to face money laundering charges. Mun Chol Myong, 55, became the first North Korean national extradited to the US, where he will face charges of defrauding US banks and laundering more than \$1.5 million to evade US and UN sanctions. The North responded by [saying](#) on March 19 that it would sever diplomatic relations with Kuala Lumpur, and [pulled](#) its diplomats from their embassy two days later. The North had maintained ties with Malaysia since 1973, but relations were

strained from 2017 when Kim Jong Nam, half-brother to Kim Jong Un, was assassinated in a Kuala Lumpur airport.

Conclusion: Heav'n from All Creatures Hides the Book of Fate

The January–April period in US–Korea relations was action-packed but inconclusive. The rest of the year will provide more clarity on the direction taken. As for US–South Korea relations, the May summit with Biden is Moon's first, best chance to convince the new administration in Washington to move on Seoul's priorities, including building on the path that started in Singapore. Moon needs to get this opportunity right, as there will not be many more—indeed the whole enterprise is trickier than usual simply because Moon and Biden are operating with different time horizons. Moon, with less than a year left in office and already a quasi-lame duck after his party's crushing losses in major by-elections in April, is under pressure to deliver in a hurry on key agenda items, while Biden is at the beginning of his term. We will see if Moon has better things to say about Biden than [he does about Trump](#).

The US–North Korea dossier is more opaque. No one outside of a small circle in Pyongyang really knows what North Korea's leadership wants from relations with the US, while Washington's slow-moving North Korea policy review rollout sounds fine in theory (Pragmatism! Phased engagement!), but provides no practical substance on how Pyongyang can be enticed to the negotiating table, much less what serious (read: painful) offer of sanctions relief the US would be willing to make to get North Korea to engage in some as of now unclear form of denuclearization. It is hard to avoid the suspicion that the Biden administration will fail to square the circle, just like its predecessors.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2021

Jan. 7, 2021: Spokesman for the South Korean Foreign Ministry [congratulates](#) US President-elect Joe Biden after the Congress's certification of election victory.

Jan. 8, 2021: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [approves](#) creation of a new cyber-security and emerging technologies bureau to fight cyber-security threats, citing threats from North Korea.

Jan. 10, 2021: North Korea [revises](#) party rules at the 8th Party Congress in Pyongyang to clarify its aim to strengthen national defense capabilities.

Jan. 12, 2021: Kurt Campbell, former state department official for Asia during the Obama administration, [is appointed](#) Joe Biden's "Asia czar"—coordinator for the administration's overall Indo-Pacific policy.

Jan. 13, 2021: US Ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris [announces](#) his pending departure from his post, officially leaving the post on Jan. 20.

Jan. 15, 2021: North Korea [holds](#) a military parade in Pyongyang, displaying its new submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM).

Jan. 19, 2021: South Korean Defense Ministry [says](#) South Korea is ready to talk about any issues with North Korea via military channels to ease tensions.

Jan. 19, 2021: During US Senate confirmation hearings Secretary of State-designate Antony Blinken [vows](#) to improve its relationship with allies, saying Biden administration will review the entire approach to North Korea.

Jan. 21, 2021: Biden [becomes](#) the 46th president of the United States, underlining the importance of its relationship with allies.

Jan. 23, 2021: South Korea's top national security officer Suh Hoon [discusses](#) bilateral cooperation in advancing the Korean peace process and global issues with his new US counterpart, Jake Sullivan.

Jan. 24, 2021: South Korea's Defense Minister Suh Wook and US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [reaffirm](#) the importance of their alliance, promising to cooperate on improving the relationship.

Jan. 25, 2021: South Korean Minister of Unification Lee In-young [hopes](#) for a "wise" and "flexible" solution to joint military drills with the US to prevent serious tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

Jan. 26, 2021: South Korea [pushes](#) for high-level meetings with the administration of US President Joe Biden at an early date.

Jan. 27, 2021: Chinese President Xi Jinping [expresses](#) active support for Korean denuclearization in phone talks with Moon.

Jan. 28, 2021: South Korea's Foreign Ministry [launches](#) a task force to strengthen policy-related communication with the new Biden administration.

Jan. 29, 2021: North Korea's Ambassador to Geneva Han Tae-song [says](#) Pyongyang is building up its war deterrent capabilities to defend itself and open a "genuine era of peace with eternally no wars."

Jan. 31, 2021: Gyeonggi Province Gov. Lee Jae-myung [sends](#) letter to the US Congress calling for support for an ROK law enacted to ban the sending of propaganda leaflets into North Korea.

Feb. 2, 2021: Secretary Blinken [says](#) the US looks for optimal ways to advance the denuclearization process in North Korea.

Feb. 3, 2021: South Korean Unification Minister Lee In-young [says](#) South Korea has been sufficiently communicating with the US on anti-leaflet law.

Feb. 3, 2021: President Moon [pledges](#) to upgrade the alliance with the US in a phone call with President Biden.

Feb. 5, 2021: National Security Adviser Sullivan [says](#) the US will closely consult with South Korea on North Korea issues.

Feb. 6, 2021: Department of State [says](#) the US is committed to quickly reaching a “mutually acceptable” defense cost-sharing agreement with South Korea.

Feb. 8, 2021: Acting US Ambassador to South Korea Rob Rapson [highlights](#) the strong bilateral partnership between the two countries in the first tweet he posted.

Feb. 9, 2021: South Korea’s Unification Ministry [expresses](#) hopes for the early resumption of the Kaesong complex as it marks the fifth anniversary of its closure.

Feb. 10, 2021: South Korea’s top nuclear envoy, Noh Kyu-duk, and a senior US diplomat [agree](#) to close consultations on North Korea policy during their phone talks.

Feb. 11, 2021: Biden [says](#) the US will not hesitate to use force to protect its people and allies.

Feb. 12, 2021: New ROK Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and Secretary Blinken [stress](#) close cooperation for complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula during their first phone talks.

Feb. 13, 2021: US State Department [says](#) the North Korean nuclear issue is a top priority for the Biden administration despite the lack of direct engagement with the country.

Feb. 18, 2021: South Korean Minister of Unification Lee In-young [says](#) that North Korea faces a food shortage of over 1.2 million to 1.3 million tons this year due to damage from heavy downpours that happened last year.

Feb. 20, 2021: Ned Price, press spokesperson at the State Department, [highlights](#) the importance of South Korea and Japan working together, saying “any US effort to denuclearize North Korea will not be as effective without the support and close cooperation of South Korea and Japan.”

Feb. 22, 2021: Minister of Unification Lee [calls](#) for efforts to restart a long-suspended project to compile a unified Korean-language dictionary project with North Korea.

Feb. 23, 2021: Minister of Unification Lee [renews](#) calls for building a joint response system with North Korea against infectious diseases.

Feb. 24, 2021: State Department spokesman [says](#) the US and South Korea may discuss Iran sanctions but that there has not yet been a release of Iranian funds held in the US.

Feb. 26, 2021: US federal district court [orders](#) North Korea to pay over \$2.3 billion in damages to the crew and family of a US naval vessel captured in 1986.

Feb. 26, 2021: Minister of Unification Lee [urges](#) that international sanctions on North Korea do not result in unintended negative effects on ordinary North Korean people.

Feb. 27, 2021: US Defense Department spokesman [says](#) North Korea’s continued development of weapons poses a threat to the United States and its allies.

March 1, 2021: Moon [says](#) South Korea is ready to talk with Japan anytime, stating that it would also be helpful to the trilateral partnership with the United States.

March 2, 2021: Chief of the UN nuclear watchdog [says](#) North Korea has been showing signs of operating a steam plant at a plutonium reprocessing facility.

March 3, 2021: South Korea’s presidential office [says](#) Moon is likely to talk with Biden in April during a global climate summit.

March 4, 2021: State Department spokesperson [says](#) South Korea and the US are “very close” to an agreement to set Seoul’s share of the cost for US troops on the Korean Peninsula.

March 4, 2021: Secretary Blinken [lays out](#) the “most urgent” priorities for American diplomacy, skirting the issue of how to deal with nuclear-armed North Korea.

March 4, 2021: US Indo-Pacific Command [says](#) North Korea poses the “most immediate threat” to the United States until they agree to full denuclearization.

March 5, 2021: Secretary Austin [includes](#) North Korea on the list of threats to the US and its allies.

March 6, 2021: Pentagon spokesman John Kirby [says](#) the US takes its commitment to the security of South Korea very seriously, “making sure there are ready military capabilities should they be needed.”

March 7, 2021: South Korea and the US [kick off](#) scaled-back combined military exercise.

March 8, 2021: South Korea and the US [reach](#) a defense cost-sharing agreement in maintaining US troops on the Korean Peninsula.

March 9, 2021: Seoul’s Defense Ministry [says](#) South Korea and the United States are to stage joint outdoor drills throughout the year, not during specific periods of time.

March 10, 2021: US Indo-Pacific Commander Adm. Phil Davidson [says](#) that North Korea poses a serious and most imminent threat to the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region, including South Korea.

March 11, 2021: Washington [says](#) it will not ease its sanctions on Iran, including Iranian funds in South Korea, until Iran returns to compliance with the JCPOA.

March 12, 2021: Former US nuclear negotiator Robert Gallucci [urges](#) South Korea and the US to refrain from large-scale combined military exercises and for North Korea to avoid nuclear tests.

March 13, 2021: Administration official [says](#) North Korea has not responded to the behind-the-scenes Biden administration’s diplomatic outreach since mid-February.

March 14, 2021: Blinken [embarks](#) on a trip to Asia to discuss major challenges in the region, including North Korea and [China](#), with Japan and South Korea.

March 15, 2021: South Korea and the United States [plan](#) to initial a defense cost-sharing deal after a 2+2 meeting of their top foreign and defense officials.

March 16, 2021: White House spokesperson Jen Psaki [says](#) that North Korea continues to be unresponsive to US calls for dialogue.

March 16, 2021: Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong [condemns](#) South Korea for military exercises with the United States.

March 17, 2021: Four people of Korean descent [are killed](#) in deadly shootings in Atlanta.

March 17, 2021: Foreign workers in Seoul [complain](#) of being singled out as Seoul mandates all foreigners working at for-profit organizations be tested for coronavirus by the end of the month.

March 18, 2021: North Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui [says](#) North Korea will continue to ignore any contact from the US unless the US withdraws its “hostile policies” toward North Korea.

March 18, 2021: South Korea and the US [hold](#) “2+2” talks of their foreign and defense officials in Seoul to discuss a coordinated strategy on North Korea and efforts to reinforce the alliance.

March 18, 2021: South Korea and the United States announce [plan](#) to launch a new working-level policy dialogue to reinforce their bilateral alliance.

March 18, 2021: President Moon [says](#) South Korea will improve strained ties with Japan to bolster trilateral security cooperation involving the US during talks with Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of Defense Austin.

March 19, 2021: North Korea [says](#) that it will sever diplomatic relations with Malaysia for extraditing its businessman living in Malaysia to the United States.

March 20, 2021: Blinken [says](#) that the US and China had a candid conversation on North Korea during a ministerial meeting in Alaska.

March 21, 2021: North Korean diplomats [leave](#) their embassy in Malaysia after Pyongyang said it would cut diplomatic ties with Malaysia over its citizen's US extradition.

March 22, 2021: 55-year-old businessman Mun Chol Myong, who faces money laundering charges, [becomes](#) the first North Korean citizen ever extradited to the United States.

March 24, 2021: North Korea [fires](#) two cruise missiles off the west coast, Pyongyang's first missile test in about a year.

March 25, 2021: North Korea [fires](#) at least one unidentified projectile into the East Sea, according to the Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff.

March 25, 2021: South Korea [convenes](#) emergency National Security Council (NSC) meeting on North Korea's latest projectile launch.

March 26, 2021: Washington [condemns](#) North Korea's ballistic missile launches as "destabilizing" actions violating UN Security Council resolutions.

March 27, 2021: North Korea [accuses](#) Biden of a "provocation" for criticizing its missile launches, warning that the US will face "something not good" if such "thoughtless remarks" continue.

March 27, 2021: Director of North Korea policy at the South Korean Defense Ministry Cho Yong-geun and US Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Affairs David Helvey [express](#) deep concerns over North Korea's recent missile launches.

March 29, 2021: North Korea [accuses](#) the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) of violating its sovereignty and applying a "double standard" for the recent missile test.

March 30, 2021: Kim Yo Jong [criticizes](#) Moon for his speech, mocking him as a "parrot" that repeats the US' "gangster-like logic."

March 31, 2021: US Acting Assistant Secretary of State Lisa Peterson [says](#) the US will hold North Korea accountable for its "egregious" human rights violations.

April 1, 2021: Korea Institute for Defense Analyses [says](#) North Korea likely to conduct more test launches of its *Iskander*-variant ballistic missiles to replace *Scud* missiles with advanced solid-fuel ones.

April 2, 2021: State Department spokesman Ned Price [says](#) that denuclearization will be at the center of any new US policy toward North Korea.

April 3, 2021: South Korea, Japan, and the US [agree](#) on the need to quickly resume dialogue with North Korea to peacefully resolve the nuclear issue.

April 5, 2021: South Korea's Defense Ministry [rejects](#) Japan's renewed territorial claims over the country's easternmost islets of Dokdo, saying Seoul does not even have to repeat explanations on the matter.

April 6, 2021: North Korea [decides](#) that it will not participate in the upcoming Tokyo Summer Olympics to protect its athletes from the coronavirus pandemic.

April 7, 2021: South Korea's Unification Ministry [vows](#) efforts to resume inter-Korean talks despite North Korea's decision not to participate in the Tokyo Olympics.

April 8, 2021: White House spokeswoman Psaki [says](#) that the United States is prepared to engage in diplomacy with North Korea if it leads to denuclearization on the peninsula.

April 9, 2021: US House of Representatives [says](#) it will hold a public hearing on South Korea's ban on anti-Pyongyang leaflets into North Korea.

April 10, 2021: White House spokeswoman Psaki [says](#) that North Korea's difficult conditions are caused by the actions of its own leadership, arguing that no US actions or sanctions are targeted at the North Korean people.

April 11, 2021: Biden [hails](#) settlement of an electric vehicle battery dispute between LG and SK as a "win for American workers and the American auto industry."

April 12, 2021: South Korea's Foreign Ministry [expresses](#) "grave concerns" over Japan's decision to release Fukushima water into the sea.

April 15, 2021: South Korean Unification Ministry official [says](#) the upcoming US congressional hearing on South Korea's ban on sending anti-Pyongyang leaflets into North Korea will not affect South Korea-US alliance.

April 16, 2021: South Korean Unification Ministry [expresses](#) that an upcoming summit between South Korean and US presidents will help build consensus on denuclearization, improving inter-Korean relations.

April 17, 2021: President Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide [commit](#) to the complete, irreversible, and verifiable dismantlement (CVID) of all weapons of mass destruction in North Korea.

April 20, 2021: South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [says](#) that South Korea is "earnestly discussing" the COVID-19 vaccine swap deal with the United States.

April 21, 2021: North Korea [continues](#) working on submersible missile test barge at its Nampo shipyard, a US think tank says, suggesting that it could be preparations for a ballistic missile test.

April 21, 2021: President Moon [urges](#) the US to restart dialogue with North Korea at an early date during an interview with *The New York Times*, criticizing Donald Trump for failing to "pull it through" and reach a deal.

April 22, 2021: A Congressional Research Service reports [says](#) North Korea seeks to develop capabilities to degrade US missile defense systems deployed in the region.

April 23, 2021: Chief of US Strategic Command Adm. Charles Richard [says](#) that the United States is ready and able to deter any aggression from North Korea.

April 28, 2021: South Korean defense ministry [says](#) that it is trying to secure new "large-scale" firing ranges for the US Forces Korea (USFK) as the US military has complained about limited access to existing ones due to protests from residents.

April 29, 2021: Biden [says](#) that he will work with allies to address threats from North Korea through "diplomacy" and "stern deterrence."

April 29, 2021: South Korean Unification Minister Lee In-young [says](#) that South Korea will strive to restart the stalled peace process on the Korean Peninsula, and urges the US to engage North Korea at the earliest possible date.

April 30, 2021: *Washington Post* [reveals](#) details of Biden administration's completed policy review, indicating that the administration seeks to strike a balance between the Trump administration's leader-to-leader diplomacy and the Obama presidency's arm's-length approach to the crisis.

Chronology compiled by Pacific Forum Research Intern Hanmin Kim.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

ASEAN CONFRONTS DUAL CRISES

CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

The Feb. 1 [coup](#) in Myanmar dealt a serious blow to the ASEAN diplomatic order and presented the incoming Biden administration with its first major policy challenge in Southeast Asia. More profoundly, the coup set into motion a political and humanitarian crisis that has pushed Myanmar into an economic free fall. The [imposition](#) of Western sanctions gave China and Russia an opening to strengthen ties with the Tatmadaw. Myanmar was an extreme example of political turmoil, but the instability surrounding Thailand's anti-regime and anti-monarchy movement [persisted](#) into the new year. In January, Vietnam [embarked](#) upon a more orderly political transition through the 13th National Party Congress, resulting in a leadership structure focused on ensuring stability, both external and internal.

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Political turmoil and transition in Southeast Asia has taken place against a backdrop of the continued COVID-19 crisis. A second surge has [hit](#) the region, fueled by variants, delaying economic recovery and curtailing diplomatic and security relations with regional partners. COVID has limited joint exercises between the US Indo-Pacific Command and their Southeast Asian partners, and the flagship Cobra Gold Exercises, co-chaired by Thailand and the United States, have been deferred to the second half of the year. Attention has focused instead on the US-Philippines alliance as Washington and Manila [opened talks](#) on renewing the Visiting Forces Agreement. In early 2021, the United States entered the “vaccine race” to provide COVID vaccines to Southeast Asia and other areas of the Indo-Pacific with the announcement in March of a large distribution program through the Quad. However, COVID’s [dramatic surge](#) in India may delay, although probably not upend, that effort.

Myanmar’s Military Upends Democracy

The timing of Tatmadaw Commander Min Aung Hlaing’s [overthrow](#) of the newly elected (in November 2020) government in Myanmar on Feb. 1 was very precise. The parliament was on the verge of opening in Naypyidaw, the capital compound that was accessible through a broad highway but easily sealed off, after which the new cabinet was to be announced. Min Aung Hlaing’s discontent with the results of general elections on Nov. 8, 2020, which gave the National League for Democracy (NLD) a strong majority in parliament and weakened the military’s role in the legislature. The two sides had been in closed-door talks in the run-up to the opening, reportedly on the composition of the new government, and they were presumed to have blunted the edge of the military’s resentment. However, the events of Feb. 1 point to a broader and deeper set of grievances than an election loss. The NLD’s determination to strengthen ties with the ethnic political parties by bringing them into the government would have affected the Tatmadaw’s hold on some conflict areas. Moreover, the party’s signal that the government—rather than the military—would issue licenses to foreign banks and other changes in economic policy threatened the military leadership’s control of certain economic sectors and, thus, a major source of income.

The junta reorganized into the State Administrative Council (SAC), with Min Aung Hlaing as the chair. The SAC’s immediate action was to [detain](#) Aung San Suu Kyi and top NLD leaders, including President Myint Win, alleging that the November elections had been fraudulent and calling for new polls. In the ensuing weeks, a [variety](#) of criminal charges were brought against the leaders, ranging from violating COVID restrictions during the campaign to the possession of illegal communications equipment. These charges are intended to sideline leaders elected in November for months, and possibly years, presumably until the junta can redirect Myanmar’s political trajectory back to greater military influence.

However, if the SAC’s objective was to turn the clock back to the 1990s, when the military ruled directly but allowed the theoretical possibility of an eventual elected government, it had not reckoned on generational changes in Myanmar’s population. A broad-based and nation-wide civil disobedience movement (CDM) has [emerged](#) that protests the military overthrow but also seeks to disrupt the normal course and pace of business with strikes and slowdowns. The health care sector and banking sectors were the movement’s first targets, the latter because it is largely under the Tatmadaw’s control through military holding companies.

The resistance movement has [persisted](#), and the crackdown [continues](#) to be swift and brutal. The junta moved quickly to use live fire ammunition against demonstrators and [announced](#) publicly that it would shoot resisters in the head. According to the [Assistance Association for Political Prisoners](#) (AAPP), which tallies casualties from its base in Thailand, by the end of April over 750 civilians had been killed, including children caught in the crossfire; over 4,500 arrested; and more than 3400 still in detention. The SAC has [restricted](#) internet service, usually allowing it during business hours but cutting it off at other times, and has [put into place](#) a series of martial laws making it a crime to oppose the regime.

The elected government in internal exile and protest leaders have [formed](#) the National Unity Government (NUG), intended to raise their profile in the international community and, they hope, to function as a shadow government. In the meantime, Myanmar’s economic state is rapidly deteriorating; in mid-April the World Bank [calculated](#) that the economy had

contracted by 10%. Food prices have [doubled](#) and fuel prices have [risen](#) by 15%. The disruption to the daily conduct of business and to vital supply chains, already damaged by the COVID-19 pandemic could, according to the United Nations Development Program, push half the population into poverty by the end of the year.



Figure 1 Protesters, wearing red makeup to simulate tears of blood, making the three-finger salute during a demonstration against the military coup in Hlaing Township, Yangon, Myanmar, April 1, 2021. Photo: AFP via Getty Images

ASEAN's Dilemma

Although the coup caught ASEAN by surprise, as the 2021 chair Brunei was quick to [issue](#) a statement calling for restraint and reconciliation between the parties. From the outset, however, cracks were evident, making a common position for the group difficult, if not impossible, to formulate. Indonesia and Malaysia were quick to condemn the violence; Singapore joined Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, but [cautioned](#) the international community against the implementation of broad-based sanctions like those imposed by the United States in the 1990s and 2000s. Manila and Bangkok were reticent, not wanting to draw attention to their own human rights situations. The Feb. 1 coup was particularly awkward for Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, who began his own rule as a coup leader in 2014, although he transitioned to the role of an elected prime minister in 2019, albeit under a new constitution that the military had crafted. Moreover, the strength and determination of Myanmar's resistance movement has re-energized Thai protests against his administration. Min Aung Hlaing's early [appeal](#) to Prayuth for support has only worsened this dilemma for Prayuth. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were categorically reluctant to criticize the internal affairs of another ASEAN member.

ASEAN rarely attempts to mediate between parties in a member state, but the severity of the situation in Myanmar led Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi to [engage](#) Min Aung Hlaing in Bangkok on Feb. 24, with Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai; there were no tangible results, but the meeting drew ire from protestors within Myanmar, who feared that ASEAN was on a path to *de facto* recognition of the SAC as the legal government of Myanmar. Complaints intensified when the ASEAN foreign ministers [held](#) a virtual meeting on March 2 with Min Aung Hlaing in an attempt to persuade him to stop the use of lethal force against civilians and to release political detainees. Brunei insisted that they were engaging the junta as a military rather than a government, an explanation that drew scorn and disbelief in the resistance movement. ASEAN's initial aim is to reduce the violence of the coup's aftermath and, with the SAC's refusal to release Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders or to grant international access to them, ASEAN is not in a position to broker talks between the parties and views engaging Min Aung Hlaing as its only option.

This dilemma deepened in late April, when ASEAN [convened](#) an in-person "special meeting" on Myanmar in Jakarta, which hosts the ASEAN Secretariat. Although it was originally intended to be a summit, the fact that three countries—Thailand, the Philippines, and Laos—sent their foreign ministers instead of heads of government prevented that. The chairman's statement from the meeting [outlined](#) five "points of consensus": (1) There should be an immediate cessation of violence on the part of all sides of the conflict; (2) The conflict in general should be resolved through dialogue among the parties; (3) ASEAN will appoint a special envoy to act as an interlocutor between the parties to help resolve the conflict; (4) ASEAN will dispatch a delegation to Myanmar to confer with the parties led by the special envoy; and, Myanmar will accept humanitarian aid and utilize ASEAN HA/DR mechanisms to receive international assistance.

What is missing from this list is as important as what ASEAN managed to include. Most obvious was a call for the release of political prisoners, although the chairman's statement duly noted that the group had "heard calls" for a release. Nor is there an explicit call to halt the killing of civilians or otherwise protect them. Finally, the list contained no point calling for the results of

the November 2020 elections to be honored, much less for a broader return to elected government in Myanmar. The consensus points demonstrate that ASEAN is likely to be effective only in helping to put a tourniquet on the violence at this point, but as a near-term possibility even that is in doubt: on April 26, the SAC [released](#) a statement that it would “consider” the ASEAN consensus points only after the situation had become “stable,” the definition of which is left to the junta. Although the five-point plan has been praised by the international community and represents the most likely path forward, for the time being it will remain on the shelf.

In the Myanmar crisis, ASEAN is more constrained in its ability to broker a solution than it might be with a third country. The group is hampered by its two most longstanding principles: non-interference in the internal affairs of a member state and decision-making by consensus. The ASEAN Charter, agreed upon in 2007, has no provision for the expulsion of a member state. Moreover, Myanmar’s conflict and its growing status in the international community as a pariah state could make a range of ASEAN plans for regional integration and for strengthening relations with external partners, particularly the United States and the European Union, more difficult.

The International Response

Western response to the February coup was swift and primarily targeted at the military rather than the broader population in Myanmar. For the time being, Washington aims to maintain a program of targeted sanctions that will isolate the coup leaders and restrict their access to revenue, both international and domestic. Under President Biden’s Feb. 11 [Executive Order](#), the United States has employed a ladder of sanctions that now include visa and financial restrictions on junta leaders and other top security officials; freezing the Myanmar governments’ \$1 billion in assets in the United States; sanctions on the adult children of military leaders; and, sanctions on economic entities controlled by or associated with the military, including two large holding companies.

Other Western countries and groups—the United Kingdom, the European Union, New Zealand, and Australia—have followed suit with sanctions on top military leaders, many adding

to restrictions that were already imposed after the 2017 crackdown on the Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State. Moreover, the coup and its aftermath sparked an unprecedented [statement](#) from the defense chiefs of 12 countries (the US, UK, Australia, Canada, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and South Korea) on March 27, condemning the use of lethal force and calling on the junta to follow international standards of military professionalism.

However, some countries are less inclined to follow with sanctions on companies that are linked to the military. Japan has spoken out against the violence but is warier of applying economic instruments; however, some Japanese companies in Myanmar have severed relations with their in-country partners, fearing the impact of Western sanctions. French energy giant Total has [declined](#) to halt production in Myanmar, arguing that it would only contribute to the country’s dysfunction by further disrupting the power supply. In reality, the West—Washington in particular—has little economic leverage on Myanmar: the United States is Myanmar’s 84th-largest trading partner. Moreover, Japan and India have greater influence in Myanmar, and with the military, than other Western countries, and will likely be key interlocutors if and when the situation allows dialogue.

Without doubt, the return to direct military rule in Myanmar increases the influence of China and Russia, the Tatmadaw’s two closest partners. China is the largest provider of arms to Myanmar, with Russia second in place. Moscow was quick to capitalize on the opportunity by [sending](#) Deputy Defense Minister Aleksandr Fomin to Myanmar in late March for the Tatmadaw’s Armed Forces Day, for which he received a medal from Min Aung Hlaing. China is in a more difficult position, given its prominent economic presence in Myanmar. Several Chinese factories have been targeted by protestors, causing Beijing to issue a mild statement calling for the peaceful resolution of the conflict. Moreover, thanks to their shared border, China is affected by the [conflict](#) between the military and ethnic armed insurgent groups, some of which support the elected government and some of which support the military. Beijing is particularly wary of conflict that could spill over from Chin State, which has spiked since the coup.

Vietnam Transitions to (Partly) New Leadership

At the 13th Vietnamese National Party Congress in January President Nguyen Phu Trong [retained](#) his position as party Secretary-General for an unprecedented third term. Most likely Trong chose to stay on—a decision that was not without controversy—because he was unable to get his preferred successor, Tran Quoc Vuong, elected to the top slot. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc replaced Trong as president later in the spring and, on April 5, the Vietnamese National Assembly confirmed Pham Minh Chinh as prime minister, completing the leadership transition. Also of note was the increase in the Politburo and the Party Central Committee of military members; the 23 military officials now hold the largest voting bloc in the committee.



Figure 2 Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong delivers the closing remarks of the 13th National Party Congress on Feb. 1. Photo: VNA

National Party Congresses and their leadership line-ups telegraph the policy objectives and concerns. The bottom line for the 13th NPC is a greater concern for security, both external and internal. Trong's extended tenure will also ensure that his anti-corruption campaign, in the party and the government, will likely continue for the next five years.

Trong's inability to have his favorite succeed him was a sign of growing factionalism in the Vietnamese Communist Party, which the aging and ailing Party Secretary-General is unlikely to reduce. He has enough confidence from the party—given Vietnam's relative success in fighting COVID and its relative economic health as compared to its Southeast Asian neighbors—to hold onto power, but party officials worry that he may not be the right leader to face Vietnam's domestic and foreign policy challenges going

forward. The safety net will be Phuc as president.

Prime Minister Chinh is a former Deputy Minister of Public Security, an agency responsible for internal security, which includes the response to political opposition as well as foreign intelligence. Chinh is the first prime minister not to have held the post of deputy prime minister before his ascension since 1988. His background—as an intelligence officer covering the United States before normalization and, more recently, as party chief in Quang Ninh province bordering China—is expected to help Hanoi walk a delicate line between Washington and Beijing.

The US–Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement: Down to the Wire

Washington and Manila have until August to renegotiate the 1998 US–Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) before the pact expires. The timing of these bilateral talks favors Washington: Manila is increasingly challenged by China's actions in the South China Sea and continues to face threats to internal security from multiple insurgency groups. In March the Biden opened negotiations with a “2+2” framework (Defense and Foreign Affairs Ministries/Departments), President Rodrigo Duterte has expressed ambivalence about renewing the VFA, although he agreed to final window for negotiations, and will likely draw out the process as long as possible. In February, he [demanded](#) a four-fold increase in US assistance in return for renewal of the VFA; although Washington has not made its counter-offer public, Ministry of Defense officials have signaled their approval of the package, to Duterte's chagrin.

In early 2021 China's maritime actions have brought the VFA negotiations into the spotlight. In the January announcement of its [new coast guard law](#), Beijing claims the right for Chinese vessels to attack foreign ships and boats that are deemed to threaten Chinese security, including disputed island features in the South China Sea. Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin, Jr., lodged a diplomatic protest and [labeled](#) the announcement of the law “a verbal threat of war.”

Equally alarming for Manila was the prolonged [presence](#) of 200 Chinese vessels around Whitsun Reef, 170 nautical miles west of Palawan in the

northern Spratly Islands. The Philippines claims the reef lies within its Exclusive Economic Zone, causing Locsin to summon the Chinese ambassador in Manila for discussions. When the ships appeared in mid-March, Manila claimed them to be a “maritime militia” under the command of the PLA Navy, while Beijing maintained they were fishing vessels sheltering from bad weather, although satellite photos showed little evidence of fishing equipment. Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana characterized the move as a tipping point in Chinese intentions to occupy additional features in the West Philippine Sea.

Washington was quick to express support for Manila, in a State Department tweet that incorporated the “maritime militia” label and, in April, [moved](#) the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt and the USS Makin Island into the South China Sea. By mid-April, only a small number of Chinese ships remained around the reef. Analysts view the incident as an attempt by China to demonstrate its greater leverage against the United States in the South China Sea with a new administration in Washington and renegotiation of the VFA in progress. The outcome of VFA negotiations will be one indication of whether Beijing has miscalculated.



Figure 3 An American soldier with Philippine counterparts during an exercise in 2015. Joint exercises are authorized by the US–Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement, presently under negotiation for renewal. Photo: Ted Aljibe/AFP via Getty Images

The Immediate Outlook for US–Southeast Asian Relations

For the most part, the prospects for positive US relations with Southeast Asia in the Biden administration are good, but Washington has little to show for it at this point. This is due, in large part, to the restrictions of the COVID-19

pandemic, as well as the delays attendant any incoming administration. Indeed, in comparison to the Trump administration, Biden is expected to pay greater attention to diplomacy with Southeast Asia, with consistent and high-level representation at regional meetings, such as the East Asia Summit. He is also likely to appoint a US Ambassador to ASEAN, which Trump failed to do.

However, two major questions hang over a honeymoon period in US–Southeast Asian relations. The first is the role of US security allies in the region in the context of Biden’s larger push to work with allies in his foreign policy. Shortly after his inauguration, Biden spoke by telephone with his counterparts in [Tokyo](#) and [Seoul](#), but he has yet to talk with Prime Minister Prayuth or President Duterte. In addition, on March 3 the administration released its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, which highlighted US security partnerships with Singapore and Vietnam but failed to mention the Philippines or Thailand.

This is likely a temporary problem. Negotiations on renewal of the US–Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement and continued concern over the security of the South China Sea will keep the US–Philippines alliance on the policy screen. Security relations with Bangkok took a hit when the multilateral Cobra Gold Exercises, co-hosted by Thailand and the United States, were forced to postpone field exercises this year because of COVID-19. They have been tentatively rescheduled for early August. Nevertheless, in view of these issues, Southeast Asians will pay particular attention to remarks by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin when he attends the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore in June.

A second overhanging question will be more difficult for Washington to address in the near-term. Some Southeast Asians hope that a turn away from Trump will send the United States back to the multilateral trade arena in the Asia-Pacific. There are few, if any, signs that Biden intends to do that in a first term, or at least in the first two years of this term. The prospect for keeping, or increasing, a Democratic majority in either House of Congress is by no means assured, and Biden will not want to risk alienating the progressive Democratic base. However, it will be important that his administration articulate a trade policy for Southeast Asia beyond that of the Trump

administration, which was primarily based on reducing American trade deficits.

Washington's credibility in Southeast Asia will also depend on its actions to mitigate the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, relative to other COVID "hotspots," including the United States, Southeast Asia appeared to have a lighter number of cases, although lockdowns and supply chain disruptions brought the region's economic growth rate for the year close to zero. Projections for recovery in 2021 were optimistic, and growth was forecast at a robust 6–7% for the region. However, the early months of 2021 have seen second surges of the coronavirus in Southeast Asia, with nearly every country [seeing](#) a sharp rise in cases, and more modest expectations for quick economic recovery. Moreover, it is not clear whether Myanmar's nascent vaccination program has continued in the wake of the February coup, and health officials fear that it could increase the number of cases in the region.

For the most part, Southeast Asians were heartened by the March 12 [announcement](#) of the Quad's initiative to finance, produce, and distribute 1 billion doses of the single-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine in the Indo-Pacific region by the end of 2022. The initiative marked the debut of the United States and Japan in the regional "vaccine race," heretofore dominated by China, India, and Russia. India will serve as the Quad's production base for the vaccine, despite the fact that the World Health Organization continually warned that the country was focusing more on its export of vaccine than in vaccinations within the country.

By late April, the total number of COVID cases in India exceeded 20 million, with more than 400,000 new cases being reported daily, while the country's vaccination rate is less than 5%. Although US officials insist that the Quad initiative is still on track and "moving forward expeditiously," it is not clear whether the program will meet its target dates for vaccine distribution. The United States is the largest donor to the WHO's COVAX vaccination distribution program, which will mitigate perceptions that the United States is a non-starter in the "vaccine race." However, Washington will have to step up its diplomacy in the region to assure Southeast Asian leaders that it is a reliable partner in fighting the pandemic.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2021

Jan. 1, 2021: Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien-Loong and Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin [issue](#) a joint announcement that the agreement between the two countries to construct a high-speed rail between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore is officially terminated. The two leaders ultimately decide to end cooperation on the project, which was inaugurated in 2013, because of disagreements over cost.

Jan. 12, 2021: King Abdullah of Malaysia [agrees](#) to declare a state of emergency, in an attempt to curb coronavirus infections. The emergency, which suspends parliament, is also a boon to beleaguered Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, in that it prevents an immediate challenge to his leadership and gives him extraordinary powers, including the authority to introduce laws without the approval of the legislature.

Jan. 20, 2021: The United States [contributes](#) \$1 million worth of vehicles and equipment to the UXO Lao Training Center in Vientiane, Laos, to aid UXO removal teams working in five provinces.

Jan. 21, 2021: The 13th National Party Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam [opens](#) to select the top leadership of the party as well as choosing members of the Politburo, and to set policy goals for the next five years.

Jan. 22, 2021: China [announces](#) a coast guard law which comes into effect on Feb. 1, defining the conditions in which Chinese vessels will be permitted to attack foreign vessels. The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs files a diplomatic protest over the law, claiming that it is a “threat of war to any country that defies China.”

Feb. 1, 2021: Hours before the newly-elected parliament of Myanmar is scheduled to convene in Naypyidaw, Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing and a high-ranking group of officers [overthrow](#) the new government and detain State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders of the National League for Democracy. As the 2021 ASEAN Chair, Brunei [issues](#) a statement referencing human rights principles in the ASEAN Charter and calling for dialogue, reconciliation and “the return to normalcy” in Myanmar.

Feb. 1, 2021: The Vietnamese Community Party’s 13th National Party Congress adjourns a day early because of a rise in COVID-19 cases.

Feb. 2, 2021: Biden administration officially [designates](#) the Burmese military’s actions of Feb. 1 to be a coup, a legal action which paves the way for US sanctions.

