
PACIFIC FORUM

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

EDITED BY
CARL BAKER
BRAD GLOSSERMAN

CREATIVE DIRECTOR
NICHOLAS CIUFFETELLI

JANUARY – APRIL 2019
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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

COMPARATIVE CONNECTIONS

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL RELATIONS IN THE
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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 Carl Baker and Brad Glosserman, with Carl Baker 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>.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

FREE AND OPEN, BUT NOT MULTILATERAL..... 1

**BY RALPH COSSA, PACIFIC FORUM & BRAD GLOSSERMAN, TAMA UNIVERSITY
CRS/PACIFIC FORUM**

We are focusing on regional trade and economics because it's important to look at the consequences of the current US administration's antipathy toward multilateral trade agreements. Beijing has shown no such hesitancy, with President Xi Jinping hosting visitors from more than 100 different countries (including 37 heads of state) at his Second Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) International Forum. Ships from 19 different navies (but not the US or France) participated in a naval flotilla commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Peoples' Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). One area where Washington might actually embrace a multilateral agreement would be a follow-on to the soon-to-be defunct Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty but only if it involves, among others, China.

US-JAPAN RELATIONS

TREADING WATER IN CHOPPIER SURF 15

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

The US and Japanese governments continued to work at maintaining a steadfast alliance, yet there were issues that could upend the relationship. After several months of anticipation, there was some progress on trade negotiations. While the US hoped to close the deal before President Trump visits Japan in late May, differences over the scope of the agreement and a number of difficult issues related to automobiles, agriculture, and currency rates remained. Meanwhile, domestic pressure over the Futenma relocation project returned to the news with a new referendum that strongly rejected the move. The introduction of the Reiwa era at the end of April served as a brief respite as the alliance partners sought to align interests following the "no deal" US-DPRK summit in Hanoi.

US-CHINA RELATIONS

IS A TRADE DEAL IMMINENT? 23

BY BONNIE S. GLASER, CSIS & KELLY FLAHERTY, CSIS

Intense trade talks in the first four months of 2019 made progress, raising hopes that a deal will be reached in May, and signed by Presidents Donald Trump and Xi Jinping soon thereafter. Remaining sticking points include the enforcement mechanism, which is a key US demand, and a schedule for lifting the tariffs, which is a Chinese priority. The US Department of Justice unsealed an indictment charging Huawei and its CFO Meng Wanzhou with financial fraud, money laundering, obstruction of justice, sanctions violations, and other crimes. Tensions increased over Taiwan as the Trump administration took steps to strengthen ties with Taipei and warn Beijing to back off its coercive and destabilizing policies. President Trump welcomed China’s decision to add fentanyl-related substances to a supplementary list of controlled drugs and substances beginning May 1. Growing US concerns about Chinese espionage were highlighted publicly in speeches by senior Trump administration officials.

US-KOREA RELATIONS

FROM HANOI TO HIATUS 37

BY STEPHEN NOERPER, KOREA SOCIETY AND COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Late February summitry gave way to stalemate, raising the specter of increased tension on the Korean Peninsula. President Donald Trump and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un signaled warmth around their Hanoi meeting – their second summit in a year – but Trump’s walkout hours short of the planned conclusion and the absence of an agreement left everyone struggling to define next steps. South Korea’s surprise at the lack of a deal gave way to efforts at facilitation with calls for inter-Korean economic engagement and President Moon Jae-in’s April visit to Washington. Trump and Moon urged patience and diplomacy and the US and ROK canceled spring military exercises, allowing space for North Korea negotiations. The DPRK still criticized the more limited exercises, announced an end-of-year deadline for the US to change its approach, snubbed South Korea on the first anniversary of the Panmunjom summit, and condemned US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton. Meanwhile, the US and ROK reached an agreement on host nation financial support for US forces stationed in Korea, quieting discord in an otherwise sound alliance.

US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

STRATEGIC CONCERN DEEPENS 45

BY CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

The choice of two Southeast Asian countries to host US-North Korea summits in the past year has lent some credence to claims that the region serves as the foundation for regional dialogue and cooperation. In early 2019, the region was also the recipient of extra attention when foreign investment in China began to move south, driven by US tariffs on China imposed in late 2018. However, there was little sign that new bilateral trade agreements with the US will materialize in the near term. Meanwhile, greater security cooperation with the US is more likely with the bombing of a cathedral in the southern Philippines in January serving as another harbinger of increased ISIS activity in the region and continued militarization of the South China Sea strengthening the rationale for the US-Philippines alliance but also putting more pressure on it. In political developments, Thai elections in March left questions about whether the military will remain dominant while Indonesian elections in April were less controversial, with incumbent President Joko Widodo retaining power.

CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

BEIJING CONFIDENT AMID US, REGIONAL CHALLENGES55

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

In the first third of 2019, senior Chinese leaders devoted little attention to the South China Sea and China's relations with Southeast Asian countries. Infrequent comments depicted slow progress in negotiations on a code of conduct in the South China Sea and steady advances with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), offering strong economic incentives for closer regional cooperation with China. ASEAN and Southeast Asian claimants adhered to Beijing's demands to avoid reference to the 2016 UNCLOS tribunal ruling against China's South China Sea claims and to handle disputes through negotiations without outside interference. Routine complaints about more frequent US freedom of navigation exercises and other US and allied military operations in the South China Sea came from lower-level ministry spokespersons. Little attention was given to growing angst in Southeast Asia that intensified US-China competition compels countries to take sides, a choice undermining strategies that seek benefits from close ties with both the US and China.

CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

TROUBLING TENSIONS65

BY DAVID G. BROWN, JOHNS HOPKINS SCHOOL OF ADVANCED INTERNATIONAL STUDIES & KYLE CHURCHMAN, JOHNS HOPKINS SCHOOL OF ADVANCED INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

The year began with General Secretary Xi Jinping and President Tsai Ing-wen making major statements that underline the fundamental gap between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Taiwan. In the face of Beijing's continuing pressure on Taiwan, Washington and Taipei took steps to strengthen relations and celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). In Congress, members proposed new measures, some of which challenge the established framework for US relations with Taiwan and China. Beijing repeatedly protested these efforts and in April sent two PLA fighters deliberately across the midline of the Taiwan Strait for the first time in 20 years in an ill-defined warning. In Taiwan, maneuvering for the 2020 elections has begun creating a confusing situation with unclear implications for cross-strait and US-Taiwan relations.

NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

GRINDING TO A HALT – THEN KIM PULLS THE PLUG75

BY AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

The inter-Korean peace process that blossomed in 2018 shriveled in early 2019. Pyongyang was slowing the pace even before February's Kim-Trump summit in Hanoi; since then it has severed almost all contacts with Seoul – whose “meddling” mediation Kim mocked in a speech in April. The North's ebbing interest can be seen across a range of sectors, including Kim Jong Un's failure to visit Seoul, high-level talks, the joint liaison office, NGOs, sports exchanges, tension reduction measures at the DMZ, family reunions, medical aid, and more. The DPRK's missile launches in early May are a further blow. Despite President Moon Jae-in's efforts to keep a brave face, it is hard to see where North-South relations go from here. Kim may regret dissing the most sympathetic interlocutor he is ever likely to have in Seoul, while Moon needs to think harder about what it will take to make the “irreversible” progress in inter-Korean ties that he craves.

CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

POST-HANOI HOPES TRAPPED IN A SINO-KOREAN SMOG 87

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

China consolidated relations with North Korea through a fourth summit between President Xi Jinping and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un that set the stage for a second US-DPRK summit in Hanoi. This process was further symbolized by the presence of Xi and the senior Chinese leadership at a [concert](#) by a flagship North Korean art troupe in Beijing. The no-deal Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi left Kim empty handed and caught the Chinese leadership by surprise, removing any possibility of a fifth Xi-Kim meeting during Kim’s return train ride through China from Vietnam. It left Beijing concerned about the impasse, but hopeful that a mutual compromise might be salvaged. South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s reaction to the Hanoi summit failure had much in common with that of Beijing. But despite the visit to Beijing by Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon, smog hangs over China-ROK relations. Post-THAAD fallout and recriminations toward China resulting from worsening air pollution across the peninsula will set the diplomatic agenda for China-ROK relations through the rest of 2019.

JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

WARM BUT WARY97

BY JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

Sino-Japanese interactions were less prominent in the early months of 2019, with the Chinese government focused on its Belt and Road Forum and the Japanese with the imperial abdication. Although President Xi Jinping has committed to attending the G20 Summit in Osaka in late June, no date has been set for a state visit to reciprocate Prime Minister Abe’s fall 2018 visit to Beijing. There is speculation that the Chinese are seeking prior commitment to a fifth communiqué, which would be controversial in Japan. The generally cordial atmospherics of lower-level talks belied tensions over territorial disputes, intellectual property rights, and cybersecurity.

JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

HITTING AN ALL-TIME LOW 105

BY JI-YOUNG LEE, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY & MINTARO OBA, WEST WING WRITERS

In the early months of 2019, Japan-South Korea relations have continued a downward spiral. In their dealings with the radar lock-on dispute and a South Korean court ruling on forced laborers, both Seoul and Tokyo responded to the other’s action negatively, reaching the point of suspending all senior-level defense exchanges for the first half of the year. While recent developments may point to yet another period of all-time low in Seoul-Tokyo relations, it is possible that the year 2019 may signify the beginning of a new trend at a deeper level. That is, Seoul and Tokyo do not regard the other as a valued partner in their long-term national security strategy, even when addressing nuclear and missile threats from North Korea. On the Japan-North Korea front, once the biggest regional champion of the US “maximum pressure” campaign, Japan has continued to reckon with the region’s sudden turn toward diplomacy with North Korea and made some policy adjustments for better alliance coordination with the United States.

CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

THE STORY OF TWO PIVOTS115

BY YU BIN, WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY

After a slow start, there was a burst of diplomatic activity affecting the Russia-China relationship in late-April with Russia focusing on the east for a Russia-DPRK summit in Vladivostok and China focusing on the west with its second Belt and Road Forum. The militaries expanded the scope and substance of their relationship in April with consultations for a third joint missile defense computer simulation to be conducted later this year, several Russian ships joined a naval parade to honor the 70th anniversary of China's Navy, the start of the *Joint Sea 2019* naval exercise, and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe's visit to Moscow.

JAPAN-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

THE EMERGING INDO-PACIFIC ERA125

BY KEI KOGA, NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

Japan-Southeast Asia relations have been largely positive over the past year and this trend will likely continue in a foreseeable future. Relations have gained new political traction since early 2018 from Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) concept, which has bolstered Japan's political, economic, and security engagement with Southeast Asia. There are three main positive trends: a synchronization of Indo-Pacific concepts, Japan's enhanced security commitment to Southeast Asia, and constructive development of bilateral relations between Japan and Southeast Asian countries, particularly Vietnam. However, these trends have been focused on short-term goals and have not yet cemented a strategic relationship between Southeast Asia and Japan. Accomplishing that longer-term goal depends on whether Japan and Southeast Asian states can effectively manage three emerging challenges: reconciling differences with the US approach to the FOIP, expanding economic connectivity, and developing digital infrastructure.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS135

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REGIONAL OVERVIEW

FREE AND OPEN, BUT NOT MULTILATERAL

RALPH A. COSSA, PACIFIC FORUM
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We are focusing on regional trade and economics because it's important to look at the consequences of the current US administration's antipathy toward multilateral trade agreements. Beijing has shown no such hesitancy, with President Xi Jinping hosting visitors from more than 100 different countries (including 37 heads of state) at his Second Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) International Forum. Ships from 19 different navies (but not the US or France) participated in a naval flotilla commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Peoples' Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). One area where Washington might actually embrace a multilateral agreement would be a follow-on to the soon-to-be defunct Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty but only if it involves, among others, China.

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Bilateral vs multilateral; a false choice?

A cornerstone of the Trump administration's foreign policy is a deep suspicion of, if not outright hostility toward, multilateral agreements. Upon taking office, the US withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, shortly after that the Paris climate accord, and a year later the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the deal that capped Iran's nuclear program. The logic appears to rest on several mutually reinforcing pillars. Trump seems personally convinced that no one can negotiate as well as he can and as a result all other deals are suboptimal for the US. More widespread in administration circles is the belief that, since the US is the world's biggest economy and has the world's most formidable military, it should prevail in every negotiation. Added to this is the general antipathy among many hardline conservatives, the secretary of State and national security advisor among them, that all treaties are suspect since they limit US options. While the administration continues to argue that "America first" does not mean "America alone," the above actions have undermined that narrative.

The first four months of 2019 have been a reality check for the administration, at least as far as trade talks go. Many of the administration's vaunted achievements have proven to be, in the precise language of social science, a "big nothing burger." In addition, there is a rising chorus of complaints from various constituencies, farmers perhaps loudest, charging that trade policies are hurting, rather than helping them.

Less than advertised

The first administration accomplishment was reform of the Korea-US Free Trade agreement (KORUS), which was concluded a year ago. Heralded as a "[historic](#)" negotiation, the resulting changes proved "so [insignificant](#) that apparently neither the administration nor Congress think that Congress needs to sign off on them."

The administration then turned to NAFTA, a deal that Trump dismissed as the "worst trade deal ever." After a year of negotiations, the three countries concluded what the administration then [lauded](#) as "the most modern, up-to-date and balanced trade agreement in the history of

our country." Perhaps, but analysis of the deal, released late in April offers a sobering and considerably more refined assessment. The International Trade Commission [touted](#) the 0.35% gain in GDP that will occur when the United States, Mexico, Canada Agreement (the USMCA, or new NAFTA) goes into effect, but it omitted any mention of when those benefits accrue. [Statistical sleuthing](#) revealed that the bump occurs over 16 years: the annual gain is just .02%, "an increment that would be essentially invisible."

The cows come home to roost

Then there are the ripple effects of withdrawal from TPP. Critics may have hoped that ending US participation in the deal would kill it, but the remaining 11 countries soldiered on without Washington and concluded a new agreement, the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), that went into effect Dec. 30, 2018. Japan also concluded a trade agreement with the European Union, the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, which entered into force Feb. 1, 2019.

As a result of these deals, Japan and its biggest trade partners have cut tariffs and expanded market access. For example, CPTPP exports of beef to Japan now face tariffs of 26.6% with more reductions to come; US beef is slapped with a 38.5% tariff. And if frozen beef imports to Japan exceed a threshold, then a safeguard tariff of 50% kicks in – on non-CPTPP beef (i.e., that of the US). US agricultural producers are demanding that the administration help safeguard their market share in Japan. More than 100 agricultural groups [called](#) on US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Congress to reconsider joining CPTPP, noting that "American food and agricultural producers and companies are facing significant barriers in these markets that could be addressed with the improved rules and higher standards through re-engagement with the TPP countries."

Thomas Donohue, president of the US Chamber of Commerce [warned](#) that growing trade between Japan and the countries with which it has new agreements has meant "lost sales for Americans." He added that "It's imperative that we act quickly so that our workers, farmers, and companies are not stuck on the outside, looking in." US Wheat Association President Vince Peterson was also [chafed](#), noting that "Japan is

generally a market where we seek to maintain our strong 53% market share, but today we face an imminent collapse.”



Figure 1 Japanese buyers examine US beef at FOODEX. Photo: BEEF Magazine

Cattle ranchers are also beefing, worried that exports to Japan, the top export market for US beef with nearly \$2 billion in sales in 2017, is threatened by the CPTPP. Kevin Kester, president of the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, [complained](#) that “The US beef industry is at risk of losing significant market share in Japan unless immediate action is taken to level the playing field.” Japan’s beef imports [jumped](#) 25% in the first two months of 2019 compared to the previous year, with the biggest gain coming from CPTPP member producers. US sourced imports increased, but not as much: January beef imports from the US were up 21% from the previous year, but its share of Japan’s imported beef [shrank](#) 6 percentage points. US officials acknowledge that pain is coming; US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer [conceded](#) that the market situation in Japan is “going to get bad very quickly.”

US Ambassador to Japan William Hagerty [chided](#) Japan for these developments, noting that “By implementing these agreements before addressing our bilateral trade relationship, Japan is effectively redistributing market share away from its strongest ally, the United States.” *Washington Post* economics columnist Catherine Rampell captured the irony (if that is the word) of this criticism, noting it is equivalent to saying “what a jerk you were to let me dump you!”

National security means war!

Another international trade development deserves mention here even though it doesn’t fall strictly within the purview of the Regional Overview (or perhaps even *Comparative Connections*) – but will certainly impact US trade

policy toward the region. On April 26, the World Trade Organization (WTO) [ruling](#) on Article XXI, the “national security clause,” of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the WTO’s rule book, became final. Article XXI allows a government to ignore its free-trade obligations “for the protection of its essential security interests . . . in time of war or other emergency in international relations.”

The decision in a case between Russia and Ukraine was the first ruling on Article XXI, and addressed the question of when and how a government could invoke “national security” to avoid WTO scrutiny of its policies. Russia argued that it could block the transit of Ukrainian goods through Russian territory to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, cutting them off from Central Asian markets. Russia insisted that the two countries were in a conflict that justified trade restrictions, and as a result, the national security dimension was obvious.

The Moscow government argued that its claim to be acting in behalf of “national security” was not justiciable, i.e., beyond review or second guessing, by the WTO. Several others, including the Trump administration, concur with that interpretation. The WTO panel disagreed, ruling that while every member could define its national security interests, the WTO could also review whether the claim is justified. It concluded that the current state of Russia-Ukraine relations “constitutes an emergency in international relations” and that “Russia has met the requirements for invoking” the national security clause of WTO rules.

The panel set a high bar for invoking that claim, however. It decided that “an emergency in international relations” would “refer generally to a situation of armed conflict, or of latent armed conflict, or of heightened tension or crisis, or of general instability engulfing or surrounding a state.” That makes a great deal of sense: if it were too easy to make that claim, governments would do it willy-nilly to escape WTO review of protectionist policies.

The decision matters to *Comparative Connections* readers because the Trump administration instinctively uses national security to justify its trade sanctions on Asian trade partners. President Trump has imposed tariffs on steel exports, insisting that [“if you don’t have steel, you don’t have a country.”](#) The same logic is being mooted to justify a 25% tariff on all auto

imports into the US. Turkey has challenged that move at the WTO and other governments, including some Asian trade partners, are considering similar steps. The ruling in the Ukraine case suggests that the US assertion of national security is too far-removed from actual national security considerations to be respected. That sounds like a victory for the rules-based international order, but it may prove to be anything but if it so infuriates Washington that it pulls out of the WTO.

China tightens its Belt and Road



Figure 2 A floral installation welcoming the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. Photo: The Economist

China held its second Belt and Road Forum at the end of April to bask in the glory of a project whose size and scale truly captures the ambition of Xi Jinping's China. As much was clear when China's supreme leader launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 by associating it with revival of the Silk Road, the ancient trade route that linked Asia to the Middle East and Europe, then the entirety of the world. BRI is now viewed as a 21st-century Marshall Plan, the means by which China is extending its influence throughout the world.

Were it so simple. Yes, the Second Belt and Road Initiative International Forum was a success, with 37 heads of state in attendance and more than 100 countries represented. China [says](#) that some 5,000 people from 150 countries and about 90 international organizations attended the forum, more than \$64 billion of deals were concluded, and parties reached 83 pragmatic outcomes, including intergovernmental cooperation agreements, cooperative projects, and the launch of multilateral cooperation platforms. More than 1,800 projects are said to be underway.

But there is no missing the steady pushback against BRI, as complaints mount about the

terms of its projects, in particular the risk of "debt traps" as countries are forced to accept unsustainable terms for their loans. Several governments have either pulled out of, or demanded renegotiation of the terms of, their agreements. Green groups argue that despite rhetoric of promoting sustainable projects, BRI [ignores environmental damage](#) and [promotes fossil fuels rather than "green technologies."](#)

While Xi, the CCP, and project recipients were celebrating their successes at the Beijing Forum, there is no mistaking the slightly chastened mood of the proceedings. Xi himself [acknowledged](#) that "We must adhere to the concept of openness, greenness, and cleanliness." He also pledged to ensure that developing countries do not borrow too much, to promote green projects, and to increase transparency in BRI deals.

Finally, for all the hype surrounding BRI, it is important not to hyperventilate. In addition to the reaction against Chinese overreach, much of the breathless attention to the initiative is lacking in historical perspective. First, the claim that BRI is a new Marshall Plan is false. The amount of BRI investment appears to be 12 times that spent by the US at the end of World War II – even adjusted for inflation – but when viewed as a percentage of GDP, the trillion dollars that China says it will spend on BRI over the life of the project is the same amount that the US spent in 1947 alone. (Thus far, China has spent just \$200 billion over six years and the trillion dollars is merely what Beijing says it will spend.) Moreover, the entire US economic program under the Marshall Plan amounted to about \$4 trillion, most of which was never repaid. And these numbers do not represent occupation costs in Germany and Japan nor funds spent in Asia. (A tip of the hat to George Mitrovich, whose [article](#) "If China wants to lead the global order, it will need more than the Belt and Road Initiative," provided the numbers and analysis cited above.)

Second, there is the fact that China is playing [catchup](#); in Southeast Asia, its presence is dwarfed by that of Japan. ASEAN statistics tell the story: China accounted for 9.4% of net foreign direct investment (FDI) in ASEAN member states in 2016. Japan bested that with 11.1% of net FDI, while the US provided 11.8%, and the European Union invested a whopping 31.1%. Total investments from 2007 to 2016 reveal an even bigger gap: China invested \$52.4

billion over that time, less than half of Japan's total (\$116.7 billion), that of the US (\$119 billion) and just over a quarter of that of the EU (\$194.8 billion). China provided just 12% of the investment that those three sources did – and that omits funds from Australia, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, and within ASEAN itself. Chinese investment has been growing but it remains a fraction of that of other governments.

Then there is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Chinese institution that many view as a rival to the Asian Development Bank (ADB). It has only [extended](#) \$6.4 billion in loans since its launch in 2016 to September 2018. The ADB lent \$35.8 billion in 2018 alone, a 40% jump over two years. Plainly, the BRI is a big deal but it isn't the only story and it is one that needs to be told a little more skeptically and with a little more scrutiny.

(Almost) everyone loves a (maritime) parade

The Belt and Road Forum was not Beijing's only venture into multilateralism this reporting period. President Xi also put on a big naval parade, observed by representatives from 61 different nations, which involved 18 surface ships from 13 different navies to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Peoples' Liberation Army Navy.



Figure 3 Xi Jinping inspects the honor guard during the PLAN 70th anniversary naval parade. Photo: Xinhua

France was initially invited to participate but the invitation was rescinded after a French frigate, the *Vendémiaire*, conducted a transit of the Taiwan Strait on April 6. Normally, one would hesitate to call the French effort a freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) since the 90-mile wide Strait has traditionally been recognized as international waters. It became a *de facto* FONOP however after the Chinese officially protested,

accusing the French frigate of “illegally entering Chinese waters.” The French Ministry of Defense noted that its Navy “passes on average once a year in the Taiwan Strait without incident or reaction,” further [noting](#) that “France reaffirms its attachment to the freedom of navigation in accordance with the law of the sea.”

Chinese sources [indicated](#) that Beijing was particularly upset since it believed that Washington had put the French up to it. The US Navy and Coast Guard have themselves transited the Strait no less than five times since last October.

The US Navy [was invited](#) but chose not to participate in the PLAN celebration, although the US Defense attaché was among the observers. The Japanese did participate, sending the destroyer *Suzutsuki*, flying the Navy's Rising Sun symbol on its bow; this was the first Japanese ship visit to China in seven years, reflecting the effort on both sides to smooth relations.

Six-Party Talks redux? Not hardly

One Chinese-hosted multilateral forum that, rumors aside, is unlikely to be revived anytime soon is the long-moribund Six-Party Talks, formerly hosted by Beijing and involving North and South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States. Just prior to North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un's visit to Vladivostok to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin, a “senior Russian official” reportedly [told](#) *NHK* that Putin was considering proposing a revival of the Talks during their summit. There are no indications, however, that the proposal was made. In fact, other than adding another photo op and another diplomatic feather to Kim's cap, it appears little was accomplished at this “drive-by summit.”

Putin did take advantage of the opportunity to get in a few jabs at the US, which he blamed for the collapse of the earlier talks and for undermining North-South cooperation (through interference in South Korea sovereignty). He also noted that the DPRK “needs guarantees of its security and sovereignty,” while offering neither. He also (apparently with a straight face but clearly with tongue in cheek) [promoted](#) the need “to restore the rule of international law and revert to the position where global developments were

regulated by international law instead of the rule of force.”

Had Putin and Kim proposed a resumption of Six-Party Talks, their offer would have likely fallen on deaf ears in Washington. US National Security Advisor John Bolton, when asked about the rumored proposal, stated “I think it’s not what our preference is.”



Figure 4 Kim Jong Un shakes hands with Vladimir Putin in Vladivostok. Photo: AP-Yonhap

For his part, Chairman Kim noted that “peace and security on the Korean peninsula will entirely depend on the U.S. future attitude, and the DPRK will gird itself for every possible situation.” Kim [blamed](#) the failure of the Hanoi summit between him and President Trump on the “unilateral” attitude of the US.

The exception that proves the rule

Finally, while the Trump administration’s preference for bilateral over multilateral arrangements is well established, there is a notable exception. In early February, the Trump administration declared a suspension of US obligations under the bilateral US-USSR Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and formally announced its intention to withdraw from the treaty in six months.

The 1987 INF [Treaty](#) required both sides to eliminate and permanently forswear all their nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 km. The Obama administration accused Russia of violating this treaty in 2014. Subsequent annual State Department [assessments](#) repeated these allegations, which Russia continues to deny. On Oct. 20, 2018 President Trump announced his intention to “terminate” the INF Treaty, citing Russian

noncompliance while also expressing concerns about China’s intermediate-range missile arsenal. The administration has since made it clear that any new treaty, if indeed a new one was ever possible, would have to include, among others, China, which has developed an impressive inventory of intermediate range missiles while Washington and Moscow had their hands tied behind their backs.

President Trump made this position [very clear](#) last October: “Unless Russia comes to us and China comes to us and they all come to us and say, ‘Let’s really get smart and let’s none of us develop those weapons,’” Trump said. “But if Russia’s doing it and if China’s doing it and we’re adhering to the agreement, that’s unacceptable.” Forgive us for not holding our breath until China announces its intention to come on board.

REGIONAL CHRONOLOGY

JANUARY – APRIL 2019

Jan. 1, 2019: Taiwan President Tsai [announces](#) a new “four musts” framework for cross-strait relations with mainland China, as well as her administration’s “three shields” security strategy to protect Taiwan’s democratic values, enhance cyber security, and ensure people’s livelihoods.

Jan. 1, 2019: Kim Jong Un [delivers](#) New Year’s speech with a message to President Trump that he is willing to meet again after negotiations with the US stalled. Kim also acknowledges progress in inter-Korean relations, citing the effectiveness of the “non-aggression pact” in reducing accidental armed clashes and easing military tensions.

Jan. 2, 2019: On his first day as acting secretary of defense, Patrick Shanahan [tells](#) Pentagon staff to remember “China, China, China” and that the *2018 National Defense Strategy* will guide operations.

Jan. 6-10, 2019: Russian Pacific Fleet Task Force [visits](#) Manila for an unofficial visit to strengthen the relationship between the Russian and Philippine navies. It is the seventh visit of the Russian Navy to Manila since 2012, and consists of goodwill games, a boodle fight, and shipboard tour.

Jan. 7, 2019: China’s Foreign Ministry [lodges](#) “stern representations” with the US in response to the freedom of navigation (FON) operation conducted by the guided-missile destroyer *USS McCampbell* within 12 nm of the Paracel Islands earlier in the day.

Jan. 7-8, 2019: Japanese FM Kono [visits](#) India. He holds the 10th Japan-India Foreign Ministers’ Strategic Dialogue with Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj, pays a courtesy call to PM Modi, and inaugurates the India-Japan Friendship Forum.

Jan. 7-8, 2019: US trade representatives [meet](#) Chinese counterparts in Beijing for the first face-to-face meeting to negotiate trade agreements between the two countries since Presidents Trump and Xi called a 90-day truce in trade disputes on Dec. 1, 2018.

Jan. 8, 2019: *China Central Television* [announces](#) deployment of *DF-26* ballistic missiles in China’s northwest plateau.

Jan. 8-10, 2019: North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un [arrives](#) in Beijing to meet President Xi for their fourth meeting in China in less than a year.

Jan. 10, 2019: South Korean President Moon Jae-in [accuses](#) Japan of politicizing South Korea’s Supreme Court decision ordering Japanese firms to pay reparations to Korean forced laborers during Japan’s occupation of the Korean Peninsula.

Jan. 11-16, 2019: US and UK navies [conduct](#) six days of communication drills, division tactics, and a personnel exchange in the South China Sea.

Jan. 14, 2019: Japanese FM Kono [meets](#) Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow to discuss a peace treaty and settling territorial disputes over the Kuril Islands.

Jan. 15, 2019: Thailand’s Election Commission [announces](#) postponement of the Feb. 24 general election, citing planning conflicts with the coronation of King Vajiralongkorn in May.

Jan. 15, 2019: South Korea’s military [publishes](#) 2018 defense white paper, which omits the word “enemy” and other “provocative jargon” in reference to North Korea’s government and military, and underscores determination to push for more confidence-building measures in inter-Korean military relations.

Jan. 15, 2019: Indian Ambassador to the United States Harsh Vardhan Shringla [announces](#) to the US-India Business Council India’s commitment to purchase \$5 billion in oil and gas per year, and \$18 billion in defense equipment.

Jan. 15-19, 2019: Japanese Defense Minister Iwaya [makes](#) a five-day visit to the US and meets Acting Defense Secretary Shanahan in Washington DC. Iwaya also [stops](#) in Hawaii on his first visit since taking office, where he is hosted by Adm. Davidson at USINDOPACOM headquarters.

Jan. 16-18, 2019: Prime Minister Morrison [makes](#) the first bilateral visit by an Australian prime minister to Vanuatu and Fiji.

Jan. 17, 2019: Taiwan's military [holds](#) its first large-scale drills of the year on the island's west coast, aimed at honing its combat readiness and "thwarting an amphibious invasion."

Jan. 17-19, 2019: North Korean Special Envoy Kim Yong Chol [travels](#) to Washington DC to meet Secretary of State Pompeo and Special Representative for North Korea Biegun to "make progress on the commitments President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un made at their summit in Singapore."

Jan. 18, 2019: Japanese MSDF support ship [finds](#) a North Korean-flagged tanker lying next to a vessel of unknown nationality with connected hoses in the East China Sea. Japan reports details of the incident to the UN Security Council Committee on suspicion of ship-to-ship transfers.

Jan. 18, 2019: Following President Trump's meeting with North Korean Special Envoy Kim Yong Chol, the White House [announces](#) that President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un will meet for a second summit in late February.

Jan. 22, 2019: Japanese PM Abe and Russian President Putin [agree](#) to accelerate work on reaching a postwar peace treaty and resolving disputes over the Northern Territories/Kuril Islands, following their summit in Moscow.

Jan. 22, 2019: Taiwan's Defense Ministry tells its citizens not to panic after PLA aircraft [fly](#) over the Bashi Channel within close-range of the island.

Jan. 23, 2019: Japanese SDF patrol plane [flies](#) within close proximity of a South Korean naval vessel in the East China Sea. Japanese FM Kono and South Korean FM Kang Kyung-wha meet on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum to address the incident.

Jan. 24, 2019: USS *McCampbell* and the USNS *Walter S. Diehl* [transit](#) the Taiwan Strait to demonstrate "US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific."

Jan. 24, 2019: Indian Navy [commissions](#) a third air base, INS Kohassa, in the northern Andaman and Nicobar islands.

Jan. 28, 2019: US Department of Justice [files](#) financial fraud charges against Huawei and its CFO Meng Wanzhou in relation to the company's business activities in Iran.

Jan. 29, 2019: China's Ministry of Transport [opens](#) a maritime rescue center on Yongshu (Fiery Cross) Reef in Nansha (Spratly) Islands, "to better protect navigation and transport safety in the South China Sea."

Jan. 30-31, 2019: US and Chinese officials, led by US Trade Representative Lighthizer and Chinese Vice Premier Liu He, [meet](#) in Washington DC to negotiate a trade agreement.

Feb. 1, 2019: European Union-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement enters into force.

Feb. 2, 2019: Following President Trump's announcement that the US would pull out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, President Putin [announces](#) Russia's withdrawal.

Feb. 3-8, 2019: US Special Representative for North Korea Biegun [travels](#) to Seoul and Pyongyang to meet South and North Korean counterparts to prepare for a second summit between President Trump and Chairman Kim.

Feb. 10, 2019: South Korea [agrees](#) to increase its contribution to the upkeep of US Forces Korea by 8.2% (\$915 million).

Feb. 11, 2019: USS *Spruance* and USS *Preble* [sail](#) within 12 nm of the Spratly Islands as a freedom of navigation operation "to challenge excessive maritime claims and preserve access to the waterways governed by international law."

Feb. 11, 2019: Spokesperson for the Philippine government [announces](#) that the US pledged \$5.75 million in intelligence support to assist counterterrorism efforts in the Philippines.

Feb. 11-15, 2019: US trade officials [negotiate](#) with Chinese representatives in Beijing to secure a trade deal. President Xi [meets](#) US Trade Representative Lighthizer and US Treasury Secretary Mnuchin.

Feb. 12, 2019: In testimony to the US Senate Armed Services Committee, Adm. Davidson [identifies](#) China's military as "the principle threat to U.S. interests, U.S. citizens and our allies inside the First Island Chain."

Feb. 12, 2019: Japanese government [lodges](#) a "stern protest" with Seoul in reaction to South Korea National Assembly Speaker Moon Hee-sang's remarks regarding Emperor Akihito.

Feb. 12, 2019: Members of US Congress [introduce](#) resolutions in the House of Representatives and the Senate that they hope will "reinforce" the trilateral US-Japan-South Korea alliance amidst deteriorating relations between Tokyo and Seoul.

Feb. 12-22, 2019: US and Thailand [host](#) *Cobra Gold*, Asia's largest multinational military exercise, in Thailand, during which 29 countries participate in staff exercises, humanitarian civic assistance projects, and field training exercises.

Feb. 15, 2019: Indian PM Modi [calls](#) for "the complete isolation of Pakistan" following a suicide car bombing in Kashmir that killed 42 Indian security personnel.

Feb. 18, 2019: US and UK navies [hold](#) a joint drill in the South China Sea, where crew from *HMS Montrose* embark and secure *USNS Guadalupe* in a high seas trafficking simulation.

Feb. 19-22, 2019: New round of US-China trade talks [commence](#) in Washington DC, followed by high-level talks led by US Trade Representative Lighthizer and Chinese Vice Premier Liu He.

Feb. 20, 2019: Inaugural Japan-Three Micronesian Countries' Meeting is [held](#) in Koror, Palau to enhance cooperation between Japan, Palau, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia. Japan announces that it will provide \$30.7 million in aid for disaster prevention and mitigation and economic and social development assistance.

Feb. 20-March 8, 2019: US, Japanese, and Australian troops [participate](#) in *Cope North*, the largest multilateral Pacific Air Forces exercise, designed to strengthen air operations with a focus on humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief training.

Feb. 21-22, 2019: Indian PM Modi [visits](#) South Korea and meets President Moon in Seoul to discuss strengthening economic and military ties between the two countries.

Feb. 24, 2019: Okinawan voters [reject](#) plans for the construction of a new US air base in Henoko.

Feb. 24, 2019: President Trump [delays](#) March 1 deadline for increasing tariffs on Chinese imports, citing progress made in trade talks.

Feb. 25, 2019: *USS Stethem* and *USNS Cesar Chavez* [transit](#) the Taiwan Strait to demonstrate "the U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific."

Feb. 25-26, 2019: Senior Chinese and South Korean naval officers [attend](#) the annual meeting of Asia-Pacific countries, hosted by Japan's MSDF, aimed to deepen "mutual understanding among the region's navies."

Feb. 26, 2019: Indian fighter jets [conduct](#) a strike in Pakistan. Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale claims that "a very large number of (Jaish-e-Mohammed) terrorists, trainers, senior commanders and groups of jihadis" are killed. Pakistan refutes the claim.

Feb. 26, 2019: Russian telecom operator Rostelecom [says](#) that it had laid 506 miles of fiber-optic cable throughout the Russian-claimed Kuril Islands, and that doing so would improve "the quality of life for the local population."

Feb. 27, 2019: Pakistan's military [shoots](#) down two Indian warplanes in Kashmir and captures one of the pilots.

Feb. 27-28, 2019: President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un [meet](#) in Hanoi, Vietnam for their second summit. Negotiations collapse early and end what was planned to be a two-day summit.

Feb. 28–March 1, 2019: US Secretary of State Pompeo visits the Philippines and meets President Duterte. Pompeo [assures](#) Philippines Foreign Secretary Locsin that the US would respond to “any attack on Philippine aircraft or ships in the South China Sea,” citing article 4 of the US–Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty.

March 1, 2019: Pakistan [returns](#) captured Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman to India as a goodwill gesture to deescalate tensions between the countries.

March 4, 2019: Pakistan’s Navy [denies](#) the entrance of an Indian submarine into its waters without having it “deliberately targeted” to further de-escalation efforts between the two countries.

March 4–12, 2019: US and South Korean militaries [hold](#) the inaugural *Dong Maeng* joint military exercise, a scaled-back version of the annual *Foal Eagle* and *Key Resolve* series.

March 4–25, 2019: US Navy [joins](#) its partners for the 14th Pacific Partnership. The annual Indo-Pacific multinational humanitarian assistance and disaster relief preparedness mission aims to strengthen regional ties and “enhance regional interoperability and disaster response capabilities.”

March 5, 2019: Deputy Foreign Minister of Japan Mori Takeo [meets](#) Russian counterpart Igor Morgulov in Moscow to discuss improved bilateral relations in 2019.

March 5, 2019: President Trump decides to [withdraw](#) India from the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program.

March 5–7, 2019: South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Lee Do-hoon [visits](#) Washington DC to meet US Special Representative for North Korea Biegun to coordinate plans following the US–DPRK second summit.

March 6–7, 2019: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed [makes](#) his first official visit since returning to office in 2018 to Manila to meet President Duterte.

March 7, 2019: US analysts from [38 North](#) and CSIS’s [Beyond Parallel](#) report that North Korea’s Sohae Launch Facility is returning to normal operating status after being moderately dismantled following the Singapore Summit, analysis based on commercial satellite imagery acquired on March 6.

