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REGIONAL OVERVIEW

THE PIVOT IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE (INDO-ASIA-PACIFIC) PIVOT

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In last fall's *National Security Strategy* (NSS), the Trump administration began using the term Indo-Pacific to describe an expanded Asia-Pacific region. At this year's Shangri-La Dialogue in early June, Defense Secretary James Mattis began describing a strategy to fit the region, a "whole-of-government Indo-Pacific strategy that espouses the shared principles that underpin a free-and-open Indo-Pacific." It differs from, but could encompass the so-called Quad, an informal four-party grouping of regional democracies involving Australia, India, Japan, and the US, which is also based on common values and a common commitment to the rule of law. The strategy accepts and endorses "ASEAN centrality," a point reinforced by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during his visit to Singapore for the ASEAN Ministerial meetings and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in early August. Prior to departing for Singapore, Pompeo laid out "America's Indo-Pacific Economic Vision" in his speech to the US Chamber of Commerce. While the US is envisioning its economic strategy, the so-called TPP-11 is proceeding without Washington, as is Beijing in pursuing its own more expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

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Indo-Pacific strategy: Trump's 'pivot'?

At the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 2, Secretary of Defense Mattis described the Trump administration's emerging Indo-Pacific strategy as "a subset of our broader security strategy" which involved "deepening alliances and partnerships as a priority," further stressing that "ASEAN's centrality remains vital, and cooperation with China is welcome wherever possible." The strategy also included deepening engagement with existing regional mechanisms while exploring new opportunities for meaningful multilateral cooperation.

Some have described the strategy as "Trump's pivot," with good cause: there is a great deal of consistency between this emerging strategy and the Obama administration's pivot or rebalance, as well there should be. Neither US national security interests nor Asia's importance changed with the new administration. Nor has the desire of every new administration to attach its own name to the continuing process.

Mattis identified four main (and familiar) themes of the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy: expanding attention on the maritime space by helping our partners build naval and law enforcement capabilities and capacities to improve monitoring and protection of maritime orders and interests; interoperability, to ensure that our military is able to more easily integrate with others; strengthening the rule of law, civil society, and transparent governance; and private sector-led economic development with no empty promises or surrender of economic sovereignty.

Like all prior administrations since the end of the Cold War, he assured the gathering of regional defense officials and experts that "America is in the Indo-Pacific to stay. This is our priority theater, our interests, and the regions are inextricably intertwined." What's different, in his Shangri-La speech and in the National Security Strategy document from which it is derived, is a willingness to call out Chinese behavior that "stands in stark contrast to the openness of our strategy." This "principled realism" approach still stresses the willingness and desire to cooperate with China "wherever possible," but more openly complains about Beijing's behavior, most

specifically in the South China Sea, which "calls into question China's broader goals."

Mattis also stressed that "the U.S. values the role India can play in regional and global security, and we view the U.S.-India relationship as a natural partnership between the world's two largest democracies, based on a convergence of strategic interests, shared values, and respect for a rule-based international order." What he did not mention was any reference to the "Quad," the much-touted yet still informal collaboration among Australia, Japan, India, and the United States. The term was also absent from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's keynote address the night before. When questioned, Mattis identified the Quad as "one of those additional mechanisms, multilateral mechanisms that we look to," further noting that "the first thing that jumps out at you" is that all four are democracies. He said the four nations are talking about "how do we maintain stability? How do we maintain open navigation? How do we talk about basically keeping things on a peaceful dispute-resolution path?" It was "an idea fit for its time" which he supported "100 percent."



Figure 1 Defense Secretary Mattis and Indian Prime Minister Modi meet in Singapore June 2. Photo: US Department of Defense

Prime Minister Modi was much more circumspect in describing the Indo-Pacific: "India does not see the Indo-Pacific region as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate," Modi said. "And by no means do we consider it as directed

against any country. A geographical definition, as such, cannot be.” Nonetheless, he stressed India’s commitment to an open and free system that upholds the rule of law and promotes prosperity. While some in Beijing are already complaining about the Quad being a de facto Indo-Pacific NATO aimed at containing China, in reality the grouping is likely to be more symbolic than substantive for some time to come.