Feb. 5, 2021: USS *John McCain* [conducts](#) a freedom of navigation operation in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands, the sovereignty of which is claimed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

Feb. 11, 2021: President Biden [signs](#) Executive Order 14014, which authorizes an initial round of sanctions on top military leaders in Myanmar who were involved in the Feb. 1 coup, among other possible actions. The Treasury Department subsequently announces the names of coup leaders to be sanctioned, including Min Aung Hlaing.

Feb. 11, 2021: Official negotiations [open](#) on renewal of the US–Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), triggering a 180-day countdown in which the agreement must be renewed or terminated.

Feb. 20, 2021: Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and nine ministers [survive](#) a no-confidence motion in parliament following a four-day censure debate. Protests calling for his resignation resume. The vote marks the second no-confidence vote Prayuth’s government has faced since taking office in July 2019.

Feb. 21, 2021: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte [demands](#) \$16 billion in assistance from the United States in return for renewal of the Visiting Forces Agreement. The amount would quadruple the current size of US aid to the Philippines.

Feb. 22, 2021: Biden administration [designates](#) two State Administrative Council (SAC) members Maung Maung Kyaw and Moe Mying Tun for sanctions.

Feb. 23, 2021: G7 foreign ministers [issue](#) a statement condemning the violence committed in Myanmar against protestors and calling upon the security forces to exercise “utmost restraint and respect human rights and international law.”

Feb. 24, 2021: Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi and Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai [meet](#) with Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing in Bangkok for an initial discussion on the violent aftermath of the Feb. 1 coup.

March 2, 2021: ASEAN foreign ministers [hold](#) a virtual meeting with Myanmar coup leader Min Aung Hlaing in an attempt to persuade him to reduce levels of violence in the continued internal conflict.

March 2, 2021: 324,000 doses of the AstraZeneca/Oxford COVID-19 vaccine [arrive](#) in Cambodia through the COVAX Advance Market Commitment, which supports equitable access to COVID vaccines.

March 10, 2021: United States [designates](#) the adult children of three top junta officials in Myanmar for sanctions, as well as six entities owned or controlled by these individuals.

March 12, 2021: At a virtual summit of the Quad, the United States, Japan, Australia and India [announced](#) that they will provide 1 billion doses of the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine, to be produced in India, to countries of the Indo-Pacific by the end of 2022.

March 18, 2021: US State Department [launches](#) the US–Mekong Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue, presently online.

March 22, 2021: The United States [adds](#) two individuals to the Myanmar sanctions list, the national Chief of Police Than Hlaing and Bureau of Special Operations Commander General Aung Soe, as well as two army units, the 33rd and 77th Light Infantry Divisions.

March 22, 2021: Laos [receives](#) its first shipment of COVID-19 vaccination through the COVAX facility, consisting of 132,000 doses of the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine.

March 23, 2021: Philippine Defense Minister Delfin Lorenzana [calls](#) upon the 220 Chinese vessels surrounding Whitsun Reef to withdraw, claiming they are violating the Philippines’ rights under international maritime law.

March 24, 2021: On Twitter, the US State Department expresses support for the Philippines and concern over the gathering of “PRC maritime militia vessels” near Whitsun Reef. The Chinese embassy in Manila responds, also through tweets, that the United States is “fanning flames and provoking confrontation in the region.”

March 25, 2021: Biden administration [announces](#) new sanctions relative to Executive Order 14014, designating two large conglomerates, the Myanmar Economic Holdings Public Company (MEHL) and the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) for sanctions.

March 26, 2021: World Bank [announces](#) that the economy of Myanmar has contracted by 10% since the Feb. 1 coup. Food prices have doubled, and the cost of fuel has risen by 15%.

March 26, 2021: President Biden [announces](#) his intention to nominate Daniel Kritenbrink to serve as assistant secretary of state for East Asia/Pacific. Kritenbrink has a combination of diplomatic experience in Northeast and Southeast Asia, and was most recently US ambassador to Vietnam.

March 27, 2021: Twelve defense chiefs, including Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley, [issue](#) a statement condemning the use of lethal force against civilians in Myanmar and calling on the Tatmadaw to observe international standards of military professionalism.

April 8, 2021: US Treasury Department [designates](#) Myanmar Gem Enterprise for sanctions, noting that military leaders participate in an ongoing gems emporium under the company's auspices.

April 9, 2021: The Indo-Pacific Command [moves](#) the US carrier strike group USS Theodore Roosevelt and the amphibious ready group USS Makin Island into the South China Sea, partly in response to the presence of Chinese vessels off Whitsun Reef, a perceived threat against the maritime security of the Philippines.

April 12–23, 2021: Armed Forces of the Philippines and the United States Armed Forces [conduct](#) the 36th iteration of the *Balikatan* (“Shoulder-to-Shoulder”) exercises. Although the exercises were scaled down because of COVID-19, 222 US military and 415 AFP personnel participated in combined air operations, staff seminars and humanitarian activities.

April 17, 2021: US Treasury Department [determines](#) that Vietnam has tripped the threshold for currency manipulation but does not formally declare Hanoi a currency manipulator.

April 21, 2021: US Treasury Department [announces](#) sanctions on two state-owned enterprises in Myanmar, the Myanmar Timber Enterprise (MTE) and the Myanmar Pearl Enterprise (MPE)

April 24, 2021: ASEAN [holds](#) a “special meeting” on the Myanmar crisis in Jakarta. The chairman’s statement lists five “points of consensus,” intended to stop the violence and promote dialogue among the parties.

April 26, 2021: State Administrative Council in Myanmar [says](#) in a statement that it will “consider” ASEAN’s points of consensus only when “genuine stability” has been reached in the crisis.

April 26, 2021: The State Department [issues](#) a statement of concern over the April 20 arrests of 4 journalists affiliated with the Bao Sach (Clean Journalism) movement.

April 26, 2021: After a five-day search, wreckage from the Indonesian submarine KRI Nanggala is [discovered](#) at a depth of more than 800 meters in the Bali Sea. There were no survivors among the 53-person crew.

April 28, 2021: Under the 2018 anti-terrorism law, the Indonesian government [designates](#) the National Liberation Army of West Papua as a terrorist group following an attack on April 25 in which they killed an army general, a policeman, and four civilians.

April 30, 2021: United Nations Development Program [issues](#) a report warning that turmoil and violence in Myanmar has doubled the number of people in poverty, and could force half the population into poverty by early 2022, if the situation continues unchecked. Since the coup, 11% of the population has been pushed into poverty.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

CHINA - SOUTHEAST ASIA

BEIJING'S ADVANCES COMPLICATED BY MYANMAR COUP AND US RESOLVE

ROBERT SUTTER, GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
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Beijing confidently forecast continued advances in high-priority efforts promoting regional economic integration, ASEAN's prominence as China's leading trade partner, as well as strengthening supply chain connections disrupted by the pandemic and US trade and economic restrictions. Ever-closer cooperation to counter COVID-19 saw Chinese pledges add to its leading position providing more than [60%](#) of international vaccines to Southeast Asian countries. Nevertheless, the unexpected coup and protracted crisis in Myanmar headed the list of important complications. The incoming Biden administration showed no letup in US-led military challenges to China's expansionism in the South China Sea, while strong high-level US government support for the Philippines in the face of China's latest coercive moves supported Manila's unusually vocal protests against the Chinese actions. Beijing also had difficulty countering Biden's strong emphasis on close collaboration with allies and partners, seen notably in the first QUAD summit resulting in a major initiative to [provide](#) 1 billion doses of COVID vaccines for Southeast Asia and nearby areas. The effectiveness of Chinese vaccines was now questioned by Chinese as well as foreign specialists and Beijing's domestic demand was growing strongly, slowing donations and sales abroad.

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China Emphasizes the Positive

Chinese leaders continued last year's strong emphasis on China's closer economic integration with Southeast Asian countries, notably through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement, growing China-ASEAN trade and investment, financing with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Chinese support for regional countries in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Supporting commentary stressed ever-closer Chinese integration with Southeast Asia through strengthened production chains and economic connections fostered by the BRI. Beijing [highlighted](#) the 7% growth in China-ASEAN trade in 2020, along with an increase in the [first quarter](#) of 2021 of 26% over the level in the first quarter of 2020. It advised that disruptions and declines in Chinese and Southeast Asian production chains involving the United States and the European Union prompted China and ASEAN to seek closer regional production chains and manufacturing collaboration. And it noted that China's rapid economic rebound from the pandemic and Southeast Asia's projected growth on over 5% in 2021 argued for more beneficial economic cooperation going forward.

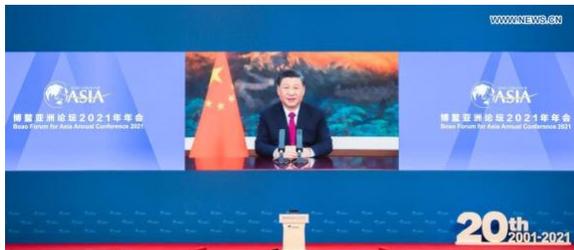


Figure 1 Chinese President Xi Jinping delivers a keynote speech via video at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference. Photo: Xinhua/Li Tao

A capstone in this effort was the annual Boao Forum for Asia, [hailed](#) by Chinese media as the “largest on-site international forum” of 2021. This year's forum attracted over 2,000 participants and over 1,000 journalists. The Chinese vice president attended in person, but President Xi Jinping and the 14 top-level foreign leaders participating did so via video link. President Xi's [address](#) to the forum featured China's vision for “high quality Belt and Road cooperation” with Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Xi implicitly countered prevailing criticism of the controversial Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a collection of bilateral agreements giving Beijing strong leverage over

individual states seeking financing and enabling corrupt, nontransparent deals often involving pollution and other environmental damage from coal fired electric power stations, hydropower dams and other infrastructure. Xi advised that the BRI was not a “private path owned by one single power” and Beijing sought “open, green, and clean” cooperation.

Problems for China in Southeast Asia received little attention during the annual meetings in March of the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese Peoples Political Consultative Conference. Premier Li Keqiang's annual press conference after the NPC meeting did not address Southeast Asia. State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi's [responses](#) to questions on Southeast Asia at his annual press conference at the NPC indicated that the China-ASEAN relationship was “a pace setter for regional cooperation,” with the two sides having a shared view on how to revitalize Asia and with China promising more support including vaccines to deal with the pandemic in Southeast Asia. Wang also emphasized “removing distractions and pressing ahead” in order to reach a conclusion of the protracted talks on a code of conduct in the South China Sea. The ASEAN chair representative [announced](#) in January that those talks probably will not conclude in 2021, citing the need for in-person consultations not possible under existing COVID requirements. Wang's comments on Myanmar stressed Chinese calls for calm, restraint, dialogue, avoiding violence and easing the crisis as soon as possible.

China's as Regional “Stabilizer”

That Beijing was concerned about possible adverse developments in Southeast Asia despite its avowed confidence in regional trends appeared in Wang's very active diplomacy with Southeast Asia during this reporting period. Chinese and foreign [reportage](#) highlighted China shoring up its position amid continued acute rivalry with the United States. Wang traveled to the region for consultations in Myanmar, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines in January, only three months after his visits in October 2020 to Cambodia, Malaysia, Laos, Thailand, and transiting Singapore. He followed up with individual meetings in Fujian province in April with visiting foreign ministers from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. According for foreign [reports](#), the meetings were located outside Beijing as part of

precautionary measures to avoid any resurgence of the pandemic in Beijing as the government prepared for the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party in July. Beijing's reporting on Wang's talks with Southeast Asian counterparts related to the fight against COVID-19, economic revival after the pandemic, and guarding against outside power's interference. On the latter, Chinese media emphasized Wang's active diplomacy as part of China's role as a regional "[stabilizer](#)," in contrast with perceived intensified US effort in a vain attempt to enlist support from regional countries to "encircle" China.

The Myanmar Crisis

The February coup in Myanmar has upended political stability in the country, with its civilian leader Aung Sun Suu Kyi ousted by the military junta and a swift crackdown on anti-coup protestors that have left more than [760 people](#) dead. China's approach to Myanmar reflected careful diplomatic calibration with Southeast Asian leaders, while deflecting international concerns about excessive interference. Shortly after the coup in February, China [blocked](#) a UN Security Council statement condemning the military coup and warned that external pressure or sanctions would only worsen the delicate situation in Myanmar, though it later in March did [back](#) a Security Council statement that condemned "violence against peaceful protesters." At a subsequent Security Council meeting in April, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized his country's support for ASEAN, and called for the regional organization to take an active role in Myanmar's domestic reconciliation process and to deal with the junta directly. Wang's message reflected key aspects of his discussion and consultation with counterparts from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines in early April.

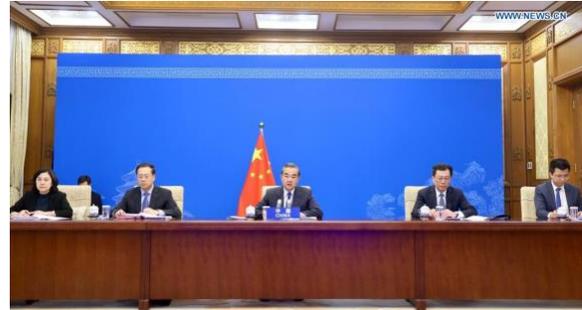


Figure 2 Chinese state councilor and foreign minister Wang Yi attends a United Nations Security Council high-level open debate. Photo: Xinhua/Liu Bin

On April 24, ASEAN convened an emergency session in Jakarta, with the leaders of Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Brunei in attendance, along with the foreign ministers of Laos, Thailand, and the Philippines. Myanmar's Senior General Min Aung Hlaing was also in attendance. The meeting produced a regional [consensus on five points](#), including an immediate cessation of violence, a constructive dialogue among all parties, a special ASEAN envoy to facilitate the dialogue, acceptance of aid, and a visit by the envoy to Myanmar. Although the formal statement at the end excluded a specific timeline for the release of political prisoners, the issue was raised and discussed in the deliberation. Malaysia Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin [explained](#) after the meeting that Myanmar "agreed that violence must stop" and "did not reject what was put forward by me and many other colleagues." Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong [added](#) that "[Min Aung Hlaing] said he heard us, he would take the point in, which he considered helpful ... He was not opposed to ASEAN playing a constructive role, or an ASEAN delegation visit, or humanitarian assistance."

Following the summit, ASEAN has stepped up its diplomatic coordination to involve the United States and China to help enforce the commitments made and the consensus reached in the April 24 meeting. According to [news reports](#), ASEAN has begun discussions with the two external powers for a foreign ministers' meeting at the annual ASEAN Regional Forum to address ongoing challenges regarding the post-coup situation in Myanmar.

Gauging US-China Competition: The Quad and Vaccine Competition

The authoritative annual [survey](#) of opinion in Southeast Asia conducted by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies reinforced recent studies charting China's continued remarkable advancing political and strategic influence along with growing economic power in Southeast Asia. At the same time, the survey showed an even more remarkable high level of anxiety and distrust held by 88% of those polled about Beijing's powerful regional position. Anticipating the new Biden administration, this year's poll showed that the United States was viewed as more influential and trustworthy than in the previous year. Forecasting growing US-China rivalry, the survey marked a big increase in regional support for and trust in US strategic influence; if forced to choose, a strong majority, 61% (versus 52% in the previous poll) would choose the United States whereas those choosing China dropped from 46% last year to 38%.

The Biden administration's strong promotion of the four-power (Australia, India, Japan, and United States) Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad as a foundation of its pledged close engagement with allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific resulted in the first summit among the powers in March. This seemed to put the lie to Chinese discourse dismissing the Quad, with Foreign Minister Wang Yi [forecasting](#) in the past that "the headline grabbing idea would dissipate like sea foam." And it was Beijing that appeared out of step with prevailing Chinese criticism of US initiatives as disruptive, out of step and unwelcome by Southeast Asian countries, when Quad powers announced how they would provide much needed COVID-19 vaccines to the region. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [affirmed](#) that "The Quad committed to delivering up to 1 billion doses to ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), the Indo-Pacific and beyond by the end of 2022."

China has repeatedly highlighted its role as the leading foreign source of vaccines for Southeast Asia, but those doses come with concerns about lack of transparency concerning clinical trials, safety, and true effectiveness. Such shortcomings were reinforced when the head of the Chinese Center for Disease Control [told](#) a conference in April that the efficacy of Chinese vaccines is "not high" and Beijing is considering options to "solve the problem." Meanwhile,

having controlled the pandemic in China through other means, Beijing lagged behind many countries in vaccinating Chinese citizens and in 2021 it launched stronger efforts to produce the vaccines needed for this massive exercise. As a result, foreign commentators reporting on lack of adequate capacity and production delays of Chinese vaccine makers predicted an increase in delays of promised Chinese vaccine shipments to Southeast Asian countries.



Figure 3 Chinese vaccine maker Sinovac Biotech performs quality checks on their COVID-19 vaccine. Photo: Reuters/Nikkei Asia

Against this backdrop, the Quad vaccine initiative, while also subject to possible delays, promised to go far in meeting pressing and protracted needs in Southeast Asian countries and thereby counter China's current advantage. Experts forecast that only Singapore will achieve widespread vaccination this year. Some others will reach this goal in 2022 but Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines will lag behind until 2023 or later.

South China Sea Complications and Disputes

Beijing's self-proclaimed role as the regional stabilizer in Southeast Asia faced a serious complication as resolute US-backed opposition by the Philippines countered Beijing's latest effort to use thinly disguised coercive expansion by Chinese security forces at the expense of other claimants to advance Beijing's control in the South China Sea. The Biden administration's top national security leaders worked effectively with their Philippines counterparts in employing repeated public protests and complaints, impressive demonstrations of military power and reaffirmations of alliance solidarity to thwart the latest episode of Chinese security forces intimidating advances at the expense of other claimants. Chinese officials were put on the defensive as the international

spotlight on China's strong-arm tactics starkly belied Beijing's publicized beneficent image.



Figure 4 Chinese ships at the Whitsun Reef. Photo: Maxar Technologies/via Japan Times

The episode involved the [massing](#) of over 200 purported Chinese Maritime Militia ships in early March demonstrating overwhelming power to effectively occupy the disputed territory of Whitsun Reef. The reef is 175 miles from Philippines governed territory and within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone. The territory is also claimed by Vietnam. China's claim rests on its expansive entitlement to most of the South China Sea that was deemed illegal by the UN Law of the Sea Tribunal in 2016. The Chinese ship presence was reported in a March 20 statement of the Philippines National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea, pledging government determination to monitor the situation and protect Philippine sovereignty. In the next week, Philippines Defense Minister Delfin Lorenzana [issued](#) a sharply worded demand that China recall the boats and halt this "provocative action of militarizing the area." Philippines Navy and Coast Guard forces were deployed to the disputed area, and the foreign ministry filed a diplomatic protest. Even President Rodrigo Duterte, who has long played down South China Sea differences with China in the interest of improved economic and other relations with China, reportedly asserted the Philippines position in a meeting with the Chinese ambassador on March 25.

The Chinese Embassy in Manila, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons and official commentary denied that the Chinese vessels were Maritime Militia saying they were fishing boats seeking shelter from bad weather and that the territory belonged to China. [Research](#) by Andrew Erickson and Ryan Martinson showed conclusively using automatic identification system transmissions that a number of People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia vessels were

deployed at Whitsun Reef. And [research](#) by Zachary Haver showed Chinese authorities have invested heavily over the past decade to supply all fishing vessels in the South China Sea with communications equipment to be used for surveillance and in replacing older wooden boats with larger steel vessels at a pace approaching 100 a year. Chinese officials consider the fishing vessels as China's "first line in defending China's maritime rights and interests."

Foreign governments weighed in with the US Embassy on March 23 accusing China of "using maritime militia to intimidate, provoke and threaten other nations." Beginning a process of high-level US official involvement, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan had a phone [conversation](#) with his Philippines counterpart emphasizing US support and the applicability of the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty in the face of the recent "massing" of China's "Peoples Armed Forces Maritime Militia vessels" at Whitsun Reef. Japan, Australia, Great Britain, Canada, and the European Union also sided with the Philippines in criticizing the Chinese flotilla as threatening regional peace.

Chinese vessels at Whitson Reef numbered about 180 in late March according to the Philippines Coast Guard. Defense Minister Lorenzana on April 1 said the number at the reef was now 44, but he warned strongly on April 2 that Chinese militia vessels were seeking to occupy more areas in the South China Sea. Philippines officials also disclosed that China had constructed structures in other parts of the Union Banks, a collection of reefs that includes Whitson Reef. In the following week, President Duterte's legal counsel and the presidential spokesman released what were seen as unusually strong statements criticizing Chinese actions and defending Philippines sovereignty. The Foreign Ministry initiated a plan to issue a daily protest until the Chinese vessels left Whitson Reef.

Strong public US government support continued in April. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken had earlier tweeted firm US alliance support for the Philippines and followed on April 8 with a phone [conversation](#) with Philippines foreign minister opposing "the massing of PRC maritime militia vessels in the South China Sea, including Whitsun Reef." He again affirmed the applicability of the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty to the South China Sea. That day,

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin had a similarly supportive phone conversation with Defense Minister Lorenzana.

By mid-April foreign reports said only “a handful” of Chinese vessels remained at Whitsun Reef, seemingly ending the standoff for now but noting why Beijing vacated now and whether or when the militia perhaps with Coast Guard or Navy support may return remained unknown. Against this background, President Duterte made his first public remarks on the controversy at a televised [briefing](#) on April 19, arguing against Philippines’ confrontation with China over the territorial dispute unless China was extracting oil from Philippines claimed territory. He stressed Philippines military weakness and added the judgment that the US will not come to the Philippines’ aid if the conflict is “of our own making.” On April 24, Philippines Coast Guard and related security forces began conducting widely publicized exercises in the disputed waters, prompting a Chinese complaint about Manila escalating tensions. The Philippines defense and foreign ministers rejected China’s opposition with the foreign minister using coarse language in demanding China withdraw its ships. Their tough public posture stood in contrast with Duterte’s remarks in late April that China was “a good friend” who would hopefully understand that the Philippines government had to protect its interests.

US, China Shows of Force, China’s Coast Guard Law

China viewed the Biden administration’s attentive resolve in support of the Philippines against the background of continued strong US military activism in the South China Sea that Beijing was determined to counter. The Beijing-based South China Sea Strategic Probing Initiative [reported](#) an unprecedented pace and intensity of US naval and air forces exercising in the South China Sea during 2020. Special attention focused on the two dual carrier strike group exercises held in July showing “very combat oriented” actions and nine freedom of navigation operations in 2020 challenging China’s South China Sea claims.

After brief slowdown in the sequence of Sino-American shows of force in the South China Sea in late 2020, the intensified pace of Sino-American military demonstrations in the South China Sea reemerged in 2021. In January Chinese forces carried out major South China Sea

exercises. According to foreign [reports](#), when a US carrier strike group was entering the South China Sea in late January, six Chinese H-6K heavy bombers flanked by four J-18 fighters flew into nearby Taiwan airspace with the pilots confirming orders for the simulated targeting and release of anti-ship missiles against the carrier. February brought another US dual carrier strike group exercise in the South China Sea as well as two US freedom of navigation exercises challenging Chinese South China Sea claims. March began with a Chinese announcement regarding a month of military exercises in the South China Sea. In early April a US carrier strike group and an accompanying amphibious assault ship group carried out exercises in the South China Sea followed a day later by the Chinese carrier Liaoning and accompanying warships entering the South China Sea after maneuvers near Taiwan.

On Jan. 22, China’s National People’s Congress passed a new Coast Guard [law](#) that went into effect in February. The law for the first time authorizes Chinese Coast Guard ships, long the mechanism of choice Beijing uses to intimidate and coerce South China Sea claimants, to fire on foreign vessels in “waters claimed by China.” According to Thayer Consultancy on Feb. 9, the Philippines voiced the strongest regional opposition to the law, filing a diplomatic protest calling it “a verbal threat of war to any country that defies the law.” Other Southeast Asian governments were publicly silent or offered less challenging responses. The US State Department [warned](#) that the law “strongly implies [it] can be used to intimidate the PRC’s maritime neighbors.” Referring to others’ opposition, the US statement said “The United States joins the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Japan, and other countries in expressing concern with China’s recently enacted Coast Guard law, which may escalate ongoing territorial and maritime disputes.”

Australia

Official Chinese media continued to counter Australian government officials seeking easing tensions and warned of protracted losses for Australia in ongoing Chinese actions restricting trade, tourism and student exchanges with Australia unless Canberra reversed recent policies adverse to Chinese interests. Adding to more than a dozen demands for changes in Australian policy made by Chinese diplomats in 2020, Beijing had a new target in April as the

Australian federal government used a new national foreign relations law to end the Belt and Road agreements signed earlier between China and the Victoria state government. [Beijing commentary](#) registered dissatisfaction by repeatedly besmirching Australia as a racist society. It also widely publicized Australia's differences with New Zealand, while wooing the latter with advantageous Chinese economic deals. In March, low-level Chinese [commentary](#) criticized Blinken's strong public support for Australia in the face of "blatant economic coercion" from Beijing.

Regional Outlook

Regional diplomats anticipate that the ASEAN Regional Forum, typically convened in the summer, will be prepared to address the ongoing crisis in Myanmar. There will be greater Southeast Asian interest to solicit additional support from the United States and China to help enforce ASEAN's earlier agreement and consensus plan with Myanmar's military junta. It remains to be seen whether China's diplomatic calibration with ASEAN of late on the issue will yield greater involvement by Beijing in the months ahead and whether the crisis would become an opportunity for closer regional coordination or a new source of conflict.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2021

Jan. 12-16, 2021: Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi [visits](#) four Southeast Asian countries to kickstart the new year. In Myanmar, Wang discusses closer economic cooperation, including donations for vaccines and medical supplies, border security, and China's role in brokering peace with Myanmar's ethnic armed groups. In Indonesia, Wang and his counterpart discuss bilateral cooperation on trade and investment, as well as closer coordination to stem the global pandemic.

Jan. 15, 2021: In Brunei, the third leg of his regional tour, Wang's visit [marks](#) the 30th anniversary of bilateral ties, and the two countries pledge to work together through ASEAN, where Brunei is the rotating chair for 2021.

Jan. 16, 2021: In the Philippines, Wang [announces](#) that his government will donate half a million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Manila. Among other highlights, the two sides also agree to deepen infrastructure development.

Jan. 22, 2021: China [announces](#) the passage of a new law that authorizes its Coast Guard vessels to fire on foreign ships and to destroy other countries' structures on islands in waters claimed by China, including in the disputed areas of the South China Sea. The new law prompts the Philippine foreign minister to lodge a diplomatic protest against China.

Jan. 26, 2021: Brunei [indicates](#) that the long-awaited Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea may not be concluded in 2021, owing to continued difficulties for convening in-person negotiations and deliberations amidst the pandemic. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang had set initially a three-year timeline to conclude the COC with ASEAN in 2018. 2021 was supposed to the year where regional negotiators begin their final reading of the text.

Feb. 28, 2021: China's Maritime Safety Administration [announces](#) that the country will hold military exercises in the South China Sea throughout March 2021.

March 7, 2021: Chinese maritime militia vessels [are spotted](#) in the Whitsun Reef in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone, prompting the Philippines to lodge a diplomatic protest against China for the incursion.

March 8, 2021: Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi [discusses](#) key foreign policy issues at his annual press conference at the National People's Congress. On China's relations with Southeast Asia, Wang emphasizes the positive aspects of regional economic and security cooperation.

March 20, 2021: In response to the continuing presence of Chinese vessels in the Whitsun Reef, the Philippines National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea [pledges](#) that Manila will continue to monitor the situation and protect the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

March 30-April 2, 2021: Visiting foreign ministers from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines [meet](#) one-on-one with Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Nanping, a city in the southern province of Fujian. The bilateral meetings focus on the latest situation in Myanmar. China indicates its support for ASEAN to take the lead in managing the post-coup crisis in Myanmar.

April 18-21, 2021: China [hosts](#) the annual Boao Forum for Asia. With over 3,000 participants in attendance, the forum marks one of the largest international gatherings in 2021. Chinese President Xi Jinping's message at this year's forum focuses on the Belt and Road Initiative, a signature program linking regional economies, and the importance of global economic governance.

April 19, 2021: China [expresses](#) concern with the ongoing unrest in Myanmar but rejects a UN Security Council resolution condemning the military coup. Instead, China supports regional efforts spearheaded by ASEAN to take a central role in working directly with the junta.

April 24, 2021: ASEAN leaders [meet](#) in Jakarta and issue a five-point consensus with regard to the post-coup situation in Myanmar. The regional consensus calls for an immediate cessation of violence and a visit by an ASEAN envoy, among other priorities. ASEAN begins laying the groundwork for a foreign ministers' meeting with the United States and China under the ASEAN Regional Forum framework to enforce the consensus plan agreed to earlier.

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

CHINA- TAIWAN RELATIONS

TAIWAN PROSPERS, CHINA RATCHETS UP COERCION, AND US SUPPORT REMAINS “ROCK-SOLID”

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STUDIES

For the leadership of Taiwan, the significance for Taiwan’s relationships with the US and China of the end of the Trump administration and the arrival of the Biden administration formed the defining concern as 2021 began. Taiwan welcomed two steps that the Trump administration took in its waning days: announcing a visit to Taiwan by the US ambassador to the UN (even though it was later cancelled) and repudiating the longstanding Taiwan Contact Guidelines, which was widely seen in Taiwan as overly restrictive. Taiwan’s anxieties regarding the Biden administration were quickly allayed, as incoming senior officials repeatedly called US support for Taiwan “rock solid” and issued new far less restrictive Guidelines. Taiwan also benefited from unusually direct expressions of support from Japan and other international partners.

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Taiwan's economy continued to boom despite the pandemic, but its dominance in high-end computer chip production became the subject of worries by US officials and industry groups over supply chain security. China's military activities near Taiwan included two days of especially intense activity, which were clearly intended to signal its displeasure with the Biden administration's support for Taiwan. China also banned the import of Taiwanese meat and pineapples and announced preferential treatment for Taiwan investors in mainland agriculture, all clearly targeted at disrupting support for Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party and President Tsai Ing-wen among its rural political base. Both strategies appeared more likely to backfire than not. Increasing tensions between the US and China, especially over Taiwan, have led to concerns on all sides that a diplomatic or military confrontation may be growing more likely.

Low-key Statements Begin the Cross-Strait Year

2021 dawned in China and Taiwan with many recalling the exchange of statements in January 2019 between People's Republic of China (PRC) President Xi Jinping, calling for movement toward unification, and Tsai Ing-wen, president of the Republic of China, staunchly defending Taiwan's separate identity. That exchange helped to reverse Tsai's lagging political fortunes and led to her reelection on Jan. 11, 2020. This year, Xi's New Year statement did not mention Taiwan.

Zhang Zhijun, president of the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS)—China's supposedly unofficial interlocutor with Taiwan—[issued](#) a statement describing the cross-strait situation as “severe and complex,” saying that “the deadlock between the two sides of the strait is difficult to resolve,” but expressing confidence that these difficulties “cannot change the melody of the era of national rejuvenation.” In her new year's statement, President Tsai [offered](#) a very different view, asserting that the actions of People's Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft and naval vessels had undermined cross-strait relations, but promising that Taiwan would “uphold our principles and not act rashly” [and] “facilitate meaningful dialogue under the principles of parity and dignity” as long as the Beijing was sincere.

On March 5, Premier Li Keqiang addressed cross-strait relations in his work report to China's National People's Congress, using language familiar from previous work reports. He [promised](#) that China would remain committed to the one-China Principle and the 1992 Consensus and “to promoting the peaceful development of relations across the Taiwan Strait and China's reunification.” China, he warned, would resolutely deter any Taiwan activity that promoted independence yet encouraged Taiwan compatriots to benefit from China's economic growth. There was none of the tension around this work report that had occurred when the 2020 work report, which was presented shortly after Tsai's second inauguration, reportedly omitted reference to peaceful reunification. These three statements from the mainland and one from Taiwan seemed to signal a relatively moderate tone on both sides and suggested that both would continue their policy approach from 2020.

The events of January through April offered a picture of considerably sharper confrontation. An early point of contention was another in the series of efforts from Taiwan to find a formula to bridge differences with the mainland over the “1992 Consensus” in order to resume cross-strait dialogue that has been frozen by Beijing since Tsai first took office in 2016. Chiu Tai-san, newly appointed as minister of Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council, [proposed](#) on March 18 that Taiwan and the mainland could renew their dialogue with “constructive ambiguity,” “finding the greatest common denominator” between the two sides. Chiu was clearly proposing that the two sides revisit the “1992 Consensus” without insisting that it reflected China's “one-China Principle.” Even if Chiu intended this to be an olive branch, no one expected it to succeed, and China's Taiwan Affairs Office promptly [rejected](#) it.

Outgoing, Incoming Administrations Raise Taiwan's Stature in Washington

On Jan. 6, the State Department [announced](#) that US Ambassador to the United Nations, Kelly Craft, would visit Taiwan, only to cancel the visit the following week. On Jan. 9, then Secretary of State Michael Pompeo [cancelled](#) the State Department's Guidance for US official contacts with Taiwan, reissued annually since at least the mid-1980s, which had helped ensure that the US did not treat Taiwan as a country with which the United States had diplomatic relations, and that

had been criticized in Taiwan as demeaning. Both of the announcements led to strong denunciations from Beijing, but were welcomed enthusiastically in Taipei. Both were interpreted as Pompeo's efforts to force the incoming Biden administration to continue a confrontational posture against China and in support of Taiwan. How would the Biden administration respond? Biden's nominees for secretary of State and Defense both assured senators at their confirmation hearings that US support for Taiwan was "rock solid." Tsai, Foreign Minister Joseph Wu, and Taiwan's Representative in Washington, Bi-khim Hsiao, all enthusiastically welcomed these confirmations that Taiwan's relationship with the US would be secure under the Biden administration. Earlier anxiety seemed to vanish.



Figure 1 Bi-khim Hsiao posing at the Biden inauguration from the website of the Taiwan DC office. Photo: TECRO

The Biden State Department issued new Taiwan Contact Guidelines on April 9 that are less restrictive than those Pompeo cancelled. The *Financial Times*, citing an unnamed Biden administration official, [said](#) the new guidance now allows US officials to regularly meet Taiwan counterparts in US federal government buildings and at Taiwan's *de facto* embassies and consulates overseas. US officials are also now

permitted to attend gatherings at Taiwan's Twin Oaks estate in Washington, except at Taiwan's Double Ten national day. The Biden official said "both sides" should be happy with the new guidance—Beijing because some "guardrails" remained in place and Taipei because several restrictions had been lifted. The official State Department [press release](#) said the liberalized guidelines are aimed at encouraging greater US government engagement with Taiwan—an "important economic and security partner"—but it also underscored the unofficial nature of US-Taiwan relations. Evidence of the Biden administration approach to contacts with Taiwan appeared even before the State Department's April 9 announcement. Most notably, the US ambassador to Palau accompanied the president of Palau during his visit to Taiwan in late March, marking the first visit to Taiwan by a sitting US ambassador since 1979. Earlier in the month, the *chargé* (acting ambassador) to Japan invited his Taiwan counterpart in Tokyo, Frank Hsieh, to the official residence of the US ambassador.



Figure 2 Frank Hsieh meeting with the acting U.S. ambassador in Tokyo. Photo: Twitter/@USAmbJapan

A few months into office, the Biden administration is actively rallying US allies against the PRC. On a visit to Tokyo in March for the Security Consultative Committee meeting, the so-called "two-plus-two," Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin issued a joint press statement with their Japanese counterparts on the US-Japan alliance, in which the four ministers underscored the importance of cross-Strait peace and stability. The following month, President Joe Biden welcomed Japan's Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide to the White House for his first in-person meeting with a foreign leader. Biden and Suga issued a joint statement on a US-Japan partnership for a "new era," which, like the "two-plus-two," underscored the importance of cross-Strait peace and

stability. This addition came as a surprise to some observers who believed Suga might have preferred to omit it for fear of overly antagonizing Beijing. The last public reference to Taiwan during a US–Japan leaders’ summit was [in 1969](#).

PLA Actions Belie Low-key Statements

Two days after Biden was inaugurated, China launched its largest ever single-day series of air sorties, sending 15 PLA Air Force (PLAAF) aircraft into Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). Twelve were combat aircraft, a significant shift from earlier sorties near Taiwan in which turboprop Y-8 anti-submarine and reconnaissance aircraft had dominated. The US State Department [responded](#) sharply, affirming Washington’s “rock solid” commitment to Taipei and urging Beijing “to cease its military, diplomatic and economic pressure.” By the end of January, PLA sorties near Taiwan [had occurred](#) nine out of every 10 days, according to *Global Times*, a nationalist mouthpiece. China’s Ministry of Defense [said](#) that they were intended as a “stern warning” to foreign forces.

Near-daily incursions continued through the first four months of the year, spiking with 20 aircraft on March 26, 15 aircraft on April 7 as Taiwan prepared to conduct missile tests, and 25 aircraft on April 12. The last was the largest on record; all of these group sorties included significant proportions of combat aircraft. Chinese naval forces, including the Liaoning aircraft carrier, also maneuvered near Taiwan. While many of these activities were described by China’s Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) or *Global Times* as signaling Chinese warnings, they clearly also served operational and training requirements for the PLA, including intelligence collection and accustoming PLAAF units to flying around Taiwan’s defensive perimeter and encountering Taiwan military challenges. They also strained the capacity of the Taiwan Air Force to respond, leading it to [request](#) an additional \$74 million to counter the incursions. Taiwan’s Air Force also [announced](#) its decision to purchase *Patriot Advanced Capability 3 (PAC-3)* missiles to enhance its defensive capabilities.