March 7, 2019: Taiwan’s deputy defense minister [announces](#) that Taiwan has submitted an official request to purchase new fighter jets from the United States.

March 8, 2019: Vietnamese official [reports](#) that a Vietnamese fishing boat was rammed by a Chinese vessel near Discovery Bay in the Paracel Islands on Mar. 6.

March 8, 2019: South Korea FM Kang [signs](#) Special Measures Agreement with US Ambassador Harry Harris, formally agreeing to pay \$915 million for the upkeep of US Forces, Korea.

March 11, 2019: UN Panel of Experts on North Korea [release](#) a 400-page document showing that the DPRK has broken UN sanctions by increasing oil imports and coal exports through ship-to-ship transfers, trying to sell arms in the Middle East, and hacking banks globally.

March 11–16, 2019: South Korean President Moon [makes](#) a three-nation ASEAN tour, stopping in Brunei, Malaysia, and Cambodia.

March 13, 2019: Former Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario, former Ombudsman Conchita Carpacio Morales, and Filipino fishermen [file](#) a complaint against Chinese President Xi Jinping before the International Criminal Court (ICC) for committing “crimes against humanity” in China’s systematic takeover of the South China Sea.

March 13, 2019: Japan [rescinds](#) its annual motion to the UN condemning North Korea’s human rights record, “given U.S. efforts to end North Korea’s weapons program and other factors.”

March 13, 2019: Two US B-52 bombers [conduct](#) “routine training in the vicinity of the South China Sea” before returning to Andersen AFB in Guam. The *USS Blue Ridge* [anchors](#) in Manila Bay after sailing through the South China Sea.

March 13, 2019: US and India [sign](#) an agreement “to strengthen bilateral security and civil nuclear cooperation,” through building six US nuclear power plants in India.

March 14, 2019: US Navy, UK Royal Navy, and Japanese MSDF [conduct](#) an anti-submarine warfare exercise in the Western Pacific to “support a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

March 15, 2019: China’s national legislature [passes](#) a foreign investment law, effective Jan. 1, 2020, to “provide stronger protection and a better business environment for overseas investors.”

March 15, 2019: Communist Party Secretary of Sansha Zhang Jun [announces](#) plans to develop Woody Island and two smaller islets in the Paracels into a “national key strategic service and logistics base.”

March 17, 2019: Philippines [withdraws](#) from the ICC after the tribunal launched a preliminary examination into “the alleged crimes against humanity of President Rodrigo Duterte and his men.”

March 18, 2019: US B-52 bombers [conduct](#) an Indo-Pacific “theater familiarization” exercise, flying north from Anderson AFB in Guam to an area east of Russia’s Kamchatka Peninsula.

March 20, 2019: Two US B-52 bombers [join](#) the US Navy and Japan’s ASDF in integrated training near the East China Sea.

March 21-28, 2019: Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen [visits](#) Pacific allies Palau, Nauru, and the Marshall Islands to “deepen ties and friendly relations.” Her tour concludes with a stop in Hawaii.

March 22, 2019: South Korea’s Unification Ministry [announces](#) that North Korea withdrew its staff from the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong following “instructions from the superior authority.”

March 22, 2019: President Trump [tweets](#) that he is withdrawing “additional large scale Sanctions” against North Korea. His decision contradicts the Treasury Department’s [announcement](#) 24 hours earlier that it would pursue sanctions against two Chinese shipping companies for aiding North Korea in evading restrictions imposed by the US and UNSC.

March 24, 2019: Two-thirds of Thailand’s 51 million voters [turn out](#) for the country’s first election since 2014.

March 24-25, 2019: The *USS Curtis Wilbur* and *USCG Bertholf* [conduct](#) “a routine Taiwan Strait transit.” It is the first FOIP mission to involve a US Coast Guard vessel.

March 25, 2019: South Korea’s Unification Ministry [reports](#) that “four to five” North Korean officials returned to work at the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong.

March 26, 2019: Free Joseon, a political organization that opposes Kim Jong Un, [claims](#) responsibility for raiding the North Korean Embassy in Spain on Feb. 22. Information stolen from the embassy was later shared with the FBI, but the US government claims no involvement in the operation.

March 27, 2019: Seven pro-democracy parties [form](#) a coalition to secure a majority in Thailand’s House of Representatives to oppose the military-backed National Council for Peace and Order.

March 27, 2019: Prime Minister Modi [declares](#) India “a space power” following the success of Mission Shakti, an anti-satellite missile demonstration.

March 28-29, 2019: US Trade Representative Lighthizer and Treasury Secretary Mnuchin [hold](#) “a rapid-fire series” of trade talks with Vice Premier Liu He and his delegation in Beijing.

March 31, 2019: Two PLAAF J-11 fighter jets [cross](#) the median line in the Taiwan Strait, prompting Taiwan to dispatch its own planes to warn off the Chinese aircraft. Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs declares the action “provocative” and a violation of “the long-held tacit agreement” of cross-straits relations.

April 1, 2019: Philippines presidential spokesman Salvador Panelo [announces](#) that the Department of Foreign Affairs has filed a diplomatic protest against China regarding “the presence of more than 200 Chinese boats” that have been recorded near Philippines-claimed territory in the South China Sea between January and March.

April 1, 2019: South Korean soldiers [begin searching](#) for Korean War remains at the border without North Korean assistance despite previous agreement at the third Kim-Moon summit that a joint search would take place from April 1 to Oct. 31.

April 1, 2019: New Zealand PM Ardern [makes](#) her first official visit to China. In addition to presiding over the opening of New Zealand's new embassy in Beijing, the two countries sign several cooperation agreements in the areas of agriculture, finance, science and technology.

April 1-12, 2019: The 2019 *Balikatan* exercises [take place](#) in Luzon and Palawan. Over 7,000 troops from the US, Philippines, and Australia participate in humanitarian and civic assistance projects as well as land, sea, air, and counterterrorism operations.

April 2, 2019: Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency [approves](#) the sale of 24 *Seahawk* helicopters to India.

April 2-14, 2019: Navy, army, and air force personnel from Australia and India [participate](#) in the third *AUSINDEX* joint maritime exercise in the Bay of Bengal. The three phases of the exercise focus on anti-submarine warfare and improving overall bilateral cooperation and interoperability.

April 3-5, 2019: Ninth round of US-China trade talks [continue](#) in Washington DC as Vice Premier Liu He meets US Trade Representative Lighthizer and Treasury Secretary Mnuchin. A meeting between Liu and President Trump also takes place.

April 8, 2019: Malaysian authorities [detain](#) 41 Rohingya migrants who arrived by boat on a beach in the north of the country.

April 8-12, 2019: Three Russian warships [anchor](#) in the Port of Manila for the second "goodwill visit" between the Philippine and Russian navies in 2019.

April 10, 2019: The US Navy [sends](#) the *USS Stethem* and a P-8A maritime patrol aircraft to assist search and rescue operations after a Japanese ASDF F-35 jet disappears off northeast Japan during a training flight.

April 10-11, 2019: South Korea President Moon Jae-in [travels](#) to Washington DC to meet President Trump for a summit on North Korean diplomacy.

April 12, 2019: Indonesia's Ministry of Defense [signs](#) a \$1.02 billion contract with South Korea's Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering (DSME) for three diesel-electric submarines, following final delivery of a previous batch of submarines from the South Korean shipbuilder on April 11.

April 13-16, 2019: Indian Navy [sends](#) the warships *INS Kolkata* and *INS Shakti* to the second *Indian Navy-Vietnam Peoples' Navy Bilateral Exercise* at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam.

April 15, 2019: Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense and Japan's Ministry of Defense separately [report](#) PLAAF jets and planes flying over the Bashi Channel to conduct exercises in the Western Pacific.

April 15-16, 2019: Japanese Economy Minister Toshimitsu Motegi [meets](#) US Trade Representative Lighthizer in Washington DC for the first round of negotiations on a bilateral trade agreement.

April 17-18, 2019: US Special Representative for North Korea Biegun [travels](#) to Moscow "to discuss efforts to advance the final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea."

April 17, 2019: Preliminary results from Indonesia's general election [show](#) incumbent Joko Widodo winning over Prabowo Subianto in the presidential race.

April 18, 2019: *Korean Central News Agency* [reports](#) that Kim Jong Un observed the testing of Pyongyang's new "tactical guided weapon."

April 19, 2019: Japanese FM Kono and Defense Minister Iwaya [meet](#) US Secretary of State Pompeo and Acting Secretary of Defense Shanahan in Washington DC for a "2+2" Security Consultative Committee meeting that focuses on bilateral "coordination on the evolving regional security environment."

April 19, 2019: Malaysian PM Mahathir [announces](#) revival of the \$34 billion Bandar Malaysia development project that was suspended in 2017. The Chinese-backed rail and property development project is described by the PM's office as "a significant contribution to the Belt and Road Initiative," and integral in fostering long-term bilateral relations between Malaysia and China.

April 18-21, 2019: The US and Sri Lankan navies [cancel](#) the 2019 *Cooperation Afloat and Readiness Training* exercise four days earlier than scheduled. The 25th iteration was based out of Hambantota Port, but was suspended following the Easter Sunday attacks.

April 21, 2019: Three churches and four hotels [are targeted](#) in coordinated bombings across Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, killing over 300 people and injuring over 500.

April 22, 2019: Cambodian PM Hun Sen and Thai PM Prayut Chan-O-Cha [inaugurate](#) the reopening of the cross-border rail link that closed 45 years ago. During the event the two leaders sign an agreement to operationalize international rail services and Thailand presented Cambodia with a four-car diesel train.

April 22-May 5, 2019: The air forces of the United States, South Korea, and Australia [undertake](#) two weeks of "scaled-back" joint air drills around the Korean Peninsula, replacing the previous large-scale *Max Thunder* drill.

April 23, 2019: FM Kono [announces](#) that Japan has removed its call to "maximize pressure on North Korea by all available means" from its Diplomatic Bluebook 2019, in favor of working to resolve the issue of North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens.

April 23, 2019: People's Liberation Army Navy [marks](#) its 70th anniversary with a naval review off Qingdao featuring its new nuclear submarines and destroyers. Ships from 13 countries including India, Japan, Australia, Russia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines participate.

April 24, 2019: US officials [report](#) that the French frigate *Vendemiaire* was "shadowed" by Chinese military when it transited the Taiwan Strait on April 7.

April 24, 2019: Two Japan MSDF *P-3C Orion* maritime patrol aircraft [join](#) the Indian Navy for a joint anti-submarine warfare exercise off Western India.

April 24-25, 2019: North Korean Chairman Kim travels to Russia to [meet](#) President Putin in Vladivostok.

April 25, 2019: North Korea's Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country [criticizes](#) South Korea for committing "acts of perfidy" in conducting joint air drills with the United States during what it views as a "crucial moment" on the peninsula.

April 25, 2019: China [protests](#) the *Vendemiaire's* April 7 transit through the Taiwan Strait, claiming that the French warship had "illegally entered China's territorial waters."

April 25-27, 2019: Second [Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation](#) is hosted by President Xi in Beijing and gathers leaders and representatives from 150 countries.

April 26-27, 2019: Japanese PM Abe [makes](#) official visit to the White House to discuss bilateral trade, focusing on the automobile industry, with President Trump.

April 28, 2019: *USS William P. Lawrence* and *USS Stethem* [sail](#) the Taiwan Strait, demonstrating "the U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific."

April 30-May 1, 2019: US Trade Representative Lighthizer and US Treasury Secretary Mnuchin [continue](#) trade talks with Chinese Vice Premier Liu He in Beijing.

May 1, 2019: The Heisei era ends and the Reiwa era begins as Naruhito [ascends](#) the throne following Akihito's 30-year reign.

Chronology by Ariel Stenek, Pacific Forum

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

US-JAPAN RELATIONS

TREADING WATER IN CHOPPIER SURF

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The US and Japanese governments continued to work at maintaining a steadfast alliance, yet there were issues that could upend the relationship. After several months of anticipation, there was some progress on trade negotiations. While the US hoped to close the deal before President Trump visits Japan in late May, differences over the scope of the agreement and a number of difficult issues related to automobiles, agriculture, and currency rates remained. Meanwhile, domestic pressure over the Futenma relocation project returned to the news with a new referendum that strongly rejected the move. The introduction of the Reiwa era at the end of April served as a brief respite as the alliance partners sought to align interests following the “no deal” US-DPRK summit in Hanoi.

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Introduction

The US and Japanese governments continue to work hard at being the steadiest alliance. Yet there are issues to be negotiated, bilaterally and in the region, that could upend the carefully orchestrated relationship between Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and President Donald Trump. Early in 2019, negotiators met to discuss the way forward for a US-Japan trade deal.

Of course, domestic pressures continue to shape alliance diplomacy. In Okinawa, the new governor implemented his campaign promise to hold a prefecture-wide referendum. Media in Tokyo and in Naha read the results quite differently, however. April brought local elections in Japan with observers trying to read the tea leaves as to how the Liberal Democratic Party will fare in the 2019 Upper House election.

The failure of the second Trump-Kim summit resulted once more in an attempt by Prime Minister Abe to present a united front between Tokyo and Washington on this most troubling security challenge. Yet concerns were visible under the surface. A 2+2 meeting sought to assuage those concerns.

But it was the abdication of Emperor Akihito that consumed attention in Japan. On April 30, the reign of Japan's 125th emperor came to an end, and the new era of Reiwa, translated by the Japanese government as "beautiful harmony," began. Even Americans seemed captivated by the pomp and ceremony in Tokyo, marking an end to the Heisei era with the "retirement" of the 85-year-old Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, and bringing a next-generation imperial couple, Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako, into the global spotlight.



Figure 1 The announcement of the name of the new imperial era. Photo: AFLO

Trade talks slowly begin to gain steam

After a [busy fall](#), US-Japan trade talks initially got off to a slow start in 2019. Prime Minister Abe and President Trump first agreed to begin negotiations on a bilateral trade agreement on goods at their [summit](#) in September 2018. The US Trade Representative (USTR) then released a set of specific [negotiating objectives](#) on Dec. 21, setting the stage for talks to begin in early 2019. But no talks ensued. Instead, the USTR began the year by first confronting the longest government [shutdown](#) in US history in January, and then [focused](#) most of its attention throughout February and March on trade negotiations with [China](#) rather than Japan.

The first round of US-Japan trade talks was eventually held April 15-16 in Washington. After the slow start, many Trump administration officials publicly voiced their desire for a speedy resolution to the deal in time for the president's visit to Japan in May. On April 12, Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said he was seeking a "[very quick agreement](#)" with Japan to reduce tariffs on agricultural goods ahead of broader efforts to reach a more comprehensive trade deal. On April 26, President Trump similarly [expressed optimism](#) in his summit with Prime Minister Abe that an agreement could be announced prior to his Japan trip. White House Economic Adviser Larry Kudlow again stated on May 3 that a deal could be [finalized](#) as soon as late May.

Japanese officials may be in [less of a rush](#) to conclude a deal than their US counterparts. Prime Minister Abe's administration is entering negotiations with the US fresh off concluding two major multilateral trade agreements last year thanks to the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement and the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (CPTPP). The signing of these agreements has put significant pressure on US suppliers of agricultural products such as wine, beef, and dairy, as these companies now face much higher tariffs in the Japanese market than their competitors in Europe and Australia. While the US is hoping to quickly reassure its agricultural sector with a new deal, Japan's chief trade negotiator, Motegi Toshimitsu, downplayed the likelihood of a speedy resolution on April 26 when he noted that any trade deal would likely require [congressional approval](#). There were also some reports that Trump agreed to a request from Abe in their

meeting to [delay further progress](#) on a trade agreement until after Japan's Upper House elections in July.

While there has been much discussion about the pace of negotiations, both the US and Japan will first need to agree on the scope of their talks. Japanese negotiators continue to discuss the deal as a trade agreement on goods, with the inclusion of a few services, while US officials are pushing for a full free-trade agreement (FTA). There are also a number of sticking points that will be tricky to negotiate, including sensitive topics such as automobiles, agriculture, and currency. The Trump administration initially pushed Japan to the negotiating table by threatening to [raise the tariff](#) on Japanese automobiles to 20%, whereas the Abe administration is hoping that these tariffs can be [eliminated](#) altogether. Japan has said that it is willing to offer the US the [same tariff rates](#) on agriculture that it negotiated with the EU and CPTPP member countries, yet Trump has long said that he seeks a "[better deal](#)" than the CPTPP. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin stated on April 13 that any trade agreement will include a commitment from Japan to refrain from [currency manipulation](#), while Motegi has repeatedly stressed that currency rates should be [discussed in a separate context](#).

As the trade talks move forward, it is likely that the political calendar will continue to affect the speed of negotiations. Officials in both countries will need to move quickly if they are hoping that Trump will have something concrete to announce alongside Abe in late May. Looking ahead to next year, Trump no doubt hopes that a broader agreement can be concluded well before the next US presidential election. A positive resolution of a US-Japan trade deal may be especially important for Trump, as the fate of his other trade objectives is more uncertain. Trump has repeatedly praised his new trade agreement with Canada and Mexico, including in his most recent [State of the Union](#) address on Feb. 5, but both Republicans and Democrats have said the deal will [need significant changes](#) before it is passed in Congress. Trump has similarly promised that a major trade deal with China will be concluded soon, but it remains to be seen how swiftly tariffs will be lifted. As Chinese negotiators arrived in Washington in early May for another round of negotiations, Trump welcomed their arrival by [threatening to expand tariffs](#) to include all Chinese goods if a deal could not be reached quickly enough.

A referendum in Okinawa

Newly elected Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki fulfilled his campaign promise to hold a referendum on the government's plan to relocate facilities for the US Marines from the Futenma base in Ginowan City to Camp Schwab in the less populated city of Nago. In September 2016, the Naha branch of the Fukuoka High Court [decided](#) in favor of the national government in a lawsuit filed by Okinawa prefecture asking that the relocation plan be terminated.



Figure 2 Aerial view of Futenma Air Station. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

On Feb. 24, 53% of Okinawa's eligible voters turned out to vote in the referendum, a lower number than voted in the gubernatorial election last September. Nonetheless, of those who turned out, [73% voted against Tokyo's base relocation plan](#) while 19% voted for it. The referendum is nonbinding, but the governor argued that he would be obligated to act should one fourth of Okinawa's voters oppose the base. The 434,000 who voted against the government's base plan represented 37% of the 1.16 million voters in Japan's southern prefecture.

After the referendum, however, Prime Minister Abe announced that he would proceed with the construction plan. Gov. Tamaki visited the prime minister's office on March 1 to convey the results and to ask that the central government reconsider its base relocation plan. Tamaki also visited the US Embassy to meet Deputy Chief of Mission Joseph Young, who said that he would pass on the message to Ambassador William Hagerty. However, Hagerty had previously told reporters the day after the referendum that while he hoped to continue the good

relationship between the US and Okinawa, “the [only option on the table](#) today is the facility in Henoko.”

The breakdown of talks in Hanoi

The second summit between President Trump and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un ended without progress on the aim of denuclearization. Held in Hanoi on Feb. 27-28, the follow-up meeting to last year’s summit in Singapore was expected to yield agreement on concrete steps for both North Korea and the United States to move toward reconciling differences over denuclearization. Yet in a surprising move, Trump [ended the discussions](#) abruptly, leaving allies in the region scrambling to explain what it meant for the future of Northeast Asia.

Prime Minister Abe received a [phone call](#) from the US president, and in his [press conference](#) stated his support for the decision to call off talks. Claiming that no deal was better than a bad deal, Abe’s response to Hanoi reflected what had been Japan’s position all along: international sanctions must be maintained on North Korea until steps are taken toward full denuclearization. This [contrasted with the South Korean position](#), which was more tolerant of some sanctions being relaxed in the course of their negotiations with the North. Tokyo has worked alongside other UN members to monitor compliance with existing sanctions, and [continues to share information](#) with the US and other partners such as Australia, France, and the UK.

Japan’s interests in the effort to negotiate with the Kim regime [center around three priorities](#). The first is the continued desire for denuclearization. A nuclear North Korea poses a serious threat to Japan, and to the reliability of the US extended deterrent in Asia. Second, Pyongyang’s missile arsenal has already had a demonstrable impact on Japanese security. Recent [short-range missile launches](#) by North Korea once more raise the specter of increased tensions between Pyongyang and Washington, despite public statements (including [tweets by the president](#)) designed to minimize their importance. Finally, Prime Minister Abe must resolve the difficult issue of abducted Japanese citizens in North Korea. The Kim regime has yet to account for the 12 remaining Japanese who were confirmed as abductees, and there are many other cases of suspected abductions that need to be addressed. In Abe’s press conference

after the breakdown of talks in Hanoi, after saying that the US made the right decision to call off the talks, he stated that he thought it was time that he spoke directly to Kim about what was at stake for Japan.

A busy summer ahead

Despite the [2+2 meeting](#) between Japan’s defense and foreign affairs ministers and the US secretaries of state and defense, there seemed to be little substantive progress on alliance issues in early 2019. Even Prime Minister Abe’s visit to Washington on April 26-27 seemed less about problem solving and more about [cementing personal ties](#).



Figure 3 Abe and Trump take in a round of golf in April. Photo: Facebook

The real test of the Abe-Trump approach will come in the months ahead. For the bilateral relationship, perhaps nothing looms larger than the terms of the impending trade deal. Abe’s LDP faces considerable headwinds going into the Upper House elections this summer, and a poor outcome on trade will hurt Abe at the polls. The Trump administration continues to struggle in its effort to bring Beijing to heel on its predatory trade behavior, and the US-Japan deal could easily become collateral damage if there are perceptions that Washington has come up short in that effort.

Prime Minister Abe has his [work cut out for him](#) this summer. Japan hosts the G20 Summit in June, and Japan’s prime minister wants to solidify his credentials as an ardent supporter of

the global liberal order. He will be surrounded by the leaders of other US allies that have criticized the Trump administration for its undermining of that order. China's President Xi Jinping will also be there to remind Abe of their common interest in opposing Washington's protectionism.

The Upper House elections follow in July, and Abe and his LDP have for the first time a coalition of supporters that could be corralled into a formal debate on constitutional revision. Maintaining that coalition could be hard, however. A hike in the consumption tax looms in the fall, an issue that often makes Upper House elections in particular a referendum on the government.

President Trump will also visit Japan in late May as the first state visitor of the new Japanese Emperor. Much has been made of this invitation, a signal that Japan still sees the United States as its most valuable partner. Fingers will be crossed that all goes well, both for the sake of the new emperor and empress but also for the US-Japan alliance.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-JAPAN RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2019

Jan. 9, 2019: US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Seko Hiroshige, and European Commissioner for Trade Cecilia Malmstrom hold a [trilateral meeting on trade](#) in Washington, DC.

Jan. 17, 2019: Prime Minister Abe Shinzo [meets](#) Adm. John Richardson, chief of US Navy operations, in Tokyo.

Jan. 19, 2019: PM Abe attends the first [Trans-Pacific Partnership Commission](#) held in Tokyo.

Jan. 20, 2019: Secretary of State Michael Pompeo [speaks](#) with Japanese Foreign Minister Kono Taro by phone about engagement with North Korea.

Feb. 1, 2019: Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Andrea Thompson [travels](#) to Japan to discuss defense trade and nonproliferation.

Feb. 5, 2019: Lt. Gen. Kevin Schneider takes over as the [new commander](#) of US Forces Japan.

Feb. 15, 2019: President Trump says PM [nominated](#) him for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Feb. 16, 2019: Reports suggest that PM Abe nominated President Trump for a Nobel Peace Prize at the [request](#) of the US government.

Feb. 18, 2019: PM Abe says he will [not comment](#) on President Trump's announcement that Abe nominated him for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Feb. 19, 2019: PM Abe [meets](#) US Congressional Study Group on Japan delegation in Tokyo.

Feb. 19, 2019: Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources Francis Fannon [travels](#) to Japan to discuss energy security and regional cooperation on energy issues.

Feb. 22, 2019: Secretary of State Pompeo [speaks](#) by phone with Foreign Minister Kono about engagement with North Korea.

Feb. 24, 2019: In a prefecture-wide [referendum](#) on the relocation of US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, 72% of Okinawan voters say that they oppose the Henoko relocation plan.

Feb. 27, 2019: President Trump meets North Korea Chairman Kim Jong Un in Hanoi.

Feb. 28, 2019: PM Abe and President Trump [speak](#) by telephone about US-DPRK summit.

March 1, 2019: Senior US defense officials [tell](#) NBC News that the Trump administration will [end](#) large-scale military exercises with South Korea.

March 19, 2019: United States and Japan release a joint statement on the [Japan-United States Strategic Energy Partnership](#).

March 20, 2019: PM Abe [meets](#) delegation of legislators participating in the US-Japan Legislative Exchange Program in Tokyo.

March 20-23, 2019: First TOFU (Think of Okinawa's Future in the United States) program participants [visit](#) Washington, DC for meetings at the Department of State and White House.

March 24-26, 2019: Second TOFU program participants [visit](#) New York for meetings at the United Nations and with former ambassador to Japan Caroline Kennedy.

March 26, 2019: PM Abe [meets](#) Gen. Robert Neller, commandant of the United States Marine Corps in Tokyo.

April 7, 2019: First round of unified local elections is held in Japan.

April 8, 2019: PM Abe [publishes article](#) on women's empowerment in Japan in *Medium*.

April 15-16, 2019: US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Fiscal Policy Minister Motegi Toshimitsu hold [talks](#) on a US-Japan trade deal in Washington, DC.

April 19, 2019: Secretary of State Pompeo and Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan host Foreign Minister Kono and Defense Minister Iwaya Takeshi in Washington, DC for a Security Consultative Committee (“2+2”) meeting. [Joint Statement](#), [Fact Sheet](#), [Remarks to the Press](#)

April 19, 2019: President Trump and First Lady Melania Trump announce that they will pay a [state visit](#) to Japan from May 25–28, 2019.

April 21, 2019: Second round of unified local elections is held in Japan.

April 25, 2019: Foreign Minister Kono’s [interview](#) is published in the *Washington Post*.

April 26–27, 2019: PM Abe meets President Trump in Washington, DC. [Remarks](#).

April 26, 2019: Finance Minister Aso Taro [meets](#) Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin in Washington, DC.

April 30, 2019: Emperor Akihito [abdicates](#) his position as emperor of Japan.

May 1, 2019: Emperor Naruhito [succeeds](#) Akihito as the new emperor of Japan.

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

US-CHINA RELATIONS

IS A TRADE DEAL IMMINENT?

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Intense trade talks in the first four months of 2019 made progress, raising hopes that a deal will be reached in May, and signed by Presidents Donald Trump and Xi Jinping soon thereafter. Remaining sticking points include the enforcement mechanism, which is a key US demand, and a schedule for lifting the tariffs, which is a Chinese priority. The US Department of Justice unsealed an indictment charging Huawei and its CFO Meng Wanzhou with financial fraud, money laundering, obstruction of justice, sanctions violations, and other crimes. Tensions increased over Taiwan as the Trump administration took steps to strengthen ties with Taipei and warn Beijing to back off its coercive and destabilizing policies. President Trump welcomed China's decision to add fentanyl-related substances to a supplementary list of controlled drugs and substances beginning May 1. Growing US concerns about Chinese espionage were highlighted publicly in speeches by senior Trump administration officials.

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Trade negotiations continue

2019 brought a fresh series of intense trade talks between the US and China, with serious negotiations to address long-standing problems in the bilateral economic relationship. A deputy-level delegation traveled to China in early January for the first meeting since both sides agreed last December to a 90-day ceasefire while negotiations commenced. The talks centered on “China’s pledge to purchase a substantial amount of agricultural, energy, manufactured goods, and other products and services from the United States,” [according](#) to the post-mortem statement from the Office of the US Trade Representative. In what would be a recurring theme, President Trump [tweeted](#) both during and after the negotiations that “talks with China are going very well.”

Additional negotiations in Beijing scheduled for Jan. 22 were [reportedly](#) cancelled by the White House due to disagreements over intellectual property policy enforcement. However, things picked back up in Washington at the end of January with two days of talks led by Chinese Vice Premier Liu He, where he [told](#) Trump of President Xi Jinping’s commitment to buy 5 million tons of US soybeans. Trump’s assertions of positive progress in the trade talks continued throughout January and February, including a [tweet](#) on Jan. 31 that there was “good intent and spirit on both sides.”

After a delay related to the US government shutdown and tensions between Trump and the Democrats in Congress, Trump delivered his State of the Union Address on Feb. 5. He criticized previous trade policies that hurt US economic interests and lauded his administration’s tariffs, [boasting](#) that “[the US Department of] Treasury is receiving billions of dollars a month from a country that never gave us a dime.” He underscored his “great respect for President Xi,” though offered little in the way of specifics on trade talks outcomes. While Trump previously alluded to his intention to meet with Xi “very soon,” he [told](#) reporters on Feb. 7 that they would not be meeting before the 90-day period of negotiations was slated to end on March 1.

Deputy-level negotiations resumed on Feb. 11 in Beijing, in advance of principal-level meetings a few days later led by USTR Robert Lighthizer and US Department of Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin. Trump spoke to reporters on Feb. 12

about the March 1 deadline, [declaring](#) for the first time that “if we’re close to a deal where we think we can make a real deal and it’s going to get done, I could see myself letting that slide for a little while.” This was a surprising about-face after previous tough language from Trump and other US government officials, including Lighthizer’s own [insistence](#) back in December that “as far as I’m concerned, it’s a hard deadline.”

Negotiations relocated to Washington on Feb. 19, with the White House still [mentioning](#) the 90-day timeframe in its statement from the press secretary announcing the talks. US Department of Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue [confirmed](#) that as part of an agreement, China would buy an additional 10 million tons of soybeans from the United States. As the cameras were rolling in the Oval Office meeting with the US and Chinese trade delegations present, President Trump grilled his lead negotiator Lighthizer about the progress of the talks. At one point, Trump denounced the use of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), which he [described](#) as “not a contract to the extent that we want.” According to a Feb. 20 *Reuters* report, [six](#) MOUs were being drafted as part of a potential agreement on what the US views as fundamental structural issues in the US-China relationship. After a back-and-forth exchange in the Oval Office in front of Vice Premier Liu He, Chinese Ambassador to the US Cui Tiankai, and the American people in which Lighthizer attempted to persuade Trump that MOUs are legally binding, they settled on scrapping the term “MOU” in favor of “trade agreement.” Listening to the exchange between Trump and Lighthizer, Liu He [guffawed](#), reflecting his dismay with the interaction and the US decision-making process.

During the late February round of talks, Mnuchin [confirmed](#) that an agreement on China’s currency devaluation had been reached, though he did not offer specifics. Furthermore, Trump followed through on his earlier prediction that the March 1 tariff hike deadline would be postponed. On Feb. 24, he [announced](#) that he would delay the planned tariff increase as a direct result of the productive negotiations – though he gave no indication of when (or if) a new deadline might be set. China’s Ministry of Commerce echoed the US assessment in its read-out of the Feb. 24-26 talks, the seventh round since the beginning of the trade war, and [noted](#) particularly substantial progress in

discussions surrounding intellectual property (IP) protection, technology transfer, services, currency, agriculture, and non-tariff barriers to trade.



Figure 1 US and Chinese trade negotiators meet with President Trump in the Oval Office. Photo: Reuters

On Feb. 27, Lighthizer testified before the House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means in a hearing on “US-China Trade.” He [described](#) the ongoing talks as “very intense, extremely serious, and very specific,” but added that “much still needs to be done both before an agreement is reached and, more importantly, after it is reached, if one is reached.”

A deal in sight?

A one-month break in face-to-face negotiations coincided with China’s “two sessions,” an annual series of plenary meetings in Beijing for the National People’s Congress and the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. March 28-29 saw talks resume in Beijing, quickly followed by China’s decision to [suspend](#) the scheduled tariff increase on US automobiles and auto parts. The ninth round of talks, with Trump and Liu He back at the helm, culminated with remarks from the Oval Office on April 4 where Trump [estimated](#) that a deal-or-no-deal outcome would be clear within the next four weeks.

On April 30, Lighthizer and Mnuchin traveled to Beijing to commence further negotiations, to be followed by a visit by Liu He to Washington on May 8 for continued discussions and possible [completion](#) of a deal. Mnuchin confirmed as much in the days before his trip to Beijing, [asserting](#) that talks were “getting into the final laps.” A White House [statement](#) implied that the US would not back away from insisting on major commitments from China to address long-

standing problems in US-China trade, saying that “discussions remain focused toward making substantial progress on important structural issues and rebalancing the US-China trade relationship.”

Both sides have held firm on several remaining issues yet to be resolved ahead of any agreement. Among the most contentious issues are a mechanism to ensure enforcement of the deal and a schedule for lifting the tariffs, which, [according](#) to Vice President Pence, are linked. The US has reportedly [demanded](#) that China agree to a non-retaliation clause if the US punishes China for noncompliance by increasing or adding tariffs, which has faced strong objections from China. Meanwhile, Beijing is resisting the US push for structural changes to its economic practices over concerns that sudden changes might have a devastating effect on China’s economy. On May 3, Pence [told](#) CNBC “Forced technology transfers, intellectual property theft are a reality. President Trump has made it clear that things have to change with China on the structural issues as well as the trade imbalance and we’ll continue to stand firm on those.” Upcoming talks might finally indicate if these sticking points can be resolved, and if they’ll be incorporated into any sort of agreement that may (or may not) be approaching.

WTO wins for the US

The Office of the USTR [released](#) its annual report on China’s World Trade Organization compliance in early February. The 175-page document criticized China’s poor record of compliance with WTO rules and regulations, the harm China’s membership has caused other WTO members, and the policies and practices that China’s “non-market economic system” employs to harm US companies. The complaints resembled many of the issues flagged by the US in trade discussions, including breaking commitments to curb forced technology transfer and offering unfair subsidies to its domestic companies.

On Feb. 27, a long-standing WTO case against China was [resolved](#) in favor of the US, which argued that China provided illegal farm subsidies that hurt US farmers. The US [notched](#) a second win against China in mid-April on unfair import quotas for agricultural products. The wins underscored Trump’s ongoing pledge to help US farmers and was likely welcomed by

the US administration despite Trump's disdain for the WTO. US grievances with the organization's dispute resolution policies have [escalated](#) into blocking appointments to the WTO appellate body, which is down to the minimum three members to continue hearing rulings. With less than three members, the organization would be unable to function, and these two ruled-upon cases would likely fall in what is described as "legal limbo," thus undermining the wins.

The Huawei Case



Figure 2 Courtroom sketch of Meng Wanzhou at British Columbia Supreme Court on Dec. 7. Source: AP

Following the December 2018 arrest in Canada of Huawei Technologies Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou, the US Department of Justice unsealed its 13-count indictment on Jan. 28 that [charged](#) Huawei and Meng with financial fraud, money laundering, obstruction of justice, sanctions violations, and other crimes. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs quickly [called](#) for the US to withdraw its arrest warrant for Meng and to not pursue an extradition request to Canada, with spokesperson Geng Shuang also urging the US to "stop its unreasonable bashing on Chinese companies."

In the on-the-record Oval Office meeting with the US and Chinese trade negotiating teams in February, Trump surprisingly and ill-advisedly [alluded](#) to the possibility of including Huawei in the pending bilateral trade agreement. This harkened back to his previous intervention on behalf of ZTE, a company that he also implied could be factored into the negotiations. However, Trump's comments were devoid of specifics and it remained unclear whether the president would intervene in the judicial process, perhaps in an attempt to use the Meng

and the Huawei case to extract trade concessions from China.

The US issued a formal extradition request to Ottawa on Jan. 29, which was authorized on March 1. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang strongly condemned the act, [accusing](#) both the US and Canada of "abus[ing] their bilateral extradition agreement and arbitrarily tak[ing] compulsory measures" against a Chinese citizen. A brief court appearance on March 6 scheduled Meng's first extradition hearing for May 8, the same day the tenth round of trade negotiations were slated to begin.

Tensions rise over Taiwan

Friction between the US and China over Taiwan continued to increase in the first four months of 2019. In a speech [delivered](#) on Jan. 2 marking 40 years since the start of improving ties between the two sides of the Strait, Xi Jinping reiterated that unification is "an inevitable requirement for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and insisted that foreign interference in the process is intolerable. Xi also noted that Beijing reserved the option to use all necessary measures, including use of force against forces that interfere with peaceful unification. Although that threat was not new, it had not been included in speeches delivered by prior Chinese leaders marking the anniversary of the 1979 "Message to Taiwan Compatriots." Some observers of Beijing's policy toward Taiwan interpreted the speech as a hardening of China's position that would not bode well for the preservation of cross-strait peace.

On March 31, two Chinese J-11 fighter jets [crossed](#) the centerline south of the Taiwan Strait and flew 43 nm for a total of 12 minutes before veering off. Although the centerline is not a legal maritime boundary line, the two sides have generally abided by a tacit agreement to avoid deliberate provocations and keep their military assets on their respective side of the dividing line. The last time that Chinese jets purposely flew across the centerline to send a political signal was 1999 when then-President Lee Teng-hui described cross-strait relations as being "special state-to-state" in nature.

The action prompted an unusual [tweet](#) by National Security Adviser John Bolton. "Chinese military provocations won't win any hearts or minds in Taiwan, but they will strengthen the resolve of people everywhere who value

democracy. The Taiwan Relations Act and our commitment are clear,” he tweeted. A US State Department spokesperson also [condemned](#) China’s crossing of the centerline, noting US opposition “to unilateral actions by any party that are aimed at altering the status quo, including anything related to force or coercion.” The spokesperson called on Beijing to stop its coercive behavior and resume dialogue with the democratically elected administration in Taipei.

It wasn’t immediately clear what triggered Beijing’s provocation. Chinese scholars privately speculated on the reasons but admitted that they did not know for certain. One expert said that China was angered by Washington’s decision to allow Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen to deliver a speech while transiting Hawaii on March 27 that was broadcast via videoconference at the Heritage Foundation in Washington DC. Another expert cited the Trump administration’s willingness to engage publicly with officials from Taiwan, including a meeting between National Security Council Senior Director Matt Pottinger and Taiwan’s Deputy Foreign Minister Hsu Szu-chien in the Solomon Islands in early March. Other Chinese scholars mentioned reports that the US plans to sell 66 F-16 Viper fighter jets to Taiwan.