‘ASEAN centrality’ remains key

The theme of ASEAN centrality, mentioned no fewer than four times in Mattis’ remarks and Q&A session, were consistently repeated by Secretary of State Pompeo and other State Department representatives before and during his trip to Singapore for the 51st US-ASEAN Ministerial and 25th ARF meeting. During a teleconference briefing by a senior State Department official just prior to his trip, it was noted that Pompeo would “underscore the importance of our strategic partnership with ASEAN, highlight our commitment to this entity and ASEAN centrality, and address various regional security and partnership economics,” during his meeting with the 10 ASEAN ministers. At the ARF he would “work with his 26 counterparts from across the region to establish practical cooperation to address nontraditional security threats, including cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.”



Figure 2 The 25th ARF Meeting. Photo: Thailand Foreign Ministry

During his press conference following the meetings, Pompeo announced nearly \$300 million in new US funding to “advance our shared priorities, especially to strengthen maritime security, develop humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping capabilities, and enhance programs that counter transnational threats.” He also raised the issue of Chinese militarization of the South China Sea and the

importance of maintaining a rules-based order in the region.

Pompeo also emphasized the importance of maintaining diplomatic and economic pressure on North Korea “to achieve the final, fully verified denuclearization of the DPRK, as agreed to by Chairman Kim,” and specifically called out Russia for allowing joint ventures with North Korean firms and granting new work permits to North Korean guest workers in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2375.

The ARF Chairman’s Statement likewise called for the “full implementation of all relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions” (without reference to specific violators) while urging “all concerned parties to continue working towards the realisation of lasting peace and stability on a denuclearised Korean Peninsula.” It also had more expansive comments than usual on the South China Sea, taking note of “some concerns on the land reclamations and activities in the area, which have eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions and may undermine peace, security and stability in the region.”

While in Singapore, Pompeo also chaired a Lower Mekong Initiative Ministerial Meeting, where he “reinforce[d] our partnership on trans-boundary cooperation” including water resource management. He also attended a preparatory session for this November’s East Asia Summit (EAS). (The White House subsequently announced that President Trump planned to send Vice President Pence to the Singapore Summit, and to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leader’s Meeting in Port Moresby, PNG, a decision that will inevitably raise questions about Washington’s commitment to the region and to its emerging Indo-Pacific strategy.)

Reassessing the economic competition

Mattis’ challenge to China at the Shangri-La Dialogue is consistent with the Trump administration’s assertion – clearly articulated in the National Security Strategy and other related documents – that the world has entered a new era of great power competition. It is hard to challenge that claim, but it should be qualified: while military confrontations cannot be ruled out, that competition will be primarily

economic. If so, then it is imperative that the US and its allies and partners develop the means to compete with China in the Indo-Asia-Pacific* region. While the effort has been fitful, the US and like-minded governments have begun to focus on the economic dimension of their competition with China and initiated programs to consolidate and perpetuate their leadership in the region.

China is perceived to be gaining ground, if not leading, in this competition. September marks five years since Xi Jinping launched what would become the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and there is little agreement on just what it is and means. China argues that it is an attempt to fill a multitrillion infrastructure investment gap and build a “community with a shared future for mankind.” Critics counter that it is a way to stimulate Chinese businesses as the domestic economy slows, or a devious strategy to put Beijing at the center of regional and global economic diplomacy and cooperation, empower and extend the reach of its military, and propagate its political influence. The prevailing narrative is of China for good reasons or bad, extending its reach and rewriting the regional and global order.

That view reflects the basic picture of BRI. It involves as many as 80 countries, includes more than two-thirds of the world’s population, impacts up to one-third of global GDP and could move a quarter of global goods and service. As envisioned, it would surpass the Marshall Plan to become “the biggest development push in history.”

Cognizant that it was losing the public relations battle, the State Department highlighted the economic dimension as it fleshed out the meaning of “a free and open Indo-Pacific.” In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in May, Alex Wong, deputy assistant secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs, noted the growing economic importance the region assumed in US and global affairs. But, Wong acknowledged that the administration was only “formulating the implementation of

that strategy.” Unfortunately, the focus of much subsequent discussion was the decision to walk away from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the administration’s seeming preference for tariffs to punish trade partners for what it deemed unfair trade practices. The failure to articulate or develop an economic instrument was striking, especially when contrasted with BRI. Participants at a Pacific Forum hosted conference in Tokyo in June that explored the meaning and significance of the Indo-Pacific concept agreed on the need to fill that gap.