When China’s National People’s Congress Standing Committee passed a new Coast Guard Law on Jan. 22, it [transformed](#) the Coast Guard into a military-like organization under the command of the Central Military Commission, and it authorized commanders to take action

when sovereignty is violated in waters claimed by China, which would include the East China Sea, the waters around Taiwan, and the South China Sea. Without acknowledging a cause-and-effect linkage, Taiwan’s Coast Guard and Navy announced plans to equip patrol vessels with anti-air missiles during wartime and integrate the vessels into the Navy’s live-fire drills later this year. On March 25 in Washington, the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Relations Office (TECRO) signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to establish a US–Taiwan Coast Guard Working Group (CGWG) without suggesting any military dimension to their cooperation. China’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying [said](#) the following day that the pact violated US commitments to China and called on the US to “be cautious with its words and actions on Taiwan-related issues,” suggesting that China did at least see the MOU as a step toward more formal US–Taiwan military cooperation.

Agriculture Becomes a Field of Contention

On Jan. 27, China’s TAO [announced](#) that it was banning the import of meat from Taiwan to prevent the spread of the highly pathogenic avian influenza and consumption of meat with ractopamine. Because Taiwan exports very little meat to the mainland, Taiwan officials expressed annoyance, but there was no significant economic damage caused.

The next month, on Feb. 26, the TAO announced that it had found unspecified biohazards in pineapples imported from Taiwan just as the pineapple harvest was beginning in Taiwan. Because the mainland is a major market for Taiwan producers, the potential economic damage was considerable. President Tsai [took to Facebook](#) to urge Taiwanese to eat more pineapples, calling the mainland decision an “ambush” and “obviously ... not a normal trade decision.”

On March 17, China [announced](#) “22 Measures on Agriculture and Forestry” to attract Taiwan investment in mainland agriculture, including provisions on land-use rights, access to financing, agricultural patents, and funding for research and development, essentially providing Taiwanese investors national treatment. While there was little evidence that such measures would attract any significant interest, Taiwanese officials treated the package as one

more in a series of economic United Front strategies, following the pineapple ban and the packages of 31 investment incentives in 2018 and 22 in 2019 that the Mainland offered. During an inspection tour of Fujian Province in March, Xi Jinping [called on](#) provincial officials to “be bold in exploring new paths for integrated cross-Strait development.”



Figure 3 Chinese President Xi Jinping visiting Fujian and calling on the province to redouble its efforts to reach out to Taiwan. Photo: Xinhua/Ju Peng

Taiwanese suspicions of Chinese agricultural policies and their negative impact on Taiwan were reinforced on April 4 when a dead pig was discovered in a harbor on Taiwan’s west coast; tests found it had been infected with African Swine Fever (ASF), which has decimated mainland pork production since 2018. Although there was no conclusive proof that the dead pig had come from China, Taiwan’s Coast Guard announced it would launch increased patrols and inspections to prevent ASF being transmitted from the mainland to Taiwan.

A Strong Economy & Chip Dominance

Taiwan emerged from a year of COVID-19 in strong economic shape. By February, Taiwan export orders had grown for the twelfth successive month, up 49% from a year earlier according to Taiwan’s Ministry of Economic Affairs, and Taiwan [was ranked](#) the 15th largest global exporter, up two spots from 2020. First-quarter 2021 manufacturing grew for the ninth straight month and [business confidence](#), as measured by the Purchasing Managers’ Index (PMI), remained over 60, where 50 and above indicates growing confidence. Taiwan’s economy has boomed thanks to huge global demand for computer and IT products in the

work-from-home age and the avoidance of any COVID-related shutdowns on the island.

Taiwan investments in mainland China dropped by both the value and number of investments from a year previous, down to 33% of Taiwan’s total outbound investment, a fall from a high of 84% in 2010. However, reflecting the continuing strength of the cross-Strait high-tech trade, China’s General Administration of Customs [released](#) foreign trade data showing that, in 2020, Taiwan’s exports to the mainland hit a record high of \$200.664 billion, an annual increase of 16%.

Taiwan’s strength in the production of high-end silicon chips and information technology and communication (ITC) equipment paradoxically posed several challenges for Taiwan. On Feb. 24, President Biden ordered a review of US supply chains, seeking to end the country’s reliance on China and other adversaries for crucial goods. On March 1, a US national security commission on artificial intelligence [concluded](#) that the dependency of the United States on semiconductor imports, particularly from Taiwan, creates a strategic vulnerability for both the US economy and military. These concerns pose a special concern for Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC). TSMC’s central role in the global productions of silicon chips was underscored by a report by a US industry group [concluding](#) that Taiwan produces 92% of the most advanced silicon chips (with channels less than 10 nanometers wide) and warning that this supply could suffer a catastrophic interruption due to natural disasters, infrastructure shutdowns, or international conflicts. The report also concluded that the largest bilateral trade flow in semiconductors was between Taiwan and China, accounting for over 60% of Taiwan semiconductor trade, a market that TSMC dominates.

In response to tightening US export controls, Chinese firms have become more aggressive in recruiting top talent from Taiwan semiconductor firms. In early March, prosecutors in New Taipei announced that they were investigating two companies with Chinese funding that were, they alleged, poaching computer chip engineers from Taiwan companies. In late April, Taiwan’s Ministry of Labor banned companies in Taiwan from posting jobs in China, especially jobs in the semiconductor and integrated circuit industries.

The Washington Post [reported](#) in early April that the Chinese company Phytium Technology had used chips that were produced by TSMC to build a supercomputer used in designing a cutting-edge hypersonic glide vehicle for the PLA. A day earlier, the Commerce Department added Phytium and six other Chinese supercomputing companies to its Entity List, imposing sanctions for actions contrary to US interests. A US official reportedly [expressed concern](#): “In this particular case, we have a partner that is under a direct military threat from China, and is also one of the few places that produce certain technologies China needs to support its military ambitions.”

Even less advanced chips became an issue as car companies across the globe were forced to pause production because they could not acquire sufficient silicon chips for increasing internet-enabled vehicles, chips that are mostly produced by TSMC. The shortage has grown so severe that the German economics minister recently [appealed](#) to his counterpart in Taiwan for help to shake loose a few chips that are urgently needed by German carmakers; the director of Biden’s National Economic Council did the same.

Trade Deals and Pork

Taiwan’s efforts to expand its international economic linkages took a step forward when Japan’s Prime Minister Suga expressed support for Taiwan’s participation in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Taiwan’s economic linkages took a step backward when the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) multilateral free trade agreement with China, Japan, South Korea, and Australia, from which Taiwan is excluded because of China.

On Jan. 1, Taiwan officially opened its markets to pork from the US, a step Tsai’s administration had announced in August 2020 to persuade the US to move toward a bilateral trade agreement despite Taiwan consumers’ concerns over US pork producers’ use of the additive ractopamine. Since August, her efforts to satisfy Taiwan consumers and US producers have failed to satisfy either. The opposition Nationalist or Kuomintang (KMT) Party announced that it had collected a sufficient amount of signatures to hold an advisory referendum to block US pork

imports, even though the Taiwan government [announced](#) that none of the 1,500 tons of US pork imported through April 8 of this year contained any trace of ractopamine. Despite Tsai’s efforts, the annual [trade report](#) issued by the US Trade Representative said that it continued to have serious concerns about Taiwan’s agricultural policies that are “not based on science” and “barriers to market access for US pork and beef.”

KMT Approves Subtle Twist to the 1992 Consensus

During the Ma Ying-jeou era (2008–2016), Taipei leveraged the 1992 Consensus, or “one China, different interpretations,” to cut trade deals with the mainland while protecting Taiwan’s sovereignty, since, in their interpretation, “China” refers to the ROC. However, under Xi, Beijing has made it crystal clear that it does accept any notion of “different interpretations,” and has equated the 1992 Consensus with the PRC’s rigid “one-China principle,” under which China constitutes the PRC. [Polling](#) indicates that an ever-wider number of Taiwan voters view the 1992 Consensus with skepticism or think that consensus was never reached. This issue is widely cited as one reason the KMT lost the 2020 presidential election, yet older senior KMT leaders insist that the 1992 Consensus is fundamental to the party’s claim to be able to calm cross-Strait tensions.

In late March, the KMT announced a “1992 Consensus Plus.” It combines the 1992 Consensus with four new affirmations: 1) the sovereignty of the Republic of China; 2) peace and security across the Taiwan Strait; 3) freedom, democracy, and human rights; and, 4) the strengthening of cross-Strait co-prosperity. On paper, these additions appear unremarkable, and are even quite close to President Tsai’s formulations, but KMT chairman Johnny Chiang said it better emphasizes the 1992 Consensus’s grounding in the ROC constitution. In Beijing, the TAO spokesperson immediately rejected the new formulation and denounced efforts to “highlight differences.” Nonetheless, Chiang insisted that the “1992 Consensus Plus” would help the KMT to “keep up with the times,” i.e., appeal to younger Taiwanese voters. Whether the KMT’s subtle twist on the 1992 Consensus will reassure a nervous Taiwan electorate remains to be seen.

Taiwanese endorse Tsai, Her Cross-Strait Policy, and Taiwan Identity, but Not US Pork

As the KMT struggles internally, recent polls indicate that Tsai continues to benefit from Taiwan's successful management of COVID-19 and its surprising economic resilience. Taiwanese continue to support Tsai and her resistance to Chinese pressure to accept its 1992 Consensus. According to two different polls (link to [first](#) and [second](#)), Tsai had almost 60% trust and approval ratings, 53% endorsed her handling of cross-Strait relations, and over 60% approved of her handling of COVID-19. Her one negative was imports of US pork, which 60 to 70% opposed. A third survey conducted by the Election Study Center [showed](#) that the DPP had significantly greater support than the KMT. Over 80% of those surveyed [supported](#) the cross-Strait status quo rather than immediate moves to either independence or reunification, while over 60% [identified](#) as "Taiwanese," 30% identified as Taiwanese and Chinese, and less than 3% identified as solely Chinese. Tsai's performance was sufficiently popular that even the chair of the opposition KMT party, Johnny Chiang, [gave credit](#) to her efforts "to show goodwill to the other side."

Looking Ahead

As May approached, officials and commentators on all sides engaged in an extended debate over what Taipei and Washington perceived as new and threatening Chinese actions to coerce Taiwan, or what Beijing perceived as Taiwan and US initiatives to move Taiwan toward *de jure* independence. *The Economist* [called](#) Taiwan "the most dangerous place in the world," leading Tsai to [respond](#), "Taiwan stands on the front lines of democracy worldwide. As long as the people of Taiwan remain united and uphold our core values while responding prudently to regional developments, we can overcome the challenges posed by authoritarian expansion."



Figure 4 Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook page announcing her response to *The Economist* May 1 cover story calling Taiwan "the most dangerous place." Photo: Facebook

As Taiwan moves into the second year of Tsai Ing-wen's second term in May, the president is in a very strong position for a second-term presidency. That should enable her to pursue long-term policies, such as increasing Taiwan's defensive capabilities and pursuing trade agreements, even if those require budget increases or pork imports. The KMT will hold elections for its party chairman in July, but it will face a major challenge over how to adjust its policies, especially on cross-Strait relations, in ways that attract popular support. The scheduled Aug. 28 referendum, which appears likely to include votes on importing US pork and closing the fourth nuclear power plant, will offer the KMT an opportunity to challenge the ruling DPP on the kind of domestic bread-and-butter issues on which the ruling party has stumbled before.

Regardless of how Taiwan's political balance is altered, China appears determined to increase the range of coercive measures—economic, diplomatic, cyber, and military—that it deploys against Taiwan. It may even be prepared to accept that its military sorties may lead to a greater risk of miscalculation or military accident followed by military action. It has no interest in establishing contacts with the ruling DPP, no matter how the party tries to show flexibility. Even if the KMT were to return to power, it appears unlikely that it would have popular support for returning to the sort of

policies that enabled President Ma Ying-jeou to secure mutually beneficial economic and other ties with the mainland. China may well perceive that Taiwanese and US debates over its coercive intents and capabilities advance its objectives by disquieting its opponents.

Renewed international attention to Taiwan's dominance in high-end chip production and the close relationship of that industry to China will make even this economic strength a subject of controversy.

Finally, Taiwan will play a more visible role in US-China tensions. The Biden administration will find support for Taiwan's democratic free-market system a popular way to signal its differences with Beijing. The US will continue to expand its role in highlighting Taiwan in its interactions with foreign partners. The US Congress will advance legislation advocating greater US support for Taiwan. Whether those will make a real difference in Taiwan's security or simply make Taiwan more of a pawn in US-China relations is less certain. The one step the US could take to strengthen Taiwan's economic security seems paradoxically the least likely to happen—progress toward a bilateral trade agreement.

With the Chinese Communist Party celebrating the 100th anniversary of its founding on July 1, 2021, one continuity seems inescapable: Beijing will continue to increase pressure on Taipei by conducting military operations around the island, blocking access to multilateral and bilateral international recognition, and threatening sanctions against any Taiwanese who does not endorse its preferred formula of "one country, two systems." The annual plenums of the PRC National People's Congress and Chinese People's Consultative Congress will offer occasions for any further tightening, or, far less likely, loosening, of Beijing's cross-strait policy.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2021

Jan. 1, 2021: New Year Message from China's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) [warns](#) that "the situation across the Taiwan Strait is severe and complex.

Jan. 1, 2021: China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) Spokesperson Zhu Fenglian [reiterates](#) that it was infeasible to launch any cross-Strait dialogues without the 1992 consensus.

Jan. 2, 2021: Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen [calls](#) for a meaningful dialogue with Beijing on an equal basis Friday in her New Year's speech.

Jan. 5, 2021: US National Security Council declassifies East Asia Pacific Security Policy. It states that the US seeks to enable Taiwan to develop an effective asymmetric defense. It also states that the US will implement a strategy capable of defending the first-island-chain, including Taiwan

Jan. 6, 2021: US and Taiwan [hold](#) a virtual political-military dialogue. US Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs R. Clarke Cooper participates.

Jan. 6, 2021: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [announces](#) that US Ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Craft will visit Taiwan because "Taiwan shows what a free China could achieve" as the US supports the Hong Kong people.

Jan. 6, 2021: Premier Su Tseng-chang [calls](#) on China to adhere to its promise to uphold Hong Kong's autonomy until 2047. KMT Chairman Johnny Chiang called on Beijing and the Hong Kong government to be prudent and tolerant and not to harm or restrict the development of freedom and democracy in the territory.

Jan. 9, 2021: Secretary Pompeo [announces](#) that Washington will no longer enforce Taiwan Contact Guidance that had restricted contacts between US officials and Taiwan counterparts since 1979.

Jan. 10, 2021: Transition official [states](#) that Biden is committed to the "strong, principled, and bipartisan" support for Taiwan and will support "a peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues consistent with the wishes and best interests of the people of Taiwan."

Jan. 10, 2021: Two medical groups in Taiwan [protest](#) the decision of the International Society of Radiographers and Radiological Technologists (ISRRT) to list "Taiwan" as "Chinese Taipei."

Jan. 11, 2021: US Ambassador to the Netherlands Pete Hoekstra and his Taiwan counterpart Chen Hsing-hsing [meet](#) at the US embassy.

Jan. 14, 2021: President Tsai Ing-wen [holds a videoconference](#) with US Ambassador to the UN, Kelly Craft, whose trip to Taiwan was canceled at the last minute.

Jan. 14, 2021: Edward McMullen, US ambassador to Switzerland and Liechtenstein, officially [meets](#) Taiwan's representative to Switzerland David Huang

Jan. 15, 2021: New Zealand Commerce and Industry Office in Taipei (NZCIO) [announces](#) that New Zealand and Taiwan have signed a mutual customs arrangement.

Jan. 16, 2021: Taoyuan voters [recall](#) Taoyuan City Councilor Wang Hao-yu of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), making him the first councilor in a special municipality ever to be recalled. A KMT spokesman calls it "the first domino effect resulting from the import of pork containing ractopamine."

Jan. 19, 2021: Vietnamese government [approves](#) Taiwan-based Foxconn's investment of \$270 million to build a new factory.

Jan. 19, 2021: Antony Blinken [expresses](#) at his confirmation hearing to be secretary of State "a strong and long bipartisan commitment to Taiwan" based on the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) and the US-China joint communiques; he promises to ensure Taiwan's self-defense capability. US secretary of Defense nominee Lloyd J. Austin echoes the same position.

Jan. 19, 2021: At a World Health Organization (WHO) Executive Board meeting, the United States [voiced](#) support for Taiwan's inclusion in the global body as an observer state.

Jan. 23, 2021: US State Department spokesman [expresses](#) concern at China's "attempts to intimidate its neighbors, including Taiwan." He urges Beijing to "engage in meaningful dialogue with Taiwan's democratically elected representatives."

Jan. 24, 2021: Fifteen Chinese military planes [enter](#) into Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) but do not cross the median line that divides the Taiwan Strait.

Jan. 27, 2021: China's TAO [announces](#) that China has banned meat products from Taiwan to prevent the spread of the highly pathogenic avian influenza and consumption of meat with ractopamine.

Jan. 28, 2021: Lowy Institute of Australia [ranks](#) Taiwan 3rd worldwide for COVID-19 performance behind New Zealand and Vietnam.

Jan. 29, 2021: US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [says](#) that US must "impose costs" for China's threats to Taiwan as well its actions in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

Feb. 1, 2021: China's new Coast Guard Law [goes into effect](#) after being passed by the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress on Jan. 22.

Feb. 4, 2021: Guyana abruptly [terminates](#) an agreement with Taiwan to open an office in the South American country, hours after China urged Georgetown to "correct their mistake."

Feb. 6, 2021: Secretary of State Blinken [tells](#) Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi in a telephone call that the US and its allies will hold Beijing accountable for its efforts to threaten stability in the Indo-Pacific, including across the Taiwan Strait. Chinese media report Blinken committed to abide by the three Sino-US joint communiques and the US "one-China Policy."

Feb 17, 2021: Taiwan's Cabinet [approves](#) over NT\$10 billion (US\$357.1 million) to assist the domestic pork industry.

Feb. 17, 2021: Taiwan's Economic Affairs Minister Wang Mei-hua [receives](#) a letter from US National Economic Council (NEC) Director Brian Deese asking for help to resolve the shortage of automobile chips faced by American automobile manufacturers.

Feb. 26, 2021: China's TAO [announces](#) that Chinese customs has banned import of Taiwanese pineapples over biosafety concerns.

March 1, 2021: US national security commission on artificial intelligence [says](#) that the dependency of the United States on semiconductor imports, particularly from Taiwan, creates a strategic vulnerability for both its economy and military.

March 3, 2021: Taiwan [announces](#) it has received its first batch of COVID-19 vaccines, 117,000 doses, from the COVAX allocation program of the World Health Organization.

March 3, 2021: Biden administration [issues](#) Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, saying "We will support Taiwan, a leading democracy and a critical economic and security partner, in line with longstanding American commitments."

March 3, 2021: Secretary Blinken [says](#) he is committed to beginning talks on free trade agreement negotiations with Taiwan, and to inviting Taiwan to the Summit for Democracy, which the US plans to host later this year.

March 4, 2021: Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga [expresses](#) his government's support for Taiwan's participation at the WHO and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

March 5, 2021: Premier Li Keqiang in the Government Work Report before the National People's Congress [repeats](#) language from previous work reports emphasizing the one China principle, the 1992 Consensus, and promoting the peaceful growth of relations across the Taiwan Strait and China's reunification.

March 7, 2021: *Washington Post* [reports](#) that the Chinese company Phytium is using chips from Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation (TSMC) in a supercomputer developing China's hypersonic glide vehicle.

March 9, 2021: KMT Chairman Johnny Chiang [announces](#) the party has submitted 528,000 signatures to the Central Election Commission to initiate a referendum opposing the government's decision to lift a ban on pork imports containing ractopamine. This would be well above the 289,667 required.

March 14, 2021: Secretary of State Blinken stresses the importance of Taiwan ties to Paraguay's president in a [phone call](#).

March 15, 2021: Taiwan's Minister of National Defense Chiu Kuo-cheng [tells reporters](#) that Taiwan has received approval from the US to acquire critical components for the submarines it is building.

March 17, 2021: China [announces](#) "22 Measures on Agriculture and Forestry," which it says would offer more "equitable treatment" to Taiwan enterprises operating there.

March 18, 2021: Taiwan's newly appointed Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) Minister Chiu Tai-san [calls](#) on mainland China to take an attitude of "constructive ambiguity" toward the 1992 Consensus as he announces rules to allow business travelers from China to visit amid the COVID-19 pandemic. China immediately [rejects](#) the idea.

March 24, 2021: Incoming commander of US Pacific Command Adm. John Aquilino [tells](#) Senate Armed Services Committee that China might attack Taiwan much sooner than most think. If China is allowed to take over Taiwan, it would be a severe blow to the credibility of the United States as a strong and trusted partner in the region.

March 25, 2021: Xi Jinping, during an inspection tour of Fujian province, [instructs](#) officials there "to be bold in exploring new paths for integrated cross-Strait development."

March 26, 2021: US and Taiwan [sign](#) MOU to establish a Coast Guard Working Group.

March 26, 2021: Twenty Chinese military aircraft [enter](#) Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ), in the largest incursion yet reported by the island's defense ministry.

March 27, 2021: Palau's President Surangel Whipps Jr visits Taiwan accompanied by US Ambassador to Palau John Hennessey-Niland, who is [reported](#) to be the first US ambassador to visit Taiwan in an official capacity since 1978. China's Foreign Ministry [cautions](#) against steps that might "damage Sino-US relations and the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait."

March 31, 2021: Office of the US Trade Representative issues its Trade Policy Agenda and 2020 Annual Report and [expresses](#) serious concerns about Taiwan's agricultural policies that are not based on science and create barriers to market access for US pork and beef products.

April 1, 2021: US industry group [reports](#) that all of the world's most advanced semiconductor manufacturing capacity—nodes below 10 nanometers—is located in South Korea (8%) and Taiwan (92%).

April 7, 2021: US Navy destroyer [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait, the fourth such passage under the Biden administration.

April 9, 2021: US Department of State [issues](#) new more permissive Taiwan Contact Guidelines.

April 12, 2021: Twenty-five PLA aircraft, including 18 fighters and 4 bombers, [enter](#) Taiwan's ADIZ, exceeding the previous record of 20 aircraft set on March 26.

April 14, 2021: President Biden [dispatches](#) to Taipei former Sen. Chris Dodd and former Deputy Secretaries of State Richard Armitage and James Steinberg to reaffirm US support.

April 14, 2021: Canada's Parliament [endorses](#) Halifax Security Forum's decision to award Tsai Ing-wen a prestigious leadership award after the Trudeau government threatened to pull funding from the organization.

April 16, 2021: A court in Beijing [sentences](#) 46 Taiwan nationals, who were deported from Spain in 2016, to up to 13 years in jail for their alleged involvement in telecom fraud.

April 16, 2021: President Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Suga [issue a joint statement](#) after their summit, including: “We underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues.

April 21, 2021: Strategic Competition Act of 2021 is [approved](#) by the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The bill that seeks to boost the United States' capability to counter China's aggression, including its belligerence against Taiwan.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

THE SOUND OF ONE HAND GIVING

AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

As in 2019–20, inter-Korean ties remained frozen, other than a rare lawsuit. Revelations that in 2018 Moon Jae-in’s government had pondered building the North a nuclear power plant caused a brief furor. Seoul’s propaganda balloon ban backfired, prompting widespread criticism—but no thanks from Pyongyang, which was also unimpressed by scaled-down US-ROK war games. North Korea tested its first ballistic missile in nearly a year, amid concerns of a new arms race; some analysts deemed the South culpable, too. Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong fired four verbal volleys, mostly insults. Another undetected defector highlighted failings in ROK border security. MOU Lee In-young was ubiquitous and loquacious, but scattergun in the causes he championed. Moon’s government remained reticent, or worse, regarding DPRK human rights abuses. With just a year left in office, and notwithstanding rare criticism of the North by ministers, Moon was expected to double down on engagement despite Pyongyang’s lack of reciprocity.

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Introduction

If the first four months of this year are any guide, and they probably are, 2021 is set to be another empty year in inter-Korean relations—like 2020 and 2019 before it, as chronicled exhaustively (and exhaustingly?) in the last half-dozen issues of *Comparative Connections*. Nonetheless, now as then a lot is happening and there is much to say. For while North Korea ignores or insults the South at every opportunity, President Moon Jae-in and his government mostly carry on as if it were still 2018, with a peace process on peninsula at some level still extant. None more so than the indefatigable minister of Unification (MOU), Lee In-young, they keep blowing on the embers of a fire which, in reality, went out more than two years ago.

The year began with both Korean leaders stating their positions plainly—just in time for the previous issue of this journal, which carried both statements. What was, and remains, a puzzle is that the Ministry of Unification (also MOU) somehow professed to find hope in Kim Jong Un's stance—even though he could not have been clearer in his rebuff, and the reasons for it. And thus it continued, as illustrated below. To adapt the Zen paradox, the inter-Korean situation currently might be likened to the sound of one hand giving—or trying to give, but actually outstretched alone in a void, eliciting not the slightest reciprocity.



Figure 1 A photo released by North Korean state media in February 2021 shows Kim Jong Un. Photo: KCNA via Reuters

Did Moon Plan a Nuclear Power Plant in the North?

For a week or so in late January, politics in Seoul was roiled by [allegations](#) that in 2018 the Moon government laid plans to build the North a

nuclear power plant. The truth is murky and remains contested, though the fuss quickly died down. This arose as a spinoff from another scandal concerning an ROK nuclear plant, shut ahead of schedule, whose economic viability was said to have been understated as Moon wished to phase out nuclear power. Ahead of an inquiry by the Board of Audit and Inspection (BAI), some officials of the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy (MOTIE) slipped into their building at night and deleted 530 computer files. But a local broadcaster obtained a list of them, which includes 17 apparently about the Northern plan. Dating from May 2018, between the first and second Moon-Kim summits that year, these were stored in a folder named *pohjois*—which means North in Finnish.

A “shocking act benefiting the enemy,” thundered the conservative main opposition, whose latest name—they changed it four times in as many years—is the People Power Party (PPP). Such criticism was “intolerable,” retorted Moon’s ruling Democrats. All this now looks like a storm in a cooling rod. On Feb. 1 MOTIE published some restored files, which show that the idea was indeed raised, including a comparison of three different sites. Yet it was noted—how could it not be?—that the “uncertainties are extremely high,” given North Korea’s nuclear weapons activities. So this was wholly hypothetical: just one among many kites being flown at that heady moment when it seemed that full-scale North-South cooperation might take off.

There was no secret plan. Then again, it is not known what exactly was in the USB memory stick of potential joint economic projects that Moon gave to Kim in 2018.

Contrasting Ministries; Chicken and Egg

Among the institutions of the ROK government, for two ministries the DPRK is central: MOU and the Ministry of National Defence (MND). Both published weighty White Papers during this period (only in Korean, so far). Their remits are obviously different, and arguably conflicting. MOU’s Work Plan for 2021, issued on Jan. 21 and available in [English](#), gives the flavor. Full of lofty ideas for cooperation, it entirely fails to address the awkward fact that Pyongyang is not interested—which means it is not so much a plan as wishful thinking.

Such daydreaming is not a luxury the military can afford. A dovish president like Moon may insist that North Korea is no longer formally tagged as an enemy. But he can hardly prevent MND researchers from tallying the DPRK's burgeoning arsenal and the threat it poses.

Or does that beg the question? Western analysis tends to assume DPRK original sin: North Korea threatens, so South Korea must defend itself. That may be true in a broad sense, but there is also a risk of chicken and egg—and things may look different from Pyongyang. The argument that in fact the causality is to some degree the other way round has been made twice recently. As Sangsoo Lee [put it](#): “South Korea’s significant improvements in its conventional force capabilities have driven North Korea to advance its strategic weapons and nuclear capability.” Ian Bowers and Henrik Hiim argued on similar lines, both in [brief](#) and at [length](#). Unsurprisingly, two senior ROK officers, Maj. Manseok Lee and Col. Dr. Hyeongpil Ham, weighed in to [rebut](#) that interpretation. They insist that, on the contrary, “South Korea’s conventional capabilities actually strengthen stability on the Korean Peninsula.”

Either way, two points deserve emphasis. First, there is a worrying risk of a new inter-Korean [arms race](#). Second, less noticed, Moon Jae-in’s talk and walk differ. The ludicrous canard that Moon is Pyongyang’s tool or dupe, loudly peddled on Seoul’s streets by ultra-rightists, is belied by soaring defense spending on his watch. His predecessor Park Geun-hye (president 2013–17) oversaw average yearly increases in the defense budget of 4.1%; under Moon that has risen to 7%. While seeking peace, Moon has by no means neglected deterrence.



Figure 2 North Korean leader Kim Jong Un speaking at the Eighth WPK Party Congress. Photo: AFP/The Straits Times

In Pyongyang they might put it differently. And they do. In his big speech to the Eighth WPK Party Congress in January, Kim Jong Un, in quite precise and moderate language, sought:

... an explanation for the chief executive [Moon]’s personal remarks that south Korea should accelerate its efforts for securing and developing latest military assets, that it would develop ballistic and cruise missiles with more precision and power and longer range than the existing ones, and that it had already developed ballistic missiles with the world’s heaviest warhead. [The south Korean authorities] should also provide a convincing explanation for the purpose and motive in their continued introduction of cutting-edge offensive equipment.

Double Standards?

On March 30, after the DPRK’s first missile test in nearly a year, Kim’s sister Kim Yo Jong took up this theme. She dug out some gushing comments by Moon when he watched a missile launch last July: “I felt really reassured to see the ultra-modern strategic weapons equipped with ... powerful destructive power.” Then she spoilt it by calling him a parrot. Sauce for the goose would have been a more appropriate avian metaphor. As she put it, sarcastically:

[So] the test-firing of ballistic missiles conducted by the Defence Science Institute of south Korea is for peace and dialogue in the Korean peninsula, but that conducted by the Academy of Defence Science of the DPRK is something undesirable that arouses serious concern among the people in the south and chills the atmosphere for dialogue.

She has a point. Sangsoo Kim looks on the bright side, reckoning that Pyongyang’s fear of Seoul’s military buildup might make it amenable to arms control talks. We shall see.

If North Korea has genuine concerns regarding the South’s missile development, by contrast its stale strictures against US–ROK joint exercises fail the John McEnroe test: they cannot be serious. In reality, since 2018 Pyongyang has gained a big win here. Thanks to Donald Trump and then COVID-19, the huge and arguably

threatening war games of yesteryear, *Team Spirit* and *Foal Eagle*, are no more. Yet the North shows no appreciation of this significant scaling down. This year's spring Combined Command Post Training (CCPT) exercise, held in March, was wholly desk-and computer-based, with no outdoor drills at all. Despite this, Kim Yo Jong – busy this year, with four separate comments in as many months—went into full attack mode, saying scale is not the issue: “we are not taken in by their nonsense coating mad dog with sheepskin.” But the KPA too has exercises, as all armies must. This maximalist demand for South Korea to stage no maneuvers whatsoever is tantamount to saying the North has no serious interest in dialogue—which we knew already.

Swimming to Freedom, Undetected

South Korea may boast cutting-edge missiles, but in more mundane security it has problems. For the third time in as many issues of this journal, a defector has demonstrated that crossing the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), while not for the faint-hearted, can be easier than it should be.



Figure 3 South Korean soldiers patrolling the demilitarized zone, where a North Korean gymnast was allegedly able to defect undetected in April. Photo: Ed Jones/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

We covered the two earlier incidents at the time. The first involved a redefector, from South to North (it does happen, though not often). A certain Kim, who was facing rape charges, cut fences, crawled through a culvert, and swam across the Han river to get home to Kaesong—which a paranoid Kim Jong Un promptly put into lockdown, for fear he had brought in the coronavirus (he hadn't). In 2017 Kim had reached Seoul by the very same route.

Then in November a North Korean presented himself to ROK troops unaware of his presence, heat sensors having failed. A pro gymnast, he had cleared two 10-foot barbed-wire fences.

The latest arrival, who showed up on the east coast in February, came by sea. Not in a boat, but swimming for six hours in diving suit and flippers. He too was undetected at first, though this time the fault was human rather than technical: military CCTV caught him 10 times, but the first eight went unnoticed. He had also crawled through a drain which the military did not even have a record of. The major-general in charge of eastern border security was dismissed.

In all three cases, ROK media waxed [indignant](#) at the security lapses. They have a point, yet there may also be an element of re-fighting the last war here. For sure the DPRK remains a potent threat, but its form has changed. Rather than tanks rolling South as in 1950, the main menace now is missiles. Still, if a defector can sneak in undetected, then so might armed infiltrators. But that too seems rather last-century: the last big cases, both involving submarines, were in [1996](#) and [1998](#). Alternative modes of entry exist: two agents [caught](#) in 2010, tasked with killing the high-level defector Hwang Jang-yop, had posed as defectors and flown in from Thailand. Nowadays, KPA saboteurs are likelier to sit safely at computers in the North, wreaking cyber-harm. But no doubt vigilance at the border remains essential.

Banning Balloons Backfires

One issue that bubbled away throughout the period was the Moon government's decision to ban the launching of propaganda balloons into North Korea across the DMZ. Passed into law in December and effective from March 30, this was attacked on free speech grounds. Critics included not only the activist groups affected, and their mostly conservative political allies in Seoul and Washington, but also more neutral observers such as Human Rights Watch.

Embarrassingly for Seoul, the UN Special Rapporteur for DPRK human rights, Tomas Ojea Quintana, voiced concern about the ban in his latest report issued on March 1, ahead of that month's UN Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva—where the ROK declined to sponsor the annual resolution criticizing Pyongyang. In an odd twist, *Yonhap*, the quasi-official ROK news agency, quoted MOU as denying that Quintana

specifically criticized the leaflet ban. But he most certainly did. Here is the paragraph in question (full links are in the Chronology):

32. The Special Rapporteur engaged with the Government of the Republic of Korea on its decision to conduct business inspections of civil society organizations and the revision of the Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act. The revision to the Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act prohibited the flying of balloons and leaflets, broadcasting by loudspeakers and installation of visual materials along the military demarcation line, punishing these with possible imprisonment to up to three years. The Special Rapporteur expressed concern that the revised law limits many activities of escapees and civil society organizations, and such limits may not comply with international human rights law, and recommended a review of the legislation.

Also notable was who did *not* comment. Pyongyang uttered not a word of acknowledgment, much less gratitude. Kim Jong Un did not deign to mention Moon's efforts in his Congress speech in January. By contrast his sister weighed in fiercely when, as was inevitable, the ban was defied equally inevitably by Park Sang-hak of Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK), the most militant—and [controversial](#)—balloon sender. Though media reports queried whether Park's latest leaflets, launched in late April, ever reached the North given wind conditions, Kim Yo Jong not only slammed this "intolerable provocation" but blamed "the south Korean authorities," who she said "winked at the reckless acts ... giving silent approval to the human scum's wild moves ..." She must know that is unfair, and will doubtless be unmoved that police swiftly raided Park's premises. With Pyongyang resolutely unimpressed by Seoul's efforts on the leafletting issue, one might ask whether such appeasement—and the backlash it caused—was wise or worthwhile. Even if Moon does not mull this, his successor as president a year hence surely will, at least if the right regains the Blue House, a prospect looking less remote since the PPP's sweeping [victories](#) in mayoral by-elections in Seoul and Busan on April 7.



Figure 4 Park Sang-hak, leader of Fighters for a Free North Korea holds a leaflet criticizing North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Photo: Yonhap

MOU Lee: Energy—but Efficacy?

Lee In-young, appointed minister of Unification last July, remained indefatigable. Few if any of his predecessors have been quite so energetic. As the chronology enumerates, barely a day passed without Lee offering some proposal or other. Yet enthusiasm does not equal efficacy: the quality of these ideas was variable. And at least twice his ministry had to intervene, to "clarify" his more controversial comments.

There is a broad spectrum here. No one could demur when Lee urged the North and South to cooperate in practical areas like forestry and public health, as they agreed in 2018. Equally uncontentious was his plea in February that they should reconvene and finish their joint Korean language dictionary, long in the works and 80% complete.

More questionable, also in February and not for the first time, was his backing for individual tourism to the North. As we have argued, this daft idea is a complete non-starter for a myriad reasons, not the least being that Kim Jong Un has explicitly dismissed it. Yet for Lee this is "the best way to break boundaries" and help restore "national homogeneity." Another time he endorsed the idea of joint cheering squads from the two Koreas sharing a train to the Beijing Olympics, quite inconceivable in current circumstances. More generally, as with his ministry's work plan discussed above, one has to ask what is the point and effect of constantly endorsing ideas which may be good in principle, but failing to note that they stand no chance of being implemented?

There is also a real risk of wishful thinking. In late April Lee was [unfazed](#) by Kim Yo Jong insulting his president: “Though they are using harsh rhetoric ... they are, in their own way, controlling the level of intensity ... to explore the possibility for talks.” And the North’s resumption of missile launches? This was not a “high-intensity provocation.” Voltaire’s Dr. Pangloss—all is for the best, in this best of all possible worlds—comes to mind.