Yet another reason posited by Chinese experts for Beijing’s increased military pressure on Taiwan is the perception in China that there is an ongoing strengthening of US-Taiwan military ties and US military activities in support of Taiwan. One example is the uptick in frequency of transits through the Taiwan Strait by US Navy ships, which have reportedly taken place every month since last October. Prior to October, there had been only one Taiwan Strait transit by US naval vessels reported in more than a year, which took place in July. US Navy ships sailed through the Taiwan Strait in January, February, March and April, prompting a Chinese protest each time. In March, a US Coast Guard vessel accompanied a US Navy ship for the first time. Statements released by the Defense Department [noted](#) that US transits demonstrate the US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.

US policy toward Taiwan, including its military components, was apparently discussed between Chief of US Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson and his Chinese counterparts when he visited China in January. After departing Beijing, Richardson [told](#) reporters in Tokyo that

he had insisted that all foreign ships should be able to pass safely through the Taiwan Strait as well as the South China Sea. Richardson did not rule out the possibility that the US would dispatch an aircraft carrier through the Taiwan Strait. “We don’t see any kind of limitation on whatever type of ship could pass through those waters,” he said. The last time that a US aircraft carrier sailed through the Taiwan Strait was 2007.



Figure 3 Adm. Richardson visits China. Photo: US Navy

In mid-April, the US State Department approved the possible sale to Taiwan of a pilot training program along with a maintenance and logistics support package for its F-16 fighter aircraft stationed at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona at an estimated cost of \$500 million. The approval further confirmed the Trump administration’s determination to normalize the decision-making regarding arms sales to Taiwan and maintain its security commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA).

As the US and Taiwan marked the 40th anniversary of the TRA, a bipartisan group of senators introduced the Taiwan Assurance Act (TAA) in March. The sponsors included Tom Cotton (R-AR), Robert Menendez (D-NJ), Marco Rubio (R-FL), Ted Cruz (R-TX), Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV), and Chris Coons (D-DE). Non-binding language in the TAA calls for resumption of trade and investment talks “with the goal of reaching a bilateral free trade agreement,” and US efforts to ensure Taiwan’s meaningful participation in international organizations. In a departure from prior legislation, the TAA includes binding language requiring the secretary of defense to “make efforts to include Taiwanese forces in bilateral and multilateral military exercises.”

Progress on fentanyl



Figure 4 Chinese officials announce ban on all variants of fentanyl. Photo: Reuters

On April 1, Liu Yuejin, China's vice commissioner of the National Narcotics Control Commission, announced that China will add fentanyl-related substances to a supplementary list of controlled drugs and substances beginning May 1. The move came in response to strong pressure from the Trump administration to regulate all fentanyl-related drugs as controlled substances. Prior to the decision, Chinese authorities regulated 25 variants of fentanyl, but some Chinese manufacturers were evading controls by introducing slight changes to the molecular structure of their drugs. This enabled them to manufacture and export fentanyl-type drugs before the Chinese government was able to assess the products for safety and medical use.

Nevertheless, Beijing continued to deny that China is a major contributor to the US opioid crisis, which Liu Yuejin insisted stems from domestic causes. China agreed to take action to address US concerns largely because it sought to identify an issue on which it could cooperate with the US, and President Trump personally asked Xi Jinping to help solve the problem of Chinese exports of fentanyl to the United States.

When President Trump met Chinese Vice Premier Liu He on April 4, he [characterized](#) China's decision to reclassify fentanyl and impose criminal penalties as a "very big, big step" that is "a terrific thing for the United States" and said that he really appreciated it.

US espionage concerns spike

Growing US concerns about Chinese espionage were revealed publicly by senior Trump

administration officials several times in the first few months of 2019. Speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations on April 26, FBI Director Christopher Wray [called](#) for a "whole-of-society" response to economic espionage threats, highlighting China as the primary culprit. He described threats targeting universities and private companies. "No country poses a broader, more severe intelligence collection threat than China," Wray said, adding that "China has pioneered a societal approach to stealing innovation." He said the FBI has economic espionage investigations that "almost invariably lead back to China" in all of its 56 field offices, "spanning almost every industry." Wray acknowledged, however, that the US has to "balance the apparent concerns of the national security agencies with our fundamental nature as open, welcoming institutions."

Two days earlier Adam Hickey, the US deputy assistant attorney-general, detailed espionage threats from China in a [speech](#) to the Fifth National Conference on CFIUS and Team Telecom. Explaining the purpose of the "China Initiative" that was stood up at the Justice Department in November 2018, Hickey called attention to the need to raise awareness of the threats from China, to devote resources to counter those threats, and to improve the FBI's response to them, especially to "newer challenges."

According to Hickey, since 2011, more than 90% of the Department's economic espionage prosecutions involve China and more than two-thirds of all federal trade secret theft cases during that period "have had at least a geographical nexus to China." He claimed that there is ample evidence that Beijing is "using its intelligence services and their tradecraft to target our private sector's intellectual property." Hickey cited the alleged theft of chip technology from a US semiconductor firm, Idaho-based Micron, that has since been sued in China and is also the subject of a government antitrust investigation there. He also charged that China is failing to honor its commitments or to respect the rule of law and legal process more generally.

Next steps

If a US-China trade deal is reached in the coming weeks or months, observers will watch closely its impact on the broader bilateral relationship. Without a doubt, Xi Jinping hopes that a trade

agreement will defuse tensions and introduce greater stability and predictability in the US-China relationship. President Trump's policy approach is uncertain, however. He may initially celebrate the deal as an unprecedented victory and seek to tamp down friction in the relationship as part of a broader reelection campaign strategy that touts his success in dealing with China. But if evidence is forthcoming that China is not complying with the deal during the coming year, which is likely, Trump may see it as in his political interest to return to China bashing in the run up to the November 2020 election. Rising concern about a range of Chinese domestic and foreign policies in Congress and elsewhere in the Trump administration will weigh in favor of maintaining a tough policy aimed at enhancing US competitiveness against China.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-CHINA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2019

Jan 2, 2019: President Xi Jinping [writes](#) in a letter to the White House that as the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties approaches, US-China relations are “at a vital stage” and “that history has proved cooperation is the best choice for both sides.”

Jan. 3, 2019: Donald Trump [tweets](#), “The United States Treasury has taken in MANY billions of dollars from the Tariffs we are charging China and other countries that have not treated us fairly. In the meantime, we are doing well in various Trade Negotiations currently going on. At some point this had to be done!”

Jan. 3, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “Michael Pillsbury interviewed by @cvpayne: ‘They have the motive of making the President look bad – instead of President Trump being portrayed as a HERO. The first President to take China on, it’s 20 years overdue....’”

Jan. 3, 2019: US State Department [issues](#) a warning to US citizens traveling in China, renewing the call to exercise increased caution due to arbitrary enforcement of local laws and noting extra security checks and increased police presence in Xinjiang and Tibet.

Jan. 7-8, 2019: Deputy US Trade Representative Jeffrey Gerrish [leads](#) a US working group to visit China for discussions with Chinese counterparts.

Jan. 7, 2019: US Navy’s [Arleigh Burke-class](#) guided-missile destroyer *USS McCampbell* conducts a freedom of navigation operation, sailing within 12 nm of the Paracel Islands.

Jan. 8, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “Talks with China are going very well!”

Jan. 9, 2019: [Three days](#) of working-level US-China trade talks end in Beijing.

Jan. 13-16, 2019: [Chief of Naval](#) Operations Adm. John Richardson visits China at the invitation of Central Military Commission leadership and People's Liberation Army Navy Commander Vice Adm. Shen Jinlong.

Jan. 14, 2019: “We’re doing very well with China,” President Trump [tells](#) reporters at the White House. “I think that we are going to be able to do a deal with China. China wants to negotiate.”

Jan. 14, 2019: US Secretary of State’s Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Ambassador Khalilzad, [arrives](#) in Beijing on a tour that included Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

Jan. 15, 2019: US Defense Intelligence Agency releases a [report](#) entitled “China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win.”

Jan. 16, 2019: Speaking at the Global Chief of Missions conference in Washington DC, Vice President Mike Pence [says](#) that “too often in recent years China has chosen a path of disregard of the laws and norms that have kept the world safe and prosperous for more than half a century and the days of the United States looking the other way are over.”

Jan. 21, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “China posts slowest economic numbers since 1990 due to U.S. trade tensions and new policies. Makes so much sense for China to finally do a Real Deal, and stop playing around!”

Jan. 22, 2019: [Speaking](#) at the World Economic Forum in Davos via video, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo says, “There are those who say that superpower conflict between our two countries (US-China) is inevitable. We don’t see it that way... but the course of the relationship will be determined by the principles that America stands by: free and open seas, the capacity for nations to take their goods around the world, fair and reciprocal trade agreements.”

Jan. 23, 2019: During a healthcare roundtable at the White House, President Trump [answers](#) a question on current trade negotiations with China saying, “China very much wants to make a deal... I like where we are right now... but as you know, fairly soon, that - the deal that I made with them will come off [by the March 1 deadline].”

Jan. 23, 2019: Special Representative for North Korea Policy Stephen Biegun and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou [meet](#) in Washington to discuss North Korea.

Jan. 24, 2019: [Two](#) US Navy vessels, the *USS McCampbell* and the *USNS Walter S. Diehl*, sail through the Taiwan Strait. [US Pacific Fleet](#) spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Tim Gorman says, “[The vessels] conducted a routine Taiwan Strait Transit...in accordance with international law.”

Jan. 24, 2019: [Speaking about US-China trade negotiations] Commerce [Secretary Wilbur](#) Ross states that, “we’re miles and miles from getting a resolution.”

Jan 28, 2019: [US Justice Department](#) formally charges Huawei and Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou with financial fraud, conspiracy, and sanctions violations.

Jan. 29, 2019: [Senate Armed](#) Services Committee (SASC) holds a hearing on China and Russia.

Jan. 29, 2019: Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang [urges](#) the US “to stop its unreasonable bashing on Chinese companies including Huawei and to immediately withdraw its arrest warrant for Ms. Meng Wanzhou.”

Jan. 30-31, 2019: US and Chinese officials, led by US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Chinese Vice Premier Liu He, [meet](#) in Washington DC to negotiate a trade agreement. Jan. 31, 2019: At the signing of Executive Order, “Strengthening Buy-American Preferences for Infrastructure Projects,” President Trump [states](#), “China is having a very hard time with their economy... [speaking about the trade negotiations] Something will happen. It will be – if it does happen, it will be, by far, the largest trade deal ever made.”

Jan. 31, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “China’s top trade negotiators are in the U.S. meeting with our representatives. Meetings are going well with good intent and spirit on both sides. China does not want an increase in Tariffs and feels they will do much better if they make a deal. They are correct. I will be.....”

Jan. 31, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “...meeting with their top leaders and representatives today in the Oval Office. No final deal will be made until my friend President Xi, and I, meet in the near future to discuss and agree on some of the long standing and more difficult points. Very comprehensive transaction....”

Jan. 31, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “...China’s representatives and I are trying to do a complete deal, leaving NOTHING unresolved on the table. All of the many problems are being discussed and will be hopefully resolved. Tariffs on China increase to 25% on March 1st, so all working hard to complete by that date!”

Jan. 31, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “Looking for China to open their Markets not only to Financial Services, which they are now doing, but also to our Manufacturing, Farmers and other U.S. businesses and industries. Without this a deal would be unacceptable!”

Jan. 31, 2019: President Trump [meets](#) China’s top trade negotiator, Vice Premier Liu He, in the Oval Office.

Jan. 31, 2019: Assistant Foreign Minister Zhang Jun [meets](#) US Under Secretary of State Andrea Thompson in conjunction with her visit to China for the conference of the five nuclear-weapon states, to exchange views on the international strategic security situation, cooperation among the five nuclear-weapon states, non-proliferation and other topics.

Feb. 1, 2019: During a meeting on Human Trafficking, President Trump [states](#), “China has agreed to criminalize fentanyl. That’s going to have a huge impact on fentanyl coming into the country.” Additionally, President Trump states, “My relationship with President Xi is better, I guarantee, than any relationship of a President and a President.”

Feb. 1, 2019: US division of Chinese state-run media organization *China Global Television Network* [files](#) with the US Justice Department as a foreign agent. *CGTN America* states, “Nonetheless, CGTN America has elected to file this registration statement out of an abundance of caution and in the spirit of cooperation with US authorities.”

Feb. 2, 2019: Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang remarks on the US suspending its INF Treaty obligations, stating: “China is [opposed](#) to the US withdrawal and urges the US and Russia to properly resolve differences through constructive dialogue.”

Feb. 4, 2019: US Intellectual Property Enforcement Coordinator (IPEC), Vishal Amin, [issues](#) the Trump administration’s 2018 Annual Intellectual Property Report.

Feb. 4, 2019: Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) [releases](#) its annual report on China’s World Trade Organization (WTO) compliance.

Feb. 5, 2019: White House [releases](#) the “Presidential Message in Celebration of the Lunar New Year.”

Feb. 5, 2019: During his State of the Union Address, President Trump [says](#) that any new trade deal with China “must include real, structural change to end unfair trade practices, reduce our chronic trade deficit and protect American jobs.”

Feb. 5, 2019: China’s Commerce Ministry opposes a report by the USTR on its WTO compliance, [claiming](#) that, “it is inconsistent with the facts. The report was based on U.S. domestic law rather than WTO agreements and multilateral rules.”

Feb. 6, 2019: Speaking to media at the White House, US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin [says](#), “Ambassador Lighthizer and myself and a large team are on our way to Beijing next week. We are committed to continue these [trade] talks.”

Feb. 6, 2019: US Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation [holds](#) a hearing titled “Winning the Race to 5G and the Next Era of Technology Innovation in the US.”

Feb. 7, 2019: US-China Economic and Security Review Commission [holds](#) a hearing titled “What Keeps Xi up at Night: Beijing’s Internal and External Challenges.”

Feb. 7, 2019: Speaking at the reception for the 40th anniversary of US-China diplomatic relations and Chinese New Year, Chinese Ambassador to the US Cui Tiankai [states](#), “New global challenges keep coming up. More than ever before, the world needs China and the United States to work together.”

Feb. 7, 2019: Speaking to reporters, President Trump [confirms](#) that he will not meet with President Xi Jinping before the March 2 trade deal deadline.

Feb. 11, 2019: The [guided-missile](#) destroyers *USS Spruance* and *USS Preble* conduct freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea and sail within 12 nm of the Mischief Reef.

Feb. 11, 2019: Deputy-level trade negotiations [commence](#) in Beijing led by Deputy United States Trade Representative Jeffrey Gerrish.

Feb. 12, 2019: In [testimony](#) before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Adm. Phil Davidson, Commander, US Indo-Pacific Command, says China represents the greatest long-term strategic threat to a free and open Indo-Pacific and to the United States.

Feb. 12, 2019: China’s Development Research Centre of the State Council (DRC) [releases](#) a report predicting the US will remain the sole economic superpower until 2035.

Feb. 12, 2019: Speaking to reporters, President Trump [says](#) that “he could let the March 1 deadline for a trade agreement with China slide for a little while [but I would prefer not to].”

Feb. 12, 2019: During a Cabinet meeting at the White House, President Trump [states](#), “China wants to make a deal badly. We’ve gone up tremendously in value as a country, in economic value. Larry [Kudlow] we’ve gone up \$11 trillion, \$14 trillion? And China has gone down close to \$20 trillion since we’ve started this whole... China [currently] is the worst performing stock market in the world.”

Feb. 13, 2019: After meeting the Chinese trade delegation in Beijing, Treasury Secretary Mnuchin [says](#) talks with China are “so far, so good,” and that he hopes the talks will continue to be “productive.”

Feb. 13, 2019: Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL), chairman of the Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship, [releases](#) a report titled “Made in China 2025 and the Future of American Industry.”

Feb. 13-15, 2019: Principal-level trade negotiations take place in Beijing [led](#) by USTR Lighthizer and Treasury Secretary Mnuchin, and Chinese Vice Premier Liu He.

Feb. 17, 2019: *Xinhua* [reports](#) that Yang Jiechi, a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee hopes the US and China will implement advancing bilateral ties based on coordination, cooperation, and stability.

Feb. 18, 2019: President Trump [announces](#) that the US will welcome an official delegation from China for a series of meeting beginning Feb. 19. Principal-level meetings will begin Feb. 21.

Feb. 21-22, 2019: Principal-level trade negotiations take place in Washington [led](#) by USTR Lighthizer, and Vice Premier Liu He.

Feb. 22, 2019: USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue [tweets](#), “In Oval Office meeting today, the Chinese committed to buy an additional 10 million metric tons of US soybeans. Hats off to [@POTUS](#) for bringing China to the table. Strategy is working. Show of good faith by the Chinese. Also indications of more good news to come.”

Feb. 22, 2019: President Trump and Vice Premier Liu He of China, along with the entire US and Chinese delegations, [meet](#) in the Oval Office to discuss trade agreement negotiations.

Feb. 24, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “Very productive talks yesterday with China on Trade. Will continue today! I will be leaving for Hanoi, Vietnam, early tomorrow for a Summit with Kim Jong Un of North Korea, where we both expect a continuation of the progress made at first Summit in Singapore. Denuclearization?”

Feb. 24, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “President Xi of China has been very helpful in his support of my meeting with Kim Jong Un. The last thing China wants are large scale nuclear weapons right next door. Sanctions placed on the border by China and Russia have been very helpful. Great relationship with Chairman Kim!”

Feb. 24, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “I am pleased to report that the U.S. has made substantial progress in our trade talks with China on important structural issues including intellectual property protection, technology transfer, agriculture, services, currency, and many other issues. As a result of these very.....”

Feb. 24, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “....productive talks, I will be delaying the U.S. increase in tariffs now scheduled for March 1. Assuming both sides make additional progress, we will be planning a Summit for President Xi and myself, at Mar-a-Lago, to conclude an agreement. A very good weekend for U.S. & China!”

Feb. 25, 2019: US Navy destroyer *Stethem* and cargo and ammunition ship *Cesar Chavez* [sail](#) through the Taiwan Strait.

Feb. 25, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “China Trade Deal (and more) in advanced stages. Relationship between our two Countries is very strong. I have therefore agreed to delay U.S. tariff hikes. Let’s see what happens?”

Feb. 25, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “If a deal is made with China, our great American Farmers will be treated better than they have ever been treated before!”

Feb. 26, 2019: US House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence [holds](#) committee hearing titled “National Security Implications of the Rise of Authoritarianism Around the World.”

Feb. 27, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “All false reporting (guessing) on my intentions with respect to North Korea. Kim Jong Un and I will try very hard to work something out on Denuclearization & then making North Korea an Economic Powerhouse. I believe that China, Russia, Japan & South Korea will be very helpful!”

Feb. 27, 2019: US House Committee on Ways and Means [holds](#) a hearing on US-China trade, with USTR Lighthizer serving as a witness.

Feb. 27, 2019: US Senate’s Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations [release](#) a report saying that Chinese Confucius Institutes have acted as tightly controlled propaganda arms for Beijing and should be changed or shut down.

Feb. 27, 2019: US Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship [holds](#) a hearing titled “Made in China 2025 and the Future of American Industry.”

Feb. 28, 2019: US Senate’s Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations [holds](#) a hearing in Washington on “China’s Impact on the US Education System.”

Feb. 28, 2019: WTO releases a [report](#) and [rules](#) that Beijing provided farm subsidies in excess of its international trade commitments.

Feb. 28, 2019: USTR Lighthizer [states](#), “The United States proved that China for years provided government support for its grain producers far in excess of the levels China agreed to when it joined the WTO. China’s excessive support limits opportunities for U.S. farmers to export their world-class products to China. We expect China to quickly come into compliance with its WTO obligations.”

Feb 28, 2019: US-China Economic and Security Review Commission [holds](#) a hearing titled “Risks, Rewards, and Results: U.S. Companies in China and Chinese Companies in the United States.”

Feb. 28, 2019: While speaking at a press conference in Hanoi after his two-day summit with Kim Jong Un, President Trump [states](#), “China has been very helpful. President Xi is a great leader. He is a highly respected leader all over the world. Could he be more helpful [in encouraging Pyongyang to give up its pursuit of nuclear weapons]? Probably.”

Feb. 28, 2019: US Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations [holds](#) a hearing titled “China’s Impact on the U.S. Education System.”

Feb 28, 2019: China’s Ministry of Commerce [states](#) that the Feb. 24–26 meeting between Vice Premier Liu He and USTR Lighthizer and Treasury Secretary Mnuchin made “substantial progress with respects to technology transfer, IPR protection, non-tariff barriers, service industry, agriculture and foreign exchange rates.”

March 1, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “I have asked China to immediately remove all Tariffs on our agricultural products (including beef, pork, etc.) based on the fact that we are moving along nicely with Trade discussions....”

March 1, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), “...and I did not increase their second tranch of Tariffs to 25% on March 1st. This is very important for our great farmers – and me!”

March 1, 2019: Yang Jiechi, a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, [holds](#) a phone conversation with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

March 4, 2019: In a letter to Secretary Pompeo, members of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee [urge](#) the Trump administration to take decisive action condemning China’s human rights abuses perpetrated against Uyghur citizens in China’s Xinjiang province.

March 6, 2019: US House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology [holds](#) a hearing titled “Maintaining US Leadership in Science and Technology.”

March 7, 2019: US Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Subcommittee on Security [holds](#) a hearing titled “China: Challenges for U.S. Commerce.”

March 11, 2019: United States Attorney Sherri Lyndon [hosts](#) a discussion titled, “China’s Threat to Our National Security: An Economic and Private Sector Perspective.”

March 12, 2019: Vice Premier Liu He [discusses](#) trade deal text over the phone with USTR Lighthizer and Treasury Secretary Mnuchin.

March 12, 2019: Secretary of State Pompeo [accuses](#) Beijing of “illegal island-building in international waterways” in order to block other claimants to the South China Sea “from accessing more than \$2.5 trillion in recoverable energy reserves.”

March 13, 2019: US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations [holds](#) committee hearing titled “A New Approach for an Era of US-China Competition.”

March 13, 2019: Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Lu Kang, [rebukes](#) Secretary of State Pompeo's claims that China is blocking access to energy beneath the South China Sea, calling the claims "irresponsible."

March 13, 2019: Secretary of State Pompeo remarks on the release of the 2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices [stating](#) that China is "in a league of its own when it comes to human rights violations."

March 13, 2019: Two US Air Force B-52H Stratofortress bombers [conduct](#) a routine training mission over the contested waters of the South China Sea.

March 14, 2019: China's State Council Information Office [publishes](#) a document titled "Chronology of Human Rights Violations of the United States in 2018."

March 16, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), "Google is helping China and their military, but not the U.S. Terrible! The good news is that they helped Crooked Hillary Clinton, and not Trump....and how did that turn out?"

March 20, 2019: President Trump [tells](#) reporters at the White House that tariffs on China will remain in place to ensure that China complies with any potential trade deal.

March 21, 2019: US Treasury Department [sanctions](#) two Chinese shipping companies it says helped North Korea evade US and international sanctions. The action prohibits US dealings with the designated companies and freezes any assets they have in the United States.

March 21, 2019: US-China Economic and Security Review Commission [holds](#) a hearing titled "An Emerging China-Russia Axis? Implications for the United States in an Era of Strategic Competition."

March 22, 2019: Li Zhanshu, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, [meets](#) a "US-China Working Group" delegation of the United States House of Representatives.

March 25, 2019: United States [sends](#) a destroyer and a Coast guard cutter through the Taiwan Strait, noting that the action demonstrates the US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.

March 25, 2019: Special Representative Stephen Biegun [arrives](#) in Beijing to discuss North Korea with Chinese counterparts.

March 26, 2019: Secretary Pompeo [meets](#) representatives of the Uighur community. Pompeo calls for "the end of repression" and the release of all those who had been "arbitrarily detained."

March 27, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), "Just met with @SundarPichai, President of @Google, who is obviously doing quite well. He stated strongly that he is totally committed to the U.S. Military, not the Chinese Military...."

March 28-29, 2019: China and the US [hold](#) eighth round of high-level economic and trade consultations in Beijing. USTR Lighthizer and Secretary Mnuchin meet Vice Premier Liu He.

March 29, 2019: Secretary Mnuchin [tweets](#), "@USTradeRep and I concluded constructive trade talks in Beijing. I look forward to welcoming China's Vice Premier Liu He to continue these important discussions in Washington next week."

April 1, 2019: China's Vice Commissioner of the National Narcotics Control Commission Liu Yuejin [announces](#) that China will add fentanyl-related substances to a supplementary list of controlled drugs and substances starting May 1, 2019.

April 1, 2019: John Bolton [tweets](#); Chinese military provocations won't win any hearts or minds in Taiwan, but they will strengthen the resolve of people everywhere who value democracy. The Taiwan Relations Act and our commitment are clear.

April 4, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), "Despite the unnecessary and destructive actions taken by the Fed, the Economy is looking very strong, the China and USMCA deals are moving along nicely, there is little or no inflation, and USA optimism is very high!"

April 4-5, 2019: President Trump [meets](#) China's Vice Premier Liu He after the ninth round of high-level US-China trade talks.

April 8, 2019: US Ambassador Alice Wells [meets](#) President of the World Uyghur Congress Dolkun Isa to discuss China's campaign of repression against Uighurs, ethnic Kazakhs, and members of other Muslim minority groups, and its impact on the security of people in South, Central, and SE Asia.

April 10, 2019: US Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan [states](#) that China is the top threat economic and diplomatic threat to U.S. security.

April 10, 2019: Secretary Pompeo [says](#) China plays a role in spreading disorder in Latin America through its economic projects and financial backing of President Nicolás Maduro's regime in Venezuela.

April 12, 2019: Vice President Pence [tweets](#): "In February, the U.S. introduced a resolution calling for the restoration of democracy in Venezuela & for aid be released into the country. Russia & China blocked it. They continue to obstruct at the @UN & rogue states like Iran and Cuba are doing all they can to prop up Maduro."

April 13, 2019: Treasury Secretary Mnuchin [says](#) that he believes the United States and China are nearing the final stage of trade negotiations.

April 14, 2019: Trump [tweets](#), "Chinese Telecom Giant Huawei hires former Obama Cyber Security Official as a lobbyist. This is not good, or acceptable! @FoxNews @SteveHiltonx"

April 18, 2019: WTO [sides](#) with the US in a dispute over whether Beijing unfairly blocks market access for US grains through restrictive use of tariff-rate quotas for wheat, rice and corn.

April 20, 2019: *USS Blue Ridge*, the US 7th Fleet's command ship, [arrives](#) in Hong Kong for a port call, with its commander vowing to "sail in accordance with international law."

April 24, 2019: President Trump [declares](#) that he will soon host President Xi at the White House.

April 24, 2019: Adam Hickey, US deputy assistant attorney-general, [delivers](#) a speech at the Fifth National Conference on CFIUS and Team Telecom. He says Beijing is "using its intelligence services and their tradecraft to target our private sector's intellectual property."

April 25, 2019: US-China Economic and Security Review Commission [holds](#) a hearing titled "China in Space: A Strategic Competition?"

April 26, 2019: Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Kimberly Breier gives [remarks](#) on China's economic, technological, and political practices in Latin America at the AS/COA.

April 26, 2019: FBI Director Christopher Wray [delivers](#) a speech centered around China's "multilayered threat" to the US at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, DC.

April 28, 2019: US military [sends](#) two Navy destroyers, the *William P. Lawrence* and *Stethem*, through the Taiwan Strait.

April 30, 2019: Secretary Mnuchin and USTR Lighthizer [arrive](#) in Beijing to meet Vice Premier Liu He for the 10th round of US-China high-level economic and trade consultations.

Chronology by CSIS research intern Kevin Dong

PACIFIC FORUM

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CONNECTIONS

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

US-KOREA RELATIONS

FROM HANOI TO HIATUS

STEPHEN NOERPER, KOREA SOCIETY AND COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Late February summitry gave way to stalemate, raising the specter of increased tension on the Korean Peninsula. President Donald Trump and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un signaled warmth around their Hanoi meeting – their second summit in a year – but Trump’s walkout hours short of the planned conclusion and the absence of an agreement left everyone struggling to define next steps. South Korea’s surprise at the lack of a deal gave way to efforts at facilitation with calls for inter-Korean economic engagement and President Moon Jae-in’s April visit to Washington. Trump and Moon urged patience and diplomacy and the US and ROK canceled spring military exercises, allowing space for North Korea negotiations. The DPRK still criticized the more limited exercises, announced an end-of-year deadline for the US to change its approach, snubbed South Korea on the first anniversary of the Panmunjom summit, and condemned US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton. Meanwhile, the US and ROK reached an agreement on host nation financial support for US forces stationed in Korea, quieting discord in an otherwise sound alliance.

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Breaking down the Hanoi summit

The US and the two Koreas leaned toward the Feb. 27–28 Trump–Kim summit with much fanfare, though Washington and Seoul sought to temper expectations in the immediate run-up to the event, reflective of stumbling blocks that played out. US Special Representative for North Korea Policy Stephen Biegun had laid out the US approach for an agreement that would bring significant economic and other benefits in exchange for denuclearization during his Stanford University address in late January, and South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha had urged real progress in the next round.



Figure 1 US Special Representative for North Korea Biegun remarks on DPRK at Stanford. Photo: Twitter

With the world focused on it, the Hanoi summit started with a dinner among principals, President Trump, his chief of staff and secretary of state on the one side, Chairman Kim, his foreign minister, and party vice chair, the then-envoy Kim Hyok Chol, on the other. The first evening pleasantries, with Kim and Trump expressing satisfaction with the process begun in Singapore, gave way to a more complicated second day, which saw Trump step away from the proceedings two hours prior to the scheduled end, leaving Kim in the lurch.

Importantly, both sides chose to frame the meeting in a positive light, a step forward in a process, despite a lack of final agreement. Many in Washington breathed a sigh of relief, feeling it better that Trump walked away from signing something weak. Kim's aides, Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho and Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui, provided an initially negative assessment, but the Hanoi video aired for North Korea's public focused on the statesmanship of their leader and his relationship with Trump, avoiding any hint of a breakdown. KCNA's first statement a week later was muted relative to

prior denunciations of failed talks, blaming the US but pointing to more positive aspects of the two meetings. Vice Minister Choe followed suit in her condemnation, describing the relationship between Trump and Kim as "miraculous," while blaming the US for the failure of the talks.

Trump's initial readout for the press in Hanoi was generally positive, with he and Pompeo describing the progress made relative to the complexity of denuclearization. Trump noted the distraction of Michael Cohen's testimony on the Hill and pointed to the nuclear and missile test moratorium still in place. He also acknowledged a need for multilateral efforts along with the bilateral talks, crediting the United Nations, South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia as contributors. He twice mentioned contacting President Moon and Prime Minister Abe Shinzo for consultations post-summit, and he rang Moon from Air Force One on departure, reportedly ceding the next steps to Seoul.

The party that bore the initial brunt of the failure was South Korea, whose diplomats scurried to assess a fix and find ways to move forward. In the ensuing weeks, Seoul's dismay turned to suggestions for a return to talks, economic inducements for North Korea, and preparations for Moon's visit to Washington.

Much was made of what happened – or failed to happen – in Hanoi. Accusations that North Korea simply wanted the totality of sanctions lifted have been refuted by North Korean officials, who claimed that US demands were all or nothing. *Reuters* reported in late March that Trump had conveyed a one-page memo to Kim at the table demanding a removal of all nuclear weapons and missiles in exchange for a lifting of sanctions (a la Libya), which Kim promptly dismissed. Regardless, it appears that North Korea failed to have a Plan-B in hand, a sign of North Korea's limited capacity and of the leader's youth and relative inexperience.

Saving face

With that in mind, most ensuing actions over the spring can be seen in the light of Kim Jong Un struggling to save face. The return train to Pyongyang was a long ride, but Kim avoided stopping in Beijing along the way. Kim reportedly sidelined his chief envoy, Vice Chairman Kim Yong Chol in late April, although he remains on the powerful State Administrative

Council. Also elevated to that body was Vice Minister Choe Son Hui, who joined Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho in an impromptu press conference in Hanoi, signaling that the diplomats may carry the North forward on its next steps. The condemnation by the North of Pompeo and Bolton should also be seen in that light: we've removed our principal interlocutor, you should do the same. That and the show of force with short-range missile tests in late April might also be seen as Kim playing to hardliners after perceived Hanoi failures.



Figure 2 Trump and Kim pose prior to their meeting in Hanoi on Feb. 27. Photo: Reuters

Chairman Kim led North Korea's party plenary and central committee meetings amid a "tense situation," largely urging economic self-reliance and condemning those imposing sanctions as "hostile forces," but refraining from naming the US specifically – creating some wiggle room should the US offer some sanctions relief. Significantly, he also suggested that the US has until the end of 2019 to adopt a new approach or North Korea would pursue a different path – consistent with his New Year's Day message, where he warned of a timeline for progress. Though Trump and Pompeo did not respond to Kim's threatened deadline, the announcement portends the return to a harder line of ratcheting tensions.

Face is also an issue for Moon Jae-in, who has staked his presidency on progress with the North. As South Korea's economy has become more of a concern and political chasms have widened, Moon finds himself in need of a real win. This is particularly true with the end of year in mind, as next year will see Moon – as with all former presidents, who serve a single term – labeled a lame duck. Moon's polling numbers have declined markedly, and barring improvement with the North, the viability of his

approach is in question. Accordingly, aides like special adviser Moon Chung-in have called on the US to allow maximum flexibility, especially in considering a lifting of sanctions for inter-Korean economic development projects.

Mending rifts

President Moon arrived in the United States on April 10 with the goal of kickstarting talks between Washington and Pyongyang. A meeting and lunch with Trump led the two leaders to underscore patience with the process and the need for diplomacy. The week prior to the visit, Moon's foreign minister and defense chief had laid good ground for a cooperative stance between the allies, and Moon departed with likely the best for which he could have hoped, though critics pointed to a lack of hard results. Pyongyang's dismissiveness of Seoul's mediating ("facilitating" as the Moon administration now prefers) role – coupled with failures to show for liaison office meetings in Kaesong and to mark the first anniversary of the Panmunjom summit – represent a further poke in the eye for Moon.

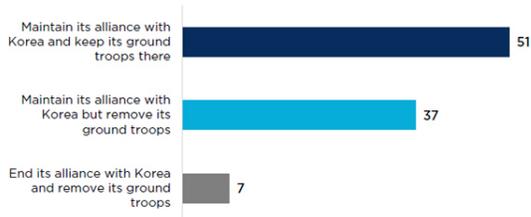
The Moon-Trump meeting came on the heels of an agreement on South Korea's support for US troops on the peninsula. After an arduous almost year-long process with 10 meetings that failed to bear fruit, the White House brushed aside its demand that Seoul increase support by a time-and-a-half – which drew National Assembly concern – and settled on an increase to about \$900 million in support for 2019. As had been the case with 2018's accommodation on the Korea-US (KORUS) Free Trade Agreement, the US and ROK arrived at a compromise, but as was the case in the lead-up to the FTA reinvigoration, Seoul negotiators were concerned, especially given fragility on the security front and the need for strong alliance support in the face of North Korean developments.

US public support on the troop issue remains strong. Chicago Council on Global Affairs polling shows a full 51 percent of Americans support US troops on the Peninsula, even if North Korea agrees to denuclearize, although 73 percent have doubt about the ability of the US and North Korea to reach agreement. Testimony by new UNC/CFC/USFK Commander Gen. Abrams to the Senate Armed Services Committee continued to emphasize US-ROK readiness and capabilities – though questions about the impact of the

drawdown of exercises persist among some observers.

The US-ROK Alliance

If North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons, should the United States: (%)



January 11-13, 2019 n=1,019
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Figure 3 Bar graph depicting US opinion on maintaining its Korea alliance if the DPRK gave up its nuclear weapons. Source: Twitter

Sanctions confusion and calls for enforcement

Washington’s messaging was not without some inconsistencies. The most noted involved Trump’s purported late March curtailment of massive new sanctions against the North. In fact, the US Treasury Department announced measures against two Chinese shipping companies with more than 60 vessels engaged in sanctions violations. Trump tweeted that he had checked those, leading to some confusion and a rush for clarification. Trump’s efforts appeared to have had the effect of winning a return of North Korean staff to the Kaesong liaison office, after a walkout reportedly ordered at the senior-most level and spurred by the Treasury announcement.

Significant sanction violations were noted in a UN Panel of Experts report released in mid-spring, highlighting violations in shipments of coal, petroleum, and arms, with 20 nations in violation of UN Security Council sanctions. Democrats seized on some of these concerns, as well as human rights and financial violations, and increased calls for greater sanctions enforcement. Concern continued about the treatment that led to student Otto Warmbier’s death, with his parents condemning North Korea as “evil” and lawmakers introducing an act aimed at financial sanctions in his name. Seoul for its part intercepted a Korean vessel on the grounds of violating sanctions, despite persistent criticism from conservative quarters that it has looked the other way too often.

The period saw several efforts to spur new approaches, designed to avoid a return to

tensions on the Peninsula. Notable among them were suggestions offered by former USFK/CFC/UNC Commander Gen. Vincent Brooks at Stanford University, Harvard University, and the Korea Society, calling for a “visible but not accessible” international fund aimed at North Korea development. Brooks suggested that North Korea be able to see the movement of funds in light of forward progress on denuclearization, but that it not be permitted access until good efforts were verified. Brooks called for increasing sanctions, while increasing incentives for North Korea at the same time – forcing its hand and encouraging real progress.



Figure 4 President Trump’s March 22 tweet. Source: Twitter

Reports of site preparations

Several US nonprofit organizations, as well as media outlets in the United States and South Korea, reported at several points on site preparations for rocket or missile launches. Whether it was following a schedule devoid of Hanoi’s input, a post-Hanoi response, or a negotiating tactic aimed at upping the ante, North Korea appeared to be active at Yongbyon with reported sightings of rail cars adjacent to a uranium enrichment area, at the Sohae rocket launch facility, and at a newly reported missile headquarters. The US and ROK governments maintained that the reports from the Center for International and Strategic Studies (CSIS) and elsewhere revealed nothing not already known, as signaled by Trump and Bolton and in Seoul by the National Intelligence Service head, who described the US and ROK as having detailed knowledge of DPRK facilities.

Perhaps the biggest policy disagreement during this period was not between US and Korean policy makers, but rather between President Trump and his intelligence chiefs. Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats testified to the intelligence community consensus that North Korea would not give up the entirety of its nuclear capabilities, a conclusion later underscored by the head of US Indo-Pacific

Command. Trump pushed back against that read, breaking with the intel community again, this time in his quest to break new ground with North Korea.