The like-minded stand up

Japanese Prime Minister Abe moved first when he announced plans to establish a three-year \$50 billion public-private fund to boost infrastructure investment in Asia. He unveiled the proposal in early June at the 24th International Conference on the Future of Asia. The project would be administered by the government-owned Japan Bank for International Cooperation, and was designed “to assist in the building of high-quality infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific region.” Abe defined “high-quality infrastructure” as investments that increase employment, expand educational opportunities for workers and attract still more foreign domestic investment, which then make the loans easier to repay – a pointed contrast with the BRI which has been increasingly characterized as “a debt trap” for recipient nations.

Abe has done the most to provide economic leadership in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. In 2015 he launched the “Partnership for Quality Infrastructure,” a five-year \$110 billion program to provide an alternative to the BRI. When President Trump withdrew the US from TPP, Abe led efforts to revive the deal and ensure its survival. Formal agreement on its successor, the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), was reached in March 2018 (and discussed in the last issue of Comparative Connections) and three countries have since ratified it: Mexico, Japan, and Singapore.

Asia itself is somehow being downgraded or neglected. This is why at the Pacific Forum we prefer the term Indo-Asia-Pacific, since it better describes the region in question.

* While using the term Indo-Pacific rather than Asia-Pacific seems designed to broaden and widen the region, it has the unintended consequence of causing many in Asia to feel that

The US stepped up with its own program, which was announced by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at a speech to the Indo-Pacific Forum in Washington, on the eve of a tour of Asian countries. Pompeo noted that the US “Indo-Pacific Economic Vision” seeks “strategic partnerships, not strategic dependency,” adding that “with American companies, citizens around the world know that what you see is what you get: honest contracts, honest terms and no need for off-the-books nonsense.” The US aspires to “a regional order, of independent nations that can defend their people and compete fairly in the international marketplace. We stand ready to enhance the security of our partners and to assist them in developing their economies and societies in ways that ensure human dignity. We will help them keep their people free from coercion or great power domination.”

The core of the program is a \$113 million fund that will promote public-private partnerships. That size reflects both a US preference for a modest government role, and the fact that it is a down payment on a larger project to reorganize and rationalize the US development aid bureaucracy to be better able to mobilize and guide private-sector capital. This project, part of the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act, would more than double the US government’s development-finance capacity, to \$60 billion, to support US private investment in strategic opportunities abroad. Priorities for lending include energy, infrastructure and digital connectivity: \$25 million will go to Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership, which will improve partner countries’ digital connectivity, deploy technical assistance to improve partner countries’ regulatory policies and cybersecurity and expand opportunities for US technology exports.

The day after Pompeo made his speech, the US, Japan, and Australia announced a trilateral partnership to boost infrastructure investment across the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. They are preparing a framework for cooperation that “promotes transparency, open competition, sustainability, adhering to robust global standards, employing the local workforce, and avoiding unsustainable debt burdens.” Organized by the US’ Overseas Private Investment Corp., Japan’s Bank for International Cooperation and Australia’s

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, investment will focus on energy, transportation, tourism and technology infrastructure.

While Australian Trade Minister Steve Ciobo denied the agreement was designed to counter China, then Foreign Minister Julie Bishop bluntly noted in a June interview the need for Western governments to compete with Chinese offers of finance and to ensure that recipient countries “have sustainable economies and that they are not trapped into unsustainable debt outcomes.” She added that “We’re concerned that the consequences of entering into some of these financing arrangements will be detrimental to their long-term sovereignty.” Australia seeks to give countries options: “What we don’t want is for countries to have no other options ... Australia should take a very proactive part in that.”

For its part, China was restrained in its response. Beijing welcomed efforts by other countries to invest in connectivity and boost connectivity. “We welcome it,” said a Foreign Ministry spokesperson. China’s Ambassador to Australia Cheng Jingye, however, rebuked Bishop’s more forthright approach, accusing her of having a “cold war mentality.”

Taking stock

Concern about the spread of Chinese influence through the BRI overlooks an important part of the economic story. A historical perspective underscores the degree to which China is playing catchup, at least in Southeast Asia. (The following draws on “Rewrite the Asian Economic Narrative,” [PacNet #63](#).)