Then we have human rights—or do we? Sadly, and shamefully, when liberal governments in Seoul seek to engage with Pyongyang, the DPRK’s human rights abuses get downplayed. While understanding the diplomatic delicacies involved, this results—as with the leafleting ban—in stances which hardly burnish the ROK’s image as a beacon of rights and democracy.

In February, four defectors filed a complaint against Lee In-young for criminal defamation, after he queried whether defector testimonies of abuses “reflect reality or are just a one-sided story.” His embarrassed ministry hastily clarified: “The Unification Ministry and its minister believe that the testimonies of defectors are valuable records that let our government and the international community know about the human rights situation in North Korea.”

This is not an isolated case. A law passed under Park Geun-hye in 2016 tasked MOU with creating a center to compile records on DPRK human rights. Since then 3,000 defectors have been interviewed, but no report has yet been published. Asked why, in April an MOU official echoed minister Lee’s skepticism, claiming they need more time, better data, and a way to check the “consistency (of testimonies) and verify their credibility.” That will not wash. A different arm of the ROK government, the Korean Institute for National Unification (KINU) – formerly under MOU but no longer – has no problem compiling and issuing a grim, meaty, lengthy annual White Paper on North Korean human rights, every year since 1996. The 2020 [edition](#) runs to 642 pages. What MOU lacks is not evidence, but will.

In another case of damage limitation, in a February interview with the *Financial Times* Lee seemed to suggest that international sanctions are to blame for North Korea’s humanitarian crisis. Again his ministry had to clarify that he did not mean this was the sole cause, only that

after five years we should review whether these tough measures are achieving their declared goal of denuclearization. Put like that, the proposition is not unreasonable. Even so, it is not a good look if the ministry keeps having to extricate the minister’s foot from his mouth.

On April 29, Lee called the first half of 2021 “a golden opportunity and the most optimal time for the South, the North and the US to move together toward the Korean Peninsula peace progress” (sic, as per *Yonhap*). With just a few weeks left, the gold is hardly shining bright. Energy and optimism are virtues, but peace on the peninsula will be a long haul requiring thought, strategy, and realism. Indiscriminate cheer-leading is not enough.



Figure 5 Unification Minister Lee In-young speaks during a meeting of the inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation council at the government complex in Seoul on Jan. 14, 2021. Photo: Yonhap

Pyongyang Sues in a Seoul Court

Perhaps the most unusual and interesting inter-Korean development in this period was in the judicial realm. On April 6 a Seoul court rejected a suit brought by two North Korean entities, and a South Korean acting for them, for compensation from four ROK firms regarding a zinc consignment worth 5.3 billion won (\$4.7 million) allegedly unpaid for. This dates back in 2010 when such commerce was possible, though the suit was only filed in 2019. This is the first time DPRK companies have sued in ROK courts, though there are precedents involving inheritance [claims](#) by private citizens. The defendants insisted they had paid, via a Chinese intermediary. The court ruled there was insufficient evidence of a contract. Even if the North had won, current sanctions would have prevented the funds from being transferred.

Is the Southern Worm Turning?

April saw two rare exceptions to South Korea's usual indulgence of the North. Introducing MOU's annual White Paper in April, Lee In-young struck an unusually robust note. "North Korea's destruction of the inter-Korean liaison office in June and the lethal shooting of a South Korean citizen at the west sea in September were intolerable incidents that shocked South Koreans hoping for peace." On the liaison office, Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong weighed in too. Pyongyang "must not only apologize ... but also promise to make sure something like this would never happen again." And they must pay for the damage: "Since it was national property, there must be compensation."

Is the worm turning? Have Moon and his government finally tired of turning the other cheek so Pyongyang can slap that one as well? Probably not. For Lee, we already noted the overall tenor of his interventions. As for Chung, he was talking in the relaxed, informal milieu of a journalists' club, letting his hair down, and perhaps his guard. Even so, he made excuses for the DPRK's inexcusable behavior. Despite deploring Kim Yo Jong's latest squib and earlier Northern insults as "senseless," "nasty," and "unbearable," he added: "But if you look closely, I think they also reflect [Pyongyang's] desperation ... We should keep in mind: If they really think they are strong, would they use these expressions?"

As I wrote [elsewhere](#): "Yes, they would! They did it all before to Moon's predecessors, only nastier, calling Park Geun-hye a [whore](#), or [cartooning](#) Lee Myung-bak as a rat being [stabbed](#) to death." We covered those vile episodes at the time. Pleading mitigation is misguided: this is just a nasty regime, being nasty. They switch it on and off, regardless of others' actions.

Prospects

Moon Jae-in seems unlikely to [change](#) his engagement approach, despite its failure to bear lasting fruit. Speaking of lasting, Moon himself is running out of time. The ROK electoral clock is relentless. A president gets only five years, with no second term, and Moon has had four of his. His successor is due to be elected next March 9 and take office on May 9, 2022.

What impact will this closing window have? It may well be one reason for Kim Jong Un's

disdain. As his father Kim Jong Il learnt the hard way over a decade ago, the risk in doing a deal with an ROK president about to leave office is that his successor may fail to honor it. In 2008 the incoming Lee Myung-bak largely ignored the joint economic cooperation projects agreed in 2007 by his predecessor Roh Moo-hyun. Kim Jong Un may feel it prudent to wait and see who comes next. Besides, sizing up the Biden administration is his priority right now.

But it could go the other way. After how Kim has treated Moon, no future ROK president will be so amenable. If Kim grasps that, the coming months may see some last-ditch outreach to Seoul, if only to try to drive a wedge between it and Washington. There are those in Moon's circle, not least MOU Lee, whose yearning for inter-Korean progress (or a simulacrum of it) burns deeply. Cooler heads will not jeopardize the US-ROK alliance, but if Kim is smart he might yet make mischief by playing on the dreams that some in Seoul still harbor.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA–SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2021

Jan. 1, 2021: Instead of Kim Jong Un’s customary substantial New Year address, DPRK media [carry](#) a very short hand-written letter from the leader. Kim offers greetings, thanks people for their trust in “difficult times,” and promises to “work hard to bring earlier the new era in which the ideals and desires of our people will come true.”

Jan. 1, 2021: Although North Korea cut all inter-Korean communication links in June, the United Nations Command (UNC) [confirms](#) that its direct telephone line at Panmunjom to the KPA remains operational. It delivered 86 messages in 2020, plus line checks twice daily.

Jan. 4, 2021: In his New Year address, South Korea’s Minister of Unification (MOU) Lee In-young [says](#) Seoul is expecting a “positive message of dialogue and cooperation” from Pyongyang in the near future. (As of May he is still waiting.)

Jan. 4, 2021: Osaka-based media NGO *Asiapress* [publishes](#) what it claims is a secret document from September in which Kim Jong Un launches a campaign to extirpate ROK linguistic usages, as part of a “policy for inciting hatred among the domestic population towards South Korea.” *Asiapress* says it has more DPRK documents in this vein.

Jan. 5, 2021: Eighth Congress of North Korea’s ruling Workers’ Party (WPK) opens in Pyongyang, unannounced; this is not reported until Jan. 6. Kim Jong Un makes an opening [speech](#). He also [commences](#) a marathon report, which will last nine hours and take two days. Few details are initially provided.

Jan. 6, 2021: Congress continues, and so [does](#) Kim Jong Un’s report.

Jan. 7, 2021: Congress continues. Kim Jong Un finally [concludes](#) his report.

Jan. 8, 2021: *Reuters* [reports](#) that ROK prosecutors have indicted Kim Ryen Hi for violating the National Security Act (NSA). Kim, a North Korean woman aged 51 who claims she was tricked into defecting, has kept trying to be sent back to the DPRK, including turning herself in as a spy. Her lawyer comments: “It would invite international ridicule if you charge someone who is only fighting to go back home with threatening national security for sharing her daughter’s letters on Facebook.”

Jan. 9, 2021: *Rodong Sinmun*, the WPK daily, [publishes](#) a 13,500 word summary (not the full text) of Kim’s nine hour speech to the Eighth Congress. This is hardline on all fronts, including South Korea. (See the previous [issue](#) of *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp 89–104, for the full text [Appendix 1] and analysis of Kim’s comments on the South.)

Jan. 9, 2021: Reacting—if hardly responding—to Kim Jong Un’s strictures, the Unification Ministry (MOU) [reiterates](#) the ROK’s commitment to implementing inter-Korean agreements.

Jan. 11, 2021: In his New Year address, ROK President Moon Jae-in [renews](#) his call for the two Koreas to work together: “Our determination to meet at any time and any place and talk even in a contact-free manner remains unchanged. The two Koreas should jointly fulfill all the agreements made together to date.”

Jan. 13, 2021: DPRK media [publish](#) a statement by Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong, attacking speculation in Seoul about the North holding a military parade. She concludes: “The southerners are a truly weird group hard to understand. They are the idiot and top the world’s list in misbehavior as they are only keen on things provoking world laughter.”

Jan. 13, 2021: Despite harsh words from both brother and sister Kims, *Yonhap*, the quasi-official ROK news agency, [quotes](#) an upbeat assessment of the prospects for inter-Korean relations by an unnamed “top official” of MOU: “There were some strong words but their remarks seemed toned-down ... The North appears to be leaving many possibilities open.”

Jan. 14, 2021: With similar optimism, MOU’s analysis report also [contrives](#) to read the WPK Congress as signaling room for improvement in inter-Korean relations.

Jan. 18, 2021: Insisting that ROK-US military exercises “are regular ... and defensive in nature,” President Moon [says](#) that if Pyongyang has concerns, they can be discussed at the joint military committee. The two Koreas agreed to create this in 2018, but it has never met.

Jan. 19, 2021: ROK Cabinet [approves](#) various revisions to the South-North Exchange and Cooperation Act. These include compensation for those affected if an inter-Korean project is suspended: seen as a belated response to the South’s abrupt closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) in 2016. Also, if MOU rejects an application to visit North Korea, it must henceforth state its reasons. The revision bill will go to the National Assembly.

Jan. 19, 2021: South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense (MND) [reiterates](#) its readiness to discuss any issues with the North. Spokesperson Boo Seung-chan denies that 2018’s accord has been all but nullified: “Since the pact was signed, the two Koreas have not taken hostile acts against each other at the agreed-upon buffer zones, and the military situation in border areas has been managed in a stable manner.”

Jan. 20, 2021: President Moon [nominates](#) Chung Eui-yong as foreign minister, replacing Kang Kyung-wha, who has held the post—the first woman to do so—throughout Moon’s term. No reason is given. In December, Kang incurred Kim Yo Jong’s wrath for doubting North Korea’s claim to be free of COVID-19. As director of the National Security Office in the Blue House during 2017-20, Chung played a key role as an emissary and go-between to Pyongyang and Washington.

Jan. 20, 2021: MOU [reveals](#) a sharp fall in the number of DPRK defectors reaching the ROK. 2020’s total was just 229, down from 1,047 in 2019 and 1,137 in 2018. Most (135) arrived in the first quarter, reflecting the impact of the DPRK’s border closure against the coronavirus. The cumulative total of former North Koreans in the South is a relatively modest 33,752.

Jan. 21, 2021: MOU [publishes](#) its Work Plan for 2021. Its professed goals are “to make progress toward denuclearization and establishing a peace regime by pursuing the peace process [...]; form a community of life and safety on the Korean Peninsula for coexistence and peace; promote inter-Korean exchange and cooperation; transform the DMZ into an international peace zone and realize greater peace in border regions; and institutionalize inter-Korean relations and lay the foundation for implementing sustainable policy.”

Jan. 25, 2021: Sources in Seoul [reveal](#) that Ryu Hyun-woo (a variant Romanization is Ryu Hyon U), formerly the acting DPRK ambassador to Kuwait, defected in September 2019 and has since been living in South Korea. (See also Feb. 1 below.)

Jan. 25, 2021: MOU Lee [expresses](#) optimism for a “wise and flexible” solution to the issue of joint drills with the US.

Jan. 27, 2021: Park Sang-hak, a prominent DPRK defector who runs the activist group Fighters for a Free North Korea, [flies](#) to Washington to attend a proposed Congressional hearing on the ROK’s newly enacted ban on sending propaganda leaflets into the North.

Jan. 28, 2021: The ROK Committee for the June 15 Joint Declaration, formed to support the first inter-Korean peace agreement (signed on that date in 2000), [reports](#) receiving “warm greetings of solidarity” from its DPRK counterpart. This is the first such message from the North in over a year. How the message was transmitted was not revealed.

Jan. 31, 2021: The People Power Party (PPP), South Korea’s conservative main opposition party, [demands](#) a probe into allegations that Moon Jae-in’s government had plans to offer to build a nuclear power plant in and for North Korea. The government vigorously denies this.

Feb. 1, 2021: MOU Lee [weighs in](#): “I will say this clearly that we, as the unification ministry, have never discussed the issue of building nuclear plants in North Korea under any circumstances.” But the same day the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy (MOTIE) publishes [documents](#) which show that this idea was indeed mooted, if only hypothetically.

Feb. 1, 2021: In his first interview since being ousted, former DPRK diplomat Ryu tells [CNN](#) (among much else) that Kim Jong Un will not give up nuclear weapons, and calls for pressure over human rights issues. He says his main motive was a better future for his teenage daughter. The family defected via the ROK embassy in Kuwait.

Feb. 2, 2021: ROK MND [publishes](#) its biennial defense [White Paper](#) (so far only in Korean). Among much else, the Korean People’s Army (KPA) Strategic Force Command now has 13 missile brigades, up from nine in 2018. The KPA has also upgraded its special forces. And yet, as in 2018, the DPRK is no longer termed an enemy as it always used to be. But this year, for the first time, Japan is no longer called a partner.

Feb. 4, 2021: After media reports that the conservative main opposition PPP will push for the Inter-Korean Co-operation Fund to be tapped to help those affected by COVID-19, MOU [says](#) this is inappropriate “from a perspective of the principle of national finance.” The fund has a budget of 1.25 trillion won this year, but is little used given the freeze between the two Koreas.

Feb. 5, 2021: At his parliamentary confirmation hearing, FM nominee Chung [says](#) US-ROK drills should be held “at a proper level”—but planning them must also consider inter-Korean ties and COVID-19. He takes up his post on Feb. 9.

Feb. 16, 2021: The National Intelligence Service (NIS) [tells](#) ROK lawmakers that DPRK hackers tried to steal data on coronavirus vaccines and treatment technologies from Pfizer as well as [South Korean](#) pharmaceutical firms. No date or further details are given.

Feb. 16, 2021: ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [say](#) a North Korean defector in his 20s came South early today “via the eastern border.” Detected on CCTV at 4.20 am, he was caught three hours later near Goseong. (See also Feb.17 and 23, and March 4, below.)

Feb. 17, 2021: JCS [clarifies](#) that yesterday’s defector arrived by sea, swimming for six hours in a diving suit and flippers. As with a similar [case](#) in November, this provokes [concern](#) about border security and military [vigilance](#). Defense Minister Suh Wook apologises for the lapses (see also Feb. 23).

Feb. 18, 2021: MOU Lee [claims](#) that North Korea faces a food shortage of over 1.2 million tons this year: a chronic million ton shortfall, and the rest from 2020’s typhoon damage. Other estimates are more [optimistic](#), or [cautious](#).

Feb. 18, 2021: Ex-Unification Minister Jeong Se-hyun [suggests](#) that foreign firms be included when seeking to reopen the Kaesong Industrial Complex. This would reassure North Korea, and make both sides hesitate before pulling out. He adds: “We have to come up with ideas that are appealing to North Korea. We need to explore ways to avoid UN sanctions.”

Feb. 20, 2021: *Yonhap* [reports](#) that the NGO Human Rights Watch has sent a formal opinion to MOU, criticizing the legal amendment to ban sending leaflets into North Korea as violating freedom of expression.

Feb. 21, 2021: Four DPRK defectors [say](#) they will sue MOU Lee for defamation after he is quoted as querying whether defector testimonies on human rights abuses “reflect reality or are just a one-sided story.” They duly [file](#) a complaint of criminal defamation, but the case is deemed unlikely to proceed.

Feb. 22, 2021: MOUA hastily [clarifies](#): “The Unification Ministry and its minister believe that the testimonies of defectors are valuable records that let our government and the international community know about the human rights situations in North Korea.”

Feb. 22, 2021: MOU Lee [calls](#) for work to resume soon on an inter-Korean [dictionary](#). The “Gyeoreomal-keunsajeon” ([겨러 말큰 사전](#)) project began in 2005, was suspended in 2010, and resumed in 2014—only to halt again in 2016. At 307,000 words and after 25 meetings, the work is said to be [81%](#) complete. (A later [report](#) suggests that ROK scholars may soon try to send a draft to their DPRK colleagues.)

Feb. 23, 2021: Speaking at a seminar on inter-Korean cooperation in public health—not, alas, an inter-Korean seminar on cooperation in public health—MOU Lee [renews](#) his call to build a joint response system with North Korea against infectious diseases. The two Koreas [agreed](#) to do this in [2018](#), but like much else it was never implemented.

Feb. 23, 2021: Embarrassed JCS now [admits](#) that last week’s defector was caught 10 times on military CCTV. The first eight went unnoticed, despite alarm bells ringing (literally).

Feb. 25, 2021: MOU Lee [says](#) the ROK will push for individual tourism to the DPRK once the pandemic ends, as this is “the best way to break boundaries” and help restore “national homogeneity.”

March 1, 2021: In his latest wide-ranging report, issued ahead of the UN Human Rights Council meeting (see March 23), UN Special Rapporteur on DPRK human rights Tomas Ojea Quintana [voices](#) concern that the ROK’s upcoming ban on sending leaflets into the DPRK “limits many activities of escapees and civil society organizations, and such limits may not comply with international human rights law.” He recommends a review of the new legislation. (See also March 9, 11 and 30 below.)

March 3, 2021: Following publication of an [interview](#) with MOU Lee in the *Financial Times* on Feb. 26, his spokesperson [clarifies](#) that Lee did not mean to imply that global sanctions are the sole cause of North Korea’s humanitarian crisis; only that after five years it is time to review whether this is achieving the declared goal of denuclearization.

March 4, 2021: Maj. Gen. Pyo Chang-soo of the ROKA’s 22nd Infantry Division, which guards the eastern land and sea border, is [dismissed](#) over last month’s defector incident. Four other senior officers will also face disciplinary hearings. (See Feb. 16, 17 and 23 above.)

March 8, 2021: The ROK and US [begin](#) regular spring military exercise. Scaled back due to COVID-19, which saw last year’s maneuvers cancelled, the Combined Command Post Training (CCPT) involves computer simulations—but no outdoor drills, as with all major joint exercises since 2019. MOU [urges](#) North Korea to “show a wise and flexible approach” about this. Pyongyang makes no immediate response (but see March 16 below).

March 9, 2021: MOU [announces](#) finalized guidelines, ahead of a ban on sending leaflets into North Korea. The ministry clarifies that this only covers items sent from the South; it does not apply to anything dispatched to the DPRK from third countries, as activist groups had feared.

March 11, 2021: Unusually, MOU Lee [accompanies](#) DM Suh to the B-1 bunker, somewhere under Seoul, which would be a command center in case of war with North Korea. Their visit is “to encourage soldiers” during ongoing CCPT maneuvers.

March 11, 2021: A propos the imminent leafleting ban, MOU [vows](#) the “utmost effort” to coordinate with the international community on DPRK human rights issues. As reported by *Yonhap*, the ministry denies that critical comments by the UN Special Rapporteur relate specifically to the new ban. But they do: his [text](#) is explicit and clear on this point (section 32; see also March 1).

March 15, 2021: Four lawmakers of the conservative opposition PPP, including former DPRK diplomat Thae Yong-ho, [meet](#) MOU Lee at his ministry to protest delays in implementing the North Korean Human Rights Act passed in 2016. Thae says “the government must stop walking on eggshells not to upset the North Korean regime.”

March 16, 2021: In a poetically titled but otherwise unlyrical statement, “It Will Be Hard to See Again Spring Days Three Years Ago,” Kim Yo Jong [blasts](#) US-ROK military exercises. Unimpressed by their scaling down (“we are not taken in by their nonsense coating mad dog with sheepskin”), she threatens that the North may dissolve its organizations dealing with the South—or even abrogate the inter-Korean military accord. For good measure, she also warns the Biden administration to “refrain from causing a stink at its first step.”

March 16, 2021: A propos Kim Yo Jong’s threats, ROK MND [reiterates](#) that “the Korea-US combined exercise is a command post exercise ...conducted on a regular basis and ... defensive in nature.” MND urges Pyongyang to be flexible, and to fully implement—rather than scrap—inter-Korean military accords.

March 18, 2021: Joint CCPT US-ROK maneuvers [conclude](#), having gone “without a hitch” according to an unnamed military source. The two allies’ defense ministers are quoted as concurring (US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin is in Seoul for ‘2+2’ talks).

March 23, 2021: MOU Lee [reiterates](#) that South Korea stands ready to provide a “sizable” amount of food and fertilizer aid to the North. The same day, his ministry [says](#) it is reviewing how best to send such aid—which Pyongyang continues to reject.

March 23, 2021: An anonymous spokesperson [says](#) the ROK says it will not join the US, Japan, and EU member states in co-sponsoring this year’s [resolution](#)—the 19th in successive years—on DPRK human rights abuses at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, but will join the document’s adoption by consensus, the third year the Moon administration has taken that stance. The ROK used to be a co-sponsor.

March 25, 2021: In its first missile test in a year, North Korea [fires](#) two initially unidentified projectiles into the East Sea. The ROK National Security Council (NSC) [holds](#) an emergency meeting and expresses “deep concern.”

March 26, 2021: DPRK media [confirm](#) yesterday’s successful test of two “new-type tactical guided [missiles](#),” with “irregular orbit features of low-altitude gliding leap type flight mode.” Using solid fuel and able to carry a 2.5-ton warhead, they flew 600 kilometers (Seoul had estimated 450; see also April 29 below). The test was supervised by [Ri Pyong Chol](#), one of Kim Jong Un’s [closest](#) aides.

March 29, 2021: MOU Lee, evidently unfazed by rockets, [calls](#) on Pyongyang to be “flexible” and accept Seoul’s offers of humanitarian cooperation. He says this at a seminar discussing the idea, far-fetched given current relations, of running joint trains to send cheering squads from both Koreas to the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.

March 30, 2021: In her second diatribe in as many weeks, Kim Yo Jong [calls](#) Moon “a parrot raised by America,” among other barbs. She accuses him of double standards, in deploring North Korea’s missile tests while praising the South’s. The Blue House [describes](#) her comments as “regrettable.”

March 30, 2021: Controversial amendment to the ROK’s Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act banning sending leaflets into the DPRK, passed in December, [comes](#) into effect. Violators face potential fines of 30 million won (\$27,400) or up to three years in jail.

April 1, 2021: MOU [says](#) that, amid signs that easing of DPRK-China border restrictions is growing likelier, it is considering letting South Korean NGOs resume aid to the North. This follows several [supportive statements](#) from Minister Lee.

April 5, 2021: MOU [announces](#) its third quinquennial [survey](#) of separated families. It will poll the 48,000 reunion applicants on its books to see if they are still alive and keen. It also plans to build 6–7 further video reunion facilities (13 exist), even though North Korea shows no responsiveness. The last reunions were held in 2018, after a three-year hiatus.

April 6, 2021: In a rare case of DPRK plaintiffs suing under ROK jurisdiction, Seoul Central District Court [rejects](#) a claim for damages brought by two North Korean entities—and a South Korean acting for them—against four Southern companies, regarding zinc worth 5.3 billion won (\$4.7 million) allegedly not paid for in 2010.

April 7, 2021: South Korea [vows](#) to keep trying with North Korea, despite the latter’s decision to pull out of the Tokyo Olympics, the first summer games it will miss since Seoul in 1988. The ROK had hoped, somehow, to use the Games to kickstart the peace process.

April 12, 2021: Former Unification Minister Jeong Se-hyun, executive vice-chair of the presidential National Unification Advisory Council and a prominent advocate of engagement with Pyongyang, [criticizes](#) an upcoming hearing by a bipartisan US Congressional caucus on the ROK’s anti-leaflet law as “interference in internal affairs” with “impure intentions.”

April 14, 2021: MOU [reports](#) that the number of Northern defectors reaching South Korea in the first quarter, having already fallen markedly in 2020 to 135, dropped further this year by 77% to just 31. The DPRK’s anti-coronavirus border closure is the main factor.

April 14, 2021: MOU [says](#) that via “various channels” it continues to seek North Korea’s participation in a regional forum on public health, proposed by President Moon, launched in December. Other participants include China, Japan, Mongolia, and the US.

April 19, 2021: MOU [says](#) it seeks to revise the Inter-Korean Exchange and Cooperation Act to require advance approval for South Koreans exchanging digital files of films or books with North Koreans. Currently, contacts with the North can be reported after they happen. It denies media reports that the aim is to restrict internet radio broadcasting into the DPRK.

April 21, 2021: In a tougher tone than usual from the current ROK government, Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [demands compensation](#) for last June’s blowing up of the inter-Korean joint liaison office. North Korea “must not only apologize ... but also promise to make sure something like this would never happen again.”

April 21, 2021: MOU [says](#) it is considering a system to pre-approve projects which local governments seek to pursue with North Korea. Currently they must first sign an agreement with Pyongyang. It is also mulling a budget for this within the Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund. (This all seems hypothetical in current circumstances.)

April 21, 2021: *With the Century*, the 8-volume memoirs of North Korea’s founding leader Kim Il Sung issued in the early 1990s, [goes](#) on sale in South Korea for the first time. These “memoirs” mostly cover, and greatly embroider, Kim’s exploits as an anti-Japanese partisan.

April 22, 2021: MOU [says](#) the local publisher of Kim Il Sung’s memoirs did not consult or seek permission in advance. It will look into this, taking action if necessary. Another firm that tried to bring out these memoirs in the ROK in the 1990s was investigated under the National Security Act (NSA).

April 25, 2021: Kyobo, South Korea’s largest bookstore chain, [pulls](#) Kim Il Sung’s memoirs from sale. It says this is “to protect customers” from potentially being charged under the National Security Act (NSA). Other ROK sellers online continue to offer the books.

April 26, 2021: Assistant Minister Kim Chang-hyun [shows](#) reporters a new videoconference room at MOU, specifically for talks with North Korea. It took two months to build and cost 400 million won (\$360,000). Kim says the North has the necessary equipment too: “there is no problem at all in connecting the two Koreas.” (No technical problem, anyway.)

April 26, 2021: Ahead of the third anniversary of the first [summit](#) between President Moon and Kim Jong Un at Panmunjom, MOU spokesperson Lee Jong-joo [reiterates](#) South Korea’s “firm determination” to implement inter-Korean accords: “It is necessary to restore all levels of dialogue between the South and the North at an early date, including summit talks.” The anniversary is celebrated unilaterally, with various low-key NGO-led events.

April 26, 2021: At a tree-planting ceremony, MOU Lee [calls](#) for the two Koreas to cooperate on forestry issues, to reduce carbon omissions and mitigate the risk of landslides. In 2018 the two sides agreed to work together on such issues, but nothing concrete has ensued.

April 27, 2021: On the third anniversary of the Panmunjom Summit, MOU Lee [says](#): “We emphasize again that we are willing to talk with the North anytime, anywhere and on any issues regardless of the format ... We hope North Korea will come out for talks at an early date in respect for the spirit of the Panmunjom Declaration.” In Pyongyang, by contrast, the anniversary goes wholly unmentioned, as in 2020.

April 28, 2021: MOU [issues](#) its annual Unification [White Paper](#). This includes data on inter-Korean exchanges. Though dismayed that Pyongyang will not talk, it notes that tensions have been contained. In his preface MOU Lee writes, with rare sharpness, that “North Korea’s destruction of the inter-Korean liaison office in June and the lethal shooting of a South Korean citizen at the west sea in September were intolerable incidents that shocked South Koreans hoping for peace.” In 2020 Seoul spent a mere 3.6% of the Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund’s billion-dollar budget, down from 6.7% in 2019.

April 28, 2021: MOU [tallies](#) last year’s inter-Korean exchanges, such as they were. In 2020 613 South Koreans visited the North, mostly ROK staffers at the inter-Korean liaison office; down from 9,835 in 2019 and 6,689 in 2018. No North Koreans (defectors aside) came South, compared to 809 in 2018. Cross-border trade transactions, which numbered 699 in 2018 and 434 in 2019, fell to just 45: mostly supplies for the liaison office, and coronavirus-related aid – though the DPRK claims to have no cases of COVID-19— from ROK NGOs.

April 28, 2021: Asked why MOU’s center for North Korean human rights records, set up in 2016 under a law passed that year, has yet to publish a report despite interviewing over 3,000 DPRK defectors to date, an unnamed official [says](#) they need more time, more data, and a way to check the “consistency (of testimonies) and verify their credibility.”

April 29, 2021: MOU Lee [opines](#) that the first half of 2021—only two months left—“will be a golden opportunity and the most optimal time for the South, the North and the US to move together toward the Korean Peninsula peace progress.” He adds that he has had his first COVID-19 vaccination, so as to be in a position to visit Washington. (The ROK has been relatively slow in rolling out vaccinations.)

April 29, 2021: A day after DM Suh says the DPRK’s missiles test-fired on March 25 flew 600 kilometers, South Korea’s JCS [explain](#) why they initially underestimated this at 450 km. The missile performed a pull-up maneuver, and was launched eastward where the Earth’s curvature creates blindspots for ROK radar. But not to worry: “If (missiles) fly in our direction, we can detect them all.”

April 30, 2021: Park Sang-hak, leader of Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK), [claims](#) that during April 25-29 his group flew 10 balloons carrying some 500,000 leaflets, 500 booklets and 5,000 \$1 bills into the North from border areas in Gyeonggi and Gangwon provinces, despite such acts being illegal in the ROK since March 30.

May 2, 2021: Kim Yo Jong issues a brief but terse [statement](#) condemning the latest leaflet launch. Accusing Seoul of “winking” at the leafleteers, she warns, “responsibility for the consequences thereof will entirely rest with the south Korean authorities who stopped short of holding proper control of the dirty human scum.”

May 3, 2021: ROK Police Commissioner-General Kim Chang-yong [orders](#) a “swift and thorough investigation” to “strictly handle the sending of anti-North Korea leaflets.”

May 3, 2021: DPRK website *Uriminzokkiri* [criticizes](#) brouhaha in Seoul over publication of Kim Il Sung’s memoirs: ““It is dumbfounded [sic] to see such impure forces’ reckless act to make a fuss as if a huge disaster happened and try to block their publication and distribution in a wicked way.”

May 3, 2021: ROK Korea Football Association (KFA) says its DPRK counterpart has informed the Asian Football Confederation that North Korea will not take part in the much-delayed second round of soccer World Cup qualifiers (Group H) which South Korea will host in June. The North reportedly cited fears of COVID-19. In the first round, [held](#) in Pyongyang in October 2019, the two Koreas’ ill-tempered match ended in a 0-0 draw.

May 4, 2021: *Chosun Ilbo*, a leading conservative Seoul daily, [claims](#) that most of the half a million propaganda flyers launched toward North Korea by Park Sang-hak on April 30 actually landed in South Korea, due to wind conditions.

May 4, 2021: Three DPRK media outlets for external audiences—*DPRK Today*, *Tongil Voice* and *Uriminzokkiri*—[attack](#) the April 21 [dismissal](#) by a Seoul court, on grounds of sovereign immunity, of a suit brought by former “comfort women” (victims of wartime sexual slavery) against the Japanese government.

May 6, 2021: In an article on the brouhaha over publishing Kim Il Sung’s memoirs in South Korea, *The Korea Times*’ Nam Hyun-woo [notes](#) that, although a rightwing NGO is seeking an injunction to ban the work, the conservative main opposition party is more relaxed. PPP Deputy Spokesperson Park Ki-nyeong comments, “We should have faith in South Korea’s public awareness and superior system and leave this to the public judgment ... No one in this country will sympathize with those who hail Kim Il-sung.”

May 6, 2021: The Seoul Metropolitan Police [raid](#) Park San-Hak and FFNK’s offices.

PACIFIC FORUM

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

CHINA- KOREA RELATIONS

CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS POISED FOR RECOVERY DESPITE INTENSIFIED CONFLICT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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China's relations with North and South Korea gained momentum in the first four months of 2021. China-North Korea relations were propelled by an exchange of messages between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Chinese President Xi Jinping around North Korea's successful convening of the Worker's Party of Korea's (WPK) Eighth Party Congress, the appointment of former North Korean Trade Minister Ri Ryong Nam as North Korea's new ambassador to China, and another round of messages in March that emphasized the importance of close relations. In a Jan. 21 Cabinet meeting, South Korean President Moon Jae-in pledged to develop relations with China to new heights, and in a Jan. 26 telephone call with Moon, Xi expressed support for Korean denuclearization and joint development of China-South Korea relations. China and South Korea held consultations on maritime enforcement cooperation, defense lines of communication, health security, and free trade negotiations.

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On April 3 Chinese and South Korean Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Chung Eui-young held consultations in Xiamen, China, which coincided with a trilateral meeting of Japanese, South Korean, and US national security advisors in Annapolis, Maryland. South Korea's cautious handling of questions about whether it will join the Quad and of official statements toward China during a 2+2 meeting of South Korean and US foreign and defense ministers in March drew praise from Chinese analysts. Hyundai Motors announced plans to launch electric vehicle sales and build fuel cells in China, while Samsung was called to a White House meeting to talk about semiconductor supplies as part of discussions on supply chain resiliency that could limit the availability of advanced semiconductors to the Chinese market. Despite the official signaling of improvements in relations between China and South Korea, Chinese and South Korean public conflicts intensified on social media, with a series of spats over cultural appropriation, online attacks from both sides, and Korean public objections to Chinese ad placement in Korean TV dramas.

Kim Jong Un's New Bestie: Xi Jinping

The January 2021 WPK Eighth Party Congress provided an [effusive evaluation](#) of North Korea's relations with China, claiming the opening of a "new chapter" in the relationship with socialism at its core. The WPK asserted that the two nations "strengthened strategic communication, promoted mutual understanding and deepened comradesly trust" through five summit meetings during 2018 and 2019. Xi congratulated Kim on his election as party general secretary and exchanged messages with Kim on the occasion of the Eighth Party Congress, with the *Rodong Sinmun* [reporting](#) Xi's comment that "it is a steadfast policy of the Chinese Party and government to successfully protect, consolidate, and develop China-DPRK relations" and the WPK Eighth Congress [emphasizing](#) the "development of long-standing special relations" between both the parties and their leaders. In a March 23 exchange of messages between Kim and Xi, Kim [reported](#) on the results of the Eighth Party Congress and Xi [reaffirmed](#) his intent to strengthen cooperation and his belief that "friendly relations between the two countries would grow stronger," noting the 100th founding anniversary of the Communist Party of China and the 60th anniversary of the Sino-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation,

and Mutual Assistance. Chinese and North Korean Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Ri Son Gwon [exchanged greetings](#) on the occasion of the Lunar New Year. South Korea's National Security Advisor Suh Hoon [reportedly](#) told US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in March that preparations are underway for a sixth Kim-Xi summit meeting as a "precursor" to renewed North Korean diplomatic engagement with the United States.



Figure 1 North Korean leader Kim Jong Un pictured at the Worker's Party of Korea's (WPK) Eighth Party Congress in Pyongyang. Photo: KCNA/Kyodo

Hints of Recovery in China-North Korea Trade Relations

In a clearly-telegraphed hint regarding areas of the bilateral relationship that North Korea hopes will be strengthened, North Korea [appointed](#) former trade minister Ri Ryong Nam as its new envoy to China, replacing long-time China hand Ji Jae Ryong. Ri's selection as an envoy to Beijing over a Foreign Ministry representative with extensive China experience suggests that North Korea hopes to revive its trade relationship with China following the debilitating effects of the COVID-19 quarantine on official China-North Korea trade in 2020. China's [appointment](#) of Liu Xiaoming as its special representative for the Korean Peninsula sends a more complicated message about China's expectations for diplomacy with and about North Korea. Known primarily as an America hand prior to his appointment as ambassador to Pyongyang from 2006-2010, Liu [reportedly](#) discouraged Chinese investment in North Korea at that time. It remains to be seen whether Liu will devote more time to public messaging regarding US policy toward North Korea or diplomatic coordination in support of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

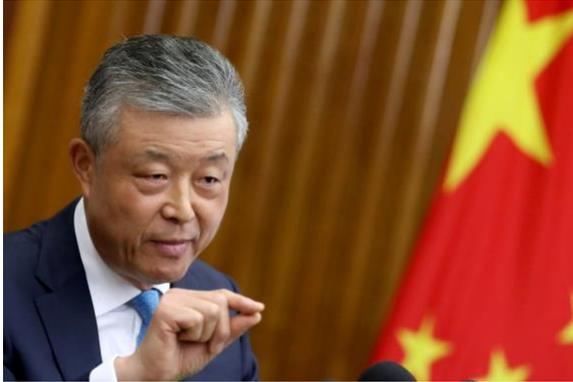


Figure 2 Liu Xiaoming, China's newly appointed special representative on Korean peninsula affairs. Photo: Reuters

The unprecedented closure of trade flows from China to North Korea in 2020 due to North Korean quarantine measures followed years of sanctions on official North Korean exports to China and brought the official bilateral trade relationship to a virtual halt. [Chinese exports to North Korea](#) in January and February totaled around \$33,000, but began to recover with \$12.98 million in trade in March, according to Chinese customs data. While evidence has accumulated that China has allowed North Korea to continue exports of [coal](#) and [sand](#) to China alongside [illicit ship-to-ship petroleum transfers](#) in Chinese waters, mysteries regarding these exchanges persist—what North Korea have brought back to China, how financial arrangements connected to the shipments have been handled, and whether the Chinese government has secretly supplied unrecorded assistance to the North Korean leadership during the North Korean border closure in response to COVID-19. By late April, [reports began to surface](#) that the extended border closure might ease with the resumption of regular cargo train service between the two countries, despite North Korea's continued wait for shipments of vaccines from COVAX, the World Health Organization's multilateral vaccine distribution mechanism. But the easing of border restrictions might be more effective in saving lives than continued enforcement of the quarantine, given reports of North Korean food shortages and Kim Jong Un's own [references](#) to another possible "Arduous March," similar to the period North Korea experienced during the famine of the 1990s.