Room for boom

The period ended with North Korea launching a volley of short-range missiles, deemed projectiles by a cautious Washington and Seoul trying together to stem any appearance of a return of North Korea provocation. The all-important moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests appeared to be intact, reflecting a calculated move by Pyongyang to push, but only so far. The early May launches followed a mid-April test, directed by Kim Jong Un, of a “new tactical weapon,” a short range guided missile. The White House shrugged off both, projecting calm. Seoul called a meeting of its national security council, but muted its responses beyond urging Pyongyang to refrain from tensions.

Though the latest launches represent a step-up from mid-April and hint at a return to more provocative ways, North Korea appears to be leveraging its threat to return to, rather than refrain from, the negotiation process. Accompanying military moves was condemnation of US Secretary of State Pompeo – with North Korea urging his dismissal from talks – and John Bolton, whose proposals were deemed “dim-witted.” Washington and Seoul refrained from much response to the verbal heat, with Pompeo not taking the bait and reminding North Korea that it is his team in charge going forward.

The US and South Korea showed flexibility and tact in the alliance by moving away from regular, large-scale spring military exercises – *Foal Eagle* and *Key Resolve* – and limiting activities to smaller-scale drills, more emphasis on computer-driven command post scenarios, and operations employing fewer forces. North Korea still bristled at the moves, which reportedly drew Kim’s ire, but North Korea no doubt saw the downtick by the US and South Korea as intended: breathing room for the negotiation process. At several other points, US officials urged confidence building and tensions reduction, with Pompeo describing denuclearization as one truncheon alongside a range of efforts at security and peacebuilding.

Looking ahead

For Trump, who enters the US political season later this year and for Moon, who sees an electoral referendum on his approach early next, the clock is ticking. With all sides holding out hope for a resumption of dialogue and Kim Jong Un sending a clear signal that North Korea expects the US to “come up with a courageous decision,” by his yearend deadline, we can anticipate more posturing by all sides in the coming months. In the end, the central problem remains: who goes first?

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2019

Jan. 1, 2019: In New Year address, Kim Jong Un says he is ready to meet Trump “at any time” and demands an end to sanctions.

Jan. 10, 2019: President Moon Jae-in calls for “bold steps: ahead of second Trump-Kim summit.

Jan. 17, 2019: Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha notes that US and South Korea are discussing “corresponding measures” to reward North Korea for steps toward denuclearization.

Jan. 17, 2019: President Donald Trump unveils the US Missile Defense Review, which labels North Korea an “extraordinary threat.”

Jan. 17-19, 2019: North Korean Special Envoy Kim Yong Chol [travels](#) to Washington DC to meet Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun to “make progress on the commitments President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un made at their summit in Singapore.”

Jan. 18, 2019: ROK and US officials agree to seek a UN Security Council sanctions exemption for inter-Korean joint projects.

Jan. 18, 2019: Trump meets Worker Party Vice Chairman Kim Yong Chol and Special Envoy Kim Hyok Chol at White House.

Jan. 20, 2019: US Special Representative for North Korean Policy Biegun meets Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui in Stockholm.

Jan. 22, 2019: CSIS report describes Sino-ri, one of 20 undeclared ballistic missile bases in North Korea, as a missile headquarters.

Jan 22, 2019: Seoul describes US demands for funding increase for support of US forces in South Korea as “unacceptable.”

Jan 23, 2019: State media reports Kim Jong Un will advance “step by step” and was “satisfied” by recent Washington meetings and a letter from Trump. Secretary of State Pompeo hails “progress” in talks in Washington and Stockholm.

Jan 24, 2019: ROK Foreign Minister Kang calls for “concrete results on denuclearization” at Trump-Kim second summit.

Jan. 28, 2019: US National Security Adviser John Bolton calls on North Korea for a “significant sign of a strategic decision to give up nuclear weapons.”

Jan. 29, 2019: Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats tells Senate Intelligence Committee that “we currently assess North Korea will seek to retain its WMD capability and is unlikely to completely give up its nuclear weapons and production capability.”

Jan. 31, 2019: In comments at Stanford University, Special Representative Biegun notes North and South militaries working with UNC and USFK for confidence building and tension reduction. He notes that the US is willing to wait on key objectives, and that Trump is ready to formally end the Korean War.

Feb. 6, 2019: Special Representative Biegun holds talks in Pyongyang.

Feb. 10, 2019: South Korea agrees to pay \$915 million in 2019 for US troops in Korea.

Feb. 12, 2019: US Indo-Pacific Commander Adm. Philip Davidson supports US intelligence community position that North Korea is unlikely to give up all its nuclear weapons or production facilities.

Feb. 15, 2019: Secretary Pompeo says US is hoping to get “far down the road” with North Korea, adding pillars to “reduce tension, reduce military risks” in addition to denuclearization.

Feb. 18, 2019: *The Wall Street Journal* reports the US is weighing opening a liaison office in North Korea.

Feb. 20, 2019: Trump suggests he expects to meet Kim again after Hanoi and raises prospect of easing North Korea sanctions.

Feb. 21, 2019: Chairmen of the House Foreign Affairs Committee Eliot Engel, Armed Services Committee Adam Smith, and Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Adam Schiff send letter to Trump urging the White House to stop withholding information on North Korea negotiations.

Feb. 22, 2019: Special Representative Biegun meets DPRK counterpart in Hanoi for a second day of pre-summit negotiations.

Feb. 22, 2019: Trump confirms decreasing US troops in ROK not on summit agenda. White House suggests that if North Korea follows through on denuclearization, the US will explore “how to mobilize for investment, improve infrastructure, enhance food security, and more.”

Feb. 24, 2019: North Korea urges Trump to disregard skeptics.

Feb. 26, 2019: Twenty House Democrats introduce a resolution calling for an end to the Korean War but maintenance of US troops on the Peninsula.

Feb. 27, 2019: Trump hails North Korea’s “awesome” potential and that he is “satisfied” with pace of denuclearization.

Feb. 28, 2019: On second day of Hanoi summit, Trump walks away over reported DPRK sanctions demands. Trump credits China as a “big help” with North Korea.

March 1, 2019: KCNA reports that the US and North Korea “deepened mutual respect and trust” in Hanoi. Kim vows to meet again, Trump says both sides know the issues.

March 1, 2019: President Moon pledges to work with Trump and Kim after failed talks. US and South Korea suggest replacement of spring exercises with smaller drills.

March 3, 2019: Trump says North Korea has no economic future with nuclear weapons.

March 4-12, 2019: US and South Korean militaries [hold](#) the inaugural *Dong Maeng* joint military exercise, a scaled-back version of the annual *Foal Eagle* and *Key Resolve* series.

March 5, 2019: Sen. Pat Toomey and Sen. Chris Van Hollen introduce the Otto Warmbier Banking Restrictions Involving North Korea (BRINK) act.

March 5-7, 2019: South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Lee Do-hoon [visits](#) Washington DC to meet Special Representative Biegun to coordinate plans following the US-DPRK second summit.

March 6, 2019: National Intelligence Service Director Suh Hoon says ROK and US military intelligence has a “detailed grasp” of DPRK uranium enrichment and other nuclear and missile facilities.

March 6, 2019: Seoul calls for a quick resumption of talks after Hanoi breakdown.

March 7, 2019: North Korea Hanoi documentary focuses on Kim-Trump relationship, not summit breakdown.

March 7, 2019: US analysts from [38 North](#) and CSIS’s [Beyond Parallel](#) report that North Korea’s Sohae Launch Facility is returning to normal operating status after being moderately dismantled following the Singapore Summit, analysis based on commercial satellite imagery acquired on March 6.

March 8, 2019: North Korea’s *Rodong Sinmun* reports that the public blames the US for the Hanoi summit ending without agreement.

March 8, 2019: South Korea FM Kang [signs](#) Special Measures Agreement with US Ambassador Harry Harris, formally agreeing to pay \$915 million for the upkeep of US Forces, Korea.

March 11, 2019: Special Representative Biegun suggests diplomacy is “very much alive,” despite CSIS reports around Sohae rocket testing site.

March 12, 2019: Blue House adviser Moon Ching-in suggests US “all or nothing” approach won’t work with North Korea.

March 12, 2019: UN Panel of Experts reports North Korea sanctions violations by 20 countries in 66-page report.

March 15, 2019: North Korea warns it may suspend nuclear talks, but describes leaders' relationship as "mysteriously wonderful."

March 16, 2019: Pompeo says US hopes to continue talks with North Korea.

March 18, 2019: ROK Defense Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo advises a parliamentary defense committee that despite US think tank reports of DPRK launch preparation, "it's hasty to call it missile-related activity."

March 22, 2019: Trump blocks new "large-scale" sanctions directed at North Korea, in reality aimed at two Chinese shipping companies in violation of sanctions.

March 25, 2019: North Korean officials return to liaison office after weekend pullout and Trump move to stem new sanctions.

March 26, 2019: South Korean Unification Minister-designate Kim Yeon-chul promises to seek a "creative solution" for the US and North Korea to meet again.

March 26, 2019: Free Joseon, a political organization that opposes Kim Jong Un, [claims](#) responsibility for raid on the North Korean Embassy in Spain on Feb. 22. Information stolen from the embassy was later shared with the FBI, but the US government claims no involvement in the operation.

March 27, 2019: UNC/CFC/USFK Commander Gen. Robert Abrams describes North Korean activity as "inconsistent with denuclearization" to House Armed Services Committee.

March 29, 2019: *Reuters* reports Trump called on Kim to denuclearize completely in one-page Bolton memo delivered at Hanoi. Pompeo meets counterpart Kang Kyung-wha in New York.

March 31, 2019: DPRK describes Spain embassy raid as "grave terrorist attack," but refrains from blaming the US directly.

April 1, 2019: Moon Jae-in describes hope that North Korea responds positively to US-South Korea efforts in advance of his Washington trip.

April 4, 2019: Former UNC/CFC/USFK Commander Gen. Vincent Brooks calls for a "visible but not accessible" international development fund to promote North Korean denuclearization.

April 4, 2019: South Korea detains a domestic ship over North Korea sanctions violation.

April 10, 2019: DPRK central committee meets amid "tense situation."

April 10-11, 2019: President Moon [travels](#) to Washington DC to meet President Trump for a summit on North Korean diplomacy.

April 12, 2019: Kim Jong Un signals end-of-year deadline for new US stance.

April 13, 2019: Trump calls for a third summit with Kim and hope for a removal of nuclear weapons and sanctions on North Korea.

April 16, 2019: CSIS report reveals April 12 imagery of five specialized rail cars near its Uranium Enrichment Facility and Radiochemistry Laboratory at Yongbyon.

April 17, 2019: North Korea tests new tactical weapon, or a short-range guided missile, and calls for Pompeo to be dropped from talks.

April 19, 2019: Despite North Korean criticism, Pompeo underscores that "it'll be my team" on North Korea.

April 21, 2019: North Korea dismisses Bolton's call for denuclearization sign as "dim-witted."

April 22-May 5, 2019: Air forces of the United States, South Korea, and Australia [undertake](#) two weeks of "scaled-back" joint air drills around the Korean Peninsula, replacing the large-scale *Max Thunder* drill.

April 27, 2019: North Korea accuses US of pressuring South Korea on implementing sanctions.

April 30, 2019: US federal judge orders three Chinese banks to provide documents on a Hong Kong-based front company for North Korea's nuclear program.

April 30, 2019: North Korea warns of "undesired consequences" if no change in US position.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

STRATEGIC CONCERN DEEPENS

CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

The choice of two Southeast Asian countries to host US-North Korea summits in the past year has lent some credence to claims that the region serves as the foundation for regional dialogue and cooperation. In early 2019, the region was also the recipient of extra attention when foreign investment in China began to move south, driven by US tariffs on China imposed in late 2018. However, there was little sign that new bilateral trade agreements with the US will materialize in the near term. Meanwhile, greater security cooperation with the US is more likely with the bombing of a cathedral in the southern Philippines in January serving as another harbinger of increased ISIS activity in the region and continued militarization of the South China Sea strengthening the rationale for the US-Philippines alliance but also putting more pressure on it. In political developments, Thai elections in March left questions about whether the military will remain dominant while Indonesian elections in April were less controversial, with incumbent President Joko Widodo retaining power.

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Introduction

Southeast Asians never tire of casting the region as the crossroads for great powers and the foundation for regional dialogue and cooperation. The choice of two Southeast Asian countries to host US-North Korea summits—Singapore in June 2018 and Vietnam in February 2019—lends some credence to these claims. In early 2019 the region was also the recipient of extra attention when foreign investment in China began to move south, driven by US tariffs on China imposed in late 2018. More may come from Europe as the European Union ratchets up efforts to forge “bilateral” free trade agreements with ASEAN states and the United Kingdom looks for new economic opportunities to offset losses it faces with Brexit looming. However, there was little sign that new bilateral trade agreements with the United States promised by the Trump administration will materialize in the near term.

Greater cooperation with the United States on security is more likely. The bombing of a cathedral in the southern Philippines by the Islamic State in January was another harbinger of increased ISIS activity in Southeast Asia as their operatives are pushed out of the Middle East. This threat and China’s continued militarization of South China Sea land features strengthens the rationale for the US-Philippines alliance but also puts more pressure on it. In March, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was compelled to offer public assurances that the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty extended to the South China Sea. More broadly, Washington warned that Chinese plans to transform the region’s infrastructure—both physical and digital—carried risks for Southeast Asian countries. Thai elections in March were intended to lead the country out of direct military rule, but it remains to be seen whether the military will remain dominant in the new political process. Indonesian elections in April are likely headed for a less controversial result, with incumbent President Joko Widodo tipped to retain power.

The spoils of tariff war

Although the data is still preliminary, it strongly suggests that the US-China trade dispute has fueled an investment and trade surge into Southeast Asia. The trend has brought more high-value, high-technology investment (such as electronics), as well as textiles and other low-

tech goods. In addition to Japanese and Western companies, China has been relocating some of its lighter manufacturing base to Southeast Asia. Foreign direct investment (FDI) to ASEAN accelerated in the second half of 2018, when the US-China trade dispute was in full swing. In the first half of 2018, the greater momentum was on the China side. In general, the Southeast Asia region remains a robust investment site: both trends go against global drift in FDI in 2018, which showed a 19% decline.

This investment windfall has not been evenly spread across the region. Singapore, Vietnam, and Thailand have been the main beneficiaries; by contrast, Indonesia’s FDI flows continue to drop, in part because of the slow pace of economic reform. FDI in Myanmar, where international investor optimism over promised reforms in the earlier years of the decade has waned, also fell in 2018, from \$6.6 billion to \$5.7 billion.

Although welcome, Southeast Asia’s new investment boom is not without qualifications, most obviously that it could be a short-term phenomenon if Washington and Beijing resolve their trade differences. The new influx in investment puts further strain on shaky Southeast Asian infrastructure. As well, it is a disincentive for Southeast Asian leaders to follow through on the more difficult aspects of implementing the ASEAN Economic Community. Stimulating intra-ASEAN trade and investment will be an important strategy when investment in Southeast Asia begins to slow, as it inevitably will when the region’s labor costs rise.

Hanoi plays host



Figure 1 Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and US President Donald Trump meet on the sidelines of the US-DPRK Summit in Hanoi. Photo: The New York Times

If there was a winner in the US-DPRK summit in February, it was Vietnam. Although its value was purely symbolic, the choice of Hanoi as a venue was a mix of principle and *realpolitik*. Vietnam has longstanding ties with North Korea but a deepening relationship with the US as well. Washington also held Vietnam up as a model—and a pathway—to Pyongyang, for transition from an isolated country with a doctrinaire regime to a nation integrated into the international community with a government open to economic reform. There is little evidence that Pyongyang (or Hanoi) would draw such parallels, but the comparison was taken as a US vote of confidence in Vietnam.

Hosting the summit also helped Hanoi in its determination to rebrand Vietnam as the “Geneva of Southeast Asia,” a mid-sized country that can move adroitly among greater powers. This follows on the good marks that Hanoi earned for its chairmanship of ASEAN in 2012, when the government functioned as an interlocutor between the West and the Myanmar military during by-elections that marked the beginning of a political reform period. Hanoi will take up the ASEAN chair again next year.

A critical clarification?

A number of annual military exercises—*Cobra Gold*, the *Pacific Partnership*, and the US-Philippine *Balikatan* exercises—kept the US security profile high in Southeast Asia in the early months of 2019. In the absence of a confirmed secretary of defense, a greater role in alliance management fell to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. On his return to Washington from the Hanoi summit, Pompeo stopped in Manila Feb. 28–March 1 to address chronic concerns about the reliability of the United States, specifically a call by Philippine Secretary of Defense Delfin Lorenzana to review the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and subsequent agreements that support the alliance.

Lorenzana’s demand was hardly the first for a high-profile and controversial alliance, but in this case, it reflected increasing nervousness in Manila over whether the US would come to the aid of the Philippines in a conflict with China in the South China Sea. For decades Washington has been reticent on this issue and, since President Rodrigo Duterte’s election in 2016, has been focused simply on keeping the alliance on an even keel.

Past US administrations have approached Philippine inquiries on the applicability of the MDT to the South China Sea with predictable wordsmithing. Two essential communiqués—one from Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in 1979 and a follow-up from Ambassador Thomas Hubbard in 1999—maintained that Washington would apply the MDT to official Philippine ships and aircraft “in the Pacific,” beyond the metropolitan range specified in the treaty. The inclusion of the South China Sea in this mandate may have been implied by Washington, but it was not always inferred by Manila.



Figure 2 USS Blue Ridge makes a port call in Manila on March 13. Photo: AP

During his visit, Pompeo first met President Duterte and, in a joint press conference with Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin on March 1, addressed the South China Sea issue head-on with an explicit statement that the area was covered under the MDT. Not surprisingly, reaction to Pompeo’s statement was mixed. Public opinion polls consistently show that over 80% of the Philippine public supports the alliance with the US and an equivalent percentage are nervous about Duterte’s handling of the South China Sea. However, some in the Philippine defense sector expressed skepticism that Washington would risk direct conflict with China over the Philippines. They pointed out that much of Chinese aggressiveness against the Philippines in the South China Sea is targeted at Filipino fishing fleets rather than official vessels. Others expressed nervousness that Pompeo’s statement would needlessly irritate Beijing.

Nevertheless, the statement may have put US-Philippine security relations on more solid footing. In any case, Manila values the alliance as much or more for US assistance in counterterrorism; the 2017 siege of Marawi City and the bombing of a cathedral on the island of

Jolo in the southern Philippines in January only underscored that need.

Bracing for Brexit

As the United Kingdom looks ahead to a (presumed) exit from the European Union, London is planning a more activist foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region, and specifically Southeast Asia. As a current EU member, the UK participates in the Singapore-European Union Free Trade Agreement (now in operation) and the Vietnam-EU free trade agreement (FTA) that appears close to completion. Withdrawal from the EU will likely require that London renegotiate these agreements to convert them to bilateral FTAs, but the British are confident this can be easily done with Singapore and that Hanoi will likely be amenable to the switch. More broadly, the UK has signaled that it will apply to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Without membership in the CPTPP (and possibly with it), after Brexit the UK stands to lose out on benefits from the EU's quiet but steady move toward a regional FTA with ASEAN through the negotiation of bilateral treaties. In 2007, the EU embarked upon negotiations for a full region-to-region agreement but abandoned that in 2009 in favor of a more incremental approach. Apart from the Singapore-EU FTA now in place, the European Union is in FTA negotiations with Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

London is also seeking to extend its reach in Southeast Asian security for two reasons: growing concern over Chinese assertiveness in the region and the hope of solidifying the UK-US alliance through partnership in new regions. Apart from several joint exercises in the South China Sea, the UK is attempting to join the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus process and to increase its involvement in the Five Power Defense Arrangement (comprised of the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore). However, with the revelation that the UK intends to purchase some of its 5G hardware from the Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei, there is some nervousness that London may be putting the security of the "Five Eyes" intelligence arrangement at risk. The UK government insists that any procurement of Huawei equipment will not endanger security; in any event, neither Malaysia nor Singapore has

yet decided upon a hardware provider for its own transition to 5G.

Silk roads and security fears

The flap over British acquisition of Huawei equipment is a small part of a growing regional dialogue—and overt concern on the part of the United States—over the economic and security impact of China's plans to transform the Asia-Pacific region (and indeed parts of the globe) to facilitate its trade, investment, and strategic interests. A push from Washington, particularly on US allies, to eschew Chinese telecommunications companies—particularly Huawei—for fear of compromising cybersecurity has not resulted in firm pledges to do so thus far. Beijing hopes to build a "Digital Silk Road" that will elevate China to a top position in next generation (5G) internet technology. Since the cost of Chinese fiber optic cables and other hardware is typically 30% less than that of the two main Western vendors, Nokia and Ericksson, the Chinese have some chance of realizing this ambition.

Of equal concern to the United States are Chinese plans to partner with other countries to build physical infrastructure, particularly roads, railways, and ports. These are encapsulated in the "debt trap" example of Sri Lanka, which gave China access to a strategic port when Colombo was unable to fulfill the terms of the Chinese loan for its construction. The second Belt and Road Forum (BRF), held in Beijing April 25-27, exacerbated controversy on BRI issues.

Southeast Asian participation in the BRF was robust: eight countries sent heads of state (Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar in the person of State Counselor Aung Sang Suu Kyi, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand). Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc attended for Vietnam because President Nguyen Phu Trong was seriously ill and Vice President Jusuf Kallah represented Indonesia as President Joko Widodo remained in Jakarta, since results of the April 17 election had not officially been announced.

At the Forum, China signed agreements with Myanmar, Indonesia, and Laos to develop joint bilateral economic corridors, and also advanced a triangular project with Thailand and Laos to construct a rail line between Vientiane and Nongkai. But the greatest "deliverable" for Beijing from Southeast Asia came just before the BRF, when Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir

Mohamad reversed his earlier decision to cancel the Malaysia–China agreement to build an East Coast Rail Link in Malaysia. Mahathir maintains that he was able to renegotiate a new agreement more favorable to his country.

The poorer countries of Southeast Asia, particularly Cambodia and Laos, have far less leverage on Beijing in their negotiations with China, but the larger economies (Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and even Myanmar) are more confident that they can negotiate favorable agreements. Vietnam, whose relationship with China is infinitely more complicated than any other Southeast Asian country, is dissatisfied with the results of a Vietnam–China project to build a subway in Hanoi, but will most likely entertain negotiations with Beijing on construction of a new North–South Highway.

The ultimate appeal of the BRI for Southeast Asia lies not only in improving regional infrastructure but also in facilitating Southeast Asian trade with Europe, through the China–Europe Rail Link and accelerating the effects of Southeast Asian FTA’s with the European Union. Goods that travel between Southeast Asia and Europe by ship take an average of 27 days to reach their destination; by rail they will take only 14.

In its advocacy that Southeast Asia and other regions avoid the pitfalls of buying too completely into either the BRI or the “digital Silk Road,” the US is hampered by the fact that it is not a major provider in the region of either physical infrastructure or telecommunications hardware. Moreover, the tendency for each country to go its own way with China on these issues undercuts the US position. Italy’s decision earlier this year to join the BRI, despite pressure from Washington on Rome, and growing European interest in buying into the Chinese network will hardly persuade Southeast Asian leaders to take Washington’s admonitions seriously.

Maintaining the political status quo? Elections in Thailand and Indonesia

Early 2019 saw two key elections in Southeast Asia. On March 24, Thailand conducted its first general polls since the 2014 coup that overturned the government of Yingluck Shinawatra and paved the way for five years of military rule. These were also the first elections under the 2017 constitution, which altered the

political system to give advantage to smaller parties over larger, more established ones and restored the option for the prime minister to be appointed rather than elected. Both changes were designed in part to enable the Thai military—and particularly the junta led by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha that has held power since the coup—to retain power albeit through constitutional means.

By the end of April, however, Thailand’s Election Commission (EC) was unable to announce formal results of the elections. The EC was uncertain about vote-counting for MPs in the House of Representatives elected by party list and appealed to the Constitutional Court for a ruling. The Court turned the request back without a decision. Equally if not more important, two rival parties—the pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai Party and the new Palang Pracharat Party that intends to name Prayut as prime minister—have both claimed the right to form a government. All informal indications are that Pheu Thai has won the largest number of seats in the House, while Paling Pracharat has captured the highest percentage of the popular vote.

The government has indicated that it will announce formal results of the election on May 9, but those are not likely to settle the dispute between the two parties. In the end, the military-backed party is likely to form a government, probably led by Prayuth, since it will have support from the appointed Senate. Even so, if Pheu Thai is confirmed as having the larger number of House seats, the party will likely mount a no-confidence vote against a Prayuth government later this year. At this point, there are few scenarios that point to political stability for Thailand in the near term.

By all accounts, Indonesia’s general election on April 17 was more tranquil, although a spike in religious tensions in the country in recent years raised expectations of heightened political violence. This turned out not to be the case, in part because President Joko Widodo (widely known as Jokowi) was able to strengthen his position with Islamic groups in advance of the campaign, not least by choosing Muslim cleric Ma’ruf Amin as his running mate. This was notable since Jokowi’s primary opponent, Prabowo Subianto, was reckoned to have stronger support from Muslim voters.

Official results are expected on May 22, although Prabowo may try to delay that with a protest to the Supreme Court on the basis of election irregularities. That strategy, which he attempted in the 2014 election, will likely not succeed. Informal “quick count” polls give Jokowi an 8-10% lead over Prabowo. Political continuity will strengthen the Indonesian government’s plans to improve the economy, particularly through infrastructure development, and will benefit US-Indonesia relations. Indonesian politics will heat up in the later years of Jokowi’s term, however. Essentially a rogue politician, Jokowi will likely leave office in 2024 without a political heir; having lost the presidential contest three times, Prabowo may not attempt a fourth try. This would leave the 2024 elections open for new candidates and new voices, the tone of which will be influenced by Indonesia’s economic situation at the time and the degree of religious tolerance in Indonesian society.



Figure 3 Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha dances with voters at a campaign stop in early March. Photo: efe.com

Looking ahead

Political developments and regional dialogue will swing into higher gear in Southeast Asia in the next four months. The Thai and Indonesian election outcomes will be clarified, although there may be no definitive resolution for the political situation in Thailand. The midterm Philippine elections in mid-May will shed light on President Duterte’s domestic support and may point to potential successors when he leaves office in 2022. The Trump administration has issued an invitation to Duterte to visit Washington this year, and a response from Manila will likely come after the May elections.

Regional meetings on security and diplomatic affairs will be thick as well, with the ASEAN

Summit this year with Thailand as chair in June and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) later in the year. This year’s Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, May 31-June 2, will function as a barometer of Southeast Asian relations with China and, of course, US-China relations. At any time during this period, a resolution (or downturn) in US-China trade negotiations will see an immediate impact on trade and investment flows in Southeast Asia.

The US participation in and response to these developments and activities will depend in part on the political climate at home. The Trump administration has yet to nominate a new secretary of defense, although an internal DOD exercise has cleared Acting Secretary Patrick Shanahan from conflict of interest related to his prior association with Boeing, which could clear the way for a nomination. The State Department’s East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP) Bureau has lacked a permanent assistant secretary for two years. In October, the administration nominated David Stilwell, a former Air Force general, to the position, and Stilwell’s confirmation hearing was held on March 27. However, a distracted Congress and a general focus on the 2020 elections could mean that progress on filling critical positions in Asian affairs remains sluggish and under the radar.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2019

Jan. 11, 2019: US State Department issues a statement expressing deep disappointment that the convictions of *Reuters* reporters and Pulitzer Prize winners Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo are upheld by the Yangon High Court.

Jan. 4, 2019: Arakan Army [attacks](#) four police posts in the Buthidaung area in northern Rakhine, killing 13 policemen and injuring nine on the 71st anniversary of Myanmar's independence from British rule. An Arakan Army spokesperson says the attack was a response to a Myanmar military offensive against the Arakan Army that had also targeted civilians.

Jan. 15-16, 2019: US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Southeast and South Asia Joseph Felter visits Cambodia to meet Cambodian defense officials to discuss strengthening US-Cambodian military-to-military relations. Felter emphasizes to Ministry of Defense Secretary Gen. Neang Phat that advances in military cooperation will depend in part on institutional reform in Cambodia, dropping charges against opposition leader Kim Sokha, and allowing civil society and media to operate freely.

Jan. 18, 2019: Spokespersons for Myanmar's military [announce](#) that State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi ordered security forces to launch an offensive against the Arakan Army. Suu Kyi claims that if she did not order the military to attack the Arakan Army, "the international community would accuse her of religious prejudice for attacking the Muslim guerrillas of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army but not Buddhist rebels who committed similar actions with similar goals."

Jan. 21-Feb. 1, 2019: US Pacific Air Forces and Philippine Air Force [conduct](#) the seventh iteration of the Bilateral Air Contingent Exchange-Philippines (BACE-P) at Cesar Basa Air Base in Pampanga.

Jan. 23, 2019: Thailand's Election Commission [announces](#) that the first official general election since the military coup in 2014 will take place on March 24.

Jan. 27, 2019: On the southern Philippine island of Jolo 20 are killed and 111 wounded when two bombs explode in a cathedral during Sunday Mass. The Islamic State claims responsibility for the bombing through online bulletins.

Jan. 29, 2019: US Ambassador to the Philippines Sung Kim and Philippine Secretary of Defense Delfin Lorenzana open a newly constructed warehouse for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in at Cesar Basa Air Base, the first major project under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The two countries have identified future EDCA projects in four other locations.

Feb. 6, 2019: Myanmar's Parliament [agrees](#) to form a committee that will consider amending the "undemocratic" portions of the country's military-drafted Constitution.

Feb. 11, 2019: Spokesperson for the Philippine government [announces](#) that the US pledged \$5.75 million in intelligence support to assist counterterrorism efforts in the Philippines.

Feb. 12-22, 2019: Thailand and the US host the 38th iteration of the *Cobra Gold* exercises, involving 29 full participants, with China and India participating in civic action elements of the program.

Feb. 18, 2019: US Navy fleet replenishment oiler *USNS Guadalupe* and UK Royal Navy frigate *HMS Montrose* conduct maritime security and logistics training in the South China Sea.

Feb. 27-28, 2019: President Donald Trump and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un meet in Hanoi. The summit draws favorable attention to Vietnam.

Feb. 28 – March 1, 2019: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visits Manila on his return from Hanoi. He meets President Rodrigo Duterte and Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin.

March 4 – April 25, 2019: Fourteenth round of the *Pacific Partnership* exercises are held in Malaysia, the Federated State of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Thailand, Timor L'este, and Vietnam. The exercises focus on cooperation in tsunami response.

March 5–7, 2019: United States, Japan, and Indonesia host a conference on Indonesia's need for liquefied natural gas (LNG). Government and private sector participants from the three countries discuss proposals for future projects to help meet Indonesia's energy needs.

March 7, 2019: Rep. Ann Wagner (R-Missouri) introduces the Southeast Asia Strategy Act into Congress. The bill, co-sponsored by Rep. Joaquin Castro (D-Texas) and Rep. Ted Yoho (R-Florida) would require the secretaries of state, defense, and commerce to submit a multi-year strategy for engagement with Southeast Asia to Congress. The bill is referred to committee for action.

March 11–25, 2019: The 25th round of *Cope Tiger* exercises, a set of multilateral field training exercises among the air forces of the US, Singapore, and Thailand, are held in Thailand. The three services fly a combined total of 776 sorties and focused on air superiority, command and control, close air support, interdiction, electronic warfare, and tactical airlift.

March 13 – April 11, 2019: *USS Blue Ridge*, the flagship of the US Seventh Fleet makes a series of routine port calls in Southeast Asia, beginning with a stop in Manila in the Philippines and continuing on to Laem Chabang in Thailand and Kota Kinabalu in Malaysia.

March 20, 2019: US Ambassador to Indonesia Joseph Donovan unveils the new US Embassy in Jakarta, which will house the US Mission to Indonesia and the US Mission to ASEAN. He is joined by Chargé Jane Bocklage, who heads the US Mission to ASEAN in the absence of a confirmed US ambassador to ASEAN.

March 24, 2019: Thailand holds general elections. By the end of April, no official results are announced, in part due to uncertainty in the Election Commission on the methodology for counting votes.

March 27, 2019: Ninth US–Laos Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue is held in Washington, D.C. Topics include fostering a free and open Indo-Pacific, upholding the rule of law in the South China Sea, and countering transnational crime. Laos currently serves as the US country coordinator within ASEAN.

March 27, 2019: Senate Foreign Relations Committee holds a confirmation hearing for David Stilwell, nominated to be assistant secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. In his testimony, Stilwell reaffirms ASEAN centrality in Asian regional affairs and promises to strengthen US security relations with the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam.

March 27, 2019: Seven pro-democracy parties [form](#) a coalition to secure a majority in Thailand's House of Representatives to oppose the military-backed National Council for Peace and Order.

March 28, 2019: United States and Laos host the 32nd US–ASEAN Dialogue in Washington, co-hosted by State Department Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs W. Patrick Murphy and Lao Deputy Foreign Minister Thongphone Savenphet. They discuss the importance of maritime security to regional stability, combatting maritime plastic pollution, and illegal fishing.

April 1–12, 2019: Representatives from all branches of the US armed forces and the Armed Forces of the Philippines conduct the 35th iteration of the *Balikatan* (“*Shoulder to Shoulder*”) exercises. The two militaries are joined in some phases by the Australian Defense Forces. The exercises include 28 major combined or joint interoperability events, focusing on counterterrorism, amphibious operations, live-fire, urban operations, and aviation operations.

April 2, 2019: State Department issues a statement critical of Brunei's decision to implement Phases Two and Three of the Sharia Penal Code, which contain penalties of death by stoning for gay sex and adultery.

April 3, 2019: Two military helicopters [attack](#) a village in Rakhine state on a mission to “(crack) down on the Arakan Army’s terrorist activities.” The number of fatalities is unclear due to conflicting reports, but victims are identified as Rohingya refugees.

April 7-12, 2019: US and Thai naval forces conduct *Guardian Sea* exercises in the Andaman Sea, emphasizing anti-submarine warfare.

April 16-18, 2019: US INDOPACOM Commander Adm. Davidson [makes](#) his first official visit to Vietnam with stops in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to meet officials including Vietnamese Defense Minister Ngo Xuan Lich, signs an agreement on disabilities assistance, and oversees the launch of a “US-funded project on dioxin contamination remediation at Bien Hoa airport.

April 17, 2019: Indonesia holds general elections. For the first time, a single election allows the country’s 180 million voters to choose a president, legislators, and provincial officials on the same day, making it the largest election in human history. Official results will be announced May 22, but “quick count” polls indicate that incumbent President Joko Widodo defeated Prabowo Subianto.

April 17-19, 2019: Washington (State) National Guard and the Washington Emergency Management Division participate in the first Malaysian Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response Civil-Military Course, organized by the Malaysian Armed Forces.

April 22, 2019: US signs a Memorandum of Understanding with Vietnam to contain dioxin remaining from Agent Orange spraying during the Vietnam War. Washington commits \$183 million to the project, which will take 10 years. USAID also signs a “memorandum of intent” to assist Vietnamese living with disabilities believed to be tied to dioxin exposure.

April 24, 2019: State Department protests the decision by Myanmar’s Supreme Court to uphold the sentences of *Reuters* journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo.

April 27, 2019: Indonesia [arrests](#) 12 of 14 Vietnamese fishermen who were on a boat fishing in the Natuna Sea. The Indonesian Navy reports that one of the two Vietnamese Coast Guard boats that arrived rammed the Indonesian patrol vessel. The Vietnamese fishing boat sinks on site.

April 25-27, 2019: Chinese President Xi Jinping hosts the second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. Southeast Asia sends the second-largest contingent of top leaders.

April 29-May 5, 2019: State Department Undersecretary for Political Affairs David Hale travels to Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar and Japan. In Jakarta he marks the 70th anniversary of US-Indonesian relations. In Thailand Hale confers with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials on Thailand’s role as the 2019 ASEAN Chair.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

CHINA- SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

BEIJING CONFIDENT AMID US, REGIONAL CHALLENGES

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In the first third of 2019, senior Chinese leaders devoted little attention to the South China Sea and China's relations with Southeast Asian countries. Infrequent comments depicted slow progress in negotiations on a code of conduct in the South China Sea and steady advances with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), offering strong economic incentives for closer regional cooperation with China. ASEAN and Southeast Asian claimants adhered to Beijing's demands to avoid reference to the 2016 UNCLOS tribunal ruling against China's South China Sea claims and to handle disputes through negotiations without outside interference. Routine complaints about more frequent US freedom of navigation exercises and other US and allied military operations in the South China Sea came from lower-level ministry spokespersons. Little attention was given to growing angst in Southeast Asia that intensified US-China competition compels countries to take sides, a choice undermining strategies that seek benefits from close ties with both the US and China.

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ASEAN, South China Sea

Foreign Minister Wang Yi underlined Chinese confidence in recent relations with Southeast Asia in a [speech](#) reviewing 2018 international developments. Hailing successful visits to the region by President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang, Wang highlighted progress made in the China-ASEAN comprehensive strategic partnership, consultations on the code of conduct in the South China Sea, and efforts by China and ASEAN member states to maintain stability and conduct maritime cooperation in the South China Sea based on “increased mutual trust.” Briefly taking aim at “shows of force” of unnamed nonregional countries conducting “freedom of navigation” operations, Wang argued they would “by no means” upset overall stability in the South China Sea.

Unlike past years when South China Sea matters were more prominently addressed, senior Chinese leaders generally ignored such matters in the annual National People’s Congress government report and press conferences by the premier and the foreign minister. Even Premier Li’s keynote speech at the annual Boao Forum for Asia in March paid little attention to China-Southeast Asian relations or the South China Sea. China’s attention to China-Southeast Asia relations during the second Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Forum in late April likewise focused on the positive impact of the many large-scale infrastructure projects that would improve economic ties through regional connectivity.

Criticism of more frequent US freedom of navigation and other navy and B-52 bomber operations in the South China Sea by Chinese Defense and Foreign Ministry spokespersons and official media remained low-key. Also criticized was Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s rebuke in March of Beijing’s use of coercion to prevent Southeast Asian claimants from developing energy resources in the South China Sea. Other official Chinese media coverage of Southeast Asia and the South China Sea featured articles highlighting progress made in integrating China more closely with Southeast Asian economies, movement (albeit slow) toward completing the China-supported Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) regional free trade agreement involving China and ASEAN countries but not the United States, and China working alone or with others in restoring coral reefs and sustaining

environmental conditions in the South China Sea. In January, Beijing announced the establishment of a maritime rescue center on Fiery Cross reef in the Spratly Islands. In March, the Communist Party secretary of the Sansha administrative region for China’s South China Sea territories, which is headquartered in Woody Island in the Paracel Islands, announced plans to build [“an island city”](#) that would convert Woody Island and nearby islets into a “national key strategic service and logistical base.”