According to ASEAN statistics, China accounted for 9.4 percent of net foreign direct investment in ASEAN member states in 2016. Japan topped that with 11.1 percent of net FDI, while the US provided 11.8 percent, and the European Union invested a whopping 31.1 percent. Add up investments by those sources from 2007 to 2016 and the difference is more glaring: China invested \$52.4 billion over that decade, a figure less than half of Japan’s total (\$116.7 billion) or that of the US (\$119 billion) and just over a quarter of that of the EU (\$194.8 billion). During that time, China provided just 12 percent of the investment that those three sources did – and that omits monies from Australia, New Zealand,

the Republic of Korea and within ASEAN itself. Chinese investment has been growing but it remains a small fraction of other governments.

Head-to-head comparisons of infrastructure investment reinforce that story. One analysis totals Japanese infrastructure investment since the 2000s – completed and ongoing – at roughly \$230 billion; that of China was just \$155 billion.

It is unlikely that, even together, Australia, Japan, and the US can muster the resources that China can provide to the world through the BRI, but they don't have to. They do have to change the narrative and tell a story that puts the BRI in perspective. They have to remind aid recipients and others that China is not the only creditor, that alternatives exist and that priorities, values, and interests can and will differ. Ultimately, governments in Washington, Tokyo, Canberra, and elsewhere should work with Beijing to meet the developing world's infrastructure investment needs. That is the best way to deflate fears about BRI and promote the prosperity and stability we all profess to seek.

Trading places?

China has made more progress on trade: it is the number one trading partner of virtually every Southeast Asian (and East Asian) country. According to Chinese statistics, trade with ASEAN hit a record high in 2017, totaling \$514.8 billion, a 13.8 percent increase over the previous year and the fastest growth pace among China and any of its major trade partners. To change that dynamic, the US tried to expand the TPP, a quest that failed as a result of the Obama administration's reluctance to push the trade deal and Trump's decision to pull out. As noted, Prime Minister Abe did not give up on TPP, however, and working with other regional leaders to resuscitate it in the form of the CPTPP. A second regional effort has been pursued in parallel – the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), often referred to as Beijing's counter to the TPP, but it has in fact been pushed by Southeast Asian countries and there is considerable overlap in membership in the two. Another round of RCEP negotiations was held in conjunction with the ASEAN Economic Ministers meeting at the end of August. Participants said "good progress" had been made, and India appears to be happy

with negotiations, removing one especially thorny obstacle. Nevertheless, Singapore's minister for trade and industry conceded that considerable work remains if the group is going to be "substantially concluding" the trade pact by the end of the year. That language implies that the November deadline will not be met and talks will continue into 2019.

Looking to the future

The next four months will be a true test of the US Indo-Pacific strategy. The administration must square its "deepening engagement with existing regional mechanisms" and "ASEAN centrality" with the president's decision not to attend the EAS and APEC Summits. At APEC, Vice President Pence will need to square the US commitment to a "free and open Indo-Pacific" with the president's preference for using tariffs to achieve this goal. Applying the tariff weapon against longstanding allies like Japan and Canada also flies in the face of "deepening alliances and partnerships as a priority."



Figure 3 Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump meet in Singapore. Photo: Daily Standard

The US-ROK alliance could face the greatest challenge as the gap widens between rhetoric and reality in assessing President Trump's summit with Kim Jong Un. With Kim scheduled to meet with ROK President Moon Jae-In in September as both seek an "end of war declaration" – which Washington may or may not support – and the possibility of another Kim-Trump summit looming large (perhaps on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly gathering), the alliance stands as good a chance of unraveling as it does of being deepened.

REGIONAL CHRONOLOGY

MAY – AUGUST 2018

May 2, 2018: CNBC reports that China has installed antiship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missile systems on Mischief Reef, Subi Reef, and Fiery Cross Reef in the South China Sea.

May 2-3, 2018: China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the highest-ranking Chinese official to visit North Korea in years, meets Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho in Pyongyang.

May 3-4, 2018: A delegation of senior US economic advisers travels to Beijing and [meets](#) President Xi Jinping and Vice President Wang Qishan.

May 7-8, 2018: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un travels to China and meets President Xi Jinping in Dalian.

May 7-18, 2018: US and the Philippines conduct joint military exercise *Balikatan*, which focuses on counterterrorism in an urban setting as well as traditional security scenarios.