Moon Jae-in's Efforts to Recharge China-South Korea Relations

North Korean reports from the Kim-Xi exchanges did not mention China's support for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, but Xi [expressed](#) his "active support for Seoul's initiative to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula" in line with the common interests of both countries in a Jan. 26 telephone conversation with Moon. That conversation came days after Moon's [pledge](#) at a Cabinet meeting to "establish a foundation upon which bilateral [China-South Korea] relations will be elevated to a new height." During the telephone talks held days prior to Moon's first call with US President Joe Biden, Moon and Xi pledged cooperation on pandemic response, regional and bilateral economic coordination, and climate change, and an "early visit" to South Korea once favorable conditions are created. The Moon administration is still anticipating the chance to host Xi following a year's delay due to the pandemic.

Following the Moon-Xi conversation, Chinese and South Korean foreign ministers Wang Yi and Chung Eui-young spoke on the telephone on Feb. 16 and held an in-person meeting in Xiamen, China on April 3. The Chung-Wang meeting coincided with a meeting among the Japanese, South Korean, and US national security advisors in Annapolis, Maryland and [drew praise](#) from the Beijing-based *Global Times* as "a true reflection of South Korea's attitude of not choosing between China and the US."

"In this way," the paper went on, "it is unrealistic for the US to transform its post-Cold War alliance system directly into an anti-China alliance." Prior to his meeting with Wang, Chung further described South Korea's strategy as seeking to "harmoniously" develop relations with China based on a firm US-South Korea alliance and has pledged to promote cooperation between the United States and China, stating that "The US and China are by no means a subject of choice."

The foreign ministers [agreed](#) in their February phone conversation to promote cultural exchanges on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of normalization of relations in 2022 and promote a stronger China-South Korea strategic cooperative partnership. In Xiamen, Wang [praised](#) anti-pandemic cooperation with South Korea to sustain personnel exchanges and

economic cooperation. Wang [pledged](#) China's commitment to close communication and strategic dialogue with South Korea, including to accelerate "synergizing of development strategies and third-party market cooperation, and to complete the second-phase negotiation on the China-ROK free trade agreement at an early date." China proposed bilateral cooperation on 5G, big data, green economy, artificial intelligence, integrated circuits, development of a new energy and health industry, and climate change. Chung [acknowledged](#) China's importance as South Korea's "largest trading partner and an important strategic partner," and said that South Korea "appreciates and expects China to continue playing an important role in the affairs of the peninsula."



Figure 3 Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi shake hands before their talks at a hotel in Xiamen. Photo: Yonhap

The Chinese and South Korean governments have pursued a long list of efforts to strengthen their cooperation. The Chinese Commerce Ministry and South Korean Trade Ministry moved forward in February with negotiations for the second phase of free trade negotiations. The Chinese and South Korean defense ministries updated a [memorandum of understanding](#) on the establishment of direct communication lines between their air forces and navies. Bilateral meetings on the delimitation of maritime boundaries between China and South Korea [took place](#) in March. Their foreign ministries [held the first meeting](#) of a dialogue on coordination of maritime affairs in April. China participated in the [second virtual meeting](#) on "Northeast Asia Cooperation for Health Security" hosted by the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and China and South Korea established a "[green channel](#)" for

essential business travel. They also announced that they would establish a mechanism for mutual recognition of their health codes and support the inclusion of each other's citizens in national COVID-19 vaccination programs.



Figure 4 U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin inspects an honor guard with South Korean Defense Minister Suh Wook during a welcome ceremony at the Defense Ministry in March 2021. Photo: AP

China-South Korea Economic Prospects

China's Commerce Ministry [identified](#) early implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), acceleration of talks for a China-Japan-South Korea Free Trade Agreement (FTA), and consideration of joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) as priorities for 2021. All these agenda items envision closer China-South Korea economic cooperation, with Moon also [identifying](#) the China-South Korea FTA as a priority in his New Year's press conference. Lee Seong-hyun, director of the Center for Chinese Studies at South Korea's Sejong Institute think tank, [suggested](#) that China's motive is "to distance Korea from the US by strengthening economic cooperation."

China Central Television and Korean Broadcasting System [signed](#) a strategic partnership for joint content production and China's Tencent Music Entertainment [announced](#) a new partnership with South Korea's JYP Entertainment, signaling the warming of official ties between the two governments.

Semiconductor industry [outlooks](#) for 2021 predicted an overall uptick in demand for semiconductors and viewed Samsung and SK memory chip production as benefiting from the US blacklisting of Chinese tech firms including Huawei and SMIC, China's largest chip maker. Against this backdrop, SK Hynix, the world's

second-largest memory chip maker, is [betting](#) that a \$9 billion acquisition from Intel will enable the company to benefit from expansion of NAND-flash memory chips and upgrading to three-dimensional (3D) NAND wafer technology production. Samsung's [participation](#) in a March 2021 White House meeting on supply chain resilience highlights the company's critical position in the global supply network that simultaneously bridges and competes for market share in the United States and China.

Hyundai Motors continues to expand its exposure to the Chinese market with a January [announcement](#) of an investment contract with Guangdong Province to establish an offshore fuel cell system production factory in Guangzhou and an April [announcement](#) that it would sell electric cars in China starting in 2022. SK Innovation has [expanded its investment stake](#) in the Blue Park Smart Energy Technology subsidiary of the Beijing Automotive Group that sells recharged batteries for electric vehicles.

Moon, China, and the Quad

Moon Jae-in's optimistic signaling about prospects for improved relations with China has focused primarily on expanding opportunities for economic growth and encouraging China to play a constructive role on the Korean Peninsula. Peking University Professor Kim Dong-gil [notes](#) that "China's role in preventing North Korean provocations is vital," expressing a rationale that supports Moon's emphasis on engagement with China. But Kim warned of US attempts to expand the scope of the alliance and mobilize it as an instrument for countering China at a time when the Biden administration has framed China as the central focus of its Asia policy and is emphasizing cooperation with allies to that end.

Renmin University Professor Cheng Xiaohe [wrote](#) in *Global Times* in March in the run-up to the US-South Korea 2+2 meetings in Seoul that South Korea should maintain a policy of "strategic ambiguity" regarding the Quad. While Cheng noted that South Korea's conditions for joining the Quad is that the organization be "transparent, open and inclusive," he claimed that South Korea's initial evaluation of the Quad may be under pressure to change. He signaled that a South Korean decision to join the Quad would destroy mutual trust between China and South Korea and set back efforts to establish a China-South Korea

"2+2 dialogue on diplomacy and security." *Global Times* [editorialized](#) that given South Korea's trade dependence on China, "to ask South Korea to decouple from China would be like trading an apple for a crabapple, which is much smaller than the former one."

The omission of direct references to China in the US-South Korea 2+2 statement as compared to the statement from Japan was taken by Chinese analysts as evidence of South Korea as a "[weak link](#)" in US efforts to contain China. Chinese analysts [noted the omission](#) of China from the joint statement and credited it to "Seoul's rationality in dealing with Washington." Meanwhile, pressure has grown within South Korea for the Moon administration to positively consider close cooperation with the Quad. In response, ROK Foreign Minister Chung stated that the Korean government "maintains the position that it is possible for us to cooperate with any consultative body if it conforms to our principles of inclusiveness, openness, transparency, and cooperation, and if it is in our national interests and contributes to regional global peace and prosperity."

The Moon administration continued to walk a tightrope between Washington and Beijing as the United States and China both swing the rope in efforts to bring South Korea onto their side. In virtual remarks at the 2021 Boao Forum for Asia hosted by China, Moon [urged](#) cooperation to address the COVID-19 pandemic, especially between China, Japan, and South Korea, and called for "multilateral cooperation with inclusiveness enhanced." South Korea's center-right newspaper *JoongAng Ilbo* [criticized](#) Moon's choice avoidance efforts, exhorting him to "get off his diplomatic tightrope and stick with alliance-based policies."

Social Media Outrage and Conflict Between Netizens

Social media controversies between South Korean and Chinese netizens intensified in 2021 over accusations of cultural appropriation and nationalist outrage over placement ads for Chinese products in Korean TV dramas, highlighting high emotions and sensitivities between the two communities. An [uproar ensued](#) in South Korea over the TV drama *True Beauty* and its use of Chinese product advertisements, including for a Chinese instant hot pot brand and a Chinese e-commerce platform in the Korean drama, drawing strong

criticisms from South Korean bloggers and an equally strong reaction from Chinese bloggers. South Korean bloggers subsequently [targeted product placement](#) in a scene from the tvN series *Vincenzo* in which the two lead characters sit down for instant bibimbap from Zihaiguo, a Chinese brand unfamiliar to Korean viewers. Then, the Korean historical drama *Joseon Exorcist* was [cancelled](#) after only two episodes following domestic criticism that the producers were distorting Korean history by using Chinese aesthetics.

Chinese netizens [retaliated](#) by accusing makers of the Goguryeo-era Korean TV drama *River Where the Moon Rises* of copying Chinese costumes. Then, Chinese netizens [criticized](#) Big Hit Entertainment, the management company for BTS, for using maps that showed South Tibet as Indian rather than Chinese territory in a financial report.

An even bigger controversy ensued after Li Ziqi, a Chinese blogger with 14 million YouTube followers, reposted her 2017 [video](#) on the making of pickled vegetables known as *paocai* in Chinese, using processes similar to those used in making the Korean dish *kimchi*. The dispute escalated because of a Chinese drive to register *paocai* at the International Organization for Standardization, leading Korean netizens to accuse China of “cultural theft.” The dispute drew comment from China’s Ambassador to South Korea Xing Haoming, who [argued](#) that such disputes do not represent mainstream public opinion and argued for increasing mutual recognition, understanding, and friendship.

Criticism between Seoul and Beijing have also taken to the wind. Sensitivity to yellow dust has extended beyond scratchy throats to include Chinese netizens’ blame-shifting [objections](#) to South Korean media attributions of the dust to China rather than Mongolia. In the meantime, everyday South Koreans see yellow dust pollution as another undesirable and unstoppable export blowing in from China.

Perhaps most worrisome for the future of the China-South Korea relationship is the intensification of South Korean criticism of China that is reflected in public opinion polling. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs [found](#) that South Korean’s unfavorable views of China are equivalent to negative views of Japan and North Korea and that a majority of South Koreans believe China seeks to replace the United States

as the world’s most dominant power in the Asia-Pacific and the world. Among South Korean respondents, 60% viewed China as an economic threat while 37% saw it as an economic partner. Also, 83% of respondents viewed China as a security threat with only 12% viewing China as a security partner. The contrast between negative South Korean public sentiment toward China and the Moon administration’s courting of China increases the likelihood that policy toward China could become a [critical issue of political difference](#) in South Korea’s next presidential election, set for March 2022.

There is a single countervailing flashpoint still capable of bringing Chinese and South Korean netizens together: dislike for Japan. Chinese netizens [supported](#) the South Korean release of games like *Wednesday*, which contains themes related to victims of Japanese wartime sexual slavery, and *Assassinate Ito Hirobumi*, the protectorate-era Japanese resident-general of Korea who met that fate in 1909. Likewise, [the announcement of a new display](#) at South Korea’s Independence Hall featuring Chinese and Korean cooperation in opposition to Japanese colonial aggression gained Chinese approval and may draw Chinese tourists visiting South Korea. In addition, the Chinese, North Korean, and South Korean governments made common cause in [expressing concerns](#) about contamination of fish while voicing objections to the Japanese government’s decision to release contaminated water from the Fukushima nuclear reactor into the Pacific Ocean.

Conclusion

China will likely redouble efforts to bring pressure to bear on South Korea to limit its trilateral alignments with Japan and the United States. Beijing already put down a marker by eliciting assurances from the Moon administration in October 2017 that it would abide by the three no’s: no trilateral US-Japan-South Korea alliance, no cooperation with regional missile defense, and no additional deployments of the Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system in South Korean territory. The Moon administration argued that the three no’s were an expression of immediate realities; Beijing attempted to portray them as binding and enduring South Korean commitments, generating additional mistrust between Seoul and Beijing. But South Korea may

increasingly be tempted to challenge those markers

To tame South Korea while consolidating its own strategic interests, China may maximize its geopolitical leverage by carefully calibrating its cooperation with and support to North Korea to neutralize further alignment of the US-South Korea alliance in a broader mini-lateral or multilateral security context. Xi Jinping's verbal expressions of support for North Korea in late March appeared alongside Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to Beijing to demonstrate China's options and leverage vis-à-vis the United States. China will use its strategic leverage with North Korea more as an instrument to counter US influence and strategies in the Indo-Pacific than as an issue for China-US cooperation.

Biden administration efforts to enhance extended deterrence to address progress in North Korean missile development made during the Trump administration or broader efforts to extend the scope of US-South Korea maritime cooperation southward could rekindle China's sensitivities and its economic retaliation campaign toward South Korea. These developments will be designed to test the strength of the US-South Korea alliance as a potential weak link in the US alliance architecture in Northeast Asia. Despite its desire to continue to pursue choice avoidance, South Korea will need to devise more effective strategies to neutralize the threat of Chinese economic retaliation in the context of pressures deriving from South Korea's security alliance with the United States and rising China-US rivalry.

Meanwhile, North Korea's deepening dependency on China for economic and political support may sharpen Kim Jong Un's desire for the United States to treat North Korea as a strategic counterpart, even as it retains the nuclear project as both its main leverage and its main impediment in pressing its demands. In this respect, Xi has proven to be more effective in his use of summitry than either Kim or Trump, having effectively strengthened China's strategic position while North Korea and the United States live with the consequences of diplomatic failure of the 2019 Hanoi summit.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2021

Jan. 6, 2021: Central Committee of the Communist Party of China [sends](#) a congratulatory message to the Workers' Party of Korea on its Eighth Party Congress.

Jan. 8, 2021: China's Commerce Ministry [introduces](#) its 2021 work focus, which includes promotion of early implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), acceleration of talks for a China-Japan-South Korea Free Trade Agreement, and active consideration of joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2021.

Jan. 9, 2021: In remarks at the Eighth Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [asserts](#) importance of prioritizing special China-North Korea relations.

Jan. 11, 2021: In his New Year's Address South Korean President Moon Jae-in [expresses](#) his intent to expedite free trade agreement negotiations with China.

Jan. 12, 2021: Eighth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea [expresses](#) gratitude to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China for its congratulatory message.

Jan. 12, 2021: Chinese President Xi Jinping [congratulates](#) North Korean leader Kim Jong Un on his election as general secretary of the ruling party and calls for strong relations between the two countries.

Jan. 13, 2021: Kim Jong Un [expresses](#) gratitude to Xi and his intention to consolidate the China-North Korea friendship.

Jan. 15, 2021: Hyundai Motor Group [announces](#) that it has signed an investment contract with the government of Guangdong Province to establish an offshore fuel cell system production factory in Guangzhou, China.

Jan. 21, 2021: ROK President Moon Jae-in [asserts](#) the need to establish a foundation upon which bilateral China-South Korea relations will be elevated to a new height in opening remarks at a Plenary Meeting of the South Korean National Security Council.

Jan. 21, 2021: South Korea's trade commission [decides](#) to uphold anti-dumping tariffs on imported Chinese H-shaped beams.

Jan. 26, 2021: Independence Hall of Korea, a history museum in Cheonan, South Korea, [announces](#) plans to set up a memorial hall dedicated to China and South Korea's joint fight against Japanese aggression prior to and during World War II.

Jan. 27, 2021: Xi [expresses](#) support for Korean denuclearization in a call with Moon and both agree to jointly develop China-South Korea relations.

Jan. 29, 2021: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Son Gwon [exchange](#) New Year's congratulatory messages.

Feb. 2, 2021: Chinese Ambassador to South Korea Xing Haiming [calls on](#) South Korea to support China's position on Taiwan and Hong Kong in a meeting with Kwon Ki-sik, head of the Korea-China City Friendship Association.

Feb. 16, 2021: South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and Wang [agree](#) to push for high-level exchanges to further deepen bilateral relations.

Feb. 19, 2021: North Korea [appoints](#) its former trade minister, Ri Ryong Nam, as ambassador to China.

Feb. 24, 2021: China's CCTV and South Korea's KBS [sign an agreement](#) to cooperate in various aspects of the cultural industry.

Feb. 27, 2021: Chinese Ministry of Commerce and South Korean Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy [hold](#) meeting of chief negotiators for the second phase of free trade agreement negotiations.

March 2, 2021: South Korea and China [sign](#) a revised memorandum of understanding on the establishment of direct communication lines between their air forces and navies.

March 4, 2021: Eighth director-general-level meeting on the delimitation of maritime boundaries between China and South Korea [takes place](#) in video format.

March 5, 2021: Chinese Premier Li Keqiang [delivers](#) government work report that calls for acceleration of free trade negotiations with South Korea to China's top legislature.

March 9, 2021: Chinese government officially [ratifies](#) RCEP.

March 16, 2021: Chinese Foreign Ministry [denies](#) South Korean media reports blaming China for "yellow dust" sandstorm.

March 22, 2021: North Korean leader Kim and President Xi [pledge](#) to develop bilateral ties.

March 23, 2021: Kim [sends](#) a verbal message to Xi to notify him of the events of the Eighth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea. Xi [responds](#) with gratitude and stresses the importance of the China-North Korea relationship.

March 23, 2021: Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying [asserts](#) that it is China's policy to maintain, consolidate, and develop China-North Korea relations and that China has repeatedly called on the UN Security Council to modify sanctions on North Korea to improve the humanitarian situation.

March 25, 2021: In response to reports about North Korea firing two unidentified projectiles, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua [asserts](#) that China seeks a political settlement of the Korean Peninsula issue.

March 25, 2021: China's Tencent Music Entertainment enters a [partnership](#) with South Korea's JYP Entertainment.

March 26, 2021: Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Wu Jianghao [meets](#) North Korean Ambassador to China Ri Ryong Nam.

March 30, 2021: South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs [hosts](#) the second virtual meeting on "Northeast Asia Cooperation for Health Security," which brings together director-level officials and ambassadors from South Korea, the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and Mongolia.

April 3, 2021: Foreign ministers Wang and Chung [hold talks](#) in the southeastern Chinese city of Xiamen.

April 6, 2021: China and South Korea [announce](#) that they will coordinate and establish a mechanism for mutual recognition of their health codes and that they will support the inclusion of each other's citizens in their COVID-19 vaccination programs.

April 8, 2021: Representatives from China and South Korea [participate](#) in ASEAN Defense Senior Officials' Meeting Plus (ADSOM-Plus) conference.

April 12, 2021: Liu Xiaoming [is appointed](#) Special Representative of the Chinese Government on Korea Peninsula Affairs.

April 14, 2021: *Radio Free Asia* announces that North Korea has [completed](#) construction of a new rail route to its border with China designed to isolate freight to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

April 14, 2021: China and South Korea [hold](#) first meeting on exchanges and cooperation on maritime affairs.

April 14, 2021: North Korea [joins](#) China and South Korea in condemning Japan's decision to release contaminated wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear plant into the ocean.

April 15, 2021: China [opens](#) the 129th Canton Fair online, with companies from South Korea and other countries in attendance at the virtual trade exhibition.

April 15, 2021: Hyundai Motor Group [announces](#) plans to launch electric vehicles in China every year starting in 2022.

April 16, 2021: North Korea's Ambassador to China Ri Ryong Nam [presents](#) credentials to Xi.

April 17-18: South Korean Director of National Security Suh Hoon [reportedly tells](#) US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during his visit to Seoul that China and North Korea are preparing to hold a summit.

April 20, 2021: Moon [takes part](#) in 2021 Boao Forum for Asia held in the Chinese province of Hainan, along with Xi and leaders of several other Asian nations.

April 20, 2021: South Korea's Oceans Ministry [announces](#) plans to conduct a joint operation with its Chinese counterpart to curb illegal fishing in the Yellow Sea.

April 22-23, 2021: Xi and Moon [take part](#) in a virtual Leaders Summit on Climate at the invitation of US President Joe Biden.

April 26-29, 2021: China and South Korea [participate](#) in the 77th session of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

April 27, 2021: South Korea [hosts](#) 10th annual China-Japan-South Korea International Forum for Trilateral Cooperation.

April 29, 2021: North Korea [announces](#) plans to build an "export processing zone" near its border with China.

Chronology compiled by Ellen Swicord of the Council on Foreign Relations

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-ASIA-PACIFIC

JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

THE GLOVES COME OFF

JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

After several years of seeking to counter each other while insisting that their relations were at a recent best, Tokyo and Beijing became overtly contentious. A major event of the reporting period was China's passage, and subsequent enforcement, of a law empowering its coast guard to take action, including through the use of force, to defend China's self-proclaimed sovereignty over the Japanese administered Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. Heretofore reluctant to criticize Beijing over its actions in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu finally did so in April, and pledged to work with the United States to resolve China-Taiwan tensions. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [warned](#) that a continuation of such moves would cause Chinese-Japanese ties to hit bottom and threatened retaliation for any interference on Taiwan. No more was heard about a long-postponed Xi Jinping visit to Japan.

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Politics

Japan continued to reach out for allies supportive of its positions with regard to China. Suga took an interest in visiting India and the Philippines—both of whom have border disputes with the PRC—as well as to the US. China was the unspoken major topic of Suga's meeting with US President Joseph Biden in April, with Biden [reiterating](#) that Article V of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security applies to the Senkaku Islands and opposing any unilateral efforts to change the status quo in the East China Sea. The two sides "shared concerns" over China's abuse of human rights in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, which drew a response from Beijing, accusing Japan of being a vassal of the United States and interfering in China's domestic affairs.

As the new year began, *Global Times* [termed](#) a report, in center-left *Mainichi Shimbun* saying that Japanese elites had been inoculated with Chinese vaccines suspected to have been smuggled into Japan, to have been fabricated "out of thin air." There is, said *Global Times*, "no way that Chinese vaccine producers would engage in this illegal business." Around the same time, the Japanese government [considered](#) how to publicize mid-19th century British and German maps showing the Senkaku Islands as Japanese territory. The maps, reprinted in center-right *Yomiuri Shimbun*, predate the formal establishment of Japanese administrative ownership in 1895, will likely be put on display at the National Museum of Territory and Sovereignty in Tokyo's Kasumigaseki area as well as on the museum's webpage. As of March, Japan was strengthening [cooperation](#) with European nations to work toward a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) region to counter Chinese expansionism. In January, Foreign Minister Motegi became the first Japanese foreign minister invited to participate in the discussions of the European Union's foreign affairs council. According to *Asahi*, the fact that a number of EU foreign ministers expressed support for the FOIP reflects a steady change in European views of China. One sticking point for further cooperation, it was reported, is that EU nations could call upon Japan to take a stronger stance against China's human rights abuses.

In January, a Japanese research fellow at London's International Institute for Strategic Studies [advocated](#) redefining Japanese and

British efforts to meet their common challenge from China. Japan is also increasing its [engagement](#) with Myanmar to counter Chinese dominance. Measures include support for education and health initiatives, negotiating peace between the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) and the Arakan Army insurgents, and financial contributions to the troubled \$8 billion Dawei Special Economic Zone project. If fully developed, the Dawei SEZ would be Southeast Asia's largest industrial complex as well as a crucial link in Japan's plan to create a Japan-Mekong Southern Economic Corridor that would connect Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand to southern Myanmar.



Figure 1 19th century map from the London Atlas showing the Senkaku Islands. Photo: Japan Forward

Alongside these sources of friction, efforts for reconciliation continued. At a virtual conference on maritime security in January, the director-general of the Japanese Foreign Ministry's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau [protested](#) Chinese ships' activities around the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands while China reiterated hopes to manage differences through dialogue and communication and to safeguard stability in the East China Sea. *Global Times* cited unnamed analysts' speculation that the Japanese motive was partly to exert psychological pressure on China while reminding the Biden administration that it should continue Trump's policy in the Indo-Pacific.

In a move sure to worsen China-Japan relations due to its relevance to the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress adopted a law in late January [empowering](#) the coast guard to take action, including the use of weapons, when national sovereignty, sovereign rights, or jurisdiction is

illegally infringed on or threatened by foreign organizations or individuals at sea. At the time of the law's passage, Chinese expert on Japanese politics Wang Guangtao opined that Japan, and its territorial disputes, were not likely to be a priority for Biden, who is facing "a domestic mess." The Japanese government [reacted](#) nervously to the new Chinese regulations with an unnamed Defense Ministry official warning it has the potential to "shake the order based on international law."

In February, a [meeting](#) between Japanese and British foreign and defense ministers expressed concern about the new coast guard law. News that the *Queen Elizabeth II* aircraft carrier strike group will be dispatched to East Asia was said to signal the Japan-UK desire for cooperation in maritime security: Tokyo wants to utilize British naval power to offset China's maritime advances while London seeks avenues for regional cooperation after its departure from the European Union. *Kyodo* cited Defense Department Press Secretary John Kirby's [statement](#) "we hold with the international community about the Senkakus and the sovereignty of the Senkakus, and we support Japan obviously in that sovereignty," thus appearing to back Japan's sovereignty over the islands and contradicting past statements that the US takes no position on the sovereignty issue. Another Defense Department spokesperson later "clarified" that "there is no change to US policy."

A *Global Times* opinion piece [criticized](#) Tokyo for having taken the West's side in opposing the military coup in Myanmar, and advised the Japanese government to ask itself which was more important: peace and stability in Myanmar or forcibly promoting the democratic system and engaging in a global competition of models and systems. A *Nikkei* article co-authored by a Chinese and Japanese [argued](#) that Beijing must realize that it needs the world on its side if it is to realize the Chinese dream. If China continues to insist that it has the right to continue its current course of expansion, it will not end well, they argued; the Chinese dream must become everyone else's dream.

The Japan Parliamentary Alliance on China, a supra-partisan group of Diet members concerned with policy toward the PRC, adopted a statement condemning the PRC government for its violations of Uyghur human rights and called for legislation to impose sanctions on

high-ranking foreign government officials and organizations involved in the violation of human rights. However, the Japanese government remained cautious about deeming China's actions to be genocide, with Motegi telling a press conference that "we need to hold discussions with relevant ministries and agencies. We want to consider the issue carefully." A similar note of [caution](#) characterized Japanese government reactions to the military coup in Myanmar, with *Kyodo* reporting that it feared sanctions would drive the military closer to China. Chinese [analysts](#) opined that, due largely to their high volumes of trade with the PRC, Japan and Germany "are less likely [than the other G7 members] to be roped into joining the US-led 'counter China alliance.'"

South China Morning Post reported increasing [resistance](#) to influential LDP policymaker Nikai Toshihiro within his own party for his ties to Beijing. Critics believe Nikai is responsible for the government's failure to condemn China's human rights violations, its silence on the situation in Hong Kong, and its tepid reaction to Chinese ships' repeated incursions into Japanese waters around the disputed islands in the East China Sea. Citing polls, the paper pointed out that financial scandals involving members of Nikai's faction had damaged Prime Minister Suga, with an election expected in the fall.



Figure 2 Japanese LDP policymaker Nikai Toshihiro with Chinese President Xi Jinping during a 2015 meeting in Beijing. Photo: Reuters via SCMP

In March, taking note of China's punitive economic actions against Australia in response to that country's call for an independent investigation into the origins of the coronavirus, Japanese ambassador Yamagami Shingo, speaking at the *Australian Financial Review's*

business summit, [assured](#) Australia that it “is not walking alone” in dealing with an increasingly aggressive China, which is of great concern to his country.

In what was described as a conscious move to [counter](#) China’s vaccine diplomacy campaign, it was announced that Japan, which does not have its own domestically developed vaccines, will partner with the other countries of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—Australia, India, and the US—to provide vaccines to developing countries. However, center-left *Asahi* [editorialized](#) against allowing the Quad to be seen as anti-China, advocating if each partner could contribute to the advancement of universal values without pretending that it was without its own problems, the Quad would transcend its agenda of dealing with China and serve the greater purpose of supporting the international order.

Speaking at a press conference, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato Katsunobu [expressed](#) “strong displeasure” at a comment by a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson that Japan is a “strategic vassal” of the United States. Kato, [asked](#) to explain why Japan has not joined major Western economies in sanctioning the PRC over its human rights violations, expressed his “grave concern” over the violations but pointed out that Tokyo lacks a legal framework for the imposition of “sanctions directly and explicitly connected to human rights issues.” Tepid as Kato’s response was, in an April [telephone](#) call to Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Japanese counterpart Motegi Toshimitsu expressed Japan’s “serious concerns” over China’s treatment of Uyghurs and Hong Kong. Wang responded that China opposes interference in its internal affairs. Motegi also voiced concern over China’s activities in the South China Sea and its new coast guard law.

In very different reporting on the same telephone call, *Global Times* [reported](#) that Wang warned Motegi that bilateral ties had been “soured by Japan’s intense hobnobbing with the US,” and its unacceptable interference in China’s internal affairs with regard to Xinjiang and Hong Kong. He also reportedly issued a warning over Taiwan (to be discussed in a later section).

Aiming for closer [cooperation](#) to counter China’s growing clout in the Indo-Pacific, Suga in April [announced](#) plans to visit two states with border

disputes with China—India and the Philippines, though those trips were later cancelled due to COVID concerns—and Japan called for an in-person Quad summit on the sidelines of the G7 meeting in June. While two members, India and Australia, are not G7 members, host country Britain has invited them, along with South Korea, as special guests.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry in April [expressed](#) its “strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition” to Japan’s decision to release treated radioactive water accumulated at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, threatening unspecified countermeasures. Japanese officials pointed out that other countries, including China and South Korea, have released treated radioactive water from reactors into the environment. *Xinhua* [argued](#) that the deeply rooted selfish nature implicit in the release fully exposes Japan’s carefully cultivated image of self-discipline and its disregard for the public health and food safety of the international community.

Referencing Suga’s meeting with Biden, the Chinese Foreign Ministry in the same month [expressed](#) “serious concerns” over negative moves and collusion between the two countries against China, with spokesperson Zhao Lijian stating that China would “make necessary responses as appropriate.” Apparently seeing no link between the US support for Japan’s position on the Senkakus and US concern for Japanese in the waters surrounding Taiwan, *Asahi* [editorialized](#) that, although solid backing from the US is vital to defending the Senkaku Islands, the joint statement about the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait puts Japan in danger of being drawn into a security emergency: under legislation enacted in 2015, Japan can provide logistical support to the US “in a situation that has an importance influence on Japan’s peace and security.” However, the paper urged, Japan should focus on diplomatic efforts for self-restraint by China and the US.

Also in April, and aiming to [counter](#) China’s rapid expansion in the construction of undersea communication cables, Japanese, Australian, and US officials agreed to strengthen information sharing on China’s activities and cooperate in financing submarine cables in strategically important areas. Under its Belt and Road Initiative, China has been actively laying cables to create a huge economic bloc, using low costs, apparently backed by the PRC government, as leverage.

The biennial issue of the war-related Yasukuni Shrine arose in April, as usual. *Renmin Ribao* [noted](#) that, although Suga sent a ritual *masakaki* offering to the shrine's spring festival, he did not personally attend, nor did Cabinet ministers, although two also sent *masakaki* offerings. Visits and ritual offering, it stated, hurt the feelings of China, South Korea, and other countries brutalized by Japan during World War II. In the same month, to bolster its claim to the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, China's Ministry of National Resources released a topographical study of the area based on satellite images. *Asahi* [speculated](#) that the release may have been to counter a report issued in March by Japan's Environment Ministry concerning breeding by short-tailed albatross on the islands that was also based on satellite images.

As the report period closed, Japan lodged a forceful [protest](#) demanding the removal of a tweet by a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman adapting a famous Hokusai print into an image of nuclear waste being poured into the sea by people in Hazmat suits. China issued "solemn [representations](#)" to Japan over the latter's newly released diplomatic blue book which, said a Foreign Ministry spokesperson, maliciously attacked and interfered in China's internal affairs. Stating that China-Japan relations faced grave tests, he urged Japan to correct its mistakes. The blue book terms the Chinese Coast Guard's repeated entries into Japanese territorial waters as a violation of international law, with its detailed explanation of efforts to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific region clearly made with China in mind.

Economics

While crediting China's year on year growth of 18.3% in the first three months of 2021, economists believed a historically [sluggish](#) pace of 0.6% expansion compared with the quarter before indicated that the economic recovery was not yet solid. Jobless rates for migrant workers and new graduates increased. Beset with recurring waves of coronavirus infection, the Japanese economy [shrank](#) 1.6% in the same period, although in February the Nikkei [topped](#) 30,000 for the first time since August 1990 and unemployment rates were in the low 2% range, as before the pandemic. Japan's exports to China gained even as those to other countries contracted.

In a move certain to unnerve Japan, which sought to lower its dependence on China for rare earth supplies, the PRC's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology [announced](#) in January that its companies will be required to follow export control laws and regulations regarding the export and import of rare earth minerals. A tracking system is to be established that will enable closed loop management. Four days later, the Japanese government [announced](#) plans to commercialize the mining of rare metals on the seabed around Minamitorishima in the Ogasawara Islands. Japan is hoping also to include the high seas, protecting its rights to seabed resources by having a lead over China in mining technology.

Driven largely by its ability to shake off the effects of the pandemic on its economy more quickly than other major trading nations, China [imported](#) 22% of Japanese exports in 2020, surpassing the US (18.4%). Although total Japanese exports fell by 11.1%, those to China gained by 2.7%, despite ongoing Japanese worries about overreliance on China. With sales falling due to competition from Chinese rivals, Japanese manufacturer Panasonic plans to [withdraw](#) from solar cell and panel production in 2022 since it cannot compete with Chinese rivals that can produce the items at lower cost. This will leave Kyocera and Sharp as the only major Japanese companies that produce solar batteries and panels. Panasonic will, however, stay in the renewable energy business, focusing on such segments as power management systems for smart cities. Chinese [orders](#) placed with Japanese machine toolmakers increased 23.5% in 2020 even as companies suffered sharp falls from the US and even more so from Europe. Yasakawa Electric is building a large plant in Jiangsu to produce servomotors and controllers for industrial robots and Daifuku plans a plant also in Jiangsu, to manufacture conveyors for use in clean rooms.

The Second Japan-China Capital Markets Forum, an initiative to strengthen cooperation between the securities markets of the two countries, was [held](#) online at the end of January. The 400 participants heard discussions on capital market restructuring, the future on China-Japan collaboration in capital markets, developments in derivatives markets, and the role of capital markets in an aging society.

Japan is expected to [participate](#) with the "Five Eyes" (Australia, Canada, Great Britain, New

Zealand, and the US) in a US multinational fund for the development of 5G telecommunications technology and strengthening of the supply network to prevent the spread of equipment made in China. Interviewed by *Bloomberg*, Japanese Ambassador to Bangladesh Ito Naoki [stated](#) that Japan has been incentivizing its companies to shift manufacturing facilities out of China. With the help of \$350 million in special Japanese loans, a \$100 million special economic zone is being developed in Bangladesh to attract Japanese production facilities. Over the past decade, the number of Japanese companies operating in the country, including Honda and Mitsubishi, has tripled to about 300. However, in March, two Japan-based manufacturers of semiconductor wafer, one of which is headed by a Chinese, are turning to China in an effort to [catch up](#) with top producers Shin-etsu Chemical and Sumco, which together control 55% of the global wafer market. Financing has been assisted by a Chinese public sector fund and directed primarily toward the production of 12-inch wafers used to make advanced semiconductors. Led by chip-making equipment, nonferrous metals and plastic, Japanese exports to China [rose](#) 3.4% in February, slowing sharply from a 37.5% gain in the prior month due partly to the Lunar New Year holiday. And, in response to China's [request](#) that Toyota manufacture key components of fuel cell vehicles in the PRC, Toyota will do so starting as early as 2022. This will be the first time Toyota has produced such components outside Japan.

Controversy continued to [swirl](#) around the security implications of Chinese company Tencent's acquisition of a 3.65% share in wireless carrier Rakuten that did not receive the pre-screening prescribed by Japan's newly amended Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Act.