Global Times and other Chinese outlets with greater editorial freedom than official party-state media showed some concern about intensified US rivalry with China and its impact on China-Southeast Asian relations. They noted stepped-up US military operations, the recent trend of US allies and partners Australia, Japan, Great Britain, and France challenging China’s claims with naval deployments, and their support for the 2016 UNCLOS tribunal ruling against China’s South China Sea claims. And they agreed with Southeast Asian specialists that progress in the code of conduct negotiations would be complicated, notably as Southeast Asian claimants sought support from the US and its allies to back their claims against China. The commentary said that Beijing would seek to use the code of conduct negotiations “to eliminate interference from countries outside the region.”

Regional commentary highlighted dilemmas for Southeast Asian governments seeking to avoid negative consequences from the intense US-China trade disputes and broader US rivalry with China. Singapore commentator Ja Ian Chong [judged](#) that both China and the United States are viewed with distrust by regional governments facing increased pressures from both that upset regional strategies to avoid alignment with one or the other.

Philippines: China presses territorial claim amid intensified US rivalry

President Rodrigo Duterte’s efforts to ease South China Sea tension with China, pursue advantageous economic deals under China’s BRI, and distance the Philippines from close alliance relations with the United States hit a major roadblock with China’s intimidation of Philippine efforts to construct modest infrastructure upgrades in the Philippine-occupied Thitu Island. Since January, hundreds of Chinese vessels said to be part of Beijing’s

maritime militia have been involved in a standoff near Thitu Island, with the presumed intent of intimidating the Philippine occupiers and halting construction activity. According to the CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, in early March, the presence of suspected maritime militia boats spread to two smaller nearby Philippines-held features. The issue prompted thousands of Philippine citizens to protest the Chinese “invasion,” and shifted opinion against China in the lead-up to important nationwide legislative elections in May. In response, Duterte warned China to stop the pressure or he would order his soldiers to defend the territory. His chief aides were more vocal in criticizing China’s “assault.” The issue did not disrupt Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin’s inaugural visit to China in March, which went smoothly according to official Chinese media. The foreign secretary’s visit was in preparation for Duterte’s attendance at the BRI Forum in Beijing in April. Philippine officials hailed Duterte’s “highly successful” visit in late April, featuring numerous economic agreements and private talks with Xi Jinping on the dispute over Thitu Island.



Figure 1 View of the Subic Bay shipyard. Photo: AFP

The increased tensions over Chinese pressure came as Philippine leaders worried about China’s intentions and uncertainty about the US alliance. In January, a former Philippines Navy chief warned against the reported interest of Chinese companies in acquiring the Philippines largest shipyard in Subic Bay, then in bankruptcy. Subsequently, Philippines Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana advocated that rather than have the bankrupt shipyard in Subic Bay be taken over by Chinese or other foreign companies, the Philippines government should acquire the facility as a naval base.

Also in January, Lorenzana gave a speech focused on rising South China Sea disputes in which he called for a review of the Philippines defense treaty with the United States. Among other things, he sought clarification on whether the Philippines had to get involved if a shooting war broke out between the US and Chinese forces in the Philippines-claimed areas of the South China Sea. Some US specialists judged that the review suggestion was the defense minister’s way of pressing the United States to clarify the application of the defense treaty to apply to Philippines occupied outposts in the South China Sea. Visiting Manila on March 1, Secretary of State Pompeo offered the strongest US support for the Philippines on this matter. He [said](#) that “any armed attack on Philippines forces, aircraft or public vessels in the South China Sea would trigger mutual defense obligations under Article 4 of our mutual defense treaty.” That Pompeo’s remarks did not satisfy Philippines defense minister’s concern seemed evident when Lorenzana told the media on March 5 that he still sought a review of the treaty, noting his concern that the Philippines could be “automatically involved” in a “shooting war” involving US and Chinese forces in Philippines claimed waters of the South China Sea.

Chinese media rebuked Pompeo for attempting to sow discord between the Philippines and China. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson reacted mildly to the deployment of a US amphibious assault ship outfitted with fifth generation F-35B jet fighters as part of the annual *Exercise Balikatan* with the Philippines in April.

Malaysia: controversial railroad project successfully renegotiated

On April 12, the Malaysian and Chinese governments announced the renegotiation of a deal to build the China-backed East Coast Rail link. The project, with an estimated cost of about \$20 billion, was criticized and canceled by the incoming government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed in 2018 as too expensive and poorly negotiated by the corrupt Malaysian government of former Prime Minister Najib Razak. Media reports in January disclosed that Razak signed the rail deal and a companion deal for pipelines built by China, and made other concessions to Beijing in return for Chinese support. Chinese backing was sought to help the beleaguered Malaysian government in the face

of US government and media investigations and other pressures showing the extent of the regime's corrupt practices in plundering a multibillion-dollar government investment fund for the leaders' private benefit.

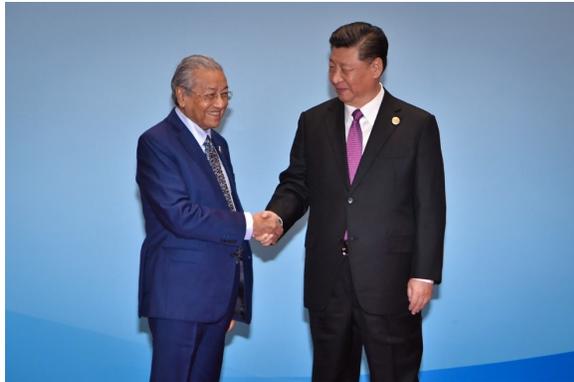


Figure 2 President Xi Jinping welcomes Prime Minister Mahathir to the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. Photo: Bernama

Intense negotiations with China followed warnings from Mahathir after visiting China in August 2018 that Malaysia faced expensive penalties for ending the rail deal. China showed keen interest in pursuing the most important BRI project in the country and arguably in Southeast Asia. The April 12 announcement said the first two links of the rail project would now cost substantially less than the original price, with Malaysia claiming a savings of one-third and China claiming a somewhat lower figure. Both governments sought to sustain close relations during the difficult negotiations. Media reports in January said Mahathir and Chinese President Xi had established “a very special understanding” when they met in August that would ease any problems between the two states. Mahathir in February was the first world leader to confirm his attendance at China's second BRI Forum in April, with the prime minister telling the media that Malaysia “valued” its relationship with China. China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson put a positive spin on the renegotiation arguing that “achieving solutions through negotiations is what matters.”

Meanwhile, presumably in deference to China's sensitivities, the Mahathir government has kept a low profile on Chinese suppression of Muslim Uighurs in the Xinjiang region, a notable contrast with the government's strong rebuke of the Myanmar government's suppression of Muslims in the Rohingya crisis. The Malaysian

authorities did defy reported intense Chinese pressure to deport 11 Uyghur refugees to China and allowed them to seek asylum in Turkey. Mahathir in interviews and comments to the media also has adopted a more critical stance against the Trump government's “unusually aggressive and inconsistent” foreign policies.

Developments in China-Myanmar relations

Three days before announcement of the dramatic cut in the cost of Malaysia's rail deal with China, *The Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) on April 9 that Myanmar in the past year had been able, thanks to the assistance of a team of specialists led by US Agency for International Development (USAID) officials, to successfully renegotiate the scope of a Chinese-funded rail link, deep-water port, and industrial zone, thereby slashing the country's debt to China. The report disclosed that the Myanmar government quietly reached out to US as well as British and Australian officials in seeking assistance to ensure that its contract with China didn't have hidden traps enlarging Myanmar's debt to China. The \$7.3 billion Myanmar project was developed in 2015 between the previous military-dominated government and Chinese state-owned Citic Group. The plan called for a rail line from China to the town of Kyaukphyu, with the intent of transforming it into a major-deep-water port and industrial zone. After renegotiation, the Myanmar government under civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi announced the deal would be reduced to \$1.3 billion, with just two jetties, with possible expansion later. *The Journal* disclosed the intention of USAID to offer similar assistance to other countries seeking to avoid onerous terms that come with Chinese-funded debt.

Xi Jinping demonstrated commitment to developing relations with Myanmar in receiving Myanmar Commander-in-Chief of Defense Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in Beijing on April 10. He said relations between the two countries have developed well in all areas, with unspecified “new progress” in jointly building the Belt and Road. The visit was Min Aung Hlaing's fifth to China since becoming commander-in-chief. At the meeting, Xi paid special attention to assuring Myanmar that China supports the peace process of Myanmar and pays attention to the development of the political and security situation in the northern part of Myanmar and to enhancing border management between China and Myanmar.

Xi's comments highlighted a now well-documented reality: contrary to China's stated principle of noninterference, Beijing has become deeply involved in the Myanmar government's efforts to seek peace with ethnic armed groups in conflict with the government, notably those along the frontier with China. Beijing also supports Myanmar against foreign criticism and in seeking a resolution of the crisis caused by the widely reported brutality of the Myanmar military against the Muslim Rohingya population.

A [report](#) by the United States Institute of Peace in 2018 notes that China's approach is driven in part by its vast economic interests in Rakhine, "including a major port at Kyaukphyu, a planned special economic zone (SEZ), and a road, rail, and pipeline network to move energy and other materials and supplies from the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar to Yunnan Province."

The report judged that on balance Myanmar viewed China's involvement in the slow-moving peace process as constructive, though there remained serious doubt that Beijing would welcome a lasting peace. The latter risked ending China's longstanding practice of using its influence with ethnic forces along the border as a source of leverage against Myanmar taking action against China's interests, such as aligning closer with India or the United States.

While China is keen to "assert its leadership in regional affairs," the report identifies a number of complicating factors. Most notably, Myanmar's policy elites harbor continued distrust of China's intentions and worry about over-reliance on China. Myanmar's proud nationalism and colonial history mean that China's influence would be strategically constrained and limited. In addition, Chinese businesses and nonstate entities involved in the commercial, business, and economic activities in Myanmar could complicate the government's official position. The report, for example, notes that "illicit Chinese entities that traffic in Myanmar's natural resources often act in concert with corrupt officials in the Myanmar government, military, and EAOs to fuel conflict in Kachin and Shan states. As a result, Chinese business actors provide revenue to conflict actors on both sides and help sustain Myanmar's civil war." While China may want to do more – and is increasingly expected to do so by the international community – the report's

conclusion is a sober reminder of the many factors beyond Beijing's direct control that could hinder its strategic goals and diplomatic efforts in the peace talks in Myanmar.

China's involvement in Myanmar's internal ethnic conflicts stands in contrast to other non-traditional security challenges stemming from Myanmar. A [new report](#), published by the International Crisis Group, examines the longstanding production of illicit drugs – especially methamphetamine – in Myanmar's Shan state that have been supported for decades by armed militias in the region as well as by Myanmar's military. The report notes that in the Mekong sub-region, the drug trade from the Shan state alone amounts to over \$40 billion a year, facilitated by "good infrastructure, proximity to precursor supplies from China and safe haven provided by pro-government militias and in rebel-held enclaves," all of which have made it a major regional, and increasingly global, source of high purity crystal meth.

With the inauguration of the new China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, increased cross-border and regional connectivity means that illicit drugs can become more readily and easily accessible. Better roads and a proposed high-speed rail from Kunming, Yunnan, to Kyaukphyu on the Rakhine state seaboard, for example, has helped bridge the link between south China to the Bay of Bengal. Thus far, China has remained relatively quiet about interfering in the illicit drug problem. According to the ICG report, China, where most chemicals needed to make meth originate, has almost never intercepted shipments crossing its border with Myanmar. It also finds that local government authorities in the region are often part of a wider corruption chain that span the border.

Cambodia: strengthening economic and military ties

While the increasingly authoritarian Hun Sen government faces growing visa and financial sanctions, withdrawn aid commitments, and other pressures from the US and other Western governments, its relations with China flourish. The Cambodian leader received top-level treatment during a trip to China in January. President Xi stressed China's "close communications and coordination on global and regional matters" in calling for ever stronger economic ties in line with China's BRI. Eight cooperative economic agreements were signed

during the visit that dealt with BRI infrastructure projects. Hun Sen gave particular attention to a special economic zone in Sihanoukville, and to strengthening bilateral coordination in China-ASEAN negotiations and in discussions in the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism.

In return for growing economic support from China, Hun Sen's government since at least 2012 has been viewed by foreign experts as China's reliable ally in ASEAN, repeatedly thwarting ASEAN from taking positions on South China Sea disputes that Beijing opposes. Military relations have grown in tandem. The Chinese Defense Ministry monthly press conference on Feb. 28 gave special prominence to the Cambodian Army commander's visit to China and to the *Dragon Gold 2019* military exercise held in Cambodia in March involving 252 Chinese soldiers helping Cambodia develop anti-terror capabilities.

Australia, New Zealand, Pacific Islands

The ferment in Australia's relations with China over the past two years continued into 2019. In January, Beijing hosted Australian Defense Minister Christopher Pyne for his first visit to China since taking office in August. Chinese media said the visit demonstrated "a much needed change given the recent chill in China-Australia relations." Nonetheless, the chill continued with China objecting in February to Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne's strong opposition to the Chinese firm Huawei playing a role in advanced telecommunications in Australia. Payne reiterated the Australian government position while visiting London in what Chinese media saw as an effort to encourage Great Britain to join the US-backed ban against Huawei. On March 26, former Foreign Minister Julie Bishop launched a broadside against the Australian business interests that lobby for a more accommodative policy toward China. She accused these interests of not understanding the risks Australia would face in allowing Chinese firms' involvement in technology projects and other critical infrastructure. Beijing reacted positively to Payne's announcement on March 29 that the Australian government is setting up an A\$44 million foundation devoted to deepening understanding of and boosting relations with China.

New Zealand also reportedly banned Huawei from its next-generation wireless networks,

which triggered China's demand in February that a New Zealand Air flight to China turn around and return home as retaliation and a signal of worsening relations. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern carried out successful talks with both Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang during a one-day visit, her first to China, on April 1. Chinese media positively highlighted the modest achievements of the visit; they also underlined concerns about New Zealand's seeming acceptance of the US-led ban on Huawei, and Wellington's efforts to work with the United States, Australia, and others to strengthen ties with Pacific Island countries to counter Chinese investment, infrastructure development, and security cooperation with Pacific Island countries.

Following Xi's unprecedented visit to Papua New Guinea where he met leaders of the eight Pacific Island countries that recognize Beijing in November, Chinese media has had little to say about recent moves by the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and others to guard against perceived adverse impacts of China's rising influence in the Pacific Islands. Both the US and Australia have elevated the importance of the Pacific Islands within their respective foreign policy government organizations. The US National Security Council (NSC) created a new position of director of Oceania & Indo-Pacific Security and its director joined the NSC senior director for Asian affairs for a trip in March to Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, along with representatives from Australia, New Zealand and Japan, reportedly to coordinate policies geared at "thwarting China's strategic ambitions in the region." Analysts at the Australian Lowy Institute judged that the US and Australia increasingly view China's role in the Pacific Islands through a strategic lens. Reinforcing this trend, Conor Kennedy published an [article](#) in The Jamestown Foundation's *China Brief* in March documenting how Chinese military analysts signal China's intent to establish maritime strongholds in strategic locations including the Pacific Islands. John Lee of the Hudson Institute [warned](#) in similar terms of China following in the Pacific Islands the pattern China employed in using aid and commercial relations to gain agreement to establish a military base in Djibouti.

Against this background, Taiwan, an important aid provider to the six Pacific Island countries that maintain official relations with Taipei, sought and received more prominence in US

efforts to build support for US objectives in the Pacific Islands at odds with Beijing. Secretary Pompeo sent a message to the 19th Micronesian Presidents' Summit in Palau in February that highlighted Taiwan's commitment to democracy and open societies, values he said were shared by the US and the five nations at the summit—Palau, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and Nauru (all but the FSM have official relations with Taipei). The US showed official support for Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen's eight-day visit in March to Palau, Nauru, and the Marshall Islands when the US ambassador to Palau attended banquets hosted by the Palau leader and the Taiwan government marking Tsai's visit. And the US approved Tsai's one-day stopover in Hawaii during her trip to the region. At this time, Hawaii-based specialist Denny Roy issued a lengthy [report](#) emphasizing the strong common interests of Taiwan and US policies in countering Chinese influence in the Pacific Islands.



Figure 3 President Tsai being welcomed in Palau. Photo: Office of the President of the Republic of China (Taiwan)

Outlook

Whether Chinese relations with Southeast Asia and the nearby Pacific figure more prominently in Chinese foreign policy after the BRI Forum in late April is uncertain. Chinese leaders may be more likely preoccupied over the next few months with intensified competition with the United States and serious domestic concerns amid lackluster economic growth.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2019

Jan. 16–Feb. 21, 2019: China conducts a military exercise that includes nearly 20 drills that draw from its navy, air force, and missile forces in the South China Sea as well as in the Pacific Ocean. The drills simulate combat situations at sea, repel advancing vessels, rescue efforts, and live-fire exercises, and are attempts to better integrate the People’s Liberation Army’s Rocket Force conventional and tactical units in its Southern Theater Command.

Jan. 22, 2019: Three PLA Navy escort vessels engage in a five-day visit to the Philippines on their return from an escort mission to the Gulf of Aden.

Jan. 22, 2019: Chinese Premier Li Keqiang meets visiting Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen to discuss the state of bilateral relations. They agree to cooperate on Cambodia’s infrastructure development and through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), jointly implement plans for the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone, and strengthen Lancang–Mekong cooperation.

Jan. 29–Feb. 1, 2019: China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand jointly carry out the 78th Mekong River joint patrol. Four vessels from each of the four participant countries are involved in the joint patrol focusing on countering terrorist activities and other cross-border crimes.

Feb. 16, 2019: Singaporean Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen announces at the Munich Security Conference that negotiations for a code of conduct between ASEAN and China aimed at easing tensions in the South China Sea will begin later this month.

March 8, 2019: Vietnamese official [reports](#) that a Vietnamese fishing boat was rammed by a Chinese vessel near Discovery Bay in the Paracel Islands on March 6.

March 13, 2019: Former Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario, former Ombudsman Conchita Carpacio Morales, and Filipino fishermen [file](#) a complaint against Chinese President Xi Jinping before the International Criminal Court for committing “crimes against humanity” in China’s systematic takeover of the South China Sea.

March 15, 2019: Communist Party Secretary of Sansha Zhang Jun [announces](#) plans to develop Woody Island and two smaller islets in the Paracels into a “national key strategic service and logistics base.”

March 26, 2019: Chinese Communist Party’s Minister of International Department Song Tao meets Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to discuss bilateral cooperation. They agree to enhance relations through the BRI and through cultural and educational exchanges.

March 29, 2019: Vietnam’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs lodges a protest against China’s Hainan Province’s notice to hold live-fire drills in the Paracel/Hoang Sa islands.

April 1, 2019: Philippines presidential spokesperson [announces](#) that the Department of Foreign Affairs has filed a diplomatic protest against China regarding “the presence of more than 200 Chinese boats” that have been recorded near Philippines-claimed territory in the South China Sea between January and March.

April 3, 2019: China and the Philippines convene the Fourth Meeting of the Bilateral Consultation Mechanism in Manila. They agree to engage in dialogue to prevent and manage incidents at sea, to build mutual trust and confidence, and to explore prospects for maritime economic cooperation.

April 17, 2019: Preliminary results from Indonesia’s general election [show](#) incumbent Joko Widodo winning over Prabowo Subianto in the presidential race.

April 19, 2019: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad [announces](#) revival of the \$34 billion Bandar Malaysia development project that was suspended in 2017. The Chinese-backed rail and property development project is described by Mahathir's office as "a significant contribution to the Belt and Road Initiative," and integral in fostering long-term bilateral relations between Malaysia and China.

April 23, 2019: Thai officials announce that Thailand will sign a memorandum of cooperation with Laos and China to increase regional connectivity and infrastructure development.

April 25-27, 2019: China convenes the second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing with a joint statement signed by China and 37 other countries in attendance. A number of infrastructure projects ranging from sea ports to railways are highlighted for their impact on strengthening land and maritime trade routes that would forge stronger economic ties between Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

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

TROUBLING TENSIONS

DAVID G. BROWN, JOHNS HOPKINS SCHOOL OF ADVANCED INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
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STUDIES

The year began with General Secretary Xi Jinping and President Tsai Ing-wen making major statements that underline the fundamental gap between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Taiwan. In the face of Beijing's continuing pressure on Taiwan, Washington and Taipei took steps to strengthen relations and celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). In Congress, members proposed new measures, some of which challenge the established framework for US relations with Taiwan and China. Beijing repeatedly protested these efforts and in April sent two PLA fighters deliberately across the midline of the Taiwan Strait for the first time in 20 years in an ill-defined warning. In Taiwan, maneuvering for the 2020 elections has begun creating a confusing situation with unclear implications for cross-strait and US-Taiwan relations.

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Tsai and Xi redefine opposing policies

Anticipating that Beijing would make a statement on the 40th anniversary of the Deng-era Message to Taiwan Compatriots, President Tsai included comments on cross-strait relations in her New Year's Day address. She called on Beijing to face the reality of the existence of the Republic of China (ROC), to respect its commitment to democracy, and to resume negotiations through authorized entities.

On Jan. 2, President Xi Jinping gave the expected [anniversary address](#). Although Xi generally repeated well-known policy, his reformulations took a decidedly tougher tone. He stated that the 1992 Consensus means not only that both sides “belong to one China” but also that they “will work together toward national reunification.” Rather than the familiar statement that the 1992 Consensus is the basis for cross-strait relations, Xi stated that Beijing’s “One China Principle is the political basis for cross-strait relations.” These statements present challenges to Taiwan, particularly to the Kuomintang (KMT), which has framed its policy as having its own and different interpretation of One China. Although Beijing’s “one country, two systems” (1C2S) proposal has long been rejected in Taiwan, Xi reiterated that this formula was the best framework for reunification. Xi went on to call for “democratic consultations” on the “two systems” portion of the formula, as if to underline that Beijing’s view of One China was a settled issue. Taiwan’s political, economic, and social conditions could be accommodated after reunification “provided that China’s sovereignty, security and development interests are ensured.” In tandem with such talks, Xi reiterated that the peaceful development policy to further integrate Taiwan with the mainland economically and socially would continue.

[Tsai responded](#) immediately. She explained that she had not accepted the 1992 Consensus because Beijing linked it to the unacceptable “one country, two systems” formula. She categorically rejected 1C2S and opined that there was a consensus in Taiwan not to accept it. The Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) promptly criticized Tsai’s remarks as advocating two separate states. The TAO clarified Beijing’s view that the 1992 Consensus and 1C2S were separate concepts.

Xi’s address provoked widespread criticism in Taiwan. The KMT stated that 1C2S was not acceptable to the majority on Taiwan. Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu called for reflection on the gap between Beijing’s resolve to achieve unification and Taiwan’s resolve to preserve its democracy. Former KMT presidential candidate Eric Chu Li-lun reiterated the KMT view of “one China, respective interpretations.” New Power Party (NPP) legislator Huang Kuo-chang likewise rejected 1C2S. Independent Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je said that 1C2S was not acceptable to people on Taiwan. Polling indicated that President Tsai’s firm rejection of 1C2S had significantly bumped up her low poll approval ratings.

It was expected that Xi would make a statement on this anniversary. But why had he taken a hardline position? Any answer must be speculative. One factor is that the CCP leadership apparently is confident about eventual reunification because of Beijing’s growing military, economic, and diplomatic power. That allows it to take a hard line on unification terms. Another factor is that despite leadership confidence, there are criticisms of the party’s Taiwan policy. One criticism is that despite Beijing’s efforts, Taiwan is evolving toward what is called “creeping independence.” Xi’s tough line and new proposal for democratic consultations on a two-systems formula can be seen as addressing this concern by defining a way forward toward unification. Another criticism seen in nationalistic press articles is aggressive talk about the use of force to accomplish unification. Xi’s reaffirmation of the party’s peaceful development approach, buttressed by PLA capabilities, is designed to disavow such talk. In the weeks following Xi’s address, Beijing has continued rhetorical, diplomatic, and military pressures on Taiwan and has begun reaching out to figures in Taiwan to promote the consultations Xi endorsed.

Strengthening US-Taiwan relations

In response to Beijing’s pressures, Washington and Taipei took steps to strengthen their ties, including visits by mid-level US officials. The State Department deputy assistant secretaries for international organizations and economic policy visited Taiwan for consultations. In March, Sam Brownback, the State Department’s ambassador for religious freedom, visited Taipei to participate in The Civil Society Dialogue on Securing Religious Freedom in the Indo-Pacific.

President Tsai participated in this dialogue, and Taipei announced the donation of \$1 million to a new fund to assist persecuted religious minorities around the world. The US and Taiwan hosted Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) conferences on women's empowerment, health issues, and combating corruption. In March, Japan joined in co-sponsoring one GCTF conference, for the first time. Also in March, the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) and the Tsai administration announced the establishment of another co-hosted forum, the Indo-Pacific Democratic Governance Consultations, which planned to hold its first meeting in September. In late April, former Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price attended a GCTF meeting on tuberculosis.

In March, President Tsai visited three Pacific allies Palau, Nauru, and the Marshall Islands. In Palau, US Ambassador Amy Hyatt attended the welcome dinner for Tsai in an indication of US support for Palau's diplomatic ties with Taipei. Despite PRC criticism, Washington facilitated Tsai's transit through Hawaii as part of the trip. In a first while on US soil, Tsai, while in Honolulu, participated by video link to a conference hosted by the Heritage Foundation in Washington.

This year, US Navy ships have transited through the Taiwan Straits each month. US military spokespersons have said these transits are designed to show commitment to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. When a French Navy ship transited the Strait in April, a PRC Ministry of Defense spokesman said the ship had been warned to leave "Chinese waters." Although this "Chinese waters" rationale was not published on the official website, the French ship was dis-invited from the PLA Navy's 70th anniversary celebration. In April, the State Department notified Congress of a \$500 million Foreign Military Sale (FMS) case to continue F-16 pilot training in the US. This was another step toward announcing arms sales in a more routine manner. In March, Taiwan confirmed that it had submitted a request for 66 F-16V aircraft. This and an earlier request for 108 M1A2X tanks are going through a necessary and thorough review. President Tsai has spoken publicly several times about strengthening Taiwan's defenses and continued visiting military installations to build support and morale for the armed forces. She has also urged acceleration of Taiwan's indigenous weapons programs, including

production of *Hsiungfeng-III* and *Tienkung III* missiles.

Both capitals celebrated the 40th anniversary of the TRA, celebrations used to portray bilateral ties as better than ever. The reaffirmation of the TRA as the framework for US-Taiwan relations was also useful at a time when some have questioned that framework. On April 9, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and other think tanks co-hosted a TRA commemoration conference in Washington. President Tsai addressed the conference by video link. In response to a question, Tsai commented that Beijing's policy was becoming more coercive and explained Taiwan's increasing defense effort stating, "We want to deter aggression by showing we are capable of effectively defending ourselves. This is what it will take to maintain peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait." Her message was well received in Washington, but condemned by Beijing.

In Taipei, AIT hosted a "TRA@40" reception at its new office complex, attended by President Tsai.



Figure 1 President Tsai speaks at AIT "TRA@40" reception.

Former House Speaker Paul Ryan headed the US delegation to Taipei. Amid press speculation about a Marine Security Detachment at the new complex, AIT stated, without commenting about marines, that US military personnel have been assigned to AIT since 2005. Beijing criticized this saying that sending military personnel to Taiwan was a violation of the three US-China communiqués.

Following adoption of the Taiwan Travel Act (TTA) earlier in 2018 and President Trump's signing of the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act on Dec. 31, members of Congress continued efforts

to demonstrate growing support for Taiwan. To mark the TRA's 40th anniversary, Congress passed resolutions renewing support for the Act. In April, drafts of a [Taiwan Assurance Act](#) were introduced in the House and Senate.

Several members also advocated steps that would directly challenge the framework for US-Taiwan relations. Rep. Steven Cabot called for a reassessment of Washington's one China policy. Rep. Ted Yoho recommended that Vice President Mike Pence should visit Taiwan. Sen. Ted Cruz said President Tsai should be invited to Washington, and six senators wrote to Speaker Nancy Pelosi recommending that Tsai be invited to address a joint session of Congress. These proposals were not based on consultations with Taipei. When asked about Tsai visiting Washington, Foreign Minister Joseph Wu said that it would require further consultation. Later, Wu reported that the subject had not come up when the president and Speaker Pelosi spoke by phone during the Hawaii transit.

Heightened PLA pressure

PLA exercises near Taiwan resumed in December after a six-month hiatus during the local election campaign. Sporadic exercises continued early in 2019. Then on March 31, two PLA J-11 fighter jets intruded across the midline of the Taiwan Strait.



Figure 2 PLA J-11 fighter jet intrudes across the midline of the Taiwan Strait.

The fighters went 43 miles beyond the midline for 11 minutes, prompting Taiwan to scramble fighters in response. This was the first time in 20 years that PLA aircraft had intentionally and provocatively crossed the tacitly observed midline. This seemed to be another military

action to convey a political message. However, neither the Ministry of Defense nor Foreign Ministry made any public comment. Only 10 days later did the TAO state that the action was a normal part of the PLA's annual training plan and that it was the PLA's sacred duty to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In the absence of clarification, it appears the intrusion was a general warning to Taipei and Washington to handle cross-strait relations more carefully.

President Tsai convened a meeting of her national security team. In Washington, the State Department condemned such coercion and urged Beijing to resume dialogue. Three days later, Tsai visited the fighter wing that had responded, commended their action, and used the occasion to carefully call on the armed forces to "forcefully expel" (強勢驅離) any further intrusions. She voiced a morale building 16-character saying, "In defending territory and sovereignty, do not give up an inch; in firmly upholding democracy and freedom, do not retreat."

Two weeks later, the PLA conducted another significant exercise in the Bashi Strait, south of Taiwan, that involved 24 aircraft, five ships, and simulated operations against Taiwan. The exercise was on April 15, the day of the AIT TRA@40 reception mentioned above. This time the Eastern Theater Command reported the exercise, highlighting some of its threatening aspects and said it was to hone joint operations to defend national territory and sovereignty. This predictable assertion of sovereignty over Taiwan was a direct rejection of Taipei's consistent demand for the acceptance of the reality of the ROC.

Nomination maneuvering: on the KMT side

These developments in the triangular relations between China, Taiwan, and the US were taking place as Taiwan politicians are preparing for presidential and legislative elections in January 2020. Although neither of the major parties has set a date for its primary contest, candidates are actively maneuvering for nomination.

About a half dozen personalities have declared themselves as candidates for the KMT primary or are being considered. The range of opinions about cross-strait relations is remarkably broad. Former Party Chairman Chu Li-lun, an early candidate, has chosen to reaffirm the KMT's

past “One China, Respective Interpretations” position and disavowed the idea of a peace agreement. However, current Party Chairman Wu Den-yih, who has made clear he is not a candidate, stated that the KMT would pursue a peace agreement with Beijing if it were returned to power. Han Kuo-yu, the populist mayor of Kaohsiung, who has a lead in the polls, has recently indicated that he would participate in the KMT primary. When Han visited Hong Kong, Macau, and Shenzhen in March to promote Kaohsiung exports, he avoided specifics by calling the 1992 Consensus a “magic wand” for preserving stability. Han has been criticized in Taiwan for meeting privately with the senior CCP representatives in Hong Kong and Macau. Like Han, several other KMT mayors and magistrates have made friendly visits to China focused on economic interests. Former KMT Premier Simon Chang and Taipei’s independent Mayor Ko Wen-je are also considering running as independents.

In late April, Hon Hai Chairman Terry Gou (Kuo Tai-ming) announced his candidacy.



Figure 3 Hon Hai Chairman Terry Gou (Kuo Tai-ming) announces his candidacy.

While Gou is a respected entrepreneur, he has no experience in foreign policy. In his initial public comments, Gou argued for the benefits of cooperating with China, criticized US arms sales, and seemed to devalue Taiwan’s democracy. He has appeared publicly in a distinctive baseball cap and made confrontational statements that seem modeled on Donald Trump’s campaign playbook. Gou’s personal wealth and his extensive investments in China will be both assets and liabilities for his

political prospects. Many suspect that his extensive ties in the mainland will skew his policy toward China and make him vulnerable to political pressure. As if to confirm this, the CCP-controlled *Global Times* commented that Gou’s elections would likely reduce cross-strait tension.

The CCP is reaching out to KMT mayors and magistrates and, in line with Xi’s Jan. 2 address, urging them to endorse the 1992 Consensus without mentioning “respective interpretations.” As mentioned, several of the recently elected local officials and other party leaders have visited. Party Chairman Wu has long wanted to visit, and the Tsai administration has said he would be free to visit after his three-year travel ban on former officials ends May 20. In contrast to their relatively good relations on the mainland, none of the KMT’s potential candidates has well-established ties in Washington, though Gou touts his personal relationship with President Trump. Chu, Han, and Ko have each made trips to the US this year, but only Ko visited Washington. Whoever becomes the nominee will undoubtedly visit Washington this fall. The array of KMT candidates, with differing policy perspectives, paints a confusing picture and creates uncertainty about future cross-strait and U.S.-Taiwan relations.

KMT Chairman Wu’s talk about a peace agreement has reignited a controversial issue. It led the DPP to state that passing legislation concerning cross-strait political agreements will be a high priority in the Legislative Yuan (LY) this year. The Tsai administration has sent the LY draft legislation on political agreements that sets such a high bar that it is unlikely a negotiation of a political agreement could ever be authorized, let alone negotiated and approved. The LY has decided that this draft and five others will be sent for inter-party consultations.

On the DPP side

The situation within the DPP is also uncertain. When Tsai’s response to Xi’s address boosted her approval rating in January, it seemed her path to renomination had been cleared. However, in March, former Premier Lai Ching-te announced his intention to run. Lai apparently believes opinion polls that show he has a better chance of winning than Tsai. As his action threatens DPP unity, party elders, most of

whom favor Tsai, are seeking to persuade him to reconsider. To allow more time, Party Chairman Cho Jung-tai has postponed the DPP presidential primary.

Lai's candidacy has raised concerns in Beijing and questions in Washington. While his underlying goals are similar to Tsai's, Lai has been much more explicit about independence, repeatedly describing himself as a pragmatic political worker for Taiwan independence. Shortly after resigning as premier, Lai appeared at an event sponsored by the fringe Taiwan Constitution Association and declared that now is the time for a new constitution that better reflects Taiwan's status as an independent state. Such statements have won Lai the backing of pro-independence elements, to whom Lai will be beholden should he win the nomination. The TAO criticized Lai by name saying his advocacy of a new constitution constituted promotion of *de jure* independence and would push Taiwan to the brink of an abyss. Chinese academics perceive Lai as even more dangerous than Tsai.

Washington has been careful to stay out of internal politics. AIT Chairman James Moriarty has said the US interest is in a free and fair process and that Washington will work with whoever is elected. James Heller, the State Department's director for Taiwan coordination, and Moriarty have repeated the well-known US position that it does not support independence. In addition, in response to the Formosa Alliance's promotion of a referendum on independence, the AIT spokesman has twice stated that the US does not support a referendum on independence, citing Washington's abiding interest in peace and stability.

Resisting CCP interference in Taiwan

The coming election campaign has again focused attention on CCP efforts to influence Taiwan politics and elections. Tsai has expressed concern about how Beijing will manipulate social media and disseminate misinformation (fake news) to interfere in the coming campaign. DPP legislator Hsiao Bi-khim has described CCP methods including: 1) influencing traditional media owned by Taiwan firms that have extensive mainland investments and actively promote Beijing's views, 2) using content farms to flood social media with misinformation and play up divisive local issues, 3) influencing grassroots and religious

organizations the CCP has cultivated and supported, and 4) indirectly funding pro-unification political groups. CCP social media operations are becoming increasingly sophisticated and now work through Taiwanese they have hired to post their messages. Tsai has portrayed Taiwan as on the frontline of the CCP's global united front and cyber warfare operations and called for international cooperation against these activities. AIT Chairman Moriarty has said the US and Taiwan as democracies face similar challenges from foreign interference.

The Tsai administration has focused on improving various agencies' ability to rapidly counter misinformation about the government. The National Communication Commission (NCC) is beginning to use its regulatory powers to discipline media that fail to fact check their reporting. In April, NCC Chairperson Nicole Chan resigned after criticism of the NCC's inadequate efforts against misinformation. The Tsai administration is seeking cooperation from local social media platforms, from *Facebook* and from the Japan-based *Line* platform to rapidly remove misinformation originating from Chinese URLs. Taipei has encouraged independent civil society groups to monitor influence operation and worked to heighten the public's media literacy including through programs co-sponsored by AIT. Minister without Portfolio Audrey Tang visited Washington in April to consult with the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) on how to respond to similar challenges to democratic institutions. On a related move, The Taiwan Internet Network Information Center shut down a Taiwan-based website that had been created to promote the TAO's "31 incentive measures."

Other developments

The African Swine Fever (ASF) epidemic in China has continued to spread through 30 of 31 provincial-level units and has reached Vietnam and Cambodia. Since December, Taiwan has taken drastic measures to prevent ASF spreading to Taiwan and damaging its important pork industry. Beijing continues to rebuff Taiwan's request for timely information, asserting that Taipei can get the information from the Organization for Animal Health (OIE). Meanwhile, several infected pig carcasses have washed up on beaches in Kinmen, presumably from China. In April, the OIE convened an Asia-

wide meeting in Beijing on the ASF epidemic. However, due to pressure from Beijing, Taiwan, an OIE member, was not invited to the meeting. Beijing's unwillingness to help Taiwan prevent ASF's spread to Taiwan is an unfortunate example of how Beijing's rigid political attitude continues to belie its assertion that the people on both sides of the strait are "one family."

Taiwan's exclusion from the ASF meeting was but one example of Beijing's relentless effort to isolate Taiwan internationally. In February, Taiwan was not able to attend the semi-annual World Health Organization meeting on the Asian Flu Vaccine, as it had done previously. The WHO invitation did not reach Taipei until the morning of the day the meeting opened in Beijing, too late to arrange for the delegation's visas. It is also clear that Beijing will again block Taiwan's participation as an observer in the World Health Assembly this May.