May 8, 2018: Vietnam's Foreign Ministry requests that China withdraw military equipment from the South China Sea.

May 8, 2018: President Donald Trump announces that the US will withdraw from the "defective" Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

May 8, 2018: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visits Pyongyang to make additional arrangements in anticipation of the Trump-Kim summit.

May 9, 2018: Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, and South Korean President Moon Jae-in hold a trilateral summit in Tokyo.

May 9, 2018: Mohamed Mahathir's opposition grouping Pakatan Harapan, with a small ally, win general election in Malaysia ending the long rule of the Barisan Nasional coalition, which has been in power in Malaysia since its birth as an independent country in 1957.

May 14-25, 2018: US and South Korea conduct annual military exercise *Max Thunder*.

May 15, 2018: North Korea's KCNA announces that the DPRK canceled high-level North South talks scheduled for May 16 and threatens to cancel the Kim-Trump summit in response to the decision to proceed with the US-ROK military exercise, denouncing it as "a rude and wicked provocation."

May 15-19, 2018: Chinese trade delegation led by Chinese Vice Premier Liu He [visits](#) Washington for consultations with US counterparts. He meets President Trump.

May 18, 2018: North Korea [denies](#) South Korean reporters access to the dismantling of its nuclear test site.

May 18, 2018: President Trump [warns](#) North Korea to denuclearize or risk overthrow, saying, "[the Libyan] model would take place if we don't make a deal," referring to the overthrow of Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi.

May 22, 2018: President Trump blames Chinese President Xi for the delay or cancellation of his summit with Kim Jong Un.

May 22-23, 2018: ROK President Moon visits Washington and [meets](#) President Trump, Secretary of State Pompeo, and National Security Adviser John Bolton.

May 23, 2018: China's State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi visits the US and [meets](#) Secretary of State Pompeo.

May 23, 2018: In response to China's continued militarization of islands in the South China Sea, the Pentagon [disinvites](#) the PLA Navy from the 2018 *Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC)* exercise.

May 24, 2018: North Korea [dismantles](#) its nuclear testing ground at Pungye-ri.

May 24, 2018: North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui [releases](#) statement referring to US Vice President Pence as a “political dummy” for his comments on North Korea and says it was up to the Americans whether they would “meet us at a meeting room or encounter us at nuclear-to-nuclear showdown.”

May 24, 2018: President Trump [cancels](#) proposed June 12 summit with Chairman Kim, citing “the tremendous anger and open hostility displayed” in recent North Korean statements.

May 25, 2018: North Korea Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan [states](#) that the DPRK is willing to meet with the US “at any time, any format”

May 25, 2018: China [urges](#) the United States and North Korea to hold denuclearization summit.

May 27, 2018: Two US Navy destroyers, the *USS Higgins* and the *USS Antietam*, [conduct](#) a freedom of navigation operation near Tree, Lincoln, Triton, and Woody Islands in the Paracels.

May 28, 2018: President Trump [calls](#) PM Abe to discuss recent developments in North Korea. They affirm the shared imperative of dismantling North Korea’s chemical, biological, and ballistic weapons programs.

May 30, 2018: Secretary of State Pompeo [meets](#) North Korean Vice-Chairman Kim Yong Chol in New York to discuss preparations for the upcoming US-DPRK summit.

June 1, 2018: After meeting with North Korean Vice-Chairman Kim, President Trump [confirms](#) the US-DPRK summit will take place in Singapore on June 12.

June 1, 2018: President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker [meets](#) China’s State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Brussels. They note the danger of protectionism and the need to cooperate to safeguard UN Charter principles and open world trade.

June 1, 2018: The 17th Asia Security Summit, or Shangri-La Dialogue, is [held](#) in Singapore.

June 4, 2018: ROK President Moon [hosts](#) summit with Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte.

June 6, 2018: China [warns](#) against US provocations in the South China Sea following two B-52 bombers flying past Chinese-held artificial islands.

June 7, 2018: Australia-New Zealand-United States Pacific Security Cooperation Dialogue [held](#) at the Department of State in Washington.

June 7, 2018: Prime Minister Abe visits Washington and meets President Trump.

June 8, 2018: President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin [meet](#) in Beijing, pledging to “firmly support each other in defending their respective values.”