Defense

The major defense-related development of the period was China's passage of a coast guard law that empowered its coast guard, whose vessels are larger and more powerful than counterpart vessels, to use force against intruding vessels in areas that are also claimed by and currently under the administration of Japan. China sent the aircraft carrier *Liaoning* and support ships through the Miyako Strait and commissioned three new vessels, as well as announcing a defense budget increase of 6.8%. Japan sought

out defense allies in Europe, commissioned an *Aegis*-class destroyer, and extended infrastructure aid to an Andaman island strategically situated off the Malacca Strait.

On Jan. 1, Naha coast guard officials [confirmed](#) the presence of four Chinese government ships in the contiguous zone off the contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. The total for 2020 was 333 days, that for 2019, 282 days. January was a busy month in the defense posture of both China and Japan. [Bracing](#) for further advancements in China's military and the rise of drone warfare, Japan began to develop unmanned, remote-controlled fighter aircraft with the goal of having them operational by 2035 to coincide with the deployment of the country's next-generation manned fighters. Japanese authorities were also concerned with domestic leakages of technology. Back-to-back articles in *Yomiuri* in January revealed that at least 44 Japanese [researchers](#) were involved in China's Thousand Talents Program to attract high-level scientists from overseas. Some of the scientists were teaching at universities with close ties to the Chinese military on such topics as artificial intelligence, robotics, and neuroscience. [Questioned](#) about their motives, the scientists cited China's more attractive research environment: according to *Yomiuri*, the Chinese government has been supplying a number of Japanese researchers with more money than they can spend. Currently, Japan has no regulations regarding participating in the Thousand Talents Program. China's science and technology budget is now nearly seven times that of Japan.

Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* [described](#) China's strategy to wear down Japanese resistance to its claim over the Senkaku Islands through repeated air and sea incursions. Citing RAND analysts, the article warned that if Japan and the US responded by stepping up cooperation in the area, the tensions could escalate and China's security situation become less stable.

Commenting in January on Japanese [interest](#) in becoming the "sixth eye" in the Five Eyes alliance, a research associate at Fudan University's Center for Japanese Studies opined that Japan is "strong in will but weak in capability" but will continue to move closer to the alliance. The barriers to inclusion are mainly domestic: unlike the CIA and the UK's MI6, Japan does not have a highly specialized

intelligence organization. Moreover, current anti-espionage laws are weak, with stricter laws facing constitutional hurdles. Finally, integration with other members of the Five Eyes will be difficult since, unlike them, Japan is not an Anglo-Saxon country.

Even as Chinese military budgets continued to rise, the official Chinese military newspaper *Jiefangjun Bao* [criticized](#) Japan's draft military budget for developing multidomain combined combat capabilities with the US, thereby breaking the boundaries of the country's pacifist constitution. Specifically, the paper pointed out that Japan's Quasi-Zenith Satellite Systems will host a US Space Situational Awareness sensor payload, and that the two are creating an intelligence-sharing mechanism that can detect and track missiles. Already in 2019, the two confirmed that the Japan-US Security Treaty is applicable to cyberattacks. In the first US-Japanese ministerial-level talk since Biden took office, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [affirmed](#) to Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo that the Senkaku Islands fall within the scope of the Japan-US Mutual Security Treaty.

Responding to affirmations for Japan's position on the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands by Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Defense Secretary Austin, and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, a Chinese military expert [commented](#) that the PLA needs "emergency plans as well as plans for potential combat in the future." Yet, Japan should avoid miscalculating American intention by going too far in pushing the issue of ownership of the islands, since Washington may simply be paying lip service to Tokyo.

And then, as mentioned in the "politics" section, the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress adopted a law [empowering](#) the coast guard. On Jan. 29, the National Security Council met, with Foreign Minister Motegi later telling a news conference that China must not apply the law in a way that goes against international law. Taking action is difficult since, as an unnamed senior Defense Ministry official [commented](#), an increased Self-Defense Forces (SDF) presence might fall into a trap of giving China an excuse to dispatch more ships to the area. Responding to queries, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi repeated the ritualistic formula that China's new coast guard law does not [target](#) any specific country.

In February, a professor at the Japan Coast Guard Academy [observed](#) that increasing numbers of Chinese fishing vessels were leading to resource depletion in the Sea of Japan as well as in the South China Sea and in the Galapagos Islands. Unlike Japanese vessels, which are restricted by tonnage and what fishing methods they can use, Chinese vessels are not, and use a method called "pair trawling," making them a new threat. He urged China to take a more responsible attitude, and for Japan strengthen its system of law enforcement and coordination. Tokyo [conveyed](#) "strong concerns" to Beijing over China's new coast guard legislation.

In March, Motegi [described](#) as "truly regrettable and unacceptable" Chinese coast guard vessels intrusion into what the Japanese government considers its territorial waters for two successive days. A spokesman for an Okinawa fishing cooperative said that fishermen were afraid of being shot at by Chinese ships. LDP Diet members discussed a bill allowing the Self Defense Forces to crack down on illegal activities in territorial patrol zone that have been designated in advance by the prime minister. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin [stated](#) that its coast guard's intrusion into territorial waters claimed by Japan are legitimate measures taken to safeguard sovereignty in accordance with the law. Under Article 7 of the police duties execution law, the Japan Coast Guard is [permitted](#) to use weapons against vessels trying to land on the Senkaku Islands when perpetrators commit crimes categorized as violent and dangerous and offer resistance. According to Japanese coast guard, 14 Chinese marine patrol vessels [entered](#) Japanese waters in the first month that China's new law on its coast guard went into effect. This compares with six in January and 12 or fewer intrusions per month last year. They have been approaching Japanese fishing boats more frequently, aiming to chase them out.

A February [analysis by US think tank](#) Foreign Policy Research Institute opined that if China is to establish maritime primacy in the Indo-Pacific, it must first get its navy beyond the Ryukyu Islands. This entails not only sailing its naval forces into the Pacific Ocean but keeping them safe and supplied once there. Japan's growing defenses in the Ryukyus complicate China's ability to do either. According to a [memo](#) written in 2018 that was declassified in the final days of the Trump administration but not made

public until February 2021, the US will defend both Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands in the event of an “emergency.”

[Responding](#) to the 6.8% increase in China’s defense budget, a March *Asahi* editorial asked how the world could buy the narrative of peaceful development that China has been trying to sell. The Chinese military newspaper *Jiefangjun Bao* riposted that it is a nation’s right to determine its [defense expenditures](#) and how they will be used, stating that other countries do not have the right to point fingers. China’s expenditures were determined by “our defense demand, economic size, and defensive defense policy, and is [sic] commensurate with our ranking as the world’s second largest economy.”

That same month, a US defense website [reported](#) that Japan’s Office of National Space Policy signed a “historic” memorandum of understanding to launch two US payloads into Geostationary Earth Orbit on Japan’s Quasi Zenith Satellite System to help surveillance of Chinese space activities.

Also in March, the Maritime Defense Force [commissioned](#) its newest *Aegis*-equipped destroyer, the *Haguro*, completing its fleet arrangement as advocated in the 2013 National Defense Program Guidelines. The *Haguro*’s Cooperative Engagement Capability (CEC) allows instant sharing of tactical information such as the location of enemy missiles and is also capable of mounting the *SM-3 Block IIA* interceptor missiles now being jointly developed with the US. Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo hinted that the SDF and US military might conduct [joint drills](#) around the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the future. They have heretofore avoided doing so, citing the risk of heightening tensions with China. The US and Japanese defense chiefs agreed to [closely cooperate](#) in the event of a military clash between China and Taiwan, though apparently there was no discussion on how the coordination would take place and the communique merely called for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

According to Japanese government sources, local opposition to the deployment of a Ground Self Defense Force detachment on Yonaguni Island has [diminished](#) in the five years since its controversial deployment there. The GSDF pays ¥15 million (about \$137,000) annually in rent,

and service members pay about 20% of the town’s tax revenue as well as participating with their families in volunteer activities such as cleaning up roads. The island is considered a likely target in the event of confrontation with China.



Figure 3 Japanese and Indonesian Foreign and Defense Ministers meet during the “two-plus-two” meeting in Tokyo. Photo: David Mareuil/Pool via Reuters

Japan’s efforts to include other countries in its efforts to counter Chinese expansionism included two-plus-two talks with Indonesia at the end of March that centered on shared concerns over China’s growing include and territorial claims in the East and South China seas. They [resulted](#) in an agreement on the transfer of Japanese defense equipment and technology to Jakarta. The two sides also agreed to actively participate in multinational military exercises, to jointly develop remote islands in the South China Sea, and to oppose attempts to change the status quo by force. The Chinese Foreign Ministry immediately [expressed](#) its “grave concern,” saying that the Indonesian side had “clarified the situation” without specifying how, and urged the Japanese media to stop creating false news. Signaling a closer defense [relationship](#) with India, Japan made its first project-type grant to an Indian-owned Andaman island. The Andamans provide unparalleled advantage in surveillance and monitoring the Malacca Strait as well as being close to the Straits of Indonesia, the alternate route into the Indian Ocean. The shallow waters and crowded sea lanes of the area force submarines to surface, enabling India to track Chinese boats as they pass from the South China Sea into the Indian Ocean. At 2+2 security talks, the German and Japanese foreign and security ministers exchange [views](#) on China’s territorial claims in the East and South China sea and expressed grave concern over the situation in

Hong Kong and Xinjiang. They agree to increase cooperation in defense and military equipment and technology transfers based on the intelligence-sharing pact they signed in March.

According to *Renmin Ribao*, at the third annual meeting of the China–Japan maritime and air liaison mechanism and fifth round of working-level consultations on defense affair, the Chinese side [reiterated](#) that the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands are China’s inherent territory and urged Japan to stop provoking China and making groundless accusations against it. Japanese papers did not mention the meeting.

Nikkei [reported](#) in early April that a meeting of LDP lawmakers heard that China is planning to build up land around the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and move 20,000 people there. In response, a proposal was being prepared that would allow Japan Coast Guard vessels to use arms against foreign ships that refuse to comply with expulsion orders, in accordance with international law. The LDP caucus was also reportedly considering the deployment of the GSDF to remote islands to reduce response time in the event of a hostile situation. According to a Defense Ministry source, the large-scale [deployment](#) of F-35Bs is considered a “decisive measure for the defense of remote islands” in response to China’s military buildup. The planes’ short takeoff and vertical landing capabilities mean they can be used at both SDF and civilian airports, and they will operate together with the Kaga destroyer, which is being upgraded to an aircraft carrier.

In April, a few days after exercises between the US and Australian navies in the eastern Pacific, the Chinese aircraft carrier *Liaoning* and five escort vessels passed [through](#) the Miyako Strait for the first time since April 2020. Japan deployed assets to monitor the movements of the Chinese vessels and scrambled a fighter plane in response to the passage of a Chinese Y-9 military transport aircraft over the strait. In line with its effort to deal with China’s military buildup in the region, Japan will [build](#) three transport ships to supply ammunition, fuel, and provisions to troops stationed on its outlying islands. The expected date of deployment is 2024. According to Chinese naval expert Toshi Yoshihara, if Japan continues with limiting its responses to expressions of regret and concern, there is no doubt that China will seize sovereignty of the contested islands.

Declassified documents [obtained](#) by *Kyodo* from the US National Archives revealed that the US government rejected requests from its military to resume use of a bombing base in the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands lest it become involved in the China–Japan dispute over their sovereignty.

As the reporting period closed, Japanese newspapers [reported](#) that the Chinese navy, already the world’s largest, launched three new vessels—a ballistic missile submarine, a destroyer, and an amphibious assault ship.

Culture

Cultural ties remained warm despite political, economic, and defense tensions, with audiences on both sides generally reacting well to productions by the other, and a few joint ventures taking place as well.

In January, Takeuchi Ryo, a Nanjing-based Japanese documentary film director [explained](#) polls showing Japanese people’s negative impressions of China as the result of a significant number of programs smearing China on Japanese TV: such programs are most popular with male viewers over 50 years old, whose self-esteem in hurt when they see China surpassing Japan. Younger Japanese, he added “do not have such a bad impression of Japan.” A few weeks later, Chinese netizens voiced [approval](#) of a 7-tip list for Japanese taking part in a Chinese competition show, including avoiding “culturally sensitive topics” like the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, “confusing statements regarding the keyword Taiwan,” and wearing clothing that features the Japanese flag. *Detective Chinatown 3*, a Chinese film set in Tokyo co-starring Japanese actors, [took in](#) \$163 million on its first day, far surpassing the opening box office record in China and continuing to break records. Pandemic restrictions on travel are believed to be a major reason behind the success. A Japanese film production company that participated in the project is considering the film’s release in Japan. Chinese animated films, often based on works of classical Chinese literature that many Japan are familiar with, are experiencing a popularity [boom](#) in Japan.

Taiwan

Taiwan continued to be a contentious issue in China-Japan relations, with trade and cultural ties between Japan and its former colony increasingly close, albeit within Japan's understanding of its one-China policy. Suga's pledge to work together with the US to calm China-Taiwan relations prompted an unusually sharp warning from Foreign Minister and State Councillor Wang Yi.

Warm relations continued on people-to-people, economic, scientific, cultural, and—very cautiously—political matters. Regarding the first, the Japanese government [honored](#) 90-year-old Taiwanese librarian Liu Yao-tzu with its Order of the Rising Sun for his services in promoting cultural services between Japan and Taiwan. Liu is among three Taiwanese out of the 141 recipients in the past year. Taiwan's iconic Taipei 101 skyscraper began displaying [LED messages](#) proclaiming the strong friendship between the peoples of Japan and Taiwan. The head of Japan's embassy equivalent in Taiwan, the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association (JTEA) and Taiwan dignitaries were among those attending the lighting-up ceremony.

Economically, and amid great fanfare, Japan's largest discount store Don Quijote [opened](#) its first branch, known locally as Don Don Donki, in Taipei. The store will be open 24 hours a day, employ 400 people, and feature Japanese products that had been in short supply because of the pandemic. The Japanese government is [reportedly](#) making efforts to convince Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. to set up advanced manufacturing facilities in Japan with the aim of rejuvenating the country's lagging chip industry and fending off competition from China. A joint Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA)-Academia Sinica NCKU Institute of Space and Plasma Sciences team [reported](#) breakthroughs in energization and radiation in geospace with important implications about how electrons work at higher altitudes as well as communications and electrical systems on earth.



Figure 4 Japan's Don Quijote opened its first location in Taiwan, known locally as Don Don Donki. Photo: Taiwan News via Facebook

In February, LDP leaders formed a Taiwan project team to consider measures to strengthen relations with Taiwan. Options [included](#) a Japanese version of the Taiwan Relations Act, a regular 2+2 meeting of the two countries' defense and foreign ministers, intelligence sharing, closer coordination among coast guards, the exchange of military liaison officers, and Taiwan's inclusion in a missile defense network. Amid worsening ties with China, the LDP's pro-China [wing](#) has lost ground to its pro-Taiwan wing. The newly formed Taiwan team, which was expected to submit recommendations to the government in April on bolstering ties to Taiwan, has discussed such measures as facilitating Taiwan's entry in the Trans-Pacific partnership.

Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) approved a [plan](#) to invest up to \$177.7 million in a fully owned subsidiary in Japan's Ibaraki prefecture that will expand its research into 3D semiconductor material. Also under discussion is establishment of a production line in Japan. The Japanese government [requested](#) its embassy-equivalent in Tokyo to ask Taiwan, the world's largest production base for semiconductor products, to increase output since chips for automobiles are in short supply worldwide. The German and US governments have made similar requests, with [Nikkei reporting](#) that China's auto industry faces a more serious predicament than other countries since most of the other top chipmakers are in Europe, Japan, and the US.

The US and Japanese defense chiefs agreed to [closely cooperate](#) in the event of a military clash between China and Taiwan, though apparently there was no discussion on how the coordination

would take place and the communiqué merely called for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. In addition to castigating Japan for “hobnobbing” with the US and interfering in China’s internal affairs, Foreign Minister Wang warned counterpart Motegi that China–Japan ties, already at a crossroads, would spiral down sharply if Japan were to involve itself in the Taiwan question and would be [met](#) with “the fiercest retaliation.”

In April, *South China Morning Post* wrote that, in response to an opposition politician in the Diet about Japan’s commitment to defend Taiwan at the summit with Biden, Suga [replied](#) that the statement “does not presuppose military involvement at all.” Note that, contrary to the paper’s interpretation, this does not imply that Japan would not be involved, but only that there had been no commitment to do so. *Nikkei* [reported](#) that, although Suga deflected pressure from NSC Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt Campbell for a Japanese version of the US Taiwan Relations Act, Biden had not done so, with Suga informing his aides afterward that “the Senkakus and Taiwan are linked.”

A signed editorial by the *Global Times* editor-in-chief [warned](#) Japan that if it follows the US, Japan would definitely become the target of the PLA and if its bases acted as vanguards during a Taiwan contingency, those bases would be hit as well. Yao Chung-yuan, a former deputy director of Taiwan’s Ministry of Defense’s strategic planning department [argued](#) that a quasi-military alliance has emerged among Japan, Taiwan, and the United States to counter the threat from China. He noted that when in 1999 the Japanese government proposed new guidelines for US–Japan defense cooperation, it expanded the definition of “areas around Japan” beyond the geographical to include six examples germane to his point: imminent armed conflict; past armed conflict after which order has not yet been restored and maintained; insurrection or civil war affecting Japan’s security; a likely influx of refugees due to political turmoil elsewhere; and acts defined by the United Nations Security Council as aggressions. As the report period closed, 74% of the respondents to a *Nikkei* telephone poll [supported](#) Japan’s engagement in Taiwan issues.

Conclusions: Implications for the Future

China–Japan relations are as bad as they have been since the postwar low in 2012. Increasing

Chinese pressure on the disputed territories has pushed Japan closer to the United States even as Japan recognizes the importance of robust trade with the PRC if it is to pull the country out of its pandemic-induced contraction. At the same time, neither side seems willing to compromise on issues that could enable a diminution of tensions. Beijing could widen the space for negotiation by reducing its patrols into disputed areas but so far shows no inclination to do so. Although no high-level meetings are planned, Suga and Xi will have opportunities to interact at international conferences. Another barometer of relations will be what level of attention is paid to preparations for the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the normalization of China–Japan relations in 2022.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2021

Jan. 1, 2021: Bracing for further advancements in China's military and the rise of drone warfare, Japan [begins](#) to develop unmanned, remote-controlled fighter aircraft with the goal of having them operational by 2035.

Jan. 2, 2021: Back-to-back articles in *Yomiuri* [reveal](#) that at least 44 Japanese researchers have been involved in China's Thousand Talents Program to attract high-level scientists from overseas. [Questioned](#) about their motives, the scientists cite China's more attractive research environment.

Jan. 2, 2021: Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* [describes](#) China's strategy to wear down Japanese resistance to its claim over the Senkaku Islands through repeated air and sea incursions.

Jan. 3, 2021: Naha coast guard officials [confirm](#) the presence of four Chinese government ships in the contiguous zone off the contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands on Jan. 1.

Jan. 3, 2021: Commenting on Japanese [interest](#) in becoming the sixth eye of the Five Eyes alliance, a research associate at Fudan University's Center for Japanese Studies opines that Japan is "strong in will but weak in capability," but will continue to move closer to the alliance.

Jan. 3, 2021: *Global Times* [terms](#) fabricated "out of thin air" a report in center-left *Mainichi Shimbun* saying that Japanese elites have been inoculated with Chinese vaccines suspected to have been smuggled into Japan.

Jan. 7, 2021: Takeuchi Ryo, a Nanjing-based Japanese documentary film director, [explains](#) polls showing Japanese people's negative impressions of China as the result of a significant number of programs smearing China on Japanese TV.

Jan. 8, 2021: *Japan Forward* [reprints report](#) that the Japanese government is considering how to publicize mid-19th century British and German maps showing the Senkaku Islands as Japanese territory.

Jan. 14, 2021: Official Chinese military newspaper *Jiefangjun Bao* [criticize](#) Japan's draft military budget for developing multidomain combined combat capabilities with the US as breaking the boundaries of the country's pacifist constitution.

Jan. 14, 2021: PRC's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology [announces](#) that companies will be required to follow export control laws and regulations regarding the export and import of rare earth minerals.

Jan. 15, 2021: The Japanese government [honors](#) 90-year old Taiwanese librarian Liu Yao-tzu with its Order of the Rising Sun for his services in promoting cultural services between Japan and Taiwan.

Jan. 18, 2021: Japanese government [plans](#) to commercialize the mining of cobalt and other rare metals on the seabed near Minamitorishima, in the Ogasawara Islands.

Jan. 19, 2021: Japan's largest discount store Don Quijote [opens](#) first branch, known locally as Don Don Donki, in Taipei.

Jan. 19, 2021: Japanese government [reportedly](#) seeks to convince Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. to set up advanced manufacturing facilities in Japan to rejuvenate the country's lagging chip industry and fending off competition from China.

Jan. 21, 2021: A Japanese research fellow at London's International Institute for Strategic Studies [advocates](#) redefining Japanese and British efforts to meet their common challenge from China.

Jan. 22, 2021: Joint Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA)-Taiwan Academia Sinica NKCUI Institute of Space and Plasma Sciences team [reports](#) breakthroughs in energization and radiation in geospace with important implications about how electrons work at higher altitudes as well as communications and electrical systems on earth.

Jan. 22, 2021: At a virtual conference on maritime security, the director-general of the Japanese foreign ministry's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau [protests](#) Chinese ships' activities around the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.

Jan. 22, 2021: Statistics [show](#) China imports 22% of Japanese exports in 2020, surpassing the US at 18.4%.

Jan. 22, 2021: Report [shows](#) Japan's increased engagement with Myanmar to counter Chinese dominance. Measures include support for education and health initiatives, negotiating peace between the Burmese military (Tatmadaw) and the Arakan Army insurgents, and financial contributions to the troubled \$8 billion Dawei Special Economic Zone project.

Jan. 23, 2021: The Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress [adopts](#) a law empowering the coast guard to take action, including the use of weapons, when national sovereignty, sovereign rights, or jurisdiction is "illegally" infringed on or threatened by foreign organizations or individuals at sea.

Jan. 23, 2021: Taiwan's iconic Taipei 101 skyscraper [begins](#) displaying LED messages proclaiming the strong friendship between the peoples of Japan and Taiwan.

Jan. 24, 2021: In first US-Japanese ministerial-level talk since President Biden took office, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [affirms](#) to Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo that the Senkaku Islands fall within the scope of the Japan-US Mutual Security Treaty.

Jan. 25, 2021: Responding to affirmations for Japan's position on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands by Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Defense Secretary Austin, and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, a Chinese military expert [comments](#) that the PLA needs "emergency plans as well as plans for potential combat in the future."

Jan. 25, 2021: The Second Japan-China Capital Markets Forum, an initiative to strengthen cooperation between the securities markets of the two countries, [is held](#) online.

Jan. 27, 2021: Chinese [orders](#) placed with Japanese machine toolmakers increase 23.5% in 2020 even as companies suffer sharp falls from the US and even more so from Europe.

Jan. 28, 2021: Japan's government [requests](#) its embassy-equivalent in Tokyo to ask Taiwan, the world's largest production base for semiconductor products, to increase output since chips for automobiles are in short supply.

Jan. 31, 2021: Japanese manufacturer Panasonic withdrawal from solar cell and panel production in 2022 is [announced](#), as it cannot compete with Chinese rivals' ability to produce the items at lower cost, leaving Kyocera and Sharp as the only major Japanese companies that produce solar batteries and panels.

Jan. 31, 2021: Japan's government [reacts](#) to new Chinese regulations allowing its coast guard to enforce restrictions, including the use of weapons, in areas administered by Japan but claimed by China, with an unnamed Defense Ministry official warning it has the potential to "shake the order based on international law."

Feb. 1, 2021: Professor at the Japan Coast Guard Academy [observes](#) that increasing numbers of Chinese fishing vessels is leading to resource depletion in the Sea of Japan the South China Sea, and the Galapagos Islands.

Feb. 1, 2021: Japan's participation [is expected](#) with Five Eyes in a multinational fund for the development of 5G telecommunications technology and strengthening of the supply network to prevent the spread of equipment made in China.

Feb. 3, 2021: Tokyo [conveys](#) "strong concerns" to Beijing over China's new coast guard legislation.

Feb. 3, 2021: Japanese and British foreign and defense ministers [express](#) concern about China's new law empowering its coast guard to use weapons against foreign vessels in contested waters claimed by the PRC.

Feb. 3, 2021: *Global Times* [criticizes](#) Tokyo for taking the West's side in opposing the military coup in Myanmar.

Feb. 5, 2021: A *Nikkei* article co-authored by a Chinese and Japanese [argues](#) that Beijing must realize that it needs the world on its side if it is to realize the Chinese dream.

Feb. 6, 2021: Head of the LDP's Foreign Affairs Division [announces](#) creation of a Taiwan project team that will, inter alia, discuss the possibility of a counterpart to America's Taiwan Relations Act.

Feb. 8, 2021: Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin [states](#) that its coast guard's intrusion into territorial waters claimed by Japan are legitimate measures taken to safeguard sovereignty in accordance with the law.

Feb. 9, 2021: Foreign Policy Research Institute analysis [states](#) that if China is to establish maritime primacy in the Indo-Pacific, it must first get its navy beyond the Ryukyu Islands.

Feb. 9, 2021: LDP leaders reportedly [form](#) Taiwan project team to consider ways to strengthen relations with Taiwan.

Feb. 10, 2021: Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) [approves](#) a plan to invest up to \$177.7 million in a fully owned subsidiary in Ibaraki prefecture that will expand its research into 3D semiconductor material.

Feb. 10, 2021: Japan Parliamentary Alliance on China adopts a statement condemning the PRC government for its violations of Uyghur human rights and calling for legislation to impose sanctions on high-ranking foreign government officials and organizations involved in the violation of human rights.

Feb. 11, 2021: *Kyodo* [reports](#) that the Japanese government is hesitant to impose sanctions on Myanmar following the military coup, fearing that doing so would drive the military closer to China.

Feb. 15, 2021: It is [reported](#) that Japan will build three transport ships to supply ammunition, fuel, and provisions to troops stationed on its outlying islands. The expected date of deployment is 2024.

Feb. 17, 2021: *Kyodo* [cites](#) a statement by Defense Department press secretary John Kirby that the US "support[s] Japan obviously in that sovereignty," appearing to back Japan's sovereignty over the islands and contradicting past statements that the US takes no position. Another Defense Department spokesperson later "clarifies" that "there is no change to US policy."

Feb. 17, 2021: Japanese ambassador to Bangladesh Ito Naoki [states](#) that Japan has been incentivizing its companies to shift manufacturing facilities out of China.

Feb. 17, 2021: Japan's Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu [describes](#) as "truly regrettable and unacceptable" Chinese coast guard vessels' intrusion into what the Japanese government considers its territorial waters for two successive days.

Feb. 18, 2021: *South China Morning Post* [reports](#) increasing resistance to influential LDP policymaker Nikai Toshihiro within his own party for his ties to Beijing.

Feb. 18, 2021: Chinese netizens [voice approval](#) of a seven-tip list for Japanese in a Chinese competition show, including avoiding "culturally sensitive topics" like the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, "confusing statements regarding the keyword Taiwan," and wearing clothing that features the Japanese flag.

Feb. 19, 2021: Chinese analysts [opine](#) that, due largely to their high volumes of trade with the PRC, Japan and Germany "are less likely [than the other G7 members] to be roped into joining the US-led 'counter China alliance.'"

Feb. 26, 2021: According to a memo written in 2018 and declassified in the final days of the Trump administration but not made public until February 2021, the US [will defend](#) both Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands in an "emergency."

Feb. 26, 2021: Article 7 of police duties execution law [permits](#) Japan Coast Guard to use weapons on vessels trying to land on the Senkaku Islands when perpetrators who commit crimes categorized as violent and dangerous offer resistance.

March 1, 2021: Japan's coast guard [reports](#) that 14 Chinese marine patrol vessels entered Japanese waters in the first month that China's new law on its coast guard went into effect.

March 5, 2021: *Nikkei* [reports](#) that, amid worsening ties with China, the pro-China wing of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party has lost ground to its pro-Taiwan wing.

March 7, 2021: Foreign Minister Wang Yi [states](#) that China's new coast guard law does not [target](#) any specific country.

March 8, 2021: Responding to the 6.8% increase in China's defense budget, an *Asahi* editorial [asks](#) how the world can buy the narrative of peaceful development that China is trying to sell.

March 8, 2021: Chinese military newspaper *Jiefangjun Bao*, [says](#) it is a nation's right to determine its defense expenditure and how it will be used.

March 9, 2021: Japanese Ambassador Yamagami Shingo [assures](#) Australia that it "is not walking alone" in dealing with an increasingly aggressive China, which is of great concern to his country.

March 12, 2021: A US defense website [reports](#) that Japan's Office of National Space Policy has signed a "historic" memorandum of understanding to launch two US payloads into Geostationary Earth Orbit on Japan's Quasi Zenith Satellite System to help surveillance of Chinese space activities.

March 16, 2021: It [is reported](#) that two Japan-based manufacturers of semiconductor wafers, one headed by a Chinese national, are turning to China in an effort to catch up with top producers Shin-etsu Chemical and Sumco.

March 16, 2021: It [is reported](#) that, led by chip-making equipment, nonferrous metals and plastic, Japanese exports to China reportedly rise 3.4% in February.

March 17, 2021: Center-left *Asahi* [editorializes](#) against allowing the Quad to be seen as anti-China.

March 19, 2021: The MSDF [commissions](#) the *Aegis*-equipped destroyer, the *Haguro*, completing its fleet arrangement as advocated in the 2013 National Defense Program Guidelines.

March 20, 2021: DM Kishi [hints](#) that the SDF and US military may conduct joint drills around disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

March 20, 2021: Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato Katsunobu [expresses](#) "strong displeasure" at a comment by a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson that Japan is a "strategic vassal" of the United States.

March 23, 2021: It [is reported](#) that Toyota will manufacture key components of fuel cell vehicles in the PRC as early as 2022. This will be the first time Toyota has produced such components outside Japan.

March 24, 2021: Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato, [expresses](#) "grave concern" over PRC human rights violations but points out that Tokyo lacks a legal framework for the imposition of "sanctions directly and explicitly connected to human rights issues."

March 25, 2021: *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) on the urgency of drawing up clear rules to prevent technology leaks to China and other countries.

March 28, 2021: Japanese government sources [state](#) that local opposition to the deployment of a Ground Self-Defence Forces detachment on Yonaguni Island has diminished.

March 31, 2021: Two-plus-two talks between Japan and Indonesia centering on shared concerns over China's growing territorial claims in the East and South China seas [result](#) in agreement on the transfer of Japanese defense equipment and technology to Jakarta.

March 31, 2021: According to *Renmin Ribao*, at the third annual meeting of the China-Japan maritime and air liaison mechanism and fifth round of working-level consultations on defense affairs, China [reiterates](#) that the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands are China's inherent territory and urges Japan to stop provoking China and making groundless accusations against it. Japanese papers do not mention the meeting.

April 1, 2021: Chinese Foreign Ministry [expresses](#) "grave concern" over Japan-Indonesian 2+2 talks, saying that the Indonesian side had "clarified the situation" (without specifying how) and urges Japanese media to stop creating false news.

April 2, 2021: *Nikkei* [reports](#) that a meeting of LDP lawmakers last week heard that China is planning to build up land around the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and move 20,000 people there.

April 4, 2021: *Yomiuri* [cites](#) a source close to the Defense Ministry saying that, in response to China's military buildup, the large-scale deployment of F-35Bs will be a "decisive measure for the defense of remote islands."

April 5, 2021: Chinese aircraft carrier *Liaoning* and five escort vessels [pass](#) through the Miyako Strait for the first time since April 2020.

April 5, 2021: Declassified documents obtained by *Kyodo* from the US National Archives [reveal](#) that the US government rejected requests from its military to resume use of a bombing base in the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands lest it become involved in the China-Japan dispute over their sovereignty.

April 6, 2021: In a telephone call to Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Japanese counterpart Motegi [expresses](#) Japan's "serious concerns" over China's treatment of Uyghurs and Hong Kong. Wang responds that China opposes interference in its internal affairs. Motegi also voices concern over China's activities in the South China Sea and its new law empowering coast guard vessels to fire on foreign ships within a maritime jurisdiction determined by China.

April 6, 2021: *Global Times* [reports](#) that Wang warned Motegi that bilateral ties had been “soured by Japan’s intense hobnobbing with the US,” and its interference in China’s internal affairs regarding Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

April 7, 2021: Suga [announces](#) plans to visit India and the Philippines, both of whom have border disputes with the PRC, in late August, though the trips are later cancelled over COVID concerns.

April 7, 2021: Signaling a closer defense [relationship](#) with India, Japan makes its first project-type grant to an Indian-owned Andaman island.

April 8, 2021: Japan [calls](#) for an in-person Quad summit on the sidelines of the G7 meeting in June.

April 14, 2021: At two-plus-two security talks, German and Japanese foreign and security ministers [exchange](#) views on China’s territorial claims in the East and South China sea and express grave concern over the situation in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

April 16, 2021: China’s Foreign Ministry [expresses](#) its “strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition” to Japan’s decision to release treated radioactive water accumulated at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

April 16, 2021: Regarding Suga’s meeting with President Biden, the Chinese Foreign Ministry [expresses](#) “serious concerns” over negative moves and collusion between the two countries against China.

April 18, 2021: *Asahi* [editorializes](#) that, although solid backing from the US is vital to defending the Senkaku Islands, the joint statement about the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait puts Japan in danger of being drawn into a security emergency.

April 19, 2021: Aiming to counter China’s rapid expansion in the construction of undersea communication cables, Japanese, Australian, and US officials [reportedly agreed](#) to strengthen information sharing on China’s activities and cooperate in financing submarine cables in strategically important areas.

April 21, 2021: *South China Morning Post* [reports](#) that, in response to an opposition politician in the Diet asking about Japan’s commitment to defend Taiwan at the summit with Biden, Suga replied that the statement “does not presuppose military involvement at all.”

April 21, 2021: *Renmin Ribao* [notes](#) that, although Suga sent a ritual *masakaki* offering to the Yasukuni shrine’s spring festival he did not personally attend, nor did Cabinet ministers.

April 23, 2021: *Nikkei* [reports](#) that although Suga deflected pressure from NSC Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt Campbell for a Japanese version of the US Taiwan Relations Act, Biden had not raised the issue, with Suga informing his aides afterward that “the Senkakus and Taiwan are linked.”

April 24, 2021: A signed editorial by *Global Times*’ editor-in-chief [warns](#) Japan that if they follow the US, they will definitely become the target of the PLA.

April 25, 2021: Yao Chung-yuan, former deputy director of Taiwan’s Ministry of Defense’s strategic planning department, [argues](#) that a quasi-military alliance has emerged among Japan, Taiwan, and the US to counter the threat from China.

April 26, 2021: 74% of respondents to a *Nikkei* telephone poll reportedly [support](#) Japan’s engagement in Taiwan issues.

April 26, 2021: To bolster its claim to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, China’s Ministry of National Resources [releases](#) a topographical study of the area based on satellite images.

April 26, 2021: Japan [lodges](#) forceful protest demanding the removal of a tweet by a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman adapting a famous Hokusai print into an image of nuclear waste being poured into the sea by people in Hazmat suits.

April 27, 2021: China [issues](#) solemn representations to Japan over the latter’s newly released diplomatic blue book, which terms the Chinese Coast Guard’s repeated entries into Japanese territorial waters a violation of international law.

April 27, 2021: Japanese newspapers [report](#) that the Chinese navy, already the world’s largest, has launched three new vessels—a ballistic missile submarine, a destroyer, and an amphibious assault ship.

April 30, 2021: Controversy [swirls](#) around the security implications of Chinese company Tencent’s acquisition of a 3.65% share in wireless carrier Rakuten that did not receive the pre-screening by Japan’s newly amended Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Act.

PACIFIC FORUM

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

DIFFICULT TO DISENTANGLE: HISTORY AND FOREIGN POLICY

Ji-YOUNG LEE, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Unsurprisingly, historical issues proved difficult to disentangle from other foreign policy issues in Japan-South Korea relations, which remained at the “worst level since the normalization” in the first four months of 2021. The Seoul Central District Court’s ruling on Jan. 8 that the Japanese government should pay damages to victims of sexual slavery during World War II set the tone for contentious relations at the beginning of the year. While the Moon Jae-in administration made gestures to mend ties, the Suga administration maintained that South Korea should take concrete measures to roll back the 2018 South Korean Supreme Court ruling on Japanese companies requiring them to compensate wartime forced laborers. Export restrictions levied by Japan against South Korean companies in 2019 remain in place, while [the case](#) is with the World Trade Organization after South Korea reopened a complaint in 2020 that was filed and then suspended in 2019.

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In 2021, two events could have created an opportunity for meaningful engagement to repair these frayed bilateral relations. The first is the inauguration of President Joseph Biden in the United States and his administration's emphasis on Seoul-Tokyo-Washington trilateral cooperation. Developments in the first 100 days of the Biden administration suggest, however, that South Korean, Japanese, and US policy objectives and priorities concerning North Korea and China do not align. Trilateral cohesion might require significant policy coordination efforts.