Taipei continues working to stabilize ties with its allies, and the US is doing more to assist. For example, National Security Council Director for Asia Mathew Pottinger and Taiwan Vice Foreign Minister Hsu Szu-chien met in the Solomon Islands in March. In April, Deputy Assistant Secretary Cindy Kierscht met publicly in Port au Prince, with Taiwan's Ambassador Hu Cheng-hao to promote US-Taiwan cooperation on sustainable development in Haiti. These are examples of a new pattern of the US and Taiwan cooperating with host governments on useful projects, which also help stabilize Taiwan's relations with allies.

The disruptions caused by US-China trade frictions continue to affect Taiwan and Taiwan investors in China (Taishang). There is anecdotal evidence that Taishang are hedging by diversifying some operations to Southeast Asia and in some cases back to Taiwan. All Taishang in China have been concerned about how the new PRC Individual Income Tax Law, that became effective Jan. 1, will affect their tax status. In March, Premier Li Keqiang said that Beijing continues to support investment from Taiwan and that special benefits for Taiwan investment would continue under the new law. The TAO has said that the tax law implementing regulations would include benefits for Taishang and stated that the new PRC residence cards for Taiwanese was a separate issue from their tax status. Zhang Zhijun, the chairman of the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS), has commented that

investments from Taiwan would be treated as "special internal investments," though without explaining what that means.

President Xi's reaffirmation of the 1C2S formula has again focused attention in Taiwan on how that formula is being applied in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Special Administration Region's plan to amend the Hong Kong extradition law to allow deportation to China has raised concerns, such as that critics of the CCP from Taiwan who visit Hong Kong could be seized and deported to China. In April, Hong Kong bookseller Lam Wing Kee, who is known for publishing books critical of Chinese leaders, fled to Taiwan, reportedly to avoid the possibility of deportation after the law is adopted. Hong Kong's proposed National Anthem Law has been criticized as yet another limitation on the freedom of expression promised under 1C2S. The stiff penalties imposed on participants in the 2014 Umbrella Movement were also criticized in Taiwan. These and other Hong Kong developments only reinforce opposition to 1C2S in Taiwan.

Looking ahead

The Taiwan campaign period will be a particularly sensitive time. Once Taiwan's main parties have nominated their presidential candidates this summer, the shape of the campaign will become clearer. The cross-strait policies of the candidates should indicate what role cross-strait political and economic issues will play in the campaign. Attention will remain focused on how the CCP is influencing the election. The expected conclusion of a US-China trade agreement will bring some clarity on the trade front and may create circumstances in which the Trump administration could address trade issues with Taiwan.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2019

Jan. 1, 2019: President Tsai Ing-wen’s New Year address [announces](#) a new “four musts” framework for cross-strait relations with mainland China, as well as her administration’s “three shields” security strategy to protect Taiwan’s democratic values, enhance cyber security, and ensure people’s livelihoods.

Jan. 2, 2019: General Secretary Xi Jinping’s 40th anniversary address; President Tsai responds.

Jan. 6, 2019: Cho Jung-tai elected Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) chairman.

Jan. 8, 2019: Nauruan President Baron Divavesi Waqa visits Taipei.

Jan 11, 2019: Premier Lai Ching-te and Cabinet resign; Su Tseng-chang appointed premier.

Jan. 17, 2019: Taiwan’s military [holds](#) its first large-scale drills of the year on the island’s west coast, aimed at honing its combat readiness and “thwarting an amphibious invasion.”

Jan. 22, 2019: Taiwan’s Defense Ministry tells its citizens not to panic after PLA aircraft [fly](#) over the Bashi Channel within close-range of the island.

Jan. 23, 2019: Lai Ching-de says Taiwan needs a new constitution.

Jan. 24, 2019: *USS McCampbell* and the *USNS Walter S. Diehl*, [transit](#) the Taiwan Strait to demonstrate “US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

Feb. 5, 2019: Premier Su hosts web video on African Swine Fever (ASF) measures.

Feb. 14, 2019: KMT Chairman Wu Den-yih says party will promote peace agreement.

Feb. 14-22, 2019: Former KMT Party Chairman and presidential candidate Eric Chu Li-lun visits the US.

Feb. 19, 2019: Secretary Mike Pompeo holds video conference with Micronesian President’s Summit and expresses support for Taiwan.

Feb. 20, 2019: Taipei is excluded from WHO biannual flu vaccine meeting in Beijing.

Feb. 25, 2019: *USS Stethem* and *USNS Cesar Chavez* [transit](#) the Taiwan Strait to demonstrate “the U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

Feb. 27, 2019: Taipei submits request to buy 66 F-16V for estimated \$13 billion.

March 6, 2019: Taoyuan Mayor Cheng Wen-tsan visits Washington.

March 7, 2019: Taiwan’s deputy defense minister [announces](#) that Taiwan has submitted an official request to purchase new fighter jets from the United States.

March 11, 2019: Ambassador Sam Brownback attends Civil Society Dialogue on Securing Religious Freedom in Taipei.

March 12, 2019: Taipei announces \$1million donation to fund for persecuted religious minorities.

March 13, 2019: Keelung Mayor Lin Yu-tang visits Washington.

March 18, 2019: Former Premier Lai Ching-te registers for DPP primary.

March 16-24, 2019: Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je visits the US.

March 19, 2019: AIT and Taipei announce new “Indo-Pacific Democratic Governance Consultations” Forum.

March 22, 2019: Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu visits Hong Kong.

March 22, 2019: President Tsai visits Palau.

March 24, 2019: President Tsai visits Nauru.

March 24-25, 2019: USS *Curtis Wilbur* and USCG *Bertholf* [conduct](#) “a routine Taiwan Strait transit.” It is the first FOIP mission to involve a US Coast Guard vessel.

March 25, 2019: Mayor Han meets Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) Director Liu Jieyi in Shenzhen.

March 26, 2019: President Tsai visits Marshall Islands.

March 27, 2019: President Tsai transits Hawaii.

March 28, 2019: Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations Affairs Nerissa Cook in Taipei for consultations

March 31, 2019: Two PLAAF *J-11 fighter jets* [cross](#) the median line in the Taiwan Strait, prompting Taiwan to dispatch its own planes to warn off the Chinese aircraft. Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs declares the action “provocative” and a violation of “the long-held tacit agreement” of cross-straits relations.

April 7, 2019: French Navy French frigate *Vendemiaire* transits Taiwan Strait.

April 8, 2019: Taipei is excluded from Organization for Animal Health (OIE) meeting in Beijing concerning ASF.

April 9, 2019: President Tsai gives video address to Washington conference commemorating 40th anniversary of Taiwan Relations Act.

April 7-15, 2019: Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu visits the US with stops in Boston, Los Angeles, and San Jose.

April 12, 2019: Visiting PRC scholar Li Yi is deported from Taiwan for violating terms by giving a speech advocating one country, two systems.

April 15, 2019: State Department notifies \$500 million foreign military sales case for continued F-16 pilot training.

April 15, 2019: Former Speaker Paul Ryan leads US delegation to American Institute in Taiwan’s TRA anniversary events.

April 15, 2019: Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense and Japan’s Ministry of Defense separately [report](#) PLAAF jets and planes flying over the Bashi Channel to conduct exercises in the Western Pacific.

April 16, 2019: AIT Chairman James Moriarty meets President Tsai.

April 17, 2019: Hon Hai Chairman Terry Gou enters race for KMT presidential nomination.

April 20, 2019: PRC dissident in US Wang Xizhe is banned from Taiwan for advocating forceful unification.

April 22, 2019: US Agricultural Trade Mission visits Taiwan.

April 23, 2019: Minister Audrey Tang visits Washington for consultations on cyber and misinformation issues.

April 24, 2019: US officials [report](#) that the French frigate *Vendemiaire* was “shadowed” by Chinese military when it transited the Taiwan Strait on April 7.

April 25, 2019: China [protests](#) the *Vendemiaire*’s April 7 transit through the Taiwan Strait, claiming that the French warship had “illegally entered China’s territorial waters.”

April 28, 2019: Senators Chris Coons and Maggie Hassan visit Taipei.

April 28, 2019: USS *William P. Lawrence* and USS *Stethem* [sail](#) the Taiwan Strait, demonstrating “the U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

GRINDING TO A HALT – THEN KIM PULLS THE PLUG

AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

The inter-Korean peace process that blossomed in 2018 shriveled in early 2019. Pyongyang was slowing the pace even before February's Kim-Trump summit in Hanoi; since then it has severed almost all contacts with Seoul – whose “meddling” mediation Kim mocked in a speech in April. The North's ebbing interest can be seen across a range of sectors, including Kim Jong Un's failure to visit Seoul, high-level talks, the joint liaison office, NGOs, sports exchanges, tension reduction measures at the DMZ, family reunions, medical aid, and more. The DPRK's missile launches in early May are a further blow. Despite President Moon Jae-in's efforts to keep a brave face, it is hard to see where North-South relations go from here. Kim may regret dissing the most sympathetic interlocutor he is ever likely to have in Seoul, while Moon needs to think harder about what it will take to make the “irreversible” progress in inter-Korean ties that he craves.

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Introduction

With anything involving North Korea, the tea-leaves are often hard to read. But sometimes they are all too clear. As of May 2019, the peace process on the Korean Peninsula has ground to a halt. After almost a year and a half when the DPRK observed a moratorium on nuclear and missile testing, its two missile launches in early May (maybe more, by the time you read this), both personally supervised by Kim Jong Un, signal beyond doubt that the momentum for peace has been lost. That does not mean it is irrecoverable, though at this point it is hard to see how. One side or the other would have to yield at least a little, be it on-site inspections or sanctions relief – precisely the kinds of concessions they have each refused to make hitherto, which is what has brought us to this impasse. There seems scant prospect of that happening.

Thus far, I am referring to the recent peace process *in general*, where the principal actors are North Korea and the United States. No offense intended to South Korea, especially given the inter-Korean remit of this article. But the events of the past four months, galling as they are to President Moon Jae-in's government and to all who hoped we were seeing the dawn of a new 'sunshine' era of reconciliation on the peninsula, brook no other interpretation. Kim Jong Un, it is now clear, does not regard South Korea as an important dialogue partner in its own right.

Our last update on inter-Korean relations for *Comparative Connections* bore the title: "An Unprecedented Year, But Will Progress Continue?" While lauding what the two Koreas had achieved in 2018, we could not but note a slowing down toward the end of the year, after the blistering pace set earlier on. Sadly, that caution has proved prescient. Even before the second Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi in February, discussed elsewhere in this issue, this deceleration got worse in early 2019. As detailed below, on all fronts meetings and exchanges grew fewer and further between. In the weeks after the Hanoi summit broke down, the slowdown became a full stop. As of early May, North-South dialogue has ground to a halt completely.

Dismaying though it is, one can only conclude that for Kim Jong Un, last year's three North-South summits, and the lofty aspirations

written into both the Panmunjom and Pyongyang Declarations, were just hot air – or rather, a means to an end. He took advantage of Moon's good offices to get the prize he really wanted: a line to Donald Trump. But once that new relationship was up and running, who needs the middleman? Adding insult to injury, in April Kim sneered at "the south Korean authorities" for what he had the gall to call "pos[ing] as a meddling 'mediator' and 'facilitator' as they busy themselves with foreign trips." This was on the very day that President Moon flew back from Washington, after yet another valiant effort to kickstart the peace process. (Trump, for his part, didn't even deem Moon's visit worth tweeting about. Nobody loves or respects the middleman, it would seem.)



Figure 1 Moon and Trump meet for bilateral talks in Washington. Photo: Reuters

A reality check is overdue. For Trump and Moon alike, it is painful to admit that 2018's push for peace has now stalled. The debacle in Hanoi prompted still ongoing *post-mortems* in both Washington and Seoul, with divergent views over what went wrong and who is to blame. *Mortem* is Latin for death, which alas is correct. The Moon administration in particular seems loath to admit that. Moon was unlucky to publish a lengthy and ruminative *article* in a leading German newspaper, including a boast that "the sounds of gunfire have disappeared in the air, on the sea and on the ground around the Korean Peninsula," just as Kim Jong Un was rudely proving him wrong. Yet clearly Moon was too sanguine by half – jumping the gun, is an apt metaphor. Declaring peace is by no means the same as establishing and securing it.

No Kim visit; meetings ever fewer

The four months under review were a game of two halves – before and after Hanoi. In the run-up to the second Kim-Trump summit, i.e., during January and most of February, the positive tenor of expectations – totally misleading, it turned out – regarding what that meeting might yield allowed for a good deal of optimism, in Seoul and beyond. (One example: amid widespread speculation that the Hanoi agenda could include a declaration that the Korean War was finally over, on Feb.20 the noted if anonymous blogger of “[AskAKorean](#)” published a long, heartfelt [post](#) titled “How To End A Forever War.” It reads painfully now.) There was also widespread anticipation, not least in Seoul, that Trump would offer Kim some relief on sanctions, such that practical projects for inter-Korean cooperation discussed in 2018 – reconnecting roads and railways, and reviving joint ventures at Kaesong and Mount Kumgang – could go ahead.

Yet at the same time, and despite Moon’s expressed aim to put Seoul back in the driver’s seat in peninsular affairs, the inter-Korean dimension was visibly slowing down. As we noted last time, on Dec. 30 Kim Jong Un wrote to Moon, apologizing for not visiting Seoul yet, and promising to meet “often” in 2019. Yet there was no indication of any fourth summit being prepared. So did Kim ever really have the intention to come to Seoul, or was he just stringing Moon along? Either way, they have not met again since Pyongyang in September, and show no signs of doing so. On April 15 Moon [called](#) for a fourth North-South summit to break the post-Hanoi US-DPRK deadlock, “without being restrained by the venue and format.” Such flexibility might seem laudable, but as critics noted it came at the cost of reciprocity. Just as his father Kim Jong Il reneged on pledges to visit Seoul, Kim Jong Un seems to be doing the same. Bottom line: there was and is no sign of a fourth Moon-Kim summit, anywhere.

Lower-level inter-Korean meetings also dwindled, before they stopped completely. After a flurry of sectoral talks in various fields in the latter half of 2018 – discussed in our last two update articles, and listed [here](#) on the ROK Unification Ministry (MOU)’s website – the first such meeting in 2019 was also, for now, the last. On Jan. 31 the two Koreas met in Kaesong to discuss connecting cross-border roads and modernizing those in the North. This followed

similar talks and joint field surveys last year. According to *Yonhap*, the quasi-official ROK news agency, they [discussed](#) a possible visit by Northern officials to look at Southern roads, exchanged documents on each other’s highway systems, and “agreed to discuss further details in the near future through additional talks or exchange of documents.” That did not happen, nor any further meetings in other fields – e.g., forestry – which had been discussed in 2018.

Liaison Office: A Shell Drained of Substance

True, the inter-Korean permanent liaison office in the former Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) remains nominally open. But this year so far has been a far cry from last. On Dec. 20, *NKNews* [reported](#) an MOU briefing which tallied no fewer than 285 meetings hosted by the new liaison office during its first 100 days of operation. These included 10 high-level talks, 10 ministerial talks, 26 at vice-ministerial level, 49 on-demand working-level consultations, and 188 regular meetings. At that stage it seemed that both Koreas meant business.

It was a very different story four months later. On April 19, MOU confirmed that what were supposed to be regular weekly meetings between the liaison office’s joint directors had not been held for two months, since Feb. 22 when the North sent a stand-in. The two co-heads of the office – ROK Vice Unification Minister Chun Hae-sung and the DPRK’s Jon Jong Su – last met on Jan. 25. These dates show that the North was losing interest even before Hanoi – though the latter is presumably what prompted a bigger if temporary hiccup. On March 22, the office’s Northern staff all abruptly [left](#), with no reason [given](#) except “instructions from higher authority”; they told their Southern colleagues to stay on if they liked. But most of them returned three days later, again sans explanation – disingenuously [saying](#) “we came to do our shift as usual.” Their absence was over a weekend, so perhaps too much was made of what may just have been a recall to Pyongyang for a briefing. Nonetheless this was unsettling. And present or absent, no real business is being done at the liaison office any longer.

NGOs: Emphasis on the GO

It was a similar story with NGOs. Last year ROK charities and other nonstate bodies got busy organizing all manner of visits and exchanges,

but here too the pace has drastically slowed in 2019. In fact, the only visit of any substance was on Feb. 12-13, when some 250 South Koreans from a range of NGOs – religious groups, labor unions, and organizations of women, youth and farmers – [joined](#) Northern counterparts at the Mount Kumgang resort on the DPRK's east coast for a delayed New Year get-together. The two sides appealed for full implementation of last year's summit accords, and full-fledged cross-border cooperation. As the Northern participants may have known – though not necessarily, given the top-down way the Kim regime operates – none of that was about to happen; in fact, quite the reverse.

Two months later, on April 18, the center-right Seoul daily *JoongAng Ilbo* ran a headline, “North severs contacts in South.” The [article](#) cited several unnamed Southern NGO sources telling the same story: all were now getting the brush-off from counterparts in the North, who had previously been keen to pursue joint projects. Ever since the Hanoi summit, meetings and visits were being cancelled, with no reason given save “orders from superiors.” Faxes went unanswered in the North, as did telephones. Some in Seoul said they heard that Kim Jong Un had personally issued a blanket ban, forbidding DPRK organizations to contact Southern ones.

Sport: What chance joint teams now, much less co-hosting?

In one field, sports, some cooperation did continue, although here too future prospects now look uncertain. Last year's inter-Korean thaw began with sports, when at the last minute the North invited itself to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. Various exchanges in different sports followed, and ‘Korea’ fielded a few unified squads at the Asian Games in Indonesia. Grand plans were laid too, including some joint teams at the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, and even a bid to co-host the 2032 Olympics. Those two plans required a trip to Lausanne in February by the sports ministers of both Koreas. They met with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which duly gave its blessing.

Co-hosting must be a nonstarter. Even if a bid does go forward, it will surely gain few votes. If the two Koreas fall out after barely a year of dialogue, what chance of them staying friends for over a decade? By 2032 South Korea will have had two further presidents after Moon Jae-in,

and will just have elected a third. As for Tokyo 2020, it remains to be seen whether inter-Korean relations will recover in time to prepare joint teams – or if Kim Jong Un, who is keen on sport, makes an exception. A leaked [report](#) claiming that the North has set a target for its athletes to win 180 medals (including 50 golds) in international meets this year, including qualifying events for the 2020 Olympics, suggests that the DPRK does indeed plan on coming to Tokyo – but in its own right, rather than sharing the honors with the ROK. We shall see.

Meanwhile inter-Korean sports exchanges, vigorous last year, have largely ceased – with one exception. In April the two rival global bodies in taekwondo – the International Taekwondo Federation ([ITF](#)) and World Taekwondo ([WT](#), no longer WTF) – [staged](#) joint demonstration [events](#) in Lausanne and Geneva to mark the 25th anniversary of taekwondo's acceptance as an Olympic sport. Though the ITF and WT are broadly run by the DPRK and ROK respectively, in this instance control may not be absolute. Headquartered in Vienna, the ITF was founded by an ROK general who ended up in Pyongyang via exile in Canada – whereupon the ROK created the rival WTF. It will be interesting to see if the two bodies continue to cooperate. Or perhaps this Olympic anniversary gig was a one-off high-profile event that for reasons of face could hardly be cancelled, despite the new freeze between the two Koreas.

DMZ: Seoul goes solo

One striking aspect of last year's thaw was the signing in September of a radical new inter-Korean Comprehensive [Military Agreement](#). As described in our last issue, the CMA's provisions included creating no-fly zones along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ, the *de facto* inter-Korean border); shared administration by unarmed troops from both sides of the Joint Security Area (JSA) at Panmunjom; some demining, and the closure of a few of each side's guard posts in the JSA and elsewhere; and joint searches for MIA remains in a sector of the central DMZ known as Arrowhead Ridge, which had seen heavy fighting during the Korean War. Other aspects of the CMA, including the pledge to create a joint military committee that would meet regularly, were never implemented.

Here too 2019 has seen a Northern retreat. The no-fly zone and JSA arrangements remain in

force. The latter make a real difference to the atmosphere at Panmunjom, as visitors [reported](#) when tours from the South resumed on May 1, after a six-month hiatus while the changes were implemented. (Tourism from the Northern side had never stopped; it is unclear why the two Koreas applied different policies in this regard.) Even the UN Command (UNC), which administers the Southern side of the JSA, [opined](#) in uncharacteristically hippie tones that at Panmunjom “what once was a vibe of tension is now a vibe of peace.”

The wider impact should not be exaggerated. Outside the DMZ, the Korean People's Army (KPA)'s heavy deployments along the border are unchanged. Perhaps in a sense Panmunjom was yesterday's war, frozen in time. In 2019, even if inter-Korean relations worsen as they have, the threat now would be missiles or cyber-attacks – not KPA tanks surging south, as in 1950. Panmunjom is still the frontier, but no longer so much where the action is or would be.

Elsewhere, South Korea is carrying on alone. Last autumn's striking scenes of soldiers from both sides shaking hands and working together in the DMZ have not been repeated. Instead, and again predating Hanoi, in 2019 the DPRK has simply not replied to repeated ROK efforts to concretely organize the previously agreed joint demining and MIA searches. So Seoul perforce went solo. On April 1, it began [digging](#) at Arrowhead Ridge on its own, unhelped but also unhindered by the North. (Operations are of course limited to the southern side of the Military Demarcation Line.)

Video reunions: much ado about nothing

Similar uncooperativeness played out across the board, though in some cases South Korean reporting hardly stressed that. Readers of *Yonhap* could be forgiven for thinking that the two Koreas are in process of organizing video-link reunions of separated families, as they agreed last year. Several reports highlighted successive stages of this – obtaining a sanctions waiver from the UN Security Council (UNSC) to send video equipment to North Korea, acquiring the equipment, installing it across the South, and most recently (early May) testing it.

Yet all this activity is by the South alone. The ROK Red Cross is still waiting to hear from its DPRK counterpart when or whether they will deign to take delivery of these gifts, strenuously

acquired and generously paid for by the South; let alone whether they will actually use them to allow a few elderly citizens to at least see and speak with, though not embrace, their long-lost Southern kin – before this rapidly dwindling cohort dies out completely, as it soon will.

In that regard, it was already puzzling that 2018's burst of North-South activity included only one round of face-to-face family reunions, last August. Given the ticking clock of mortality, a meaningful resumption of inter-Korean engagement would mean urgently setting a schedule for regular and frequent meetings, as indeed Moon and Kim pledged in Pyongyang a month later. In this field at least, sanctions are no obstacle. That this never happened, even before 2019's freeze, should already have warned that North Korea was insincere, or had different priorities. One also wonders how hard the South pushed on this; it barely did so in public.

The great Tamiflu mystery – solved?

In other areas, even establishing the facts is problematic. In December, South Korea agreed to send a batch of the antiviral drug Tamiflu, worth \$3.2 million and enough for 200,000 people, to help the North through the worst of the winter influenza season. In January, this was said to be shipping imminently. Then it was delayed for reasons unclear, and ultimately it was never sent at all. Why not?

In a [round-up](#) of the inter-Korean situation on April 26 (whose title mixed metaphors, “Sea change in inter-Korea relations, bumpy road still ahead”), *Yonhap* blamed “Washington's [apparent] concerns that [this] could undermine the sanctions on Pyongyang.” Yet on Feb. 7, reacting to earlier rumors in that vein, UNC [said](#) publicly on Twitter that it had approved the shipment. The US Embassy in Seoul promptly retweeted this. So what really happened?

The Tamiflu and other cases prompted some dogged and timely investigative journalism by *NKNews*. In a long [article](#) (not paywalled, unusually for this site) published on Feb. 22, Chad O'Carroll and Dagyum Ji explained the legal complexities of any and all transfers from South to North Korea. As the DMZ is not a normal international border, UNC permission is needed – with UNSC, US and other sanctions now a further complication. But the authors also

found much stonewalling, obfuscation and buck-passing (that is my paraphrase, they were more polite) between different agencies of the US and ROK governments; both on the generalities – what counts as a ‘transfer,’ and who decides? – and as regards specific cases.

On Tamiflu, “multiple sources” told them the reason it “has still not been delivered is that North Korean authorities simply haven’t taken action to receive it.” That tallies with other instances of DPRK noncooperation cited above – and again, this happened before Hanoi. But the fault is not only or always Pyongyang’s. The article also probes the bizarre case of South Korean journalists covering February’s inter-Korean civilian confab at Mount Kumgang cited above, who were forbidden to bring laptops and cameras – not by the North, but by their own side for fear of breaching sanctions. That does seem like overkill, or obstruction by someone.

Kim Disses Moon’s ‘Meddling’

By early April Pyongyang’s new coolness was clear, both from its actions (or inactions) and a rising tide of critical comment in DPRK media. Then on April 12, Kim Jong Un weighed in. Unusually, indeed for the first time since his grandfather Kim Il Sung in 1990, the leader used the annual spring session of the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) to deliver a major policy [speech](#); the SPA ran to a second day for this. Kim was hardline on all fronts, not least toward South Korea which he criticized on three main counts. First, it was still holding joint war games with the US; Kim was unimpressed that these had been scaled down and renamed. Second, he urged the South to honor last year’s accords – hypocritically, given the North’s failure to do so in key aspects – and to maintain an independent national stance (translation: support the DPRK line in all things). Yet Kim surely understands the constraints of the US alliance. He should also appreciate that he could not possibly have – and may well never have again – a more sympathetic interlocutor in Seoul than Moon Jae-in.

Not a bit of it. For third, as already quoted, Kim rudely dissed Moon’s activity as a mediator – even though without this he would never have gotten his two summits with Donald Trump. It hardly seems tactful to make it quite so clear that he was just using Moon, as the proverbial sprat to catch a mackerel. To rub it in, later the same month Kim marked the first anniversary

of the Panmunjom summit by heading to Vladivostok for his first meeting with Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, sending a clear signal, to extend the piscine metaphor, that he now had other fish to fry. In a sad, nay humiliating sign of how progress has been reversed, on April 27, South Korea staged an anniversary [concert](#) at Panmunjom, including [artists](#) from the US, China, and Japan – but none from North Korea. One hand clapping, indeed. With a certain inevitability, the program included John Lennon’s ‘Imagine.’ But as I have written [elsewhere](#), in truth Roy Orbison would have been more appropriate. [It’s Over](#).

Missiles? what missiles?

Against this background, Kim Jong Un’s resumption of missile testing in May heightened the Moon administration’s discomfort, while also exposing its incongruities. Just as this was an unfortunate time for Moon to claim that the guns had fallen silent on the peninsula, the ROK government’s use of the term ‘projectiles’ in an attempt to deny that the North had launched ballistic missiles (among other things) did not impress local [media](#), and was [grist](#) to the mill of the conservative opposition Liberty Korea Party (LKP). After the first such incident but before the second, security expert Jeffrey Lewis [tweeted](#) acerbically that “If I write an article about the trouble that the ROK government has telling the truth about North Korea’s May 4 missile launch, I may have to title it “PROJECTILE DYSFUNCTION.” While of course it is entirely proper to wait for technical [analysis](#) to clarify exactly what Pyongyang has fired on such occasions, the fact that as of May 12, after the second launch, the Moon administration (but no one else) was still in BM [denial](#) mode is clearly a political choice, and not a wise one.



Figure 2 North Korea tests short-range missiles on May 9. Photo: The Washington Post

Conclusion and Prospects

As of mid-May 2019 it is hard to predict where inter-Korean relations will go, and equally hard to be optimistic. Unexpectedly, and in my view also [unwisely](#), Kim Jong Un has brutally exposed the flimsiness of what the two Koreas accomplished in 2018. Not that nothing was done, far from it. But as we now see, it could all – or almost all – be swiftly undone again, by the North simply withdrawing cooperation. In that sense, both of Moon’s key avowed aims – to put Seoul in the driver’s seat and create a peace process that is [irreversible](#) – remain utterly unfulfilled. Frustratingly, South Korea remains a largely impotent bystander on its own peninsula, vulnerable to the whims of Washington and Pyongyang alike. With Kim Jong Un reverting to hardball to show his post-Hanoi annoyance, plus the usual worrying uncertainty as to how Trump will react, Moon’s peacemaking is needed more than ever – yet may not be welcomed by either side.

Conceivably, if he sees advantage in it, Kim might at some point try to make nice with South Korea again. But it may not work – the damage has been done. The [genius](#) of his coming-out diplomacy last year was to do just enough to inspire a plausible belief that this latest young Kim might be different and sincere. That was true everywhere, but South Korea is a special case; it is not just some foreign country. 74 years after the peninsula was divided, attitudes to the North are varied and complex, but the pain of partition runs deep. So it was foolish as well as cruel for Kim Jong Un to raise hopes in 2018, only to dash them cynically in 2019.

If Kim does come knocking on Seoul’s door again, he will find wariness at best. Even media strongly supportive of engagement, like the left-wing daily *Hankyoreh*, did not conceal their [exasperation](#) with Pyongyang’s reversion to missile launches. Not least, as Kim must know, his new *froideur* seriously undermines his Southern counterpart. Moon Jae-in has just three more years in office, with no second term. For now, progressive parties have a majority in the National Assembly (if they cooperate), but parliamentary elections next April may see the conservative LKP gain seats. Moon is still more popular than any previous ROK president at this stage, but his support is ebbing. While voters mainly judge him on domestic issues, for failing to create jobs or boost economic growth, Nordpolitik is not helping.

In a useful Twitter [thread](#), Christopher Green of the International Crisis Group (ICG) looked at recent ROK public opinion survey data. While RealMeter [found](#) a narrow majority still in favor of Moon’s North Korea policy (52.2% for, 44.7% against), a different poll by Gallup Korea found that support for Moon’s approach has fallen from 83% in May 2018 – just after the Panmunjom summit – to 45% today. That is still substantial, yet the trend is ominous. If Kim launches more missiles, backing for engagement will surely erode further.

Moon’s position is unenviable. One challenge, as I have argued [elsewhere](#), begins at home. South Korea needs to build a bipartisan consensus on how to handle the North long-term, so that policy does not zigzag every five years with the advent of a new president. That is a very tall order, given the ROK’s ideological divisions and the DPRK’s rebarbateness. As to the latter, Seoul should insist on reciprocity and also call out Pyongyang’s bad behavior. Why did Moon not riposte sharply to Kim’s jibes about “meddling”? He would gain more respect that way than from a Panglossian pretense that all is well when plainly it isn’t. One sympathizes with his predicament, but hopefully this will force a rethink on what it would take to make real, irreversible progress in inter-Korean relations.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA–SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2019

Jan. 1, 2019: North Korea’s supreme leader Kim Jong Un delivers his annual New Year [address](#). Regarding North–South relations, he praises 2018’s achievements but warns that “joint military exercises with foreign forces ...should no longer be permitted.”

Jan. 4, 2019: Vice Unification Minister Chun Hae-sung, the ROK joint head of the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong, [meets](#) very briefly (just 20 minutes) with Kim Kwang Song, the DPRK’s vice-chief at the office, to discuss “pending issues.”

Jan. 5, 2019: Thae Yong Ho, a senior North Korean diplomat who defected in 2016, in an open letter [urges](#) the former DPRK *chargé d’affaires* in Rome, Jo Song Gil, who is reportedly seeking asylum in the US, to choose South Korea instead. Thae calls this “an obligation, not a choice” which will accelerate reunification.

Jan. 9, 2019: South Korea’s Ministry of Unification (MOU) [says](#) it will “consider various elements” before allowing companies who invested in the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) to visit the site and check the state of facilities there. It has refused six previous applications from them for such visits since then-President Park Geun-hye closed the KIC in early 2016.

Jan. 10, 2019: Saying more preparation is needed, MOU [postpones](#) delivering 200,000 doses of Tamiflu antiviral drugs and 50,000 early detection kits to the North, planned for Jan. 11. Seoul trade media earlier reported [dismay](#) among ROK pharmaceutical firms that the costly Roche original is being provided, rather than cheaper ROK-made generics; and also suspicion that Pyongyang may sell these on rather than use them itself.

Jan. 10, 2019: In his New Year press conference, ROK President Moon Jae-in [calls](#) on Pyongyang to take bolder steps toward denuclearization – and for the US to reward these.

Jan. 14, 2019: The DPRK website [Uriminzokkiri](#), aimed at external audiences, [says](#): “Active efforts should be made to expand and advance North–South cooperation and exchanges in all aspects.” It commends results achieved so far despite “brutal obstruction” from the outside. *Meari*, another North Korean site, even claims that “Had inter-Korean economic cooperation been pushed actively, the South’s economy would not be in a devastating state as it is today.”

Jan. 15, 2019: In its latest biennial [White Paper](#), the ROK Ministry of National Defense ([MND](#)) [drops](#) its characterization of the DPRK government and military as an “enemy.” It also deletes other terms now deemed provocative, including Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPPR) – a plan to take out the North’s leadership in case of war – and the Kill Chain strike platform.

Jan. 16, 2019: South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha [says](#) that the future of two suspended inter-Korean joint ventures, the Kaesong complex and tourism to Mt. Kumgang, depends on how diplomacy goes between North Korea and the US:

Jan. 28, 2019: North Korea’s leading daily *Rodong Sinmun*, organ of the ruling Workers’ Party (WPK), [calls on](#) South Korea to stop “war exercises,” which it calls “a dangerous military action that runs counter to the current trend ... toward our people’s reconciliation, peace and stability.” Meanwhile the North’s million-strong Korean People’s Army (KPA) [continues](#) its own winter training exercises as usual.

Jan. 31, 2019: In the first such sectoral talks of 2019 – and the last, as of mid-May – the two Koreas meet in Kaesong to [discuss](#) connecting cross-border roads and modernizing those in the North, following surveys last year. They exchange documents, discuss a DPRK delegation visiting the ROK, and agree to plan future meetings and exchanges. None of that happens.

Feb. 4, 2019: Official of the Blue House (Cheong Wa Dae, the ROK presidential office and residence), as usual anonymous, [tells Yonhap](#): “An inter-Korean summit will naturally be the next step following the second North Korea-U.S. summit.” *Yonhap*’s article is headlined: “S. Korea to push for fourth Moon-Kim summit to set stage for denuclearization.” Such optimism is widespread in Seoul at this juncture.

Feb. 5, 2019: MOU [data](#) highlight the urgency of family reunions, currently stalled. Out of 133,208 South Koreans who have applied since 1988, the majority (77,221) are now dead. Of the 55,987 still alive, most (62%) are now aged 80 or over.

Feb. 8-9, 2019: A 22-strong delegation from Hyundai Asan, which developed and ran tours to North Korea’s Mount Kumgang east coast resort from 1998 to 2008 (when Seoul suspended the program after a Southern tourist was shot dead), [visits](#) Kumgang-san for a ceremony to mark the firm’s 20th anniversary. MOU hastens to point out that this does not mean tourism is about to resume, despite rumors.

Feb. 11, 2019: ROK Olympic Committee [chooses](#) Seoul over Busan as the venue city for its bid to co-host the 2032 Summer Olympics with the DPRK. North Korea is not known to have conducted any equivalent exercise, but only Pyongyang has the necessary facilities.

Feb. 12-13, 2019: In the first (and last?) North-South civilian event of 2019, some 250 South Koreans from a range of NGOs – including religious groups, labor unions, and organizations of women, youth and farmers – [join](#) Northern counterparts at the Mount Kumgang resort on the DPRK’s east coast for a delayed New Year get-together.

Feb. 14, 2019: MOU [says](#) Pyongyang has not responded to its proposal to jointly mark the centenary of the March 1, 1919 protests against the Japanese occupation of Korea, as agreed at last September’s Pyongyang summit. On Feb. 21, the North finally [replies](#) in the negative, saying circumstances do not allow this – but offering no further explanation.

Feb. 15, 2019: The sports ministers of North and South Korea [meet](#) Thoma Bach, president of the International Olympic Committee, at IOC headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland. Bach says they plan to march together at the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics and to enter joint teams in four sports. He adds: “We warmly welcome the historic initiative of the two Koreas to put forward a joint Korean candidature for the Olympic Games 2032.”

Feb. 18, 2019: Citing unnamed “officials” and a raft of concrete cases, *Yonhap* [reports](#) that ROK local governments are gearing up for expanded cooperation with the DPRK, expecting fresh momentum for peace from the upcoming Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi. Sports, culture, education and economy are seen as promising areas for such activity.

Feb. 22, 2019: *New York Times* headline [reports](#) that “South Korea Awaits 2nd Kim-Trump Summit With Both Hope and Fear.”

March 5, 2019: Unification Minister Cho Myoung-gyon (soon to be sacked) [says](#) Seoul will discuss with Washington ways to prepare for future resumption of the Kaesong and Kumgang joint North-South projects, including sanctions waivers. (But see March 7, below.)

March 6, 2019: Blue House [announces](#) that Choi Jong-kun, a professor of international relations, has been appointed as the new presidential secretary for peace at the National Security Office (NSO). Choi was previously secretary for arms control within the NSO.

March 7, 2019: Asked on background whether Washington is considering allowing sanctions exemptions so that key inter-Korean economic projects can resume, a senior State Department official ([presumably](#) Special Representative Stephen Biegun) bluntly [replies](#): “No.”

March 7, 2019: DPRK’s official *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* [attacks](#) the new *Dong Maeng* exercise (replacing the former *Foal Eagle*), which runs March 4-12, as a “violent violation” of last year’s agreements between Pyongyang, Washington and Seoul.

March 8, 2019: As part of a wider Cabinet reshuffle affecting seven portfolios, President Moon [nominates](#) Kim Yeon-chul, head of the Korean Institute of National Unification ([KINU](#) – a think-tank under MOU) as minister of unification, to replace Cho Myoung-gyon.

March 11, 2019: South Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism ([MCST](#)) [says](#) it will continue to pursue cooperation and exchanges with North Korea. Plans include joint teams in four sports at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics; a joint bid to co-host the 2032 summer Olympics; and inviting the North to various sports meets in the South. MCST will also “push for joint projects to compile a unified Korean-language dictionary, unearth historic relics at the Manwoldae site in the North's border town of Kaesong, and conduct a joint survey of ancient tomb murals in Pyongyang.”

March 15, 2019: *Washington Post* headline [reads](#): “After Hanoi breakdown, Moon's credibility as U.S.-Korean intermediary is on the line”.