June 8-9, 2018: Canada [hosts](#) the G7 Charlevoix Summit.

June 9, 2018: President Xi [meets](#) Prime Minister Modi of India in Qingdao. They agree that the “two sides should make persistent efforts to speed up the implementation, maintain strategic communication, expand economic and trade cooperation, promote people-to-people and cultural exchanges and enhance coordination and cooperation on international and regional affairs.”

June 9-10, 2018: China [hosts](#) Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Qingdao.

June 11, 2018: Prime Minister Abe [calls](#) President Trump regarding the US-DPRK summit.

June 12, 2018: The US-DPRK summit is [held](#) in Singapore. President Trump and Chairman Kim sign a joint declaration that calls for improved diplomatic relations, a new peace regime and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and a resumption of the recovery of US POW/MIA remains from North Korea.

June 12, 2018: PM Abe [hosts](#) meeting with Malaysian PM Mahathir at the Prime Minister’s Office.

June 14, 2018: South Korean President Moon and Secretary of State Pompeo [meet](#) in Seoul to discuss the agreements reached at the United States-North Korea Summit.

June 15, 2018: President Moon [states](#) that the South Korean government will “carefully consider” suspending military drills with the US following the US-DPRK Summit.

June 15, 2018: President Trump [imposes](#) 25 percent tariffs on \$50 billion of Chinese goods, accusing China of intellectual copyright theft. China responds with equal tariffs on \$50 billion of US goods.

June 19, 2018: South Korea and the United States announce the decision to stop all planning for and suspend the *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* (UFG) exercise scheduled to be held in August.

June 19–20, 2018: North Korean Chairman Kim visits China and meets President Xi in Beijing.

June 21, 2018: United States [withdraws](#) from the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC).

June 21–24, 2018: ROK President Moon [visits Russia](#) and meets counterpart Vladimir Putin. Their discussion focuses on economic cooperation and the situation in North Korea.

June 27, 2018: Defense Secretary Jim Mattis visits Beijing and meets President Xi, Politburo Member Yang Jiechi, and Minister of National Defense Gen. Wei Fenghe. Mattis reaffirms the importance of strategic transparency in the US-China defense relationship.

June 27, 2018: 26th biennial *Rim of the Pacific* (RIMPAC) military exercise [held](#) in and near Hawaii. China, which was disinvited, deploys a *Type 815 Dongdiao*-class naval vessel to observe the exercise.

June 28, 2018: Secretary of Defense Mattis [states](#) that the US will keep current troop levels in South Korea.

June 28, 2018: Second US-Japan Pacific Dialogue is [held](#) in Tokyo, Japan.

June 29, 2018: Defense Secretary Mattis and Japanese Defense Minister Onodera Itsunori [agree](#) to continue joint military exercises.

July 6, 2018: US and China tariffs [begin](#) on \$34 billion in each other’s imports, with possibility of further tariffs being enacted in future. There are no signs of negotiations to ease tensions.

July 6, 2018: North Korean state-run media [denounces](#) the United States for criticizing North Korea’s human-rights record while the two countries attempt to improve diplomatic ties.

July 6, 2018: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [meets](#) North Korean officials in Pyongyang to discuss specific commitments to denuclearization.

July 7–8, 2018: Two US Navy warships, the *USS Mustin* and *USS Benfold* guided-missile destroyers, [sail](#) through the Taiwan Strait.

July 8, 2018: Japanese PM Abe receives courtesy [call](#) from Secretary of State Pompeo at the Prime Minister's Office.

July 8, 2018: South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Kang Kyung-wha visits Japan and meets PM Abe at the Prime Minister’s Office.

July 8–9, 2018: Secretary of State Pompeo visits Vietnam and [meets](#) General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Truong, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, and Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh.

July 10, 2018: South Korean President Moon visits India and [meets](#) President Modi. They agree to strengthen the “special strategic partnership” including upgrading their Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

July 12, 2018: President Moon visits Singapore and [meets](#) Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. They agree to expand cooperation between their nations, including expanding trade, investment in human resources and state that they [agreed](#) to enter a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) within the year.

July 13, 2018: US [accuses](#) North Korea of breaching a United Nations sanction cap on refined petroleum via unlawful ship-to-ship transfers at sea with unknown third parties.