The second is the Tokyo Summer Olympics, scheduled for July. The Moon and Suga administrations are interested in using this sporting event as a venue for engagement with North Korea. If Kim Jong Un decides to join (as Tokyo and Seoul hope), South Korea and Japan might have a chance to restore and increase diplomatic activities in pursuit of their policy goals toward Pyongyang. Chances appear slim at this point, however. North Korea declared in early April that it would not participate due to the pandemic, while many Japanese [believe](#) that the Olympics should be cancelled or postponed considering the public health risks.



Figure 1 Protesters call for the cancellation of the Tokyo Olympics in front of the organizing committee's offices in Tokyo, February 2021. Photo: Reuters

The Biden Administration and Future of Trilateral Cooperation

Signaling the importance that the Biden team places on allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region, Japan and South Korea, along with India, were the first destinations of international trips by Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin. Both Seoul and Tokyo were able to reach military cost-sharing agreements with Washington early in

2021, which had been dragging on under the Trump administration. As the Biden administration's Asia policy was taking shape, Japan and South Korea sought to put their respective alliance relationship with the United States on a solid footing, while also putting forward their policy preferences on North Korea and other regional affairs.

Remarks by South Korean President Moon and Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide on Jan. 18 are worth noting in this regard. In [his policy speech](#) at the opening of the Lower House parliamentary session, Suga reconfirmed that Japan would continue to pursue the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, stressing the need to cooperate more tightly with the United States, Southeast Asian countries, Australia, India, and Europe. On relations with South Korea, he assessed that "bilateral relations are in an extremely severe situation," calling South Korea "an important neighboring country," which is a downgrade from "a *critically* important neighboring country" used in his previous policy speech.

Broadly speaking, Japan's foreign policy outlook on regional security affairs, especially those involving China, converges with that of the Biden administration. In March, Japanese foreign and defense ministers and US Foreign and Defense secretaries issued a joint statement that "[expressed](#) serious concerns about recent disruptive developments in the region, such as the China Coast Guard law." Tokyo received an assurance from the Biden administration that the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands fall under the US-Japan security treaty.

President Moon's New Year's press conference on Jan. 18 indicated that Seoul prioritizes a diplomatic breakthrough with North Korea over other foreign policy objectives. President Moon [said](#), "the inauguration of the Biden administration would provide a turning point to newly start US-North Korea dialogue, South-North dialogue, to inherit the achievements that were made under the Trump administration. ... The dialogue can pick up the pace if we restart from the Singapore declaration and seek concrete measures in the negotiation." In January, South Korea's Cabinet reshuffles reflected the desire to pursue this goal, known as the Korean Peninsula Peace Process, while working closely with the US. In late January, Moon also had a phone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping seeking China's

support for inter-Korean relations and US-DPRK talks.

As the first Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) leaders' summit in March set the tone for the Biden administration's Asia policy, South Korea's reservations toward the Quad—of which Japan is a member—became a focus of domestic, as well as international, debate. In the context of the framework of FOIP and China policy, Korea observers were worried that Seoul's alliance cohesion with Washington has been weakening, and that South Korea was being marginalized in regional affairs.

Differing views and preferred policy options on North Korea can be a determinant of Seoul-Tokyo-Washington trilateral partnership under the Biden administration. After the US-Japan in-person summit in April, Washington and Tokyo [confirmed](#) that the goal is the “complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement of all of Pyongyang's weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles of all ranges.” While the world awaits details of the new administration's policy toward North Korea, Biden said, “we will empower our diplomats to work to reduce the threat posed by North Korea's growing nuclear and missile programs, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the Republic of Korea and Japan.” On April 2, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Japanese National Security Secretariat Secretary General Shigeru Kitamura, and South Korean National Security Office Director Suh Hoon held an in-person trilateral meeting at the United States Naval Academy. The press statement [reads](#), “They agreed on the imperative for full implementation of relevant UN Security Council resolutions by the international community, including North Korea, preventing proliferation, and cooperating to strengthen deterrence and maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.” But the devil is in the details. It remains to be seen what specific measures the three countries will come up with, especially after the US-South Korea summit meeting scheduled to be held on May 21.



Figure 2 Protesters call for the cancellation of the Tokyo Olympics in front of the organizing committee's offices in Tokyo, February 2021. Photo: Reuters

“Same Bed, Different (Olympic) Dreams”

The Moon administration has been working to improve relations with the Suga administration with its eye on the Tokyo Summer Olympics in July as an opportunity to engage with North Korea, likely in a similar fashion to the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics. During his March 1 address that commemorated the 102th anniversary of the March First Independence Movement, President Moon suggested that he was ready for talks with Japan, [noting](#) that “bilateral cooperation will not only benefit our two countries but also facilitate stability and common prosperity in Northeast Asia and the trilateral Korea-United States-Japan partnership.” He [stated](#), “the Olympic Games scheduled for this year may serve as an opportunity for dialogue between South Korea and Japan, South and North Korea, North Korea and the United States.”

In an interview with Japanese media, Kang Chang-il, South Korea's new ambassador in Japan since January [said](#), “President Moon Jae-in has a firm intention to rebuild South Korea-Japan relations and intensify cooperation with Japan,” adding that the president would be willing to do his utmost to support Japan's successful Olympics this summer. As of early May, Kang had not met with Prime Minister Suga and Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu.

On the first day of the Tokyo Olympic torch relay in late March, North Korea launched two short-range ballistic missiles into the sea near Japan, the first provocation since Biden came into office. Japan protested officially through its embassy in China. [Criticizing](#) the test as “a threat to peace and stability in Japan and the

region,” Prime Minister Suga told reporters after an emergency National Security Council meeting that Japan “will closely cooperate with the United States, South Korea and other countries to firmly protect people’s peaceful lives.”

The Suga administration sees the Tokyo Olympics as a possible conduit to resolve the abduction issue, which has been foremost in Japan’s dealings with North Korea. Following his April 16 summit meeting with Biden, Suga reiterated that he would be willing to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un “without precondition.” An important context of Suga’s desire to meet Kim is that Japan’s position of comprehensively resolving North Korea’s nuclear, missile, and abduction issues have not changed. In this vein, Tokyo’s unilateral sanctions on North Korea, first imposed over 10 years, were extended. During the Biden-Suga summit, Japan and the United States confirmed that they would work to strengthen deterrence against threats originating from North Korea. North Korea’s official *Rodong Sinmun* newspaper on April 18 responded by [condemning](#) Japan for “occupying the Korean [P]eninsula during the first half of the 20th century and engaging in a barbaric policy to annihilate the people.”

In early April, North Korea announced that it decided not to participate in the Summer Olympics out of concern about the pandemic. Both Tokyo and Seoul expressed hope that Pyongyang would change its mind. Suga [said](#) that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Tokyo “will sort the situation out.” Seoul submitted to IOC a joint bid to cohost the 2032 Summer Olympics with Pyongyang, in accordance with their September 2018 summit meeting between the two Koreas.

Two Rulings on “Comfort Women”

On Jan. 8, the Seoul Central District Court ruled that the Japanese government was responsible for compensating victims of wartime sexual slavery. A legal battle that had begun over seven years ago led to a ruling that the Japanese government should pay 100 million won (about \$90,000) each to the 12 plaintiffs. Japan had refused to participate in the trial, citing state immunity, and the trial had proceeded in absentia.

In response to the ruling, Japan’s Foreign Ministry summoned outgoing South Korean

Ambassador to Japan Nam Gwan-pyo to file a complaint. In a telephone call between South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha and Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi, Motegi [requested](#) that Seoul “take appropriate measures immediately to correct the violation of international law,” saying that the ruling went against a 2015 deal between the two governments. Kato Katsunobu, Japan’s chief Cabinet secretary, said Japan will not appeal the ruling because that would place Japan under South Korea’s jurisdiction. If the Japanese government does not appeal the district court ruling and refuses to pay compensation, South Korean courts can order the seizure of Japanese government assets in South Korea.

After the Jan. 8 ruling, President Moon is reported to [have said](#), “I was frankly a bit thrown when the matter of the Comfort Woman judgment was added into things amid our efforts [toward a diplomatic resolution].” During the New Years’ press conference on Jan. 18, Moon [said](#) for the first time that it was “not desirable” that South Korean courts sell off the assets of Japanese companies to compensate wartime forced laborers, saying that Seoul will continue talks with Japan to explore a solution that the plaintiffs can agree with. On the 2015 agreement on the “Comfort Women” issue, he [said](#) that the “South Korean government recognizes it as an official agreement between the two countries.” Japan’s response was not what Seoul would have liked. Masahisa Sato, director of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party’s Foreign Affairs Division, [commented](#), “it is we who are bewildered. [Moon’s comments] had nothing specific that could lead to a resolution.”

On April 21, in another ruling, a different chamber of the Seoul Central District Court rejected a compensation claim against the Japanese government by 20 individuals including survivors of wartime sexual slavery, citing Japan’s state immunity. At the heart of this ruling that contradicted the earlier January case was the question of state immunity, a legal principle that “[protects](#) a State and its property from the jurisdiction of the courts of another State.” Whereas the January ruling upheld that state immunity was not applicable due to Japan’s “crime against humanity,” Judge Min Seong-cheol [said](#), “if an exception on state immunity is acknowledge, a diplomatic clash would be inevitable during the process of forcing the ruling’s implementation.” In response to this April ruling, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato

said, “as the Japanese government, we will continue to strongly ask the South Korean side for an appropriate action.” Lee Yong-soo, one of the plaintiffs and a victim, described the ruling “absurd, nonsense,” and [urged](#) the South Korean government to “take the issue to the International Court of Justice regardless of whether it produces a good or bad outcome.”



Figure 3 Former South Korean ‘comfort woman’ Lee Yong-soo speaks to the media after the Korean court’s April ruling. Photo: Jung Yeon-je/AFP

Disputes over Fukushima Waste Water

The Japanese government’s announcement of its decision to release 1.25 million tons of treated wastewater from the Fukushima plant into the Pacific Ocean has caused diplomatic friction, triggering protests from South Korea as well as China and Taiwan. South Korea’s Second Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-moon summoned Japanese Ambassador to South Korea Aiboshi Koichi to protest the decision. President Moon [requested](#) officials to “proactively consider” bringing this to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea to stop Japan from dumping water into the ocean. Some 30 South Korean college students shaved their heads in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul, protesting Japan’s decision.



Figure 4 Former South Korean ‘comfort woman’ Lee Yong-soo speaks to the media after the Korean court’s April ruling. Photo: Jung Yeon-je/AFP

In a roundtable meeting with Seoul, US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry signaled that Washington would not intervene in the matter, saying that it would not be “appropriate.” Within Japan, the plan faced objections from the fisheries association as they are concerned about reputational damage to their products. A NHK survey showed that 51% of respondents are against the release while 18% support the decision. The release is scheduled to take place two years from now.

Looking to Summer 2021

Election losses of [South Korean](#) and [Japanese](#) ruling parties in by-elections in April amid falling approval ratings of both Suga and Moon mean that their immediate attention will be on domestic problems. Handling the pandemic is one of their shared top priorities. The Tokyo Olympics in July might potentially present Tokyo and Seoul with opportunities for diplomacy. But as of early May, it is unclear whether they will materialize. For South Korean leader Moon Jae-in, a successful summit with President Biden in late May will be a milestone for South Korean foreign policy at a point where Moon has one more year in office.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2021

Jan. 1, 2021: North Korea's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) [reports](#) that in a handwritten New Year's card North Korean leader Kim Jong Un addresses the Korean people offering thanks for their trust and support in the difficult times.

Jan. 5, 2021: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [convenes](#) the Worker's Party Congress in Pyongyang.

Jan. 7, 2021: KCNA reports that during a speech to the Worker's Party Congress, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [expresses](#) his determination to "place the state defense capabilities on a much higher level, and put forth goals for realizing it."

Jan. 7, 2021: Seoul Central District Court [issues](#) ruling ordering the Japanese government to compensate 12 plaintiffs who are victims of wartime sex slavery.

Jan. 8, 2021: In a phone call, Japanese Foreign Vice Minister Akiba Takeo [speaks](#) to South Korean ambassador to Japan Nam Gwan-pyo about the South Korean court ruling issued against the Japanese government and says, "The ruling is extremely regrettable and the Japanese government absolutely cannot accept it."

Jan. 9, 2021: South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha and Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu [talks](#) on the phone. Motegi requests that Seoul "take appropriate measures immediately to correct the violation of international law."

Jan. 11, 2021: South Korean Finance Minister Hong Nam-ki [said](#) that South Korea will review membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Previously President Moon had, during his New Years' Message, said South Korea would positively review joining the CPTPP.

Jan. 13, 2021: Suga [said](#) that he would seek dialogue with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un "without precondition" by taking advantage of the Summer Olympics in Tokyo in July.

Jan. 17, 2021: Kang Chang-il, as South Korea's new ambassador in Japan, [signals](#) South Korea's willingness to mend ties in an interview with Japanese media, saying "President Moon Jae-in has a firm intention to rebuild South Korea-Japan relations and intensify cooperation with Japan."

Jan. 18, 2021: At a New Year's news conference South Korean President Moon Jae-in [says](#), "The inauguration of the Biden administration would provide a turning point to newly start US-North Korea dialogue, South-North dialogue, to inherit the achievements that were made under the Trump administration."

Jan. 18, 2021: Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide [delivers](#) his policy speech at the opening of the Lower House parliamentary session.

Jan. 20, 2021: Joseph Biden is [inaugurated](#) as president of the United States.

Jan. 23-24, 2021: *Asahi Shimbun* survey [shows](#) that the approval rating for Suga's cabinet went down to 33% from 65% when Suga took office in September 2020.

Jan. 26, 2021: South Korea's Bank of Korea [announces](#) that South Korea's real gross domestic product fell by 1% in 2020, marking the lowest growth rate in 22 years.

Feb. 5, 2021: In a statement, South Korea's Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy [says](#) that South Korean Minister of Trade Yoo Myung-hee will drop her bid to be World Trade Organization director-general.

March 1, 2021: During a ceremony for March 1 Independence Day, South Korean President Moon Jae-in [says](#), “The [Olympic] Games scheduled for this year may serve as an opportunity for dialogue between South Korea and Japan, South and North Korea, North Korea and Japan, and North Korea and the United States.”

March 7, 2021: Seoul’s Joint Chiefs of Staff [issue](#) a statement saying that after a review of the pandemic and diplomatic efforts, the March US–South Korean joint military drills will be scaled down.

March 16–17, 2021: US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III [attend](#) the US–Japan Security Consultative Committee (“2+2”) meeting in Tokyo. The meeting is hosted by Japan’s Minister for Foreign Affairs Motegi Toshimitsu and Minister of Defense Nobuo Kishi.

March 17–18, 2021: US Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of Defense Austin [attend](#) a US–ROK Foreign and Defense Ministerial (“2+2”) in Seoul. The meeting is hosted by the ROK’s Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and Minister of Defense Suh Wook.

March 25, 2021: North Korea launches two ballistic missiles into the sea near Japan. Prime Minister Suga calls an emergency meeting of the National Security Council and says that Japan will closely cooperate with the US, South Korea, and other countries.

March 30, 2021: Japan’s Ministry of Education authorizes 30 social studies textbooks for the 2022 school year which assert that the Takeshima/Dokdo and Senkaku/Diaoyu islands are a part of Japanese territory. South Korea’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Choi Young-sam responds by saying, “we cannot help but deplore and strongly condemn the approval of the textbooks carrying ungrounded claims to Dokdo, which is clearly our indigenous territory historically, geographically and by international law.”

March 31, 2021: UN Security Council committee on North Korea sanctions expert panel [releases](#) report indicating that “cyberactors linked to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea continued to conduct operations against financial institutions and virtual currency exchange houses in 2020 to generate revenue to support its weapons of mass destruction.”

April 2, 2021: Blue House National Security Office Director Suh Hoon, Japan National Security Secretariat Secretary General Shigeru Kitamura, and US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [hold](#) trilateral talks at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

April 3, 2021: South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [meets](#) with Chinese counterpart Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Fujian Province to discuss bilateral relations.

April 5, 2021: A report on North Korean Sports Ministry website DPRK Korea [states](#) that the North Korean Olympic Committee “decided not to participate in the 32nd Olympic Games in order to protect players from the world public health crisis caused by COVID-19.”

April 7, 2021: During a press briefing in Washington, DC White House spokesperson Jen Psaki [says](#) “We have a clear objective as it relates to North Korea, denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula” and “We are prepared to consider some form of diplomacy, if it’s going to lead us down the path toward denuclearization.”

April 8, 2021: South Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun and US Acting Ambassador to Seoul Robert Rapson formally [sign](#) the 11th Special Measures Agreement six-year defense cost-sharing arrangement at the Seoul government complex.

April 13, 2021: During a press conference after a meeting at a Seoul government complex, head of Korea’s Office for Government Policy Coordination Koo Yun-cheol [says](#) “The Korean government expresses strong regret over the Japanese government’s decision to release contaminated water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant into the ocean, and plans to take all necessary measures keeping the safety of our people as the top priority.”

April 14, 2021: South Korean presidential spokesperson Kang Min-seok [says](#) that “at a Blue House meeting the president ordered his aides to actively examine ways to bring Japan’s decision to release contaminated water from [the Fukushima] nuclear plant to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.”

April 14, 2021: During a reception held after a credentials presenting ceremony, South Korean President Moon Jae-in [tells](#) Japanese Ambassador to South Korea Aiboshi Koichi that “Korea has extremely serious concerns over Japan’s decision to release contaminated water from the nuclear plant into the sea because our geographic location is the closest and the two countries share the sea.”

April 14, 2021: In response to Japan’s decision to release the contaminated Fukushima plant water, South Korean DP Rep. Shin Dong-kun [says](#) “It is very disappointing that the United States, our [traditional] ally, sided with Japan.” Acting DP leader Rep. Do Jong-hwan [says](#), “We denounce the Japanese government for making the decision without offering transparent information and a verification process.”

April 16, 2021: President Biden and Prime Minister Suga [hold](#) an in-person summit meeting.

April 16, 2021: Judge Kim Yang-ho [issues](#) ruling in Seoul Central District Court authorizing collection of the legal fees from the Japanese government for 12 plaintiffs that sued the Japanese government for compensation for wartime suffering as comfort women.

April 18, 2021: During a roundtable meeting with media, US special climate envoy John Kerry [responds](#) to questions about US involvement in Japan’s release of contaminated water from the Fukushima plant. John Kerry says, “We don’t think it is appropriate for the US to jump into the process that’s already underway and where there are very clear rules and expectations.”

April 21, 2021: Seoul Central District Court [rejects](#) a compensation claim against the Japanese government by 20 individuals including survivors of wartime sex slavery, citing sovereign immunity.

April 30, 2021: According to a Gallup Korea poll, President Moon’s approval rating dropped to 29%, the lowest since his inauguration. Respondents cited real estate policies, the handling of the pandemic, economy and people’s livelihood as reasons for the drop.

This chronology was prepared by Patrice Francis, MA student at American University’s School of International Service.

PACIFIC FORUM

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

CHINA- RUSSIA RELATIONS

EMPIRE STRIKES BACK AT MOSCOW AND BEIJING

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For [Moscow](#) and Beijing, the changing of the guard in the White House in January 2021 meant no reset of ties with Washington. Instead, the newly inaugurated Biden administration turned the screws on both China and Russia by reinvigorating alliances, firming up sanctions, and prioritizing force deployment, particularly to the Indo-Pacific region. In contrast to Biden's multifaceted diplomatic offensive, China and Russia seemed passive, if not inactive, both in terms of their bilateral ties and their respective relations with the US. Top Russian and Chinese diplomats met in person just once in the first four months of 2021 in the middle of sharply escalated tensions across the Taiwan Strait and in East Ukraine. Meanwhile, Beijing and Moscow waited to see if the transition from Trumpism would lead to a brave new world ("[new concert of powers](#)"), a grave new world of [Kissingerian](#) "[great games](#)" in the era of WMD plus AI, or something in between.

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The Eye of the Storm?

A month into his administration, President Biden declared to the Munich Security Conference that “[America is back](#).” Meanwhile, interactions between Russia and the PRC—the main US “strategic competitors,” remained routine, if not minimal. In his speech, Biden repeated his “America is back” catchphrase three times lest anyone miss it, but he wasn’t limited to just words. Indeed, in the first few weeks of the new administration, the US rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement and World Health Organization, reversed the troop withdrawal from Germany, ordered airstrikes on Iran-back militias in Syria, discussed re-entering the Iran nuclear deal, applied sanctions against the Myanmar military coup, among other steps. Yet, far from working together to counter Biden’s initiatives, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin did not even have a telephone conversation in the first four months of 2021 (compared to [five times](#) in 2020, including one in April).

In fact, much of the diplomatic interaction between Beijing and Moscow during this time occurred at the functionary level. On Jan. 15, Deputy Chinese Foreign Minister Le Yucheng and Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Denisov met in Beijing to [discuss bilateral issues and those of “common concern.”](#) The two met again on Jan. 28 for issues of “[strategic coordination](#).” In late February, Denisov [met in Beijing with](#) Cheng Guoping, special envoy for external security affairs of the Chinese Foreign Ministry. They discussed antiterrorism and other bilateral issues.

In the first 50 days of the Biden administration, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov talked on the phone [only once](#) (Feb. 4). In contrast, Wang and Lavrov talked [four times](#) in the first four months of 2020. This time, they “stressed the importance of upholding [non-interference](#) in other countries’ internal affairs” (such as [Alexei Navalny](#) and [Xinjiang](#)). For both China and Russia, the return of liberal interventionism in Washington was a familiar, though unwelcome, harbinger of challenges ahead.

COVID-19 continued to minimize normal diplomatic interactions between the two large powers. Yet at least two other factors might explain the current lull in Russia-China

interactions. One was the absence of any major problems between the two, hence the mutual confidence in bilateral ties. On Jan. 2, [Wang Yi](#) described relations with Russia as the “best in history in all areas.” [Alexander Gabuev](#), senior fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center, observed that bilateral relations had remained stable in 2020 and even improved in some “important aspects.” With the waning of the pandemic, Putin is scheduled to visit China in summer 2021 and the two sides are likely to ink “a hefty package of new deals,” said Gabuev.

The other possible reason: Moscow and Beijing also seemed to wait for the dust in Washington to settle in the wake of a chaotic power transition from Trump to Biden. Neither Russia nor China placed unrealistic hopes in the new US administration. However, [Beijing](#) and Moscow expected something different from the new team, as relations with the US under Trump had hit a low point. “An already bad relationship cannot be further destroyed,” [Putin was quoted](#) as saying. And there was a positive initial step: Biden’s quick move to extend the New START was “a step in the right direction,” according to [Putin](#).

From “Strategic Patience” to “March Madness”

For all its declared “de-Trumpification efforts,” the Biden administration started with a similarly China-heavy-and-Russia-lite tilt, evidently meant to weaken the Beijing-Moscow partnership. This was soon replaced—deliberately or not—by a dual strategy of taking on both China and Russia, leading to strong pushbacks to the extent that [a US observer](#) warned in April that Biden now “faces a nightmare scenario” as a result of “deepening ties between China and Russia.”

In the beginning, however, the Biden administration seemed to follow a carefully scripted [policy paper](#) (from the Center for a New American Security, authored by two former senior intelligence officials) to limit, if not break, the depth of Russia-China partnership. To this end, Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov [was invited to join Biden’s inauguration](#). Also among the guests was Taiwan’s de facto ambassador in Washington, [Hsiao Bi-khim](#). Six days after his inauguration, [Biden called](#) Putin. The two [agreed to extend the New START Treaty](#) for five years without

China's participation, as had been insisted upon by the Trump administration. Biden and Xi did not talk over the phone [until two weeks later](#) (Feb. 10). For this, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki referred to a policy of "[strategic patience](#)" with China while prioritizing relations with allies. Meanwhile, the stage was set for a more robust China-focused strategy when an anonymous author on Jan. 30 released "the [Longer Telegram](#)," named after George Kennan's famous "Long Telegram" from Moscow in February 1946, a precursor to the Cold War.

The Biden–Xi two-hour telephone conversation on Feb. 10 took place after Biden called China the US's "[most serious competitor](#)" in his first foreign policy speech on Feb. 4 and just a few hours after his [first visit to the Pentagon](#), where he announced the formation of a [DOD China Task Force](#) for intra-departmental China policy coordination, as well as liaising with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the intel community.

Biden's China-focused strategy unfolded rapidly in March as the China Task Force became operational on March 1. Two days later, the White House unveiled its "[Interim National Security Strategic Guidance](#)," defining China as "the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system." Russia, on the other hand, merely plays a "destructive role."

As part of efforts to confront China, Biden held the first virtual summit with other Quad leaders (Japan, India, and Australia) on March 12. Although the joint statement did not mention China, everything the leaders talked about was about China, a [Chinese source noted](#). Meanwhile, senior US foreign and defense officials (Secretaries Antony Blinken and Lloyd Austin) traveled to East Asia for "2+2" talks with their Japanese and South Korean counterparts on [March 16](#) and [18](#) before meeting two senior Chinese diplomats (Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi) in Anchorage, Alaska on their way back on March 18–19.

Chinese media offered [various reasons, real or imagined](#), for the location of the first US–China senior dialogue: a mid-point between continental America and Asia, a sense of equality for both sides, its [low COVID infection](#)

[rate](#), its distance from the US political center, etc. Alaska is, nonetheless, the coldest place in the US. The two-day dialogue, however, started with heated exchanges in front of reporters. Top Chinese officials were evidently taken aback by Blinken's opening statement containing what the Chinese side considered [anti-China allegations](#) and interference in Chinese domestic politics. A series of [sanctions](#) (against Chinese telecom companies and Hong Kong officials) imposed shortly before the meeting added to [China's discomfort](#). The ensuing two sessions of closed-door discussions ended without releasing a joint statement.

While prioritizing China, Russia was never out of Biden's sight, and soon tensions were rising again. On Feb. 25, the US bombed pro-Iranian forces in Syria. Russian Foreign Minister [Sergey Lavrov complained that](#) Russia was given only four or five minutes' warning before the strikes. Sergei Tsekov, a member of the foreign affairs committee of the Federation Council, described the bombing as "[extremely outrageous](#)." A week later, the Biden administration [imposed its first round of sanctions](#) against Russia for the alleged poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

Biden's other "Russia shoe" (calling Putin "a killer") dropped on March 17 [in his interview with ABC News](#). No matter how off-handed the comment was, it officially ended Moscow's "strategic patience" with the new administration. So ended lingering hope to "[normalize relations](#)" with the US, expressed by Putin in his Jan. 26 phone call with Biden. [Putin responded](#) by wishing Biden "good health" and then invited Biden to [a public discussion](#) to be broadcast live in Russia and the US. Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov [called](#) Biden's remarks "very bad," and "unprecedented," saying they showed that Biden "definitely is not planning to improve ties with Russia." Russia [immediately summoned](#) Ambassador Antonov back to Moscow for "urgent consultations," and "advised" US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan to go back to Washington "for consultations." The last time Russia recalled its ambassador from the US was in [1998](#), to protest US airstrikes against Iraq.

Outraged as Russian sources were, Chinese [analysts](#) were not particularly surprised by Biden's "killer" remarks, given Biden's past rhetoric about Putin. Russia's response (recalling ambassador), according to [Wu Dahui](#),

a prominent Russologist in Beijing, was a “you-go-low-I-go-lower” tit-for-tat strategy in the “darkest time of Russia-US relations.” Just two days after the Biden-Putin exchange, [Russia](#) deployed all six of its Black Sea Fleet submarines as NATO kicked off its *Sea Shield 21* (March 19-29).

Taiwan and Donbass: End of Ambiguity?

March got “madder,” at least from Chinese and Russian perspectives, with the sensitive buttons of Ukraine and Taiwan being pushed. Until recently, both Taiwan and Donbass were carefully capped from significant escalation by the three large powers with different degrees of ambiguity. For Beijing and Washington, four decades of stability across the Taiwan Strait was kept by the “one-country-two-system” formula with the US maintaining [strategic ambiguity](#) regarding its direct intervention in times of hostility across the Taiwan Strait. Russia monitored the situation carefully, speculating on US motives for confronting the PRC on its Taiwan claims. By contrast, in the Ukraine case China is officially neutral, having ties with Kiev as well as Moscow, and the US and Russia successfully kept the proxy skirmishes in East Ukraine from escalating.

In the last week of the Trump administration, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [lifted](#) longstanding restrictions for US and Taiwanese diplomatic engagement, which Beijing regarded as a serious violation of the “one-China” arrangement (see more in the [China-Taiwan chapter](#)). A crisis was narrowly averted by the last-minute cancelation, [presumably by Biden’s transition team](#), of a trip to Taiwan by [Kelly Craft](#), then-US ambassador to the UN, scheduled for the closing days of the Trump administration. Since then, both the Chinese and US militaries stepped up their posturing in the East and South China Seas. The US *Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group* was deployed to the region [twice in three months](#) (Jan. 23 and April 6). On Feb. 9, the USS *Nimitz* [joined](#) the *Roosevelt Group* in the South China Sea to “improve our readiness levels in the region.” Meanwhile, Chinese military aircraft routinized their intrusion into [Taiwan’s air defense identification zone](#) (ADIZ) on an almost daily basis ([98 days](#) in the first four months of 2021).



Figure 1 The aircraft carriers USS Nimitz and USS Theodore Roosevelt, along with ships and aircraft from their strike groups, stream through the South China Sea on Feb. 9, 2021.

Russia watched the tense US-China standoff over Taiwan with deep concern. “Pompeo has wilfully crossed China’s [red line](#) on Taiwan,” declared an RT commentator when Pompeo lifted the Taiwan restrictions in January. [RT](#) also noted that Blinken’s March 10 remarks on Taiwan as a “country” broke with the longstanding US policy. A month later (April 10), the State Department issued new guidelines making it easier for US diplomats to meet with officials from Taiwan. “The move is certain to further increase tensions with Beijing,” RT predicted. As China’s strategic partner, Russia has been a firm supporter of China’s Taiwan policy. Although it has no obligation to directly assist China in a Taiwan crisis, Russia could do a host of things to alleviate China’s pressure. In March, Russia indicated that it would retaliate if the US brings [intermediate-range missiles](#) to Asia-Pacific, presumably to Japan and South Korea. For both China and Russia, a “back-to-back” posture (背靠背) is the most optimal position short of an alliance, argued an editorial of [Global Times](#) in Beijing.

While the US was moving from “strategic ambiguity” to “[strategic clarity](#)” regarding Taiwan, China found its own ambiguity tested by the rapidly unfolding conflict between Ukraine and Russia in the Donbass region. In the 2013-14 crisis, Beijing took a delicate position of neutrality between Moscow and Kiev. Since then, Ukraine has become a major hub for China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Europe. Despite the Russia-Ukraine conflict, China has [greatly expanded its economic ties](#) with Ukraine in the past few years and even displaced Russia in 2019 as Ukraine’s largest trading partner. Under Washington’s pressure, Ukraine moved in early February to nationalize aircraft engine company Motor Sich (Мотор Січ) and

NATO membership, and solicited assistance from the US and Turkey. Zelensky's anti-Russian "brinkmanship game," similar to that of his predecessor Petro Poroshenko in 2018, would enhance Ukraine's national identity and hence, more legitimacy for himself as his domestic rating slid.

[Zhao Huasheng](#) of Fudan University in Shanghai saw rising tension in East Ukraine as part of a geopolitical fixation for Russia. In his analysis for the Valdai Club in March, Zhao argued that "[T]he near abroad is not only a strategic resource for Moscow, but under unfavorable circumstances, it is also a burden," remarked Zhao. The Ukraine conflict should be seen within this broad framework. Despite the diverse assessments at the expert level, the absence of official Chinese comments on the Donbass conflict was a sign of China's cautious neutrality between Russia and Ukraine. Even with Ukraine's unilateral ending of the Motor Sich deal, China continued to treat Ukraine as a "strategic partner." On March 25, Ukraine received the first shipment of the Chinese Covid vaccine ([CoronaVac](#)). It was against the backdrop of vanishing ambiguity (Taiwan) and lingering neutrality (Ukraine) that Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov traveled to China on March 22-23 (just three days after the Anchorage meeting).

Lavrov in Guilin

Wang received Lavrov in the southwestern Chinese city of Guilin, whose picturesque scenery and mild weather were a sharp contrast to the freezing Anchorage climate of a few days before. "China offers a very intense agenda" while "all has been quiet on the Western front," remarked [Lavrov](#), referencing the German anti-war novel of the 1920s turned Academy Award-winning movie of 1930, suggesting Russia was completely at odds with Europe.



Figure 4 Lavrov and his team take a boat ride in the Li Jiang River, Guilin on March 22 before the formal meeting with Wang Yi. Photo: DW News

Lavrov and his team take a boat ride in the Li Jiang River, Guilin, on March 22 before the formal meeting with Wang Yi. Sources: [DW News](#).

In the two-day meeting, the foreign ministers covered a wide range of issues in "extremely business-like and practical talks," and with "a traditionally friendly and trust-based manner," said [Lavrov](#) in the post-meeting press briefing. Relations with the Biden administration topped the agenda. [Wang and Lavrov briefed](#) each other on their US policies and coordinated policies to offset Biden's "[coercion](#)" (打压). The two diplomats also discussed a host of international and regional issues, including the Iranian nuclear deal, Afghanistan, Myanmar, UN reform, climate change, the region as a whole, Syria, Sudan, etc. They reached broad [consensus](#) in four areas: 1) maintain close and active interactions between the two presidents; 2) closely coordinate pandemic policies; 3) promote pragmatic economic ties; and 4) work together to enhance global stability, which was in jeopardy as a result of the West's effort to "invent their own rules and to impose them on all others," remarked [Lavrov](#).

To better synchronize foreign policies, Wang and Lavrov signed a [joint statement](#) for "Global Governance in Modern Conditions." "The world has entered a period of high turbulence and rapid change. In this context, we call on the international community to put aside any differences and strengthen mutual understanding and build up cooperation in the interests of global security and geopolitical stability, to contribute to the establishment of a fairer, more democratic and rational multipolar world order," said the statement. The document addresses four areas in international governance: 1) the importance of the "universal,

indivisible, and interrelated” human rights as opposed to the use of human rights they consider politicized, intrusive, and applied inconsistently; 2) the rights of sovereign states to choose their own path for developing democracy; 3) the importance of the UN as an anchor for international peace and security; and 4) the need for an open, equal, and non-ideological multilateralism for global governance, strategic stability, and development.

Wang and Lavrov also worked on [a series of bilateral issues](#), including drafting the joint statement for the 20th anniversary of the “Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China.” Putin and Xi are expected to sign it in 2021. The two ministers also signed an annual plan for consultations between the two ministries for “practical discussions on a wide range of global and regional matters.”

Limits and Potential of “Partnership without Alliance”

“Russia and China do not ally against anyone,” said [Lavrov](#) at the end of the formal meeting in Guilin. The key for stable Sino-Russian relations was “that both sides follow the principles of non-alliance, non-confrontation, and not being against any third party,” echoed [Wang](#). Speculation about forming an alliance, however, never subsided and even gained momentum as the Biden administration and its Western allies applied growing pressure on Moscow and Beijing. On March 17 (the day Biden called Putin a “killer”), a paper published by Russia’s newly established [Institute of International Political and Economic Strategies](#) (IIPES) called for a “strategic military-political alliance between Moscow and Beijing” as the main condition for peace and stability of the world. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi started from early 2021 to define China’s strategic relations with Russia as one of “[no limit, no forbidden zone, and no ceiling to how far this cooperation can go](#) (没有止境, 没有禁区, 没有上限).” In Guilin, Wang repeated the new formula.

Back home, [Lavrov](#) outlined the nature of relations with China: “our relations are not a military alliance, and we are not pursuing this goal,” he said in an interview with Channel One’s *Bolshaya Igra* (*Great Game*) talk show. In

comparison to NATO’s “traditional” military alliance, “[O]ur relationship with China is completely different ... Maybe in a certain sense, it is an even closer bond,” added Lavrov. The alliance issue, therefore, remained open-ended, at least at the official level, with space for further convergence as well as comfort for free and independent actions. One example was China’s failure to follow [Russia’s effort](#) to move away from the US dollar-based international payment system. Given their very different degrees of economic integration with the outside world, China’s response to efforts by Biden and Trump to de-couple has been to further its opening to the outside world, noted [Feng Yujun](#) of Fudan University in Shanghai. In mid-February, the Chinese navy went as far as to [opt out](#) of a joint naval drill with Iran and Russian in the northern part of the Indian Ocean, which was described as a classic form of [tacit signaling](#) to China’s friends and foes.

Even the 25-year, \$400 billion [deal with Iran](#) signed on March 27 was a carefully calculated move taken only after [Washington decided to return](#) to the Iran nuclear deal. China waited [six years](#) for this window of opportunity when the impact of its Iran deal for Washington would be [minimized](#). For this goal, Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#) first traveled to Saudi Arabia and Turkey, both are US allies, before heading for Tehran.