March 22, 2019: Entire DPRK staff of the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong [leaves](#), abruptly and mysteriously, [citing](#) “instructions from higher authority.” Most return on March 25 after the weekend, simply [saying](#) “we came to do our shift as usual.” By March 29 the Northern complement is back to [normal](#).

March 28, 2019: The IOC [announces](#) that it has approved the two Koreas' proposal to form some unified teams and march together at the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics.

March 29, 2019: MOU releases [findings](#) from last year's joint inspections of DPRK roads and railways. Both the west and east coast main rail lines, totaling 800 miles in length, “are in serious condition,” with erosion and damage to rails. Tunnels and bridges are a particular concern: some bridges 70-100 years old (i.e., built by Japan) have never been renovated. Highways, though newer, are no better. On the 100 mile-long [main road](#) from the border (Kaesong) north to Pyongyang, completed in 1992, there was high risk of rock slides in 33 places and 90 bridges were cracked, as were tunnels. (See also April 9 below.)

April 1, 2019: The ROK military [begins](#) de-mining and search operations for MIA remains at Arrowhead Ridge, a Korean War battle site in the central DMZ. This was meant to be a joint operation, but this year the North has not responded to Southern attempts to set a schedule.

April 3, 2019: DPRK website *Meari* [accuses](#) the ROK of excessive caution toward the North: “Talks of prudence by the South Korean authorities are an evasion of responsibility over implementing North-South declarations promised in front of the whole nation, and an overt surrender to the pressure from the US and the conservatives.”

April 5, 2019: MOU [says](#) South Korea has shared information on a serious forest fire in its northeastern border region with North Korea via the Kaesong liaison office.

April 8, 2019: Kim Yeon-chul is [sworn in](#) as South Korea's new minister of unification, despite the National Assembly's failure to confirm him – which is not mandatory. The conservative opposition Liberty Korea Party (LKP) calls him unacceptably “pro-North.”

April 9, 2019: *Uriminzokkiri* [attacks](#) MOU for publishing the results of last year's joint inspections of Northern railways, which found them in poor condition and in need of repair (see March 29, above). Calling this “disrespectful”, the DPRK website also criticizes the ministry more generally for poor performance, and the ROK government for kow-towing to Washington: “If South Korea is truly interested in North-South cooperation, it should tell the US what it should be told, instead of disclosing some clumsy report.”

April 10, 2019: Kim Jong Un chairs the fourth plenary [session](#) of the seventh term Workers' Party of Korea Central Committee (WPK CC). This key meeting of North Korea's ruling party immediately precedes the annual spring session of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), the DPRK's rubber-stamp parliament; see April 11-12.

April 11, 2019: First session of the 14th SPA, “elected” in March, is [held](#) in Pyongyang. As usual there is a budget speech with no hard numbers. Personnel changes include a titular head of state, Choe Ryong Hae, replacing Kim Yong Nam who at 90 has retired; and a new premier, Kim Jae Ryong, replacing Pak Pong Ju who has been moved to another post.

April 12, 2019: Running to a rare second day, the SPA hears a long and tough policy [speech](#) by Kim Jong Un. *Inter alia* Kim upbraids South Korea for continuing war games with the US and not implementing last year’s accords, while “pos[ing] as a meddlesome ‘mediator.’”

April 11-12, 2019: Two rival global organizations in Taekwondo – the DPRK-backed International Taekwondo Federation ([ITF](#)), and the more widely recognized ROK-backed World Taekwondo ([WT](#)) – [stage](#) joint demonstration [events](#) in Lausanne and Geneva, to mark the 25th anniversary of Taekwondo’s acceptance as an Olympic sport.

April 15, 2019: Moon Jae-in [says](#): “I hope the two Koreas will have another summit without being restrained by the venue and format,” given the need for “concrete and substantive discussions” that will yield “fruits.” Critics insist it is Kim Jong Un’s turn to come to Seoul.

April 15, 2019: Radio Free Asia (RFA) [reports](#) that North Korea is trying to buy South Korean high-yielding rice seeds via traders in China. The latter are reluctant, as PRC Customs inspections for farm products are stringent. They wonder why Pyongyang doesn’t simply ask Seoul, which in the ‘Sunshine’ era allowed civic groups to supply such seeds.

April 18, 2019: Under the headline “North severs contacts in South,” the center-right Seoul daily *JoongAng Ilbo* [cites](#) several unnamed Southern NGOs who say that their Northern counterparts are cold-shouldering them: no longer replying to fax and phone messages. Some claim that Kim Jong Un has personally forbidden such contacts.

April 19, 2019: MOU [confirms](#) that supposedly weekly meetings between the inter-Korean liaison office’s joint directors have not been held for two months: since Feb. 22, when the North sent a stand-in. The two co-heads of the office – ROK Vice Unification Minister Chun Hae-sung, and the DPRK’s Jon Jong Su – last met on Jan. 25.

April 20, 2019: Japanese daily *Mainichi Shimbun* [reveals](#) leaked details of North Korea’s never-published 2016 Five-Year Plan, acquired somehow by a South Korean researcher. *Inter alia*, so as to reduce economic dependence on China this advocates boosting trade with Russia – but does not mention either South Korea or Japan, both formerly major trade partners.

April 27, 2019: South Korea stages a [concert](#) at Panmunjom on the anniversary of Moon and Kim’s first summit there.

April 30, 2019: MOU [says](#) it will spend two weeks testing newly renovated nationwide facilities for family reunions via videolink.

May 4, 2019: Ending a 17-month moratorium on such testing, North Korea fires a volley of projectiles into the East Sea from Hodo-ri, near Wonsan. Kim Jong Un [presides](#). After some initial [confusion](#) in Seoul, observers [conclude](#) that these involved two types of large-caliber multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) and a new short-range ballistic missile (SRBM).

May 6, 2019: Blue House releases an English [text](#) of “The Greatness of the Ordinary”: a long op-ed by President Moon for the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which [publishes](#) it on May 9.

May 9, 2019: North Korea [launches](#) two apparent SRBMs from Kusong-ri, north of Pyongyang. Again Kim Jong Un is [present](#). The Blue House calls this “very worrisome” and unhelpful for efforts to reduce tensions.

May 9, 2019: Interviewed by KBS hours after Pyongyang’s latest missile launch, President Moon [says](#): “I’d like to warn North Korea that if such behavior ... is repeated, it could make the current dialogue and negotiation phase difficult.”

May 10, 2019: MOU deputy spokesperson Lee Eugene [insists](#): “There is no change in [the Moon administration’s] position that it is necessary to provide humanitarian assistance to the North from a humanitarian and compatriots' perspective.”

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

CHINA - KOREA RELATIONS

POST-HANOI HOPES TRAPPED IN A SINO-KOREAN SMOG

SCOTT SNYDER, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
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China consolidated relations with North Korea through a fourth summit between President Xi Jinping and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un that set the stage for a second US-DPRK summit in Hanoi. This process was further symbolized by the presence of Xi and the senior Chinese leadership at a [concert](#) by a flagship North Korean art troupe in Beijing. The no-deal Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi left Kim empty handed and caught the Chinese leadership by surprise, removing any possibility of a fifth Xi-Kim meeting during Kim's return train ride through China from Vietnam. It left Beijing concerned about the impasse, but hopeful that a mutual compromise might be salvaged. South Korean President Moon Jae-in's reaction to the Hanoi summit failure had much in common with that of Beijing. But despite the visit to Beijing by Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon, smog hangs over China-ROK relations. Post-THAAD fallout and recriminations toward China resulting from worsening air pollution across the peninsula will set the diplomatic agenda for China-ROK relations through the rest of 2019.

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A high-level kick-off for China-North Korea relations in 2019

After delivering a [New Year's speech](#) with little reference to China, Kim Jong Un tried to lay the foundation for additional international diplomatic breakthroughs in 2019 with a surprise birthday visit to Beijing on Jan. 7-9. In meetings with Kim, Xi Jinping [repeated](#) his admonition that “the two sides should maintain high-level exchanges, strengthen strategic communication, deepen friendly exchanges and cooperation, and promote the long-term, healthy and stable development of China-DPRK relations.” Xi also sought to bind Kim to his denuclearization commitments by [stating](#) that “China supports the DPRK’s continued adherence to the direction on the peninsula, supports the continuous improvement of inter-Korean relations, supports the DPRK and the US holding summits and achieving results, and supports relevant parties resolving their respective legitimate concerns through dialogue.” [KCNA reported](#) that Kim pledged North Korea’s support to Xi for “the goal of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the faithful implementation of the joint statement produced in its summit with the US in Singapore, and the pursuit of a peaceful resolution through dialogue.”

Prior to meeting Kim in Beijing, Xi had [urged](#) Trump and Kim to “meet each other halfway” while pledging China’s support for the achievement of peace, denuclearization, and regional stability. Xi [stated](#) to Kim at the summit that “the fundamental issues brought up by the North Koreans are appropriate requests. We fully agree with the need for the North Koreans’ reasonable interests to be appropriately resolved. Paying attention to this and dealing with these issues appropriately is the right choice for the related parties.” Zhang Liangui of China’s Central Party School [stated](#) that “before taking the next step and meeting with Trump again, [Kim] would want to consult with China on what to say and how to say it.”

[Xinhua reported](#) Kim’s positive comments on China’s economic and social development, and [Rodong Sinmun reported](#) that Kim and Xi had “reached an agreement on new plans for expanding and developing high-level mutual visits in various areas.” Kim reinforced his emphasis on economic development through extensive North Korean media coverage of

Kim’s visit to one of China’s oldest pharmaceutical companies while in Beijing.

By the end of January, following North Korea’s former spy chief Kim Yong Chol’s visit to the US to prepare for a second Trump-Kim summit, a 280-person North Korean art troupe led by Korean Workers’ Party Central Committee Vice Chairman Ri Su Yong visited Beijing. Including the Moranbong band, the art troupe performed in Beijing Jan. 26-28 before many senior members of the Chinese Communist Party leadership, including Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan. The Moranbong band had traveled to Beijing with a similar art troupe in December 2015 only to have the concert canceled due to signs that North Korea was preparing for its fourth nuclear test, which subsequently occurred in January 2016. If the December 2015 concert cancellation marked a humiliating public setback for efforts to recover and stabilize the China-North Korea relationship, the [attendance](#) of Xi and many of China’s top leaders at the Jan. 27 concert provided a clear symbolic affirmation of the return to normalcy and close ties between the two leaders.

China-North Korea economic stabilization amid pressure

Chinese and North Korean coverage of the Xi-Kim summit in January did not lay out concrete economic deliverables. But the overall trend of China’s relaxation of economic pressure and reorientation of the China-North Korea economic relationship in recent months has demonstrated Chinese support for North Korean stability. At the same time, bilateral trade growth continues to face constraints. For example, the city of [Hunchun reportedly traded](#) 100,000 tons less coal and other freight with North Korea compared with the same period in 2018.

Several indications of the change in China’s economic approach to North Korea have emerged amid ongoing sanctions. First, at the United Nations and in public remarks, China has actively [advocated](#) for relaxing sanctions in tandem with North Korean cooperation on denuclearization rather than adhering to the “maximum pressure” approach the US has favored. This approach has even involved formal expressions of support for gradual, selective lifting of UN sanctions against North Korea to accompany progress on denuclearization.

Second, China has [failed](#) to actively enforce UN sanctions measures, including [an apparent failure to adequately enforce prohibitions](#) on ship-to-ship transfers of petroleum in China's Exclusive Economic Zone. The US has continued to exhort China to maintain economic pressure and enforce sanctions on North Korea, including through the [subpoena of three Chinese banks](#) in a US criminal investigation of a Hong Kong company for abetting North Korea's evasion of sanctions.

Third, China [opened a new bridge](#) between Jian in China and Manpo in North Korea in April that is well-equipped to handle exchanges of individuals and goods. This is the fourth modernized border checkpoint between the two countries. The addition of a state-of-the-art Customs facility expands the capacity of the two countries to pursue bilateral economic exchanges in the event of relaxation of international sanctions on North Korea.

China and South Korea's post-Hanoi hopes

Chinese and South Korean leaders began the New Year with high hopes for progress on Korean Peninsula denuclearization and peace. South Korea's Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha [called](#) 2019 "the starting year for a full-fledged Korean Peninsula peace process," while Chinese counterpart Wang Yi [projected](#) "a substantive breakthrough on the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue" this year. During Chinese Embassy celebrations of the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening in January, Ambassador Qiu Guohong supported a "sustainable and irreversible" political solution on the peninsula, noting the increasingly regional and global significance of China-ROK relations. Seoul welcomed the fourth Xi-Kim summit in Beijing on Jan. 7-9, which propelled the continuation of bilateral coordination among China, the two Koreas, and the United States in the run-up to Trump-Kim talks in Hanoi. China's nuclear envoy Kong Xuanyou met South Korean counterpart Lee Do-hoon and Vice Foreign Minister Cho Hyun in Seoul on Jan. 17-18, a day ahead of North Korea's Vice Chairman Kim Yong Chol's [talks](#) with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun in Washington.

The breakdown of the Trump-Kim talks a month later underscored the lack of bilateral trust that Moon has identified as a primary

source of the US-DPRK deadlock over who should do what next. It also challenged Beijing and Seoul's preferences for incremental and reciprocal measures. In anticipation of the summit, Foreign Minister Wang Yi on Feb. 1 expressed hopes for "parallel progress" in denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime. Moon similarly called for not just "practical denuclearization steps" from Pyongyang but also "corresponding measures" – what North Korea's wish list would identify primarily as sanctions relief, but has also included an end to the Korean War, open communication channels with Washington, and adjustments to US-ROK military drills.

Although many knew that it was [doomed from the start](#), the Hanoi summit disappointed South Korean observers who expected more concrete results after the symbolic gestures exchanged in Singapore last year. On the other hand, [optimists](#) in Seoul point to positive signals such as the commitment to continued dialogue, mutual restraint, and exchange of clear proposals. Days after the Trump-Kim meeting, the Chinese Foreign Ministry [claimed](#) that "the political settlement of the Korean Peninsula issue is currently at a critical state" as it welcomed a US-ROK decision to forego two annual joint military exercises in favor of smaller-scale drills.

Post-THAAD recovery in China-ROK relations

Taking up his position in Beijing in April, South Korean Ambassador to China Jang Ha-sung [promised](#) to enhance bilateral ties to fully facilitate China's role in denuclearization and peace. Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon's visit to China on March 27-30 demonstrated the revival of high-level exchanges since the 2016-2017 THAAD dispute. Lee held talks with Premier Li Keqiang for the first time since June 2016, and [sought](#) global support for President Moon's peace initiative with North Korea at the Boao Forum in Hainan. On March 29, he oversaw a joint ceremony marking the restoration of the Korean Liberation Army's general headquarters in Chongqing, where the Korean government in exile eventually settled after being established in Shanghai in 1919. 2019 marks the 100th anniversary of the April 11 establishment of the Korean provisional government and March 1 independence movement against Japanese colonial rule.



Figure 1 South Korean Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon attends the Boao Forum for Asia in Hainan, meets China's Premier Li Keqiang. Photo: Yonhap News

ROK Army Chief of Staff Gen. Kim Yong-woo's visit to Beijing and Shanghai on March 20-23 affirmed the resumption of bilateral military exchanges. Kim met People's Liberation Army (PLA) Ground Force Commander Gen. Han Weiguo and other Chinese defense officials, and visited a memorial hall for Korean independence fighter Yun Bong-gil in Shanghai. Working-level talks on exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in Xiamen were also held in January. Amid ongoing clashes over EEZs, China's incursion into South Korea's air defense identification zone near disputed Ieo Island in February highlighted brewing tensions over overlapping air defense identification zones between China, South Korea, and Japan. The regular appearance of Chinese vessels on the South Korean side of the designated midpoint marking the respective EEZs in recent months has stimulated a quiet South Korean consultation with its US ally on counterstrategies for dealing with a more assertive China in the maritime sphere.

Rather than the economic repercussions demonstrated by the THAAD dispute, Seoul's most important motivation for avoiding conflict with China is the implementation of Moon's inter-Korean projects. The Chinese company managing North Korea's Rajin Port reportedly sought investment from Busan Port Authority last fall amid debate over the future of sanctions. In April, Representative Lee In-young of South Korea's ruling Democratic Party led the National Assembly's Special Committee on Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation on a five-day tour of Chinese and Russian border areas with North Korea. But the international sanctions on North Korea remain the key sticking point in Seoul's inter-Korean and cross-border development agenda. As Foreign

Minister Kang Kyung-wha suggested at a January press conference in Seoul, prospects for the resumption of major projects like the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mount Kumgang tour program will be decided "at the North Korea-U.S. bargaining table."

South Korea fights fine dust "made in China"

Environmental and health challenges have emerged as a major concern in the renewed diplomatic interactions between China and South Korea. Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon raised the fine dust problem when he met Premier Li Keqiang in Hainan on March 27, and called for regional cooperation on such issues at the Boao Forum. Amid mounting South Korean public concerns and debate over responsibility, Beijing and Seoul took a series of mitigation and prevention steps this year. In January, the China-ROK Joint Committee on Environmental Cooperation agreed to set up a joint early warning system on fine dust and recommended a trilateral action plan with Japan. After talks with Chinese counterpart Li Ganjie in Beijing on Feb. 26, South Korean Environment Minister Cho Myung-rae pledged to promote information and technology exchange through the newly established China-ROK Environmental Cooperation Center in Beijing. South Korea's Ministry of Education and National Research Foundation on April 9 also announced plans for joint research with Chinese counterparts on the health impact of fine dust pollution. A meeting between ROK Industry Minister Sung Yon-mo and China's National Energy Administration Chief Zhang Jianhua in Beijing on March 28 produced additional measures for reducing emissions, including exchanges between coal-based power plants.



Figure 2 Beijing denies role in fine dust over Korean Peninsula. Photo: Yonhap News

Such agreements support Moon's comprehensive directives on cooperating with China to fight fine dust air pollution, led by a new agency headed by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. The first meeting of the Special Committee on Tackling Fine Dust on Feb. 15 produced a decision to propose a trilateral agreement on fine dust reduction with Beijing and Tokyo. South Korea's National Information Resources Service of the Ministry of the Interior and Safety on Jan. 28 confirmed research findings on China's responsibility for fine dust over Korea, based on data from the Ministry of Environment and the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon in an MBC radio interview earlier that month similarly challenged Beijing's denial of China's role in fine dust over the Korean Peninsula. According to the Seoul Research Institute of Public Health and Environment, pollutants from China are responsible for 50 to 70% of fine dust pollution over the Seoul region. The Ministry of Environment's National Institute of Environmental Research claimed that 75% of the country's fine dust pollution in January was from external sources, mostly China.

Protectionist pressures challenge China-South Korea trade

South Korean exports to China grew by 14.2% to \$162.2 billion in 2017-2018, contributing to a 5.5% increase in exports, according to the ROK Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy. Overseas direct investment in China also surged by 48.9% to \$4.77 billion in 2018, while overseas investment grew 11.6% to \$49.78 billion. China's increased infrastructure spending under Xi's Belt and Road Initiative appears to be especially benefiting South Korean companies in the Chinese excavator market. The number of China sales of South Korea's biggest construction equipment maker Doosan Infracore jumped 44% in 2017-2018, while that of Hyundai Construction Equipment Co. tripled.

Although South Korea's annual exports exceeded \$600 billion in 2018 to make it the world's sixth biggest exporter, Industry Minister Sung Yun-mo pointed to an unfavorable business environment of US-China trade tensions and slowing growth in major economies. The Korea Institute for Industrial Economics and Trade forecast a 3.7% increase in South Korea's exports in 2019, suggesting slowing export growth. South Korea's Industry

Ministry in January revealed plans to work with local exporters to address Chinese and US trade barriers as it faced anti-dumping investigations by China in more than a dozen product categories that month.

At the regional level, China and South Korea held the 15th round of trilateral trade talks with Japan in Tokyo on April 9-12. Focused on advancing a free trade deal that has made limited progress since talks launched in 2012, the meeting reinforced China's broader efforts to pursue regional trade deals amid tension with the US. Earlier that month, the finance and central bank deputies of the ASEAN Plus Three met in Chiang Mai ahead of high-level regional financial talks in Fiji in May. The post-THAAD recovery has also lifted clouds over China-ROK exchanges at the local level. Guangdong Gov. Ma Xingrui led a business delegation to Seoul in April for talks with Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon on economic cooperation. Ma mistakenly [presented](#) Park a surprise gift – a portrait of Gyeonggi Province Gov. Lee Jae-myung.



Figure 3 Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon and Guangdong Gov. Ma Xingrui hold economic cooperation talks in Seoul. Photo: Yonhap News

Chinese views on the Post-Hanoi impasse and next steps with North Korea

The US-DPRK Hanoi summit failure was as much a surprise to China as any of the parties, particularly because China urged both sides to meet each other halfway and make a deal back in January. The summit failure immediately produced [media speculation](#) that Kim might seek to meet Xi for a debriefing as part of his 60-hour plus return train ride to Pyongyang. But the lack of good news made the prospect of

such a meeting awkward for both sides, so Kim proceeded directly back to Pyongyang to a warm welcome and declarations of success. It took several days for the North Korean media to adjust its tone, admit the failure of Hanoi, and to lay the blame for that failure on the United States.

China's stocktaking post-Hanoi involved hopeful encouragement for both sides to continue dialogue, alongside frustration that more was not accomplished. China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson [stated](#) immediately following the Trump-Kim summit failure that "we hope North Korea will continue dialogue, move in the same direction, truly accommodate each other's legitimate concern on the basis of mutual respect, and promote the political settlement process of the Korean Peninsula issue." The spokesperson advocated that "the two sides should consider the issues of the lifting of sanctions and non-nuclearization and resolve them at the same time" and called for a flexible UN Security Council response on relaxing sanctions for North Korea.

The United States has continued to seek China's assistance in applying pressure on North Korea to achieve denuclearization, but the China-US tariff war negotiations limited bureaucratic efforts for both sides to treat North Korea as a rare issue of limited common interest amid rising competition in the overall relationship.

Chinese public commentary on the aftermath of the Hanoi summit appears to have been limited due to the delicacy of the diplomatic situation. But China's interest in playing an indispensable role in pursuing a stable pathway toward denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula remains constant. The [Global Times](#) stated that "No power should disrupt the reconciliation process on the peninsula. China will never accept any retrogression. This is our bottom line to which we will firmly stick. We hope South Korea will continue to cooperate with us. The United States and North Korea shouldn't frustrate the whole region and the international community." There is speculation that Xi will visit Pyongyang and Seoul in conjunction with the G20 Summit to be held in Osaka in June.

Conclusion: regional and domestic factors in China-Korea relations

The failed second round of Trump-Kim talks in February raised three implications for regional diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula. First, it suggested that there might be growing pressure on Washington for more flexibility on Pyongyang, especially given the Moon administration's current inter-Korean initiatives in coordination with China. South Korean officials have denied any divergence between Washington and Seoul on the preferred scope and implementation of denuclearization. As Foreign Minister Kang indicated in January, the US-ROK alliance remains the foundation for the diplomatic drive on the Korean Peninsula. But she also noted the need to diversify regional partners, echoing Moon's aspirations in his March 1 address to play an autonomous role in shaping South Korea's strategic environment.

Second, the failure in Hanoi raised concerns over the influence of domestic politics. South Koreans hope to avoid the entanglement of nuclear talks in US domestic politics ahead of the 2020 US presidential elections, as suggested by Washington's revived hardline stance in Hanoi. U.S. domestic priorities already loomed over the Trump-Moon summit in April. Domestic pressures also play a role in South Korea, where Moon is championing inter-Korean initiatives as a new engine for revitalizing the South Korean economy and overcoming falling public support. Moreover, Moon's outreach to North Korea is increasingly challenged by deepening domestic polarization and backlash against his domestic political reform efforts in the run-up to the April 2020 National Assembly elections.

Third, the no-deal summit outcome in Hanoi left undetermined the extent to which the Korean Peninsula's future will be shaped by limited China-US cooperation or emerging China-US rivalry. Both the US and North Korea will continue to rely on China's cooperation as one of the factors likely to shape the next steps in US-North Korea negotiations on denuclearization.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2019

Jan. 4, 2019: Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon in an MBC radio interview challenges Beijing's denial of China's role in fine dust over the Korean Peninsula.

Jan. 7-9, 2019: Kim Jong Un, his wife Ri Sol Ju, and other senior DPRK officials visit China. Kim meets Xi Jinping on Jan. 8.

Jan. 8, 2019: ROK Foreign Ministry and presidential office express support for Kim Jong Un's visit to China.

Jan. 14, 2019: Two ROK Navy ships arrive in Shanghai for commemoration ceremony of the establishment of Korea's provisional government during Japanese colonial rule.

Jan. 14, 2019: South Korean liquefied petroleum gas carrier accidentally leaks gas in waters near Dongying port in Shandong province.

Jan. 17-18, 2019: China and South Korea hold working-level EEZ talks in Xiamen.

Jan. 17-18, 2019: China's nuclear envoy Kong Xuanyou visits Seoul to meet South Korean counterpart Lee Do-hoon and Vice Foreign Minister Cho Hyun.

Jan. 19, 2019: North Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Sin Hong Chol and officials of North Korea's Samjiyon Orchestra arrive in Beijing on separate trips.

Jan. 20, 2019: Senior North Korean official Kim Yong Chol arrives in Beijing on his way to Pyongyang after talks with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Washington.

Jan. 23, 2019: China and South Korea hold 23rd session of their Joint Committee on Environmental Cooperation.

Jan. 23, 2019: South Korea's icebreaking vessel helps evacuate 24 isolated Chinese researchers in the Antarctic.

Jan. 24-30, 2019: Ri Su Yong, vice chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea Central Committee, arrives in Beijing leading an art delegation.

Jan. 26-28, 2019: North Korean art troupe performs in Beijing. President Xi Jinping and wife Peng Liyuan watch the Jan. 28 performance and meet North Korean Delegation Chief Ri Su Yong.

Jan. 28, 2019: Study by South Korea's National Information Resources Service confirms that China is largely responsible for fine dust over the Korean Peninsula.

Feb. 22, 2019: Harbin railway station reopens after renovations without restoring markings commemorating Korean independence fighter Ahn Jung-geun.

Feb. 23, 2019: Chinese military plane enters the ROK's air defense identification zone.

Feb. 26, 2019: China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi expresses hopes for progress on Korean Peninsula denuclearization and peace.

Feb. 26, 2019: South Korea's Environment Minister Cho Myung-rae and Chinese counterpart Li Ganjie hold talks in Beijing.

March 4, 2019: Jeju provincial government announces it will nullify the approval of Shanghai-based Greenland Group's medical center to operate South Korea's first for-profit hospital.

March 5, 2019: China's Foreign Ministry welcomes US-ROK decision to scale down joint military drills.

March 6, 2019: South Korean Defense Ministry announces that 10 of the 15 sets of Korean War remains excavated in border areas over the last two years were of Chinese soldiers.

March 12, 2019: South Korea's Animal and Plant Quarantine Agency announces a cooperation agreement on veterinary medicine with China Institute of Veterinary Drug Control.

March 14, 2019: South Korean media report China's strengthening of visa controls of DPRK workers.

March 15, 2019: South Korean media report cancelation of March 2 China-DPRK investor relations meeting in Shenyang.

March 16, 2019: South Korean Coast Guard seizes a Chinese fishing boat suspected of illegal fishing in waters near Baengnyeong Island.

March 20-23, 2019: South Korean Army Chief of Staff Gen. Kim Yong-woo visits Beijing and Shanghai to meet Chinese defense officials.

March 20, 2019: South Korean police data reveal that Chinese nationals accounted for more than 40% of foreign drug offenders arrested in South Korea in 2018.

March 22, 2019: North Korea's Kim Yong Nam, president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, and Premier Pak Pong Ju send a joint message of condolences to Chinese leaders after a deadly explosion at a Chinese chemical factory.

March 26, 2019: South Korean media report arrival of a senior North Korean official in Beijing, received by China's International Liaison Department and DPRK Ambassador to China Ji Jae Ryong.

March 27-30, 2019: South Korean Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon attends the Boao Forum for Asia in Hainan, meets China's Premier Li Keqiang, and visits Chongqing.

March 28, 2019: South Korean Industry Minister Sung Yun-mo meets Chinese officials in Beijing, including National Energy Administration Chief Zhang Jianhua and Zhang Mao of the State Administration for Market Regulation.

March 29, 2019: South Korea's Industry Ministry expresses concern over China's anti-dumping investigation into hot-rolled stainless steel plates.

April 1, 2019: China and South Korea hold a ceremony in Seoul casketing the remains of 10 Chinese soldiers who died in the Korean War.

April 2-3, 2019: ASEAN Plus Three finance and central bank deputies meet in Chiang Mai.

April 5, 2019: Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon and Guangdong Gov. Ma Xingrui hold economic cooperation talks in Seoul.

April 7, 2019: Ambassador Jang Ha-sung arrives in Beijing as new ROK ambassador to China.

April 7-11, 2019: South Korean National Assembly's Special Committee on Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation led by Representative Lee In-young tours Chinese and Russian border areas with North Korea.

April 8, 2019: China and North Korea open a new cross-border bridge along the Yalu River linking Jian and Manpo.

April 9, 2019: South Korea's Ministry of Education and National Research Foundation announce plans for joint research with China on the health impact of fine dust air pollution and other projects.

April 9-12, 2019: The 15th round of China-ROK-Japan trade talks is held in Tokyo.

April 10-13, 2019: South Korean parliamentary delegation attends commemorations of the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Korean provincial government in Shanghai and meets Korean residents and business leaders in Guangzhou.

April 10, 2019: President Xi issues a congratulatory message to Kim Jong Un for his re-election as chairman of the State Affairs Commission.

April 17, 2019: South Korea's Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul meets China's Ambassador to South Korea Qiu Guohong in Seoul.

April 19, 2019: *Korean Central News Agency* releases Kim Jong Un's response to Xi's April 10 congratulatory message.

April 22-25, 2019: South Korean Navy delegation led by Rear Adm. Kwon Heak-min attends an international fleet review in Qingdao.

April 25-27, 2019: South Korea's Finance Minister Hong Nam-ki visits China to attend the Belt and Road Forum and to meet China's Vice Premier Hu Chunhua and AIIB President Jin Liqun.

April 29, 2019: Chinese and South Korean officials hold a memorial ceremony in Shanghai for Korean independence fighter Yun Bong-gil.

Chronology compilation and research assistance provided by Michael Strickland, San Francisco State University

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

JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

WARM BUT WARY

JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

Sino-Japanese interactions were less prominent in the early months of 2019, with the Chinese government focused on its Belt and Road Forum and the Japanese with the imperial abdication. Although President Xi Jinping has committed to attending the G20 Summit in Osaka in late June, no date has been set for a state visit to reciprocate Prime Minister Abe's fall 2018 visit to Beijing. There is speculation that the Chinese are seeking prior commitment to a fifth communiqué, which would be controversial in Japan. The generally cordial atmospherics of lower-level talks belied tensions over territorial disputes, intellectual property rights, and cybersecurity.

This article is extracted from *Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal of Bilateral Relations in the Indo-Pacific*, Vol. 21, No. 1, May 2019. Preferred citation: June Teufel Dreyer, "Japan-China Relations: Warm but Wary" *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp 97-104.

Politics

A columnist for *China Daily* [criticized](#) Japan for unrealistic expectations on the return of the disputed Kuril Islands, citing Japan's alliance with the United States as a major factor. The Japanese Coast Guard [apprehended](#) another Chinese fishing boat illegally harvesting coral in Japan's EEZ, the fourth so far this year, although the large-scale poaching witnessed in 2014 has not occurred so far. In a conversation with Japanese Deputy Foreign Minister Mori Takeo, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [lamented](#) that, although the Chinese people's opinion of Japan had improved, most Japanese people held unfavorable views of China. He suggested youth exchanges and other bilateral programs to make a success of a visit by Xi to Tokyo.



Figure 1 Source: Yomiuri

In what was regarded as a sign that amicable Sino-Japanese relations would continue, Vice-Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou 59, was [appointed](#) ambassador to Japan, succeeding Cheng Yonghua, 64, who held the post for nine years. Kong previously served as minister-counselor in the embassy in Tokyo. His appointment may [indicate](#) an upswing in the prestige of Japan specialists in the Foreign Ministry. There is speculation about the signing of a fifth communiqué should Xi make a state visit to Japan in the fall. However, reaction to the Japanese choice of *reiwa* for the era of the new emperor symbolized underlying concerns. Japanese sources [observed](#) that this was the first

time an era name had been derived from a classical Japanese source, the *Manyōshū*, while a Chinese commentator [observed](#) that the use of Chinese characters underscored the two countries' deep cultural ties. He hoped that *reiwa* would portend an era of peace after a cold, harsh winter. Xi is expected to attend the G20 Summit scheduled for June 28–29 in Osaka.

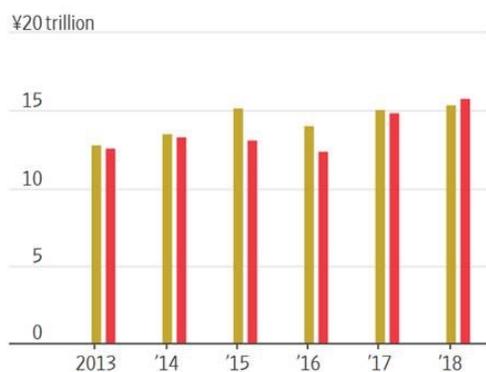
Talks between Chinese and Japanese foreign ministers in Beijing, though cordial, made little substantive progress, with Wang Yi [warning](#) counterpart Kono Taro that the two countries' relationship remained "sensitive and fragile." The PRC did not agree to lift a ban on food from 10 Japanese prefectures that was imposed after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear meltdown, while Japan did not offer to soften regulations that hamper Chinese technology giant Huawei from operating in Japan. The two did not go into detail about their maritime disputes. A former China bureau chief for *Nikkei* [observed](#) that, although it was rare for so many Japanese government, ruling party, and Self-Defense Forces personnel to visit China in so short a period of time, there had been few results.

Economics

Bloomberg [announced](#) that, for the first time since 2012, Japanese companies topped China's in the total volume of mergers and acquisitions, predicting that the spending spree would continue in 2019. According to Chinese sources, Japanese investors' [enthusiasm](#) for China is increasing, as shown by Mitsui Sugar's purchasing 20% of COFCO Liaoning Sugar, while Kawasaki Heavy Industry disclosed plans to transfer the production of hydraulic equipment components heretofore manufactured in Japan to Suzhou.

Japanese companies continued to invest in China, despite Western analysts' prediction that the China-US trade dispute would dampen economic ties between the world's second and third largest economies. In January, Mitsui Sugar [announced](#) plans to buy 20 percent of COFCO Liaoning Sugar, marking the first time Mitsui would produce sugar in the PRC. Japan sold more goods to China than to the US, even excluding sales to Hong Kong. Major Japanese e-tailer Rakuten [announced](#) that it would upgrade its unmanned delivery services by utilizing Chinese counterpart JD.com for delivery of heavier packages over longer distances. And a consortium of China's Harvest

Fund Management and Taiwan's TPK Holdings [bailed](#) out LCD manufacturer Japan Display, in a deal that would provide the two with nearly a 50% stake in Japan Display.



Note: ¥1 trillion=\$9.2 billion

Source: Japan Ministry of Finance

Figure 2 Japan's trade with China, 2013-2018, excluding Hong Kong. Source: WSJ

[Affirming](#) their faith in China as a focus of innovation, major Japanese manufacturers including Toyota Motor and Hitachi are forging ties with startup ventures there. Until recently, such ventures had largely centered on California's Silicon Valley. Separately, in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Hitachi chair Nakanishi [declared](#) that it would be impossible for Japan to exist if it turned China into an enemy. Falling Japanese exports resulting from slower growth in China [indicated](#) how dependent the Japanese economic rebirth is on trade with the PRC.

[Responding](#) to a *Nikkei* report that Japan intended to use its chairship of the G20 to propose new guidelines on development assistance to check China's growing influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, a *Global Times* op-ed stated that China was willing to allow Japan to join the BRI, but that only China would determine its investment standards. Although little was said about either Japan's participation in BRI or its concerns with BRI during this reporting period, a Japanese Coast Guard vessel embarked on a three-month training cruise that included visits to two countries, Sri Lanka and Greece, whose ports have been included in the BRI. A government source [described](#) the visits as "stress[ing] the importance of open ports to these countries and the international community" and

demonstrating the coast guard's commitment to freedom of navigation.

Japan [downgraded](#) its assessment of the economy for the first time in three years, blaming the US-China trade war and declining Chinese economic growth. The Japanese government continued to [protest](#) Chinese test drilling for resource development near the intermediate line between the two countries in the East China Sea. Two human rights advocates [urged](#) that Japan distinguish itself from the PRC with regard to aid and investment in Cambodia. It cannot outspend China, and ignoring Prime Minister Hun Sen's human rights abuses has antagonized Hun Sen's opponents, who will remember who was on their side when he loses power. Still, according to World Bank data, Chinese investment has been [outmatched](#) by Japan's near-silent efforts, and the China-dominated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank's \$6.4 billion in outstanding loans is dwarfed by those of the Japan and US-dominated Asian Development Bank.

Defense

Japan and France [agreed](#) to strengthen security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. Concerned about Chinese and Russian capabilities to attack satellites, the SDF is to be [equipped](#) with a Japanese version of GPS as backup against the currently used US system. Using proprietary Japanese technology, the system can evade jamming and spoofing signals. It is expected to be introduced to Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) destroyers as early as 2021.

Senior foreign affairs and defense officials [met](#) in Beijing, agreeing on the importance of promoting confidence-building efforts in the security field. The Japanese side reportedly briefed Chinese officials on the country's new defense guidelines. Other issues discussed are believed to have included the situation in the East China Sea and topics related to North Korea.

A *Global Times* opinion piece [criticized](#) Japan for expanding its military power to realize its global ambitions by signing agreements with Canada, France, India, Australia, and the US. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, visiting Tokyo, joined this list when she [stated](#) her support for the Abe administration's initiative for a "free and open Indo-Pacific" to counter Chinese

expansionism, and pledged cooperation on preventing the Chinese government from collecting and harnessing vast amounts of data. Separately, it was announced that Japan and Britain will [cooperate](#) in research in such areas as quantum science and artificial intelligence in response to China's rapid advances in science and technology.