July 13, 2018: Second Round of China-India Dialogue on Maritime Cooperation [held](#) in Beijing. Chinese Director General of the Department of Asian Affairs of the Foreign Ministry Wu Jianguo and Indian Joint Secretary for Disarmament and International Security Affairs at the Ministry of External Affairs Pankaj Sharma co-chair the dialogue.

July 16, 2018: Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, European Council President Donald Tusk, and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker [hold](#) the 20th China-EU leaders' meeting in Beijing. China and the European Union agree to jointly work to safeguard the rules-based international order, promote multilateralism and support free trade.

July 16, 2018: President Moon [states](#) that India and ASEAN have been raised to the level of Korea's relations with the four major powers of the US, China, Japan and Russia as part of South Korea's "New Southern Policy."

July 18, 2018: Japan and European Union [sign](#) bilateral trade deal eliminating nearly all tariffs.

July 19, 2018: UN Security Council unanimously [supports](#) the denuclearization of North Korea.

July 19, 2018: President Trump [orders](#) the US government to investigate if higher tariffs on foreign-made vehicles and auto parts are justified on national security grounds. Japanese PM Abe warns that US tariffs on Japanese automobiles will be harmful to both economies and retaliatory tariffs may be levied.

July 20, 2018: US and Japan [hold](#) fifth Comprehensive Dialogue on Space in Tokyo.

July 26, 2018: Sixth US-Japan Cyber Dialogue is [held](#) in Washington. A US-Japan-South Korea meeting of cyber experts is [held](#) the following day.

July 26, 2018: Tenth BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) Summit is [held](#) in Johannesburg, South Africa. PRC President Xi urges a deepening of relations between the five countries to open a second "Golden Decade."

July 28, 2018: North Korea delivers the remains of US soldiers killed during the Korean War to a US delegation in Pyongyang.

July 30, 2018: Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) announces that it won all 125 parliamentary seats in the July 29 elections. Critics widely dismiss the elections as undemocratic.

July 30, 2018: Secretary of State Pompeo makes remarks on America's Indo-Pacific economic vision, at US Chamber of Commerce Indo-Pacific business forum announcing new economic strategy to support broader US Indo-Pacific strategy.

Aug. 1, 2018: Malaysian PM Mahathir [meets](#) Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Kuala Lumpur. They advocate closer diplomatic and economic ties.

Aug. 1, 2018: US Congress [passes](#) legislation authorizing \$716 billion in total defense spending for the coming fiscal year, FY2019.

Aug. 2, 2018: Fifty-first ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting is held in Singapore.

Aug. 2, 2018: China and ASEAN [agree](#) on an initial draft document regarding conduct in the South China Sea. This draft will serve as a baseline for future joint talks and negotiations.

Aug. 2, 2018: President Trump [receives](#) a second letter from North Korean leader Kim, stating North Korea's dedication to denuclearization. Trump responds with a desire to meet again with the North Korean leader.

Aug. 3, 2018: China [announces](#) it is prepared to impose tariffs between 5 percent and 25 percent on \$60 billion worth of US goods in retaliation against recent tariffs imposed on China by the US as well as US-proposed tariffs on \$200 billion of Chinese imports.

Aug. 4, 2018: Twenty-fifth ASEAN Regional Forum is held in Singapore.

Aug. 8, 2018: US Navy P-8A Poseidon reconnaissance plane [flies](#) over the Spratly Islands and receives six radio warnings from the Chinese military to "Leave immediately and keep out to avoid any misunderstanding."

Aug. 17-21, 2018: Malaysian PM Mahathir visits China and meets Xi and other senior leaders.

Aug. 23, 2018: US and China [levy](#) 25 percent duties on an additional \$16 billion of each other's imports.

Aug. 24, 2018: Scott Morrison is sworn in as prime minister of Australia.

Aug. 24-29, 2018: *Peace Mission 2018*, the joint military exercise of SCO, is conducted in Chebarkul, Russia with the eight-member states undertaking joint training. This is the first time India and Pakistan participate in the exercise.

Aug. 27, 2018: The 17th annual Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT) exercise involving sailors and coast guardsmen from Bangladesh, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, US, Thailand, and Vietnam begins.

Aug. 29, 2018: President Trump accuses China of complicating Washington's relationship with North Korea by rendering its ally economic assistance, as talks on Pyongyang's denuclearization are at a standstill.