America’s “China Syndrome”

By the end of April, both Taiwan and Donbass remained tense, yet Biden’s team seemed to have recalibrated the US approach to Russia and China, thanks to a growing cry from the media and pundits urging Biden to avoid a “[two-front confrontation](#)” against Russia and China simultaneously. Possibly because of this, a series of high-profile diplomatic moves, particularly by Washington, started to dissipate the Ukraine crisis, at least for the time being. Top Russian and US defense officials had kept lines of communication open, according to [Russian sources](#). On April 14, the [US Navy](#) canceled the deployment of two warships to the Black Sea. For its part, Russia publicly defined its buildup as a month-long “snap drill” to test combat readiness, to be concluded in late April. Three days later (April 17), [Biden called](#) Putin. In addition to urging Russia to de-escalate, Biden proposed a summit meeting with Putin in a third country in the coming months. Just a month

before, Biden [ignored](#) Putin's proposal for "a live-broadcast discussion" on Russia-US relations after Biden's "killer" reference. On April 23, Russia [ordered](#) its troops back to base from the area near the Ukraine border.

While the Donbass crisis created opportunities for Moscow and Washington to reengage, China remained ubiquitous in Washington and the US public space—a development Russian analysts watched warily. Almost every policy initiation of the Biden administration—ranging from infrastructure, climate, pandemic, education, social welfare, technology, to withdrawal from Afghanistan, Japan, the G7, etc.—was covered by the China shadow. A week after proposing a summit with Putin, [Biden](#) claimed in his first news conference that China would not "become the leading country in the world, the wealthiest country in the world, and the most powerful country in the world ... on my watch."

To drive the China issue home, [Jim Risch](#) of Idaho, the senior Republican on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, declared April 22 that "The issues facing us today in foreign policy, and perhaps for the entire 21st century, is going to be China, China, and China." He made those remarks at the Senate hearing on the [Strategic Competition Act of 2021](#), a document almost exclusively devoted to counter China in every conceivable way. It remains to be seen how the Biden team can navigate US foreign policy away from a *de facto* dual strategy for China and Russia given Democrats' intense dislike of Russia and Ukraine's ongoing request for [NATO membership](#). Short of this, a "dangerous convergence" between China and Russia may quicken its steps, warned [Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman](#)—authors of the previously mentioned CNAS paper—in a *Foreign Affairs* piece published on May 3.

An exclusive focus on China, however, may also be problematic, according to Henry Kissinger, a key architect of the China-US diplomatic breakthrough in the early 1970s. In recent months, the 97-year old US diplomat and strategist has become profoundly worried about the rapid escalation of the US-China rivalry. Three times in five weeks ([March 25](#), [April 25](#), and [April 30](#)), he warned of the danger of misunderstanding between the US and China leading to a WWI-type destruction, particularly in the nuclear age increasingly interfaced by AI.

Meanwhile, military balance across the Taiwan Strait increasingly favors the mainland. On April 23, Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#) attended an unprecedented commissioning ceremony of three large naval vessels for the PLA's South China Sea Fleet (below): a Type 094 nuclear-powered strategic ballistic missile submarine (12,000 tons underwater), a Type 055 large destroyer (13,000 tons), and the country's first Type 075 amphibious assault ship (helicopter carrier, 40,000 tons).



Figure 5 Chinese President Xi Jinping attends a commissioning ceremony of three large naval vessels for the PLA's South China Sea Fleet. Photo: Xinhua

Given China's rising and US anxiety, Russian analysts (see the [IIPES paper](#)) warned that provoking China into a military invasion of Taiwan has become the main strategic goal of the US up to 2030. Beyond that, the US is likely to lose the war with China because of the growth trajectory of China's military power.

What Biden's First 100 Days Means for Moscow-Beijing Ties

In its first 100 days, the Biden administration had accomplished so much (vaccination, economic stimulus plan, returning to WHO and the Paris climate agreement, rebuilding alliances) yet also done so little in normalizing relations with Moscow and Beijing. For Russian and Chinese political and intellectual elites, the world is in a much more challenging, if not dangerous, place.

The day after talking to Biden in the phone, [President Putin warned](#) the Davos Economic Forum: "we will face a formidable breakdown in global development, which will be fraught with a war of all against all." "The situation could take an unexpected and uncontrollable turn—

unless we do something to prevent this ... The inability and unwillingness to find substantive solutions to problems like this in the 20th century led to the WWII catastrophe,” added Putin.

Putin’s warning was echoed by [Fyodor A. Lukyanov](#), chairman of the Presidium of the Russian Council on Foreign and Defense Policy. In the first 2021 issue of *Russia in Global Affairs*, Lukyanov produced a Fukuyamanian-style “endism”: ending the global governing institutions. Great powers would go it alone by solely pursuing their own interests and relying primarily on one’s own resources, said Lukyanov.

[Feng Shaolei](#), a leading Russologist in Shanghai, did not share Putin and Lukyanov’s pessimism. He did, however, anticipate a less stable, less predictable, and even chaotic and crisis-ridden phase of the world system after a dramatic and tragic 2020. “The old world is fading away, and a new world is yet to take shape,” remarked Feng shortly after Biden’s inauguration.

It remains to be seen how the three large powers would interface between the old and new worlds, not just for themselves but for the world and humanity.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2021

Jan. 2, 2021: Foreign Minister Wang Yi [tells](#) the media that China's strategic relations with Russia have "no limit, no forbidden zone and no ceiling to how far this cooperation can go" (中俄战略合作没有止境, 没有禁区, 没有上限).

Jan. 12, 2021: The US [sends](#) an invitation to Russia to attend the inauguration of President-Elect Joe Biden.

Jan. 15, 2021: Deputy Chinese Foreign Minister Le Yucheng and Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Denisov [meet](#) in Beijing. They exchange views on bilateral relations.

Jan. 20, 2021: Taiwan's de facto ambassador in Washington, Hsiao Bi-khim, [attends](#) Biden's inauguration.

Jan. 26, 2021: Biden [calls](#) Russian President Vladimir Putin. They discuss a new START treaty. They agree to maintain transparent and consistent communication.

Jan. 26-29, 2021: SCO National Coordinators [hold](#) a four-day meeting in Dushanbe of Tajikistan and discuss a wide range of issues regarding Tajikistan's SCO chairmanship in 2021.

Jan. 28, 2021: Deputy Chinese Foreign Minister Le Yucheng and Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Denisov [meet](#) in Beijing. They discuss issues of "[strategic coordination](#)."

Feb. 4, 2021: Chinese FM Wang Yi [meets](#) in Beijing with ambassadors of Eurasian states to China. SCO Secretary-General Vladimir Norov also joins. Russian Ambassador to China Andrei Denisov speaks on behalf of the diplomatic missions in Beijing. He offers heartfelt greetings to Wang Yi on the upcoming 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party.

Feb. 4, 2021: FMs Wang Yi and Lavrov [talk](#) on the phone. They discussed the issue of "non-interference of domestic affairs" and the importance of coordination between the two countries.

Feb. 10, 2021: President Biden [talks](#) to Chinese President Xi Jinping over the phone.

Feb. 25, 2021: Cheng Guoping, special envoy for external security affairs of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, [meets with](#) Russian Ambassador Denisov, in Beijing. The two exchange views on anti-terror and other bilateral issues.

Feb. 25, 2021: Russia's largest independent gas producer, Novatek, [signs](#) a long-term contract with a Chinese partner to deliver over 3 million tons of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to China over 15 years.

Feb. 25, 2021: The US [carries out airstrikes in eastern Syria](#) against buildings belonging to what the Pentagon said were Iran-backed militias.

March 1, 2021: An article on China's Defense Ministry's website [says](#) China's strategic partnership relations with Russia is not an alliance but a new type of relationship of "non-alliance, non-confrontation, and not targeting on the third party."

March 8, 2021: Russian Ambassador Denisov [tells](#) Phoenix TV (Hong Kong) that he will take a high-speed train to Taiwan in the future: "Technologically, China is absolutely capable of building it. Indeed, the two sides of the strait belong to the same land."

March 9, 2021: Roscosmos, the Russian space agency, [signs](#) agreement with China's National Space Administration (CNSA) on the joint creation of the "International Scientific Lunar Station." The project will be "guided by the principles of equal distribution of rights and responsibilities" and will "promote cooperation ... with open access to all interested nations and international partners," according to Russian sources.

March 12, 2021: Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova [warns](#) of the "destabilizing" effect of the deployment of US land-based intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles in the Asia-Pacific.

March 18-19, 2021: A US-China senior dialogue [is held](#) in Anchorage, Alaska.

March 18, 2021: Moscow [hosts](#) regular meeting of the extended Troika on Afghanistan (Russia, China, the US, and Pakistan), including representatives of the Afghan government, Afghanistan's political activists, the Taliban, Qatar, and Turkey. FM Lavrov delivers welcoming remarks.

March 22-23, 2021: Lavrov [travels](#) to China's southwestern city of Guilin to meet with Chinese counterpart Wang Yi. The two sign a "Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of China and Russia on Certain Aspects of Global Governance in Modern Conditions."

March 24-30, 2021: FM Wang Yi [visits](#) Middle Eastern countries of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Bahrain. In Iran, Wang [signs](#) a 25-year, \$400 billion strategic agreement on March 27.

March 26, 2021: Officials of Russian space agency and the CNSA [hold](#) a video conference. The discussed issue of jointly building the lunar space station.

April 2, 2021: In an interview with Russia's *Channel One*, Lavrov [says](#) that the relationship with China was not an alliance, stating "our relationship with China is completely different from that of a traditional military alliance. Maybe in a certain sense, it is an even closer bond."

April 5, 2021: Putin [signs](#) a bill into law enabling him to run for two more terms starting 2024.

April 8, 2021: Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova [criticizes](#) politicizing the Beijing Winter Olympics on her Facebook account.

April 11, 2021: Lavrov [calls](#) for talks to create a legally binding international instrument to ban the deployment of any type of weapons in space. In 2014, Russia and China jointly submitted a draft treaty to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva.

April 13, 2021: Biden [calls](#) Putin and discusses the Ukraine issue. Biden proposes a summit meeting in the foreseeable future.

April 13, 2021: Russia and China [hold](#) 7th dialogue on North Pole affairs by video conference, reaching a "broad consensus" regarding various issues.

April 14, 2021: Biden [announces](#) withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021. Russia's Foreign Ministry [criticizes](#) the "late withdrawal" for potentially escalating violence, "which in turn might undermine efforts to start direct intra-Afghan negotiations."

April 20, 2021: Russia and China [hold](#) 9th ruling party dialogue via video. Xi and Putin send congratulatory letters.

April 23, 2021: CNSA and Roscosmos [hold](#) conference for the international moon station in [Nanjing](#) on the sideline of the 58th session of the Scientific and Technical Subcommittee of the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space.

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

JAPAN-SOUTHEAST ASIA

JAPAN-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS: A DIPLOMATIC “NEW NORMAL” IN THE INDO- PACIFIC REGION?

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Japan–Southeast Asia relations were relatively stable, despite COVID-19, as summarized by three trends: emphasizing multilateral actors; prioritizing enhancement of bilateral relations with two countries (Indonesia and Vietnam); and the synthesis of Japan’s Free and Open Indo Pacific “vision” (FOIP) and ASEAN’s ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Japan and Southeast Asian states managed to achieve tangible cooperation, as illustrated by the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED). Yet, strategic dynamics among Southeast Asia, Japan, and the United States are shifting because of changes in Japanese and US political leadership. Japan, the most reliable partner for Southeast Asia in the Trump era, seemingly faced a relative decline in the importance attached by Southeast Asia because of the United States’ renewed commitment to the region. In the context of this new diplomatic reality, the foremost challenges that Japan and Southeast Asia will likely face in 2021–2022 are Myanmar and ASEAN Centrality in the Indo-Pacific.

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COVID-19 significantly and negatively impacted Japan-Southeast Asian diplomacy—official meetings were generally conducted online, at best in a hybrid setting. Even when the COVID-19 situation seemed to improve, new waves of infections prevented Japan and Southeast Asian states from conducting normal in-person diplomacy. ASEAN’s strength rests in its convening power to invite all regional great powers to ASEAN-led forums, but under COVID-19 this advantage could not be fully exercised. Consequently, some important security agendas, such as the [second reading](#) of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, have been put on the back burner. In August 2020, Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu [mentioned](#) that, while Japan had conducted foreign ministers’ meetings online more than 60 times since the pandemic began, it would be much better to meet in person, understand diplomatic positions, and deepen discussions on cooperation.

In addition, a significant change in Japan’s domestic politics occurred in August 2020 with Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s sudden resignation. Because of his strong diplomatic leadership from 2012, which shaped the regional strategic environment, the announcement brought an even greater sense of political and diplomatic uncertainty to the Indo-Pacific region, particularly regarding whether Japan would be able to maintain its strategic ambition—its “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) vision. New Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide emphasized [the importance of diplomatic continuity](#), including FOIP, yet it was [not entirely clear](#) the degree to which Suga would do so given his lack of diplomatic experience and many domestic agendas, including the economic recovery from COVID-19, the Tokyo Olympics, and what appears to be a general election in Fall 2021.

Furthermore, one of the most pivotal players in the Indo-Pacific region, the United States, held a presidential election in November 2020, in which Joseph Biden defeated Donald Trump and was expected to return to traditional US foreign policy emphasizing multilateralism and liberal democratic values. Given the Trump administration’s weak commitment to ASEAN, as illustrated by Trump’s absence in ASEAN-

related forums from 2018 to 2020, this created new hope in ASEAN that the United States would increase its diplomatic commitment to Southeast Asia. The ISEAS Yusof-Ishak Institute’s annual survey, “[State of Southeast Asia: 2021](#),” indicates that the United States is perceived as a more “reliable strategic partner” now than in 2020.

In this setting, strategic dynamics among Southeast Asia, Japan, and the United States began to change. Japan, which was once considered the most reliable partner for Southeast Asia in the Trump era, faced a relative decline in its importance to Southeast Asian states as the US renewed its commitment to the region. That said, overall, Japan and Southeast Asian states managed to facilitate cooperation despite a changing strategic environment.

The Japan-Southeast Asia Relationship in 2020-21

Southeast Asia faced increasingly complex regional strategic dynamics. It became more difficult for states in the subregion to maintain unity because of differing socio-economic situations. Japan was not a decisive player in alleviating those strategic uncertainties because it faced a COVID wave of its own and it was able to provide vaccines. Nevertheless, Japan and Southeast Asian states managed their relations relatively well, emphasizing ASEAN-focused multilateralism, select bilateral cooperation, and a synthesis of Japan’s FOIP with AOIP ([ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific](#)).

ASEAN-Focused Multilateralism

First, Japan-Southeast Asian relations were based more on multilateralism than bilateralism. Given COVID-19, it is difficult for states to conduct in-person bilateral meetings. Their in-person bilateral ministerial- and summit-level meetings [fell](#) from 44 in 2019 to 18 in 2020. Although many of these were held online, multilateral institutions have become a more important diplomatic tool for dialogues and facilitating cooperation. Indeed, they are more efficient in terms of time management and decision-making and, if not the best overall, they can be used to share information regarding the COVID-19 situation, political-economic initiatives, and strategic postures toward

regional issues, like cyber security, digital economy, the “[Dialogue for Innovative and Sustainable Growth](#)” (DISG), and the South China Sea.

The most important initiative by ASEAN and supported by the Japanese government was the [feasibility study](#) on the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED) in the mid-2020. [Japan’s financial support](#) to establish the ACPHEED through the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF), \$50 million, was in addition to its contribution of \$1 million to the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund. When COVID-19 emerged in December 2019 and was recognized as a global pandemic in March 2020, ASEAN utilized existing institutions to counter emerging diseases, such as the ASEAN Emergency Operation Centre (ASEAN EOC) Network, and Japan and ASEAN member states cooperated through ASEAN-led institutions, particularly [ASEAN-Plus-Three](#) (APT). However, ACPHEED was proposed to enhance national and regional capacity in Southeast Asia to manage the COVID-19 and future infectious diseases more effectively and efficiently. In November 2020, when [the Japan-ASEAN Summit](#) was held virtually, ACPHEED was established, and Japan promised to assist in institutional sustainability and operationalization.



Figure 1 Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga teleconferences into the 23rd Japan-ASEAN Summit. Photo: Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Additionally, the Japan-Mekong meetings in 2020 were fruitful, as several initiatives were taken by Japan, such as the “[Five Points of Cooperation](#).” These five points are (1) “Promotion of loans and investment for the

private sector”; (2) “Grant Assistance for Grass-Roots Human Security Projects that pervades through small communities”; (3) “Cooperation concerning the rule of law”; (4) “Cooperation concerning the ocean”; and, (5) “Cooperation concerning strengthening supply chains.” On the basis of these points, Japan announced the “[Mekong SDGs Investment Partnership](#),” utilizing overseas loans and investment from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to invest in Mekong states to reach SDG objectives. Additionally, Japan launched “[KUSANONE Mekong SDGs Initiative](#),” providing “Grant Assistance for Grass Roots Human Security Projects” to facilitate socio-economic development for five Mekong states. Japan also cooperated with the US and, on its first anniversary, reaffirmed the significance of the [Japan-US Mekong Power Partnership](#) (JUMPP) in September 2020. JUMPP is based on international development standards, like sustainable economic growth, transparency, economic viability, environmental protection, and community sustainability, and it has been [welcomed](#) by all Mekong states.

Selected Bilateral Cooperation

From May 2020 to March 2021, Japan prioritized two Southeast Asian states, Vietnam and Indonesia, for bilateral relations, engaging in more high-level official exchanges with [Indonesia](#) (nine) and with [Vietnam](#) (seven) than with other Southeast Asian states (all less than five). This prioritization was also evident when Prime Minister Suga made his first overseas trips to [Vietnam](#) and [Indonesia](#) in October 2020. Vietnam is strategically important not only because of its strategic partnership status, but also for role as 2020 ASEAN Chair. Indonesia was the major democratic power in Southeast Asia, playing a pivotal role in enhancing ASEAN’s diplomatic credibility. Moreover, both of the states share concerns regarding China’s assertive behavior in the maritime domain, particularly the South China Sea.

COVID-19 and resulting diplomatic cutbacks did not prevent Japan from enhancing defense relations with Indonesia and Vietnam. From September to October 2020, the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) conducted [Indo-Pacific Deployment 2020](#) (IPD-20), a manifestation of its continued maritime

commitment in East Asia. Although the exercises JMSDF that were conducted in IPD-20 were relatively small when compared to the past, Japan dispatched a JS *Kaga* (DDH184), an *Ikazuchi* (DD107), and *O-shio* submarine with three carrier-based aircraft, which visited Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam for a bilateral exercise with Indonesia. Indonesia and Vietnam were the only two Southeast Asian states that the JMSDF interacted with in this exercise.



Figure 2 JS *Kaga* and *Ikazuchi* arrive at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam. Photo: JMSDF

Moreover, Japan successfully advanced strategic coordination with Vietnam and Indonesia. Japan reached a [substantive agreement](#) on arms and technology transfer with Vietnam in October 2020. When Suga teleconferenced with President Nguyen Phu Trong, he expressed “[serious concerns](#)” about some regional issues, particularly China’s new [Coast Guard Law](#), enacted in February. Trong did not explicitly name and shame, but promised to closely cooperate with Japan on those issues. Additionally, recent Japan-Indonesia cooperation contributed to Indonesia’s military capabilities that serve as a deterrent in the maritime domain. Japan concluded the agreement concerning the [Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology with Indonesia](#) in March 2021, and they shared “[serious concerns](#)” over “continued and strengthened unilateral behavior” in the maritime domain at their 2nd Foreign and Defense Ministers Meeting. While there was a variance in how they expressed their concerns, Japan advanced practical cooperation with these two Southeast Asian states in 2020-21.

Synthesis of FOIP and AOIP

Third, Japan emphasized the synthesis of FOIP and AOIP, rather than integrating the concepts. In every ASEAN-led multilateral meeting, including ASEAN+3 and the East Asia Summit, Japan expressed its explicit support for ASEAN Centrality and unity, as well as AOIP. The most important [political document](#) Japan and ASEAN issued in 2020 was the “Joint Statement of the 23rd ASEAN-Japan Summit on Cooperation on ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.” In it, Japan and ASEAN both aim to promote a “rules-based Indo-Pacific region that is free and open, embrace key principles, such as ASEAN’s unity and centrality, inclusiveness, transparency, and [complement the] ASEAN community building process.” Because of the fear of entrapment in great power competition, ASEAN as a regional institution has been hesitant to openly express institutional support for major regional powers’ strategic visions, be it that of the United States, China, or Japan. However, the statement illustrates that Japan and ASEAN share the same principles in the Indo-Pacific region. This infers that Japan and ASEAN will focus on principles, rules, and norms that they can agree on and seek expansion of areas of cooperation, rather than having Japan simply request ASEAN support FOIP as an overall strategic concept.

Of course, this does not mean that Japan has given up winning political support for its FOIP vision from each ASEAN member state. Japan continued to explain its FOIP vision and related international activities to each ASEAN member. In addition to the [initial political support](#) that Japan gained from several member states, Foreign Minister Motegi [stated, in Aug. 2020](#), that by explaining Japan’s efforts to pursue FOIP, Japan could gain understanding and support for FOIP from three Mekong states: Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. While it is not clear the support each ASEAN member state provided, the fact is that Japan regularly informs them of its principles and activities for regional peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, Japan’s current political objective is to gain as many supporter states from Southeast Asia on the FOIP vision as possible.

The creation of a [cooperative activity map](#) is another area where Japan and ASEAN made progress in their synthesis of FOIP and AOIP.

This conceptual map is particularly useful in locating each ASEAN–Japan project in the four priority areas AOIP suggested: (1) maritime cooperation, (2) connectivity, (3) SDGs, and (4) economic/other possible areas of cooperation. For example, maritime cooperation includes capacity-building programs for marine plastic debris, as well as countering illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, in which JICA plays a central role in facilitating Japan–Southeast Asia cooperation; connectivity includes both hard and soft infrastructure, such as internet satellite project and the “JENESYS” program that encourages youth exchanges; SDGs include counter-COVID-19 cooperation, such as the establishment of ACPHEED; and, economic and other possible areas include digital economy and fourth industrial revolution, an example of which is the capacity building program for ASEAN’s cybersecurity through the ASEAN–Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Centre (AJCCBC). Those cooperative activities existed, yet by applying AOIP’s four priority areas to categorize them, each project assumes strategic meaning and it has a broader implication for maintaining and enhancing the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region.

Other Functional Cooperation: Security, Trade, and Digital Infrastructure

Japan and Southeast Asia also cooperated in other areas of cooperation. In the security area, they Asia began to discuss maritime security more explicitly, particularly the South China Sea issues. COVID-19 presented setbacks, such as the postponement of the second reading of the ASEAN–China Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, with the SCS being a sensitive issue where it is always difficult to reach consensus. However, several ASEAN member states openly shared concerns regarding unilateral moves, just as Japan expressed its concerns about China’s behavior in the South China Sea, and China’s new Coast Guard Law in particular, which allows the Chinese Coast Guard to use force in their “jurisdictional waters,” something hard to define in disputed waters in the [East and South China Seas](#). Although the bilateral discussion did not force ASEAN members to name China, some have already protested against the law formally or informally,

including [the Philippines](#), [Indonesia](#), and [Vietnam](#). Although it would be diplomatically difficult for ASEAN member states to explicitly align with Japan over South China Sea issues for fear of China’s retaliation, they are more aligned in sharing similar concerns now and closely cooperating in terms of maritime domain awareness and capacity-building programs.

Regarding trade, Japan, ASEAN, and other regional states concluded the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP) in November 2020. Although India did not become a founding member because of its fear of a flood of imports from China and Australia, the door to RCEP membership remains open, as stipulated in the [RCEP Ministers’ Declaration](#). RCEP was considered to be significant regional agreement given the COVID-19 pandemic and international trend toward protectionism. Emphasizing the fact that the [initiative](#) was taken by ASEAN, this agreement aims to avoid being a political tool for great power competition and facilitate economic recovery, inclusive prosperity, job creation, and enhanced supply chains in East Asia. At the same time, the [first protocol](#) to amend the ASEAN–Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (AJCEPA), which focused on “Trade in Services, Movement of Natural Persons, and Investment,” would also enter into force in all ASEAN states by June 1, 2021, except Indonesia.



Figure 3 Leaders attend the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Summit online. Photo: Nhac Nguyen/AFP

Digital infrastructure and digital economy remain one of the most important agenda items for Japan and ASEAN member states because of the potential of the Fourth Industrial

Revolution. ASEAN-led institutions, including the [East Asia Summit](#), [APT](#), and [Japan-ASEAN frameworks](#), are discussing facilitating the digital economy. However, the rule-making process on data has not reached any concrete agreement. In the 2020 APT Summit, Japan pushed its principle, Data Free Flow with Trust (DFFT), but, because of [disagreements](#) among various parties, there has been no consensus in ASEAN-led institutions.

At the same time, ASEAN member states have attempted to avoid the negative impact of great power competition over digital infrastructure, particularly between the US and China. While the US and Japan have decided to exclude Chinese telecommunication products in 5G networks, [Southeast Asian states](#) (except Vietnam and Singapore) still rely on them in their major digital systems, including Huawei's 5G devices. Although this does not hinder the facilitation of the digital economy between Japan and ASEAN, there is still a risk of a split. If Japan keeps a firm position in relation to DFFT and regards Chinese products as presenting a high risk for information leaks, it would be difficult for Japan to cooperate with Southeast Asian states who rely on Chinese devices. Therefore, rule-making discussions over digital infrastructure remain one of the most important issues shaping Japan-Southeast Asia relations.

Challenges in Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategic Dynamics amid COVID-19

Despite COVID-19, there has been continuity in functional cooperation and political coordination between Japan and Southeast Asian states. Utilizing the hybrid meeting and ASEAN-led multilateralism helped them to engage with each other, albeit this is not the best option. That said, Japan and Southeast Asian states will likely face two main challenges in the near future: ASEAN Centrality in the Indo-Pacific and Myanmar.

First, there is no clear definition of "ASEAN Centrality" in the Indo-Pacific region. This is the institutional principle that ASEAN has pushed since the end of the Cold War, and many regional states strongly support it. Japan has been an enthusiastic supporter of this principle along with the 2019 AOIP. The most recent 2020 Japan-ASEAN [joint statement](#) acknowledges

"ASEAN's central and strategic role in developing and shaping an open, transparent, inclusive and rules-based regional architecture." As such, Japan's diplomatic stance toward ASEAN is clear. However, this may create a schism because member states of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), particularly the US under Biden, are now eager to institutionalize the Quad.

While all Quad members (Australia, India, Japan, and the US) [emphasize](#) "strong support for ASEAN's unity and centrality as well as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," it is not clear what relationship the Quad envisions with ASEAN. If ASEAN insists on its centrality in formulating a regional architecture and the Quad accepts it, the institutional arrangement in the Indo-Pacific would likely remain the status quo and not be as effective as Quad members hope. This is because ASEAN lacks material capabilities and diplomatic capacity to reach the entire Indo-Pacific region and confront challenges to the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Even if the Quad focuses on the maintenance and enhancement of the existing regional order and attempts to deepen cooperation with ASEAN, ASEAN would be hesitant, because the Quad connotes a counter-China coalition for ASEAN, which contradicts the principles of AOIP—inclusivity and avoiding rivalry.

The key areas of cooperation between the two remain nontraditional security issues, including counter-COVID cooperation. Of course, cooperation over COVID-19 has been politicized internationally, as in the cases of [vaccine nationalism](#) and [vaccine diplomacy](#), disrupting smooth and effective inter-state cooperation. Additionally, the path for effective cooperation is not straightforward, even among like-minded states. For example, new variants of COVID-19—illustrated by India's surge of infections in April and May 2021—hinder plans to make India the core manufacturing center of the vaccine in [Quad cooperation](#). Still, the national interests of Japan, ASEAN, and regional states are highly congruent in terms of countering COVID-19. The key is an inter-organizational dialogue to diversify and enhance cooperative networks, focusing on COVID-19 for now and avoiding excessive politicization.

Second, managing the response to the Myanmar military coup in February 2021 has become a test to gauge the extent to which Japan and Southeast Asian states manage nondemocratic actions by regional states. Unlike the United States, Japan and Southeast Asian states were hesitant to impose sanctions, even “[smart sanctions](#),” against the Myanmar military, as they are not entirely convinced that sanctions would be effective in restoring democracy. Of course, they have been concerned about the Tatmadaw’s violence against its citizens. In fact, the Japanese foreign minister issued diplomatic protests regarding [the coup](#) and the [violence](#) in February and March. In April, ASEAN also held the leader’s meeting and produced the “[Five-Point Consensus](#),” including the immediate cessation of violence, constructive dialogues among parties concerning ASEAN’s mediation, and the provision of humanitarian assistance. However, there are questions as to whether these actions are sufficient.



Figure 4 Leaders of ASEAN meet in Jakarta, Indonesia on April 24, 2021 and produce the Five Point Consensus. Photo: Laily Rachev/Indonesian Presidential Palace via Reuters

Now that the United States has returned to emphasizing democratic values in the Indo-Pacific rules-based order, including human rights, Japan faces political pressure to follow suit. For the Biden administration, democratic values are imperative because this is [its distinguishing factor](#) regarding China’s political challenges to the international order. Although China’s model of development, which focuses on economic growth while maintaining an autocratic political system, is attractive to nondemocratic states, not criticizing such a modus operandi would likely defy the international order. Given China’s rising status

and increasing material capabilities, China would more easily garner political support from nondemocratic regional states when compared to the past. To prevent this, the United States would likely strengthen its political alignment with allies and partners and request the creation of a united front. If this occurs, Japan will face a diplomatic dilemma as it has traditionally taken a softer approach toward nondemocratic states. For its part, ASEAN would likely distance itself from the FOIP that Japan and the United States envision.

These two strategic issues need to be carefully handled because they will shape the strategic environment and regional order in the Indo-Pacific region, although Japan and Southeast Asian states overcame initial challenges that were posed by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to adjust to new situations in 2020 and 2021. Their past success does not guarantee future ones. In this sense, it is important for Japan and Southeast Asian states to keep engaging each other to promote information-sharing, policy coordination and enhancing functional cooperation, particularly to tackle emerging variants of the COVID-19 infection.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

MAY 2020 – APRIL 2021

May 4, 2020: Japan-Vietnam Summit (by telephone) is [held](#) between Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc.

May 12, 2020: Japan-Philippines Defense Ministers' [telephone call](#) between Japanese Defense Minister Taro Kono and Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana.

May 13, 2020: Japan-Thailand Foreign Ministers' [telephone call](#) between Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu and Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai.

May 19, 2020: Japan-Indonesia defense ministers' teleconference [held](#) between Kono and Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto. Japan-Malaysia Foreign Ministers' telephone call between Motegi and Malaysia FM Hishammuddin bin Tun Hussein. Japan-Singapore defense ministers' teleconference [held](#) between Kono and Singaporean Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen.

May 21, 2020: Japan-Philippines foreign ministers' telephone [call](#) between Motegi and Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin.

June 1, 2020: Japan-Vietnam foreign ministers' telephone [call](#) between Motegi and Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh.

June 18, 2020: Japan-Thailand foreign ministers' telephone call between Motegi and Indonesian Foreign Minister Don.

June 29, 2020: Japan-Myanmar foreign ministers' telephone [call](#) between Motegi and Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi.

July 9, 2020: 13th Mekong-Japan Foreign Ministers' Meeting is [held](#) online.

July 20, 2020: Japan-Malaysia defense ministers' telephone [call](#) between Kono and Malaysian Defense Minister Sabri bin Yaakob.

Aug. 4, 2020: Japan-Vietnam Summit telephone [call](#) between Prime Minister Abe and Vietnamese Prime Minister Phuc.

Aug. 12, 2020: Japan-Indonesia defense ministers' [video teleconference](#) between Kono and Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo.

Aug. 13, 2020: Japan-Singapore Foreign Ministers' Meeting and a working lunch [held](#) in Singapore between Motegi and Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan. Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong receives a courtesy call by Motegi.

Aug. 14, 2020: Japan-Malaysia Foreign Ministers' Meeting [held](#) between Motegi and Malaysia Foreign Minister Hishammuddin. Motegi met Senior Minister and MITI Minister Mohamed Azmin Ali.

Aug. 22, 2020: Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen [receives](#) a courtesy call from Motegi and hosts a working lunch. Japan-Cambodia Foreign Ministers' Meeting is [held](#) between Motegi and Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn.

Aug. 23, 2020: Japan-Laos Foreign Ministers' Meeting and working dinner [held](#) in Laos between Foreign Minister Motegi and Lao Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith. Laotian Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith receives a courtesy call by Motegi.

Aug. 24, 2020: Motegi [holds](#) meetings in Myanmar with State Counsellor and Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi and with Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing.

Sept. 7-Oct. 17, 2020: Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force's "Indo-Pacific Deployment 2020" (IPD20) is [held](#).

Sept. 7, 2020: Japan-Philippines Summit (by telephone) [held](#) between Abe and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte.

Sept. 9, 2020: Japan-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting and ASEAN+3 Foreign Ministers Meeting are [held](#) online.

Sept. 12, 2020: 27th ASEAN Regional Forum is [held](#) online.

Oct. 12, 2020: Japan-Vietnam Summit (by telephone) [conducted](#) between new Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide and Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc.

Oct. 13, 2020: Japan-Indonesia Summit (by telephone) [held](#) between PM Suga and Indonesia President Joko Widodo.

Oct. 19, 2020: Japan-Vietnam Summit [conducted](#) between PM Suga and Vietnamese PM Phuc. Suga meets Chairwoman of National Assembly Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan and Vietnamese General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong. Suga makes courtesy call to Chairman of the Vietnam-Japan Parliamentary Friendship Association Pham Minh Chinh. Japan-Indonesia Foreign Ministers' telephone call between FM Motegi and Indonesian FM Retno Marsudi. Japan-Singapore foreign ministers' telephone call between Motegi and Singaporean Foreign Minister Balakrishnan.

Oct. 20, 2020: Japan-Indonesia Summit [held](#) in Indonesia between Suga and Indonesian President Widodo.

Oct. 21, 2020: Japan-Laos foreign ministers' telephone [call](#) between Motegi and Laotian Foreign Minister Kommasith. Japan-Cambodia Foreign Ministers' telephone [call](#) between Motegi and Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn.

Oct. 22, 2020: Japan-Thailand foreign ministers' telephone call between Motegi and Thai Foreign Minister Don.

Oct. 23, 2020: Japan-Philippines Defense Ministers' video teleconference [held](#) between Japanese Defense Minister Kishi and Philippine Defense Minister Lorenzana.

Oct. 28, 2020: 10th Meeting of Japan-Philippines High Level Joint Committee on Infrastructure Development and Economic Cooperation is [held](#).

Oct. 29, 2020: Japan-Singapore [Summit](#) (by telephone) between Suga and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Nov. 2, 2020: Japan-Indonesia defense ministers' [video teleconference](#) between Kishi and Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo.

Nov. 12, 2020: The 23rd Japan-ASEAN Summit Meeting is [held](#) online.

Nov. 13, 2020: The 12th Mekong-Japan Summit Meeting is [held](#) online.

Nov. 14, 2020: 23rd ASEAN+3 Summit Meeting and 15th East Asia Summit Meeting are [held](#) online.

Nov. 16, 2020: Japan-Vietnam defense ministers' video teleconference [conducted](#) between Defense Minister Kishi and Vietnamese Defense Minister Ngo Xuan Lich.

Dec. 7, 2020: Japan-Singapore defense ministers' video [teleconference](#) between Kishi and Singapore Defense Minister Ng.

Dec. 14, 2020: Japan-Philippines leaders telephone call [held](#) between Suga and Philippine President Duterte.

Feb. 1-5, 2021: Japanese Ministry of Defense/Self-Defense Force [holds](#) online capacity building assistance to Cambodian Military Engineers for UN Peacekeeping Operations (Civil Engineering).

Feb. 10, 2021: Japan-Indonesia foreign ministers' telephone [call](#) between Motegi and Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi.

Feb. 25, 2021: Japan-Brunei foreign minister's telephone call [conducted](#) between Motegi and Bruneian Foreign Minister Erywan bin Pehin Datu Pekerma Jaya Haji Mohd Yusof.

March 4, 2021: Japan-Indonesia foreign minister's telephone call [held](#) between Motegi and Indonesian Foreign Minister Marsudi.

March 8, 2021: Japan-Thailand foreign minister's telephone call between Motegi and Thai Foreign Minister Don.

March 22, 2021: Japan-Vietnam leaders telephone call [held](#) between Suga and Vietnamese General Secretary Trong.

March 29, 2021: Japan-Indonesia Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Japan [conducted](#) between Motegi and Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi. Japan-Indonesia Defense Ministers' Meeting is held between Kishi and Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto.

March 30, 2021: Suga [receives](#) courtesy call by Indonesian Foreign Minister Marsudi and Defense Minister Prabowo. Second Japan-Indonesia Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting (“2+2”) held in Japan.

April 7, 2021: Japan-Laos Summit telephone [call](#) between Suga and Laotian Prime Minister Phankham Viphavanh.

April 9, 2021: Japan-Thailand Summit telephone call [held](#) between Suga and Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha.

April 15, 2021: Japan-Malaysia Defense Ministers' telephone [call](#) between DM Kishi and Malaysian DM Ismail Sabri.

April 20, 2021: Fourth Japan-ASEAN Seminar on HA/DR is [held](#) online as part of Japan's capacity building program under the Vientiane Vision 2.0.

April 22, 2021: Japan-Indonesia Foreign Ministers' telephone [call](#) between FM Motegi and Indonesian FM Marsudi.

April 27, 2021: Japan-Vietnam Foreign Ministers' telephone [call](#) between FM Motegi and Vietnamese FM Bui Thanh Son.

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