A Japanese analyst, [lamenting](#) the rapid deterioration of his country's security environment due to China's expanding missile, submarine, cyber, and anti-satellite capabilities as well as the impasses on North Korean denuclearization and Russia's hold on the southern Kurils, suggested establishing a standing joint task force to defend the Nansei Islands as a matter of priority. The Japanese government [lodged](#) another protest with China over its continued deployment of a drilling ship in a contested areas of the East China Sea.

The Japanese Coast Guard is to set up a special 24-person section to [liaise](#) with other nations to counter maritime advances by China in the region; a particular focus will be Southeast Asian states. Japan and India [agreed](#) to work together to combat cyberattacks centered mainly on Chinese telecom Huawei's equipment. Japanese sources are concerned that illegal access to India's communications network would lead to leaks of Japanese technology and other confidential information.

China's leading military newspaper [urged](#) remaining vigilant about Japan's creeping militarization, citing as evidence the submission of acquisition and cross-servicing agreements with Canada and France for Diet approval. It also took note of the conversion of *Izumo*-class helicopter destroyers into aircraft carriers, increased investments in cutting-edge technologies such as AI, laser, and electromagnetic waves, and plans to create what the paper called space troops.

A Bank of Japan adviser to the Ukrainian government expressed serious [concerns](#) about the effect on Japanese security of Chinese entities' acquisition of sensitive Ukrainian technology. His remarks were prompted by an apparently imminent takeover of Ukraine's Motor Sich, one of the world's largest manufacturers of helicopter engines and parts for civilian and military aircraft, by a Chinese investor with strong ties to the PRC armed forces.

Three days after [announcing](#) that MSDF ships would take part in China's April fleet review, the first such visit in seven and a half years, with the MSDF chief in attendance, Japan's Defense Ministry [disclosed](#) that it planned to construct a new type of patrol ship to be mainly used in the waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. [According](#) to Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post*, the ships are meant to send a message to Beijing that Tokyo intends to defend its maritime claims in the area. A separate program to purchase 22 new destroyers, to be used in the same area, is expected to be completed by about 2032.

Consonant with its strategy of [detering](#) military threats to its southwestern islands by stationing specialized troops on them, the Japanese government [opened](#) Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) bases on Amami Oshima, Miyako Island, and Ishigaki Island. Those on Amami Oshima are equipped with surface-to-air missiles and land-to-sea missiles, as will the Miyako base. A similar base was opened on Yonaguni in 2016. In [response](#) to rapid advances in the strike capabilities of the Chinese Navy, Japan's Defense Ministry decided to develop the nation's first domestically manufactured air-to-ship cruise missile, to be mounted on Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) fighters and capable of attacking a warship from outside the range of an adversary. To counter China's increasing control over the waters linking Okinawa and other islands in the area known as the first island chain, Japan is [introducing](#) its own version of Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD). This includes the ASM-3, a high-speed gliding missile that can travel at Mach 5, with a range of 400 km. Its deployment will give Japan the ability to strike enemy bases, a capability that successive Japanese administrations have eschewed to maintain consistency with the nation's pacifist constitution. There was no immediate comment from Beijing.

China Daily [interpreted](#) the dispatch of two SDF soldiers to the command the Multinational Force and Observers on the Sinai Peninsula as a further step toward dismantling its peace constitution, under which Japan is allowed to use force only if under attack. The dispatch marks the first time that the SDF has participated in a non-UN military mission, the MNO having been set up by the US, Egypt, and Israel after the UN Security Council declined to provide UN forces.

Japanese fighter jets [intercepted](#) two Chinese anti-submarine patrol aircraft north of the Senkaku Islands – a type of the Y-9, not previously seen. Shortly thereafter, the ASDF scrambled against seven PLA Air Force planes that [transited](#) the Miyako Strait between Taiwan and Okinawa. A day later, Taiwan’s Air Force [intercepted](#) two PLAAF jets when they crossed the median line between Taiwan and China. Chinese media have been critical of warming ties between Taiwan and Japan. Japan’s Defense Ministry [reported](#) that its fighters scrambled 999 times in fiscal year 2018, the second highest number on record, with Chinese planes involved in the majority, 638, of instances. They were 500 in 2017, and were nearly all in airspace close to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and near Okinawa.

Culture

Asahi [reported](#) that wealthy Chinese buyers’ fondness for Kyoto real estate had driven prices beyond the reach of many locals, engendering resentment. In a sign that warmer high-level politics did not necessarily foster warmer feelings at the local level, angry netizens forced a Chinese actor to [apologize](#) after he questioned why Japanese did not rob and destroy Beijing’s Palace Museum when they invaded during World War II.

Taiwan

A *Yomiuri* editorial [called](#) for the US to visibly display its commitment to Taiwan in the face of Chinese pressure, deeming it essential to restraining China and maintaining stability in Asia.

Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen, [interviewed](#) in *Sankei Shimbun*, expressed for the first time her interest in direct dialogue with the Japanese government on cybersecurity and regional security issues. Tsai called on Japan to overcome legal obstacles and seek active, pragmatic collaboration with Taiwan despite the absence of official diplomatic ties. In another step toward strengthening ties in the absence of formal diplomatic relations, Taiwan’s foreign minister [advocated](#) closer Taiwan-Japan cooperation in the face of common threats such as global warming, cross-border ties, and cyberattacks. The Japan-Taiwan Exchange Organization, Japan’s unofficial embassy to Taiwan, the also unofficial American Institute on Taiwan, and Taiwan’s Foreign Ministry [co-](#)

[hosted](#) an international workshop under the Global Cooperation and Training Workshop, in what Japanese representative Numata described as a historic experience that his office had been working on for three years.

Taiwanese software entrepreneur José Lin [advocated](#) avoiding China in favor of Japan since the former has “zero concept of intellectual property rights.”

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2019

Jan. 8, 2019: Bloomberg [announces](#) that, for the first time since 2012, Japanese companies outranked China's in the total volume of mergers and acquisitions, predicting that the spending spree would continue in 2019.

Jan. 11, 2019: Japan and France [agree](#) to strengthen security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

Jan. 22, 2019: *Asahi* [reports](#) that wealthy Chinese buyers' fondness for Kyoto real estate has driven prices beyond the reach of many locals, engendering resentment.

Jan. 29, 2019: *Yomiuri* editorial [calls](#) for the US to visibly display its commitment to Taiwan in the face of Chinese pressure, deeming it essential to restraining China and maintaining stability in Asia.

Jan. 31, 2019: Columnist for *China Daily* [criticizes](#) Japan for unrealistic expectations on the return of the disputed Kuril Islands, citing Japan's alliance with the US as a major factor.

Feb. 1, 2019: Senior foreign affairs and defense officials [meet](#) in Beijing, agreeing on the importance of promoting confidence-building efforts in the security field.

Feb. 2, 2019: Beijing's *Global Times* reports that Japanese companies [continued](#) to invest in China, despite Western analysts' prediction that the US-China trade dispute would dampen economic ties between China and Japan.

Feb. 3, 2019: Japanese Coast Guard [apprehends](#) a Chinese fishing boat illegally harvesting coral in Japan's EEZ.

Feb. 5, 2019: *Global Times* opinion piece [criticizes](#) Japan as seeking to expand its military power by signing agreements with Canada, France, India, Australia, and the US.

Feb. 5, 2019: German Chancellor Angela Merkel, visiting Tokyo, [states](#) her support for the Abe administration's initiative for a "free and open Indo-Pacific" to counter Chinese expansionism, and pledges cooperation on preventing the Chinese government from collecting and harnessing vast amounts of data.

Feb. 7, 2019: Japan and Britain agree to [cooperate](#) in research in such areas as quantum science and artificial intelligence in response to China's rapid advances in science and technology.

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March 3, 2019: Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen is [interviewed](#) in *Sankei Shimbun* and expresses for the first time her interest in direct dialogue with the Japanese government on cybersecurity and regional security issues.

March 8, 2019: Japan announces it will [send](#) a Maritime Self-Defense Force ship to participate in China's fleet review.

March 9, 2019: Japanese authorities [charge](#) two Japanese nationals with exporting wagyu fertilized eggs and sperm to China without undergoing the required quarantine procedures.

March 11, 2019: Japanese Defense Ministry [announces](#) plans to construct a new type of patrol ship to be mainly used in the waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

March 14, 2019: Taiwan's foreign minister [advocates](#) closer Taiwan-Japan cooperation in the face of common threats such as global warming, cross-border ties, and cyberattacks.

March 17, 2019: Japanese Defense Ministry announces that it will develop the nation's first domestically manufactured air-to-ship cruise missile.

March 20, 2019: Japan [downgrades](#) its assessment of the economy for the first time in three years, blaming the US-China trade war and declining Chinese economic growth.

March 20, 2019: An LDP policy group [proposes](#) the creation of a National Economic Council to develop and integrate strategy on the economy, national security and diplomacy.

March 22, 2019: Japanese government continues to [protest](#) Chinese test drilling for resource development near the intermediate line between the two countries in the East China Sea.

March 23, 2019: Japanese fighter jets [intercepts](#) two Chinese anti-submarine patrol aircraft north of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

March 26, 2019: Japan-Taiwan Exchange Organization, Japan's unofficial embassy to Taiwan, the also unofficial American Institute on Taiwan, and Taiwan's Foreign Ministry [co-host](#) an international workshop under the Global Cooperation and Training Workshop.

March 26, 2019: GSDF establishes new bases on Amami-Oshima Island in Kagoshima and Miyakojima island in Okinawa to enhance defense of the southwestern Nansei islands.

March 30, 2019: Air Self-Defense Force scrambles against seven PLA Air Force (PLAAF) planes that [transit](#) through the Miyako Strait between Taiwan and Okinawa.

March 31, 2019: Taiwan's Air Force [intercepts](#) two PLAAF jets when they cross the median line between Taiwan and China, thought to be a response to Chinese criticism of warming ties between Taiwan and Japan.

April 1, 2019: Taiwanese software entrepreneur José Lin [advocates](#) avoiding China in favor of Japan since the former has "zero concept of intellectual property rights."

April 3, 2019: Consortium of China's Harvest Fund Management and Taiwan's TPK Holdings [bail](#) out LCD manufacturer Japan Display.

April 4, 2019: Kong Xuanyou 59 is [appointed](#) ambassador to Japan, succeeding Cheng Yonghua, 64, who held the post for nine years.

April 8, 2019: Japanese Coast Guard vessel *Kojima* embarks on a three-month training cruise that includes visit to Sri Lanka and Greece.

April 11, 2019: Chinese Foreign Ministry merges its Korean and Japanese divisions.

April 15, 2019: Talks held between Chinese and Japanese foreign ministers in Beijing.

April 15, 2019: Japan's Defense Ministry [reports](#) that its fighters scrambled 999 times in fiscal year 2018.

April 30, 2019: Japan [introduces](#) its version of Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD). There was no immediate comment from Beijing.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

HITTING AN ALL-TIME LOW

JI-YOUNG LEE, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
MINTARO OBA, WEST WING WRITERS

In the early months of 2019, Japan-South Korea relations have continued a downward spiral. In their dealings with the radar lock-on dispute and a South Korean court ruling on forced laborers, both Seoul and Tokyo responded to the other's action negatively, reaching the point of suspending all senior-level defense exchanges for the first half of the year. While recent developments may point to yet another period of all-time low in Seoul-Tokyo relations, it is possible that the year 2019 may signify the beginning of a new trend at a deeper level. That is, Seoul and Tokyo do not regard the other as a valued partner in their long-term national security strategy, even when addressing nuclear and missile threats from North Korea. On the Japan-North Korea front, once the biggest regional champion of the US "maximum pressure" campaign, Japan has continued to reckon with the region's sudden turn toward diplomacy with North Korea and made some policy adjustments for better alliance coordination with the United States.

This article is extracted from *Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal of Bilateral Relations in the Indo-Pacific*, Vol. 21, No. 1, May 2019. Preferred citation: Ji-Young Lee and Mintaro Oba, "Japan-Korea Relations: Hitting an All-Time Low," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp 105-114.

Japan adjusts its North Korea policy

Kim Jong Un's April visit to Russia left Japan as the last major regional power without a serious engagement process with North Korea, highlighting Japan's isolation and dwindling options. Japan faces one of the most unenviable situations when it comes to North Korea policy in the region. It has struggled to juggle its prior tough stance toward North Korea, its need to maintain close alliance coordination with the United States, and its focus on key issues of little interest to the US and others – namely, North Korea's abductions of Japanese nationals in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the threat posed by shorter-range North Korean missile launches.

As a result, Japan made a visible turn in the last three months toward proactively seeking diplomatic engagement with North Korea. In March, Japan chose not to sponsor a UN resolution on North Korean human rights abuses – an action it has taken annually since 2007. A new edition of Japan's Diplomatic Bluebook unveiled April 23 drops the goal of “maximiz[ing] pressure on North Korea by all available means” and instead declares it is “important for the international community to come together and support the U.S.-North Korea talks.” Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo told the conservative *Sankei Shimbun* newspaper on May 2 that he wants to “meet Chairman Kim Jong Un unconditionally and talk with him frankly with an open mind.” “We can't break the shell of mutual distrust between Japan and North Korea unless I directly face Kim,” Abe said, “I hope he is a leader who can make a decision strategically and flexibly on what is best for his nation.”

This shift was quickly complicated by North Korea's launch of multiple projectiles (including a likely short-range ballistic missile) off the east coast of North Korea on May 3. The move drew a muted response from Japan, with the Defense Ministry emphasizing that the projectiles “weren't a security threat and didn't reach anywhere near the country's coast.” Japan has in the past highlighted the threat shorter-range North Korean missiles pose to the Japanese mainland. In Japanese Foreign Minister Kono Taro's phone call with South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa, the two chief diplomats reportedly “agreed to keep coordinating while also ‘carefully responding’ to the launches.” The launches, coming just one day after Abe's declaration of willingness to

meet Kim Jong Un unconditionally, seemed to reflect little North Korean interest in signaling goodwill to Japan.

Over the last year, North Korea has not only seemed uninterested in engaging Japan, but apparently continued its openly hostile stance toward Japan in state media pronouncements regarding Japan. This year, the *Korea Central News Agency (KCNA)*, North Korea's official state news agency, called Japan an “immoral and impudent country.” On May 2, a KCNA commentary called Japan's purchase of missiles from the United States “a typical example corroborating Japan's sinister ambition for becoming a military giant” and claimed that Japan was “adamant on threatening the hard-won peaceful atmosphere on the peninsula and the region and seriously disrupting the strategic balance in the region.” An April 26 commentary argued that Japan “had resorted to all sorts of dirty and vicious plots for turning Korea into their colony” in the run-up to its occupation of the Korean Peninsula in the first half of the twentieth century.

However, North Korea may well shift suddenly, concluding that offering to engage Japan may put pressure on the United States at a critical moment. Back in August 2018, Japanese Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office chief Kitamura Shigeru reportedly met secretly in Vietnam with Kim Song-hye, head of the United Front Tactical Office in the North Korean United Front Department. Publicly, North Korea seems intent on continuing to portray Japan as a militarist aggressor that stands in the way of the Korean Peninsula peace process. But as we have seen in Pyongyang-Tokyo dynamics during the Six-Party Talks negotiations, Japan may well be North Korea's last major card to play in terms of big regional moves it can make, and Tokyo would remain interested in keeping the option of normalizing diplomatic relations with Pyongyang open.

This reflects a longstanding dynamic in Japan's role in North Korea policy from a broader regional security perspective: Japan is a short-term marginal power as well as a long-term latent power when it comes to North Korea. In other words, Tokyo has the potential to exercise significant clout, because it has the economic capabilities and resources and expertise in disaster situations to contribute useful incentives to any deal with North Korea. Its proximity to the Korean Peninsula and hosting

of vital US military bases also make Japan an actor with keen interests in shifting power balances on the Korean Peninsula. But whether and how much Japan can use that clout depends on other specific factors that are not in play and beyond Japan's control. Currently Japan has little leverage on North Korea policy and remains heavily dependent on the actions of the US, South Korea, and other regional actors, a situation that Prime Minister Abe would be interested in changing. However, accomplishing that goal is complicated by the difficulty with predicting the Trump administration's ultimate goal and its handling of Pyongyang and by poor relations with South Korea.

Radar Lock-on Incident and Japan-South Korea Security Partnership

In the early months of 2019, Seoul and Tokyo continued to vigorously debate Japan's claim that a South Korean Navy warship aimed its fire control radar on Japan's patrol aircraft in December 2018. Then in early January, South Korea demanded that Japan should apologize for a "menacingly" low-altitude flight by Japan's patrol aircraft near its warship. Basically, South Korea denies that its warship used a fire-control radar, while Japan denies that its patrol aircraft was flying at a threateningly low altitude. The two sides' claims, denials, and counterarguments led several media outlets to characterize their relations as *tit-for-tat*, with a [dictionary meaning](#) of "an equivalent given in return (as for an injury): retaliation in kind."

In response to Japan's release of [a video](#) in late December that conveyed its message about the alleged incident, on Jan. 4, South Korea's military posted [a video of its own](#) to refute Japan's claim. On Jan. 14, the two sides held working-level talks in Singapore but failed to narrow down their differing assessments of the situation. By Jan. 21, Japan issued two audio recordings, which it said were new evidence in support of its claim. But South Korea's military countered the claim by saying the files were doctored, with no information on the timing of the recordings. Then, on Jan. 23, [South Korea's military](#) claimed that Japan's surveillance plane made "provocative" and "threatening" passes over its naval vessel, saying that it would respond strongly should such activity recur. The [meeting of foreign ministers](#) of Japan and South Korea, Kono and Kang, on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos held on the same day did not yield any practical measure

toward resolution. South Korea released [photographic evidence](#) to back up its claim the next day. Tokyo immediately challenged it.

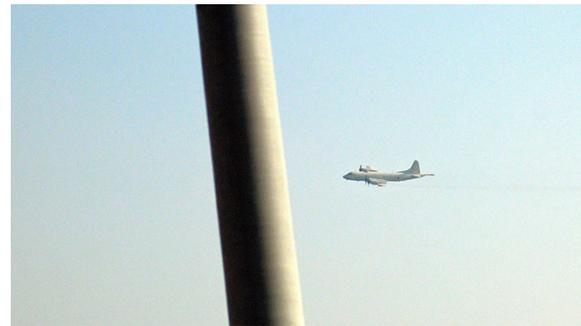


Figure 1 SDF patrol aircraft conducting a "threatening flight." Photo: South Korean National Defense Ministry

With no clear resolution in sight on the radar lock-on dispute, there was some backpedaling on the earlier efforts geared toward expanding bilateral military exchanges. The planned visit by South Korea's commander of the Korean Navy First Fleet to Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force's headquarters scheduled in February did not happen. Japan canceled the plans to deploy its *Izumo*-class helicopter destroyer to a combined maritime exercise held in South Korea. The two-part exercise aimed at countering maritime crime – involving 18 countries including the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – took place in South Korea's port city Pusan from April 29-May 2 and then in Singapore from May 9-13. According to *Sankei Shimbun*, Japan's Ministry of Defense has sent invitations to Australia, Singapore, India, and the United States to attend a naval review to be held in October this year, but withheld an invitation to South Korea, citing the radar dispute. In 2015, a South Korean Navy destroyer participated in the Japanese naval review, along with the ships from the United States, Australia, India and France.

Other indicators also cast a cloud over the future of security cooperation between Japan and South Korea. In its 2019 Diplomatic Bluebook, the Japanese government describes its ties with Seoul as "facing a very difficult situation amid a series of negative activities on the part of South Korea." The document lists South Korea's court ruling on forced laborers, the South Korean government's announcement of the dissolution of the foundation established to compensate "comfort women" survivors, issues concerning the Rising Sun Flag, and questions surrounding

Japanese aircraft patrol as “negative activities” by South Korea. South Korea’s Foreign Ministry responded by formally lodging a complaint. Compared to the previous year’s document, notable is the deletion of the expression, “although there are difficult issues between South Korea and Japan, it is important to appropriately manage these issues while advancing the bilateral relationship in a future oriented way.” South Korea, on its part, removed the statement that reads, “South Korea and Japan share fundamental values of liberal democracy and market economy,” from its biennial defense white paper released on Jan. 15, an omission from the earlier ones in 2014 and 2016.

How did things get this bad between Japan and South Korea? One possible answer is North Korea. In the past, even in the midst of rough bilateral relations, one factor that has consistently functioned as glue for Seoul-Tokyo cooperation has been their shared desire to maintain strong deterrence and policy coordination vis-à-vis North Korea, especially in the Japan-South Korea-US trilateral framework. This year, toward that end, Japanese Foreign Minister Kono and Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa met in January in Davos and again in February at the Munich Security Conference. Kanasugi Kenji, director general of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, met South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Lee Do-hoon on Feb. 9 in Seoul and April 1 in Tokyo and spoke on the phone on Jan. 11 and April 24. The two chief negotiators for North Korea policy have also met trilaterally with US counterpart Special Representative Stephen Biegun.

However, if the North Korea factor used to put the brakes on deteriorating bilateral relations, especially in the aftermath of Pyongyang’s provocations, now with President Trump seeking diplomacy with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, there are more moving parts in their respective dealings with North Korea. Not surprisingly, President Moon’s strong desire for inter-Korean reconciliation and Prime Minister Abe’s tough policy preferences toward Pyongyang did not naturally align. Until Tokyo made a North Korea policy adjustment at the end of April, Japan “underscore[ed] the importance of making tangible progress toward denuclearization,” while South Korea emphasized “work[ing] together to achieve

complete denuclearization and to establish a peace regime.” Further, compared to the Obama administration, the Trump administration is less interested in playing a mediator role when South Korea and Japan do not get along.

South Korean court ruling on forced labor

2019 began with Prime Minister Abe and other high-ranking Japanese officials expressing deep regrets over South Korean plaintiffs seeking to seize Japanese companies’ assets. In his New Year’s press conference on Jan. 10, President Moon said the South Korean government “cannot involve itself in judicial decisions,” and “must respect court rulings.” He also said, “the issue is not something created by the South Korean government. I think the Japanese government should adopt a position of humility.” These remarks were not well received in Japan. Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide, for example, argued that “President Moon’s remarks appear to be an attempt to shift South Korea’s own responsibilities onto Japan and are extremely dismaying.” South Korea’s Foreign Ministry responded by expressing disappointment with Suga’s comments. As Japan pondered ways to address the issue, some high-ranking Japanese policymaker such as Finance Minister Aso Taro advocated that Japan should consider retaliatory economic measures such as tariffs on Korean products.



Figure 2 Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to compensate Korean victims of forced labor during World War II. Photo: Korea Joongang Daily

The South Korean Supreme Court’s decision that ordered Japanese companies to compensate forced laborers brought into the open several difficult questions that the two societies are not able to answer easily. First, from a legal point of view, the Japanese government and South Korean Supreme Court adopt different interpretations of the 1965 basic treaty that established diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea. Based on the treaty, it is the view of the Japanese government that all

compensation claims had been “settled completely and finally” by the 1965 agreement. However, South Korea’s Supreme Court ruled that the 1965 agreement did not eliminate individuals’ right to seek compensation.

Second, the multi-faceted issue involves multiple actors and domestic constituencies with diverse perspectives and opinions – including those in civil society within and across Japan and South Korea who tend to approach the ruling through the lens of human rights and social justice. According to South Korean daily [JoongAng Ilbo](#), South Koreans themselves are divided on the Supreme Court rulings, with many in the diplomatic community feeling that “like it or not, the basic treaty was a promise between two states and must be respected.” The same daily reported that in November last year, 90 lawyers in Japan advocated South Korean Supreme Court rulings in October and the number reached 200 over the next 20 days. The rulings also shed light on a group of Japanese and Korean lawyers who represented the victims of forced labor since 1994. As for public opinion within Japan, according to *Yomiuri Shimbun*’s poll on Dec. 14–16, 86% of Japanese respondents thought that all forced labor claims were settled under the 1965.

Against the backdrop, tensions ran high when South Korean National Assembly Speaker Moon Hee-sang referred to the Japanese emperor as “the son of the main culprit of war crimes” in his interview with *Bloomberg*. Moon’s remarks reportedly meant to emphasize the symbolism of the apology made by the emperor, drawing criticisms from Prime Minister Abe and other high-ranking policymakers. In response, Former Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio stated his desire that the new emperor would “have an opportunity to visit Korea amid much welcome from the people of Korea.” Hatoyama, of the Democratic Party of Japan, was visiting Seoul and delivering his speech at an event in Seoul commemorating Korea’s March 1st Independence Movement against Japanese colonial rule.

Overall, after the South Korean government’s decision to dissolve an organization set up to compensate the so-called “comfort women” issue, Japanese policymakers seemed to have decided not to invest in mending relations with Seoul, raising concerns about “Korea passing” in Japan. On Jan. 28, Prime Minister Abe’s annual policy address did not mention South

Korea except with reference to North Korea. When asked by Tamaki Yuichiro, leader of the Democratic Party for the People, why he did not mention South Korea, Abe responded, “it is regrettable that there have been moves that appear to deny even the premise of the bilateral relations between Korea and Japan, including the issue of labors from the former Korean peninsula [the Japanese government expression for forced laborers].”

In South Korea, President Moon is increasingly facing criticism for the deterioration in diplomatic relations with Tokyo. By early March, President Moon and high-ranking South Korean policymakers began to highlight the importance of bilateral relations with Tokyo. Last year, President Moon’s speech commemorating the March 1st Independence Movement stated, “as the perpetrator, the Japanese government shouldn’t say ‘it’s over,” “Wartime crimes against humanity can’t be swept under the rug by saying ‘it’s over.” This year, however, his tone softened. In his 2019 March 1 speech commemorating the centennial of the March 1st Independence Movement, Moon avoided criticizing Japan directly and emphasized the need for cooperation with Japan for peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Economic relations

South Korea-Japan economic and trade relations have remained, as has typically been the case, largely unrelated to political developments and driven by practical considerations. Tourism between the two countries provided one clear example. The Korea Tourism Organization showed continuing increases in Japanese tourism to South Korea every month in 2019. Korean tourism to Japan declined 3% in January but gained 1.1% in February year-on-year; statistics for March and April were not yet available. It remained too early to gauge whether the major uptick in Japan-South Korea political tensions we have seen this year will ultimately affect tourism. But the release of final year-on-year tourism statistics for 2018 appeared promising. Japanese tourism to South Korea saw a 27.6% increase and Korean visits to Japan reached an “all-time record.” A representative of the Korea Tourism Organization in an interview with *Chosun Ilbo* attributed the bump in Japanese tourism to “warming relations with North Korea, which eased the fears of more timid Japanese tourists.”

The bilateral trade relationship was complicated not by geopolitical tensions, but by economic difficulties for both Japan and South Korea. Korean government data showed an 8.2% drop in Korean exports to Japan, attributed by *Yonhap* to “falling demand for steel and petrochemical products.” Japanese Ministry of Finance statistics show drops in both imports from and exports to South Korea every month this year so far. These drops came in the context of a tough climate for both economies more generally. South Korean gross domestic product shrank 0.3% in the first quarter, and April marked five straight months of declining Korean exports overall. In Japan, trade tensions are taking a toll on exports, with Japanese Ministry of Finance statistics showing declines in exports year-on-year from January through March (the most recent month where data is available). The Bank of Japan has announced there are “high uncertainties” for Japan’s future growth.

The two countries also shared an economic challenge in the toughening US policy toward Iran. Both Japan and South Korea, highly dependent on outside sources of energy to power their economies, have in the past imported Iranian crude oil thanks to US sanctions waivers for five major economies. But media reporting on April 21 cited US administration officials as indicating Washington would end the waiver program. The implications of the decision are not yet clear, but it is likely this will exacerbate economic challenges for South Korea and Japan and highlight their shared vulnerability to major geopolitical disruptions. Both countries are working to secure favorable trade agreements and deepen key export relationships, as seen in President Moon’s visit to Southeast Asia in March and Prime Minister Abe’s visit to Europe in April. A massive trade agreement between Japan and the European Union took effect in February, and both Japan and South Korea are working to offset the impact of Brexit. South Korea and Japan are also negotiating multilaterally through participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) talks.

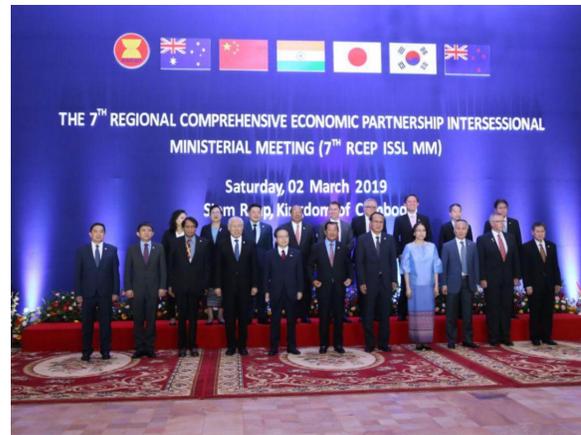


Figure 3 The 7th Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Intersessional Ministerial Meeting. Photo: ASEAN

There was one notable area where a bilateral economic issue became a source of political and diplomatic tension between Japan and South Korea: South Korea’s continuing import ban on seafood from the Fukushima region of Japan. The ban had been the subject of a legal dispute at the World Trade Organization following a complaint lodged by Japan in August 2015. In October 2018, a WTO dispute settlement panel ruled in favor of Japan. But South Korea appealed the ruling to the WTO’s appellate body, which ruled on April 11 in favor of Seoul’s import ban.

The WTO appellate body decision is final and exhausts Japan’s options in the WTO, but it has not settled the issue in the bilateral relationship. Japan’s WTO representative quickly called the decision “extremely regrettable,” and warned that it “could have a negative impact on perceptions of the safety of Japanese foods and on those seeking to export their products to countries such as Korea.” In late April, Director General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Kanasugi told Korean counterparts that Japanese seafood is safe and asked Seoul to lift the restrictions. On May 7, South Korean Minister of Oceans and Fisheries Moon Seong-hyeok reaffirmed the import ban in remarks to reporters and stated “there should never be anything that could compromise public health.” It remains to be seen how Tokyo will pursue this issue after the WTO ruling and how high profile it will remain in the bilateral relationship.

All of these developments took place with the backdrop of deteriorating South Korea–Japan political relations. Across categories, from tourism to trade, economic ties mostly appeared

to continue the longstanding pattern of general independence from politics at the beginning of 2019. But it remains to be seen if Japan would indeed take retaliatory measures against the court ruling on forced laborers, South Korean economy will no doubt adversely affected.

Looking ahead to summer 2019

In the next four months, in the absence of any major North Korean provocation, Japan will likely continue to make an adjustment in North Korea policy toward diplomacy, while trying to make progress on the abduction issue. This adjustment will not be a reflection of the fundamental shift in its perception of Pyongyang, but will be an effort to avoid diplomatic isolation in the region in ways that tighten coordination with the United States. Looking ahead, the South Korean court ruling on forced labor and the radar lock-on dispute will likely continue to pose a challenge to Seoul-Tokyo bilateral ties. The Moon administration will likely make gestures to address the current diplomatic impasse with Tokyo, but a lack of domestic incentives to improve relations with Japan can leave bilateral ties in a stalemate. For Japan, the biggest factor that could influence the relationship is the House of Councillors election in July. Abe is likely to insist that the South Korean government address the courting ruling on forced laborers in ways that consider Japanese domestic constituencies.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2019

Jan. 4, 2019: South Korea posts a [video](#) to refute Japan's claim that South Korea's warship locked its fire-control radar on Japan's patrol aircraft.

Jan. 6, 2019: Prime Minister Abe Shinzo appears on NHK's "Sunday Debate" and expresses his deep regrets over South Korean plaintiffs seeking to seize Japanese companies' assets.

Jan. 9, 2019: Japan's Foreign Ministry lodges a protest with South Korean Ambassador to Tokyo Lee Su-hoon over the court ruling on forced laborers.

Jan. 10, 2019: Japan officially requests talks with the South Korean government to address the court ruling on forced laborers.

Jan. 10, 2019: President Moon Jae-in addresses the question of South Korean court ruling on forced labor in his New Year's press conference, stating that the government "cannot involve itself in judicial decisions," and urges Japan to "adopt a position of humility."

Jan. 11, 2019: Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide expresses his regrets that President Moon's remarks tries to shift South Korea's responsibility to Japan. South Korea's Foreign Ministry expresses a disappointment at Suga's remark.

Jan. 14, 2019: South Korean and Japanese military authorities hold working-level talks in Singapore to address their conflicting claims about Japan's patrol aircraft's low-altitude flyby and South Korea's use of radar against it.

Jan. 18, 2019: South Korea's Supreme Court upholds a compensation order against Nachi-Fujukoshi Corp. over forced labor.

Jan. 23, 2019: South Korea's Ministry of National Defense lodges a complaint with Japan that a Japanese patrol aircraft flew at a low altitude near a South Korean warship.

Jan. 23, 2019: Japanese SDF patrol plane [flies](#) within close proximity of a South Korean naval vessel in the East China Sea. Japanese FM Kono and South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha meet on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum to address the incident.

Jan. 24, 2019: South Korea's Ministry of National Defense releases [photographic evidence](#) to prove its claim. Tokyo challenges the claim.

Jan. 28, 2019: Prime Minister Abe delivers his annual policy address during the regular session of Japan's Diet. He does not mention Japan's ties with South Korea.

Feb. 1, 2019: [Asahi Shimbun](#) reports that Japan and South Korea agreed to suspend all senior-level defense exchange programs for the first half of 2019.

Feb. 1, 2019: Funeral procession for Kim Bok-dong, leader of the "comfort women" protest movement, [marches](#) through Seoul and stops in front of the Japanese Embassy.

Feb. 8, 2019: Korean residents in Japan commemorate the centennial of the Feb. 8 Independence Declaration in Tokyo. Historians say that the Declaration paved the way for the March 1 Independence Movement and the establishment of Korea's provisional government in Shanghai. President Moon sent a social media message.

March 1, 2019: President Moon delivers [a speech](#) commemorating the 100th anniversary of the March 1st Independence Movement, avoiding direct criticism of the Japanese government.

March 13, 2019: Japan [rescinds](#) its annual motion to the UN condemning North Korea's human rights record, "given U.S. efforts to end North Korea's weapons program and other factors."

March 14, 2019: Japan and South Korea hold the working-level consultations in Seoul to discuss the court ruling on forced labor with no tangible outcome.

March 26, 2019: Lawyers representing Korean plaintiffs against Japanese company Nachi-Fujikoshi say they seized the company's assets in South Korea based on the court ruling.

April 23, 2019: Japan's Diplomatic Bluebook drops the goal of maximizing pressure on North Korea, while describing its relations with Seoul as "very difficult" due to South Korea's negative activities.

April 25, 2019: North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin hold a summit meeting.

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

THE STORY OF TWO PIVOTS

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After a slow start, there was a burst of diplomatic activity affecting the Russia-China relationship in late-April with Russia focusing on the east for a Russia-DPRK summit in Vladivostok and China focusing on the west with its second Belt and Road Forum. The militaries expanded the scope and substance of their relationship in April with consultations for a third joint missile defense computer simulation to be conducted later this year, several Russian ships joined a naval parade to honor the 70th anniversary of China's Navy, the start of the *Joint Sea 2019* naval exercise, and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe's visit to Moscow.

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Introduction

The first four months of 2019 were mostly quiet between Russia and China except for some low-level interactions. The end of April, however, witnessed a burst of activity: Russia's "pivot" to the east (Putin-Kim summit) and China's own "pivot" to the west and beyond (the second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing). Regardless of the differences in direction and the nature and degree of these foreign policy thrusts, the two largest Eurasian powers cooperated, coordinated and even competed for their respective national interests with implications for the rest of the world.

The Chinese and Russian militaries also tried to significantly expand the scope and substance of their mil-mil relationship during the last two weeks of April: on April 15-19, they held the first round of consultations in Beijing for a third joint missile defense computer simulation to be conducted in Russia later this year; several Russian ships joined a naval parade on April 22-25 for the 70th anniversary of the Chinese Navy; the two navies conducted a joint naval exercise (*Joint Sea 2019*) off the Chinese coast on April 29-May 4; and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe visited Moscow to meet Russian counterpart Sergey Shoigu on April 24-25.

These events occurred when both Beijing and Moscow experienced difficult relations with Washington. Issues creating concern included the announcement in early February that the [US would withdraw](#) from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), uncertainties in the wake of the failed second US-DPRK summit in late February, increasing tension over US pressure on Venezuela, and the looming US showdown with Iran.

Looking forward, 2019 is a year full of political symbolism: 100 years after the Treaty of Versailles, which led to the rise of Chinese nationalism and eventually communism, 70 years of China-Soviet/Russia diplomatic relations, 60 years after the China-Soviet split and 30 years after the normalization of ties between Beijing and Moscow. Beyond asymmetrical Moscow-Beijing-Washington triangular maneuvering, forces are gaining momentum to reshape the triangular construct with implications for world order.

Putin-Kim Vladivostok summit

The first-ever Vladimir Putin-Kim Jong Un summit was held on the campus of Far Eastern Federal University (FEFU) on April 25. During the [two-hour talks](#) (originally planned for no more than [one hour](#)), the main topic was denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. "Chairman Kim Jong Un is quite an open person and speaks freely. We had a very detailed conversation on all items on our agenda and discussed them in various aspects," remarked Russian President Vladimir Putin in his post-summit [press briefing](#). He continued, "My colleagues and I are all satisfied with the outcomes of the talks," added that "I got the impression that Kim Jong Un is interested in denuclearization, all North Korea needs is guarantees of its security and sovereignty."

Without spelling out specifics, Putin said that "the only means for such guarantees is to ensure that international law triumphs over 'rule of force.'" This would be "the first and critical step toward resolving the challenging situation." Ultimately, Putin believed that it was up to North Korea to decide the sources and shape of that guarantee. Russia, however, may have a role in the "international guarantee" if necessary.

The Putin-Kim summit was held in the aftermath of the second, and failed, Trump-Kim summit in Vietnam at the end of February. Apparently positioning himself as an "honest broker" between North Korea and the US, the Russian president reportedly welcomed Kim's effort to normalize ties with the US, saying that Russia and the US were both against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and that he was open to relaying the content of his talks to President Trump. "We are going to discuss the situation with the U.S. Russia is always open on this – there are no conspiracies. More than that Kim Jong Un personally asked us to inform Washington of his position and the issues he wants to ask about," reiterated Putin in his press conference.

The Putin-Kim one-to-one meeting was followed by enlarged meetings with officials from both sides. Economic issues were apparently the major topic during the enlarged meeting as Russian transportation, rail and development [officials](#) joined the discussion.

Putin left Vladivostok shortly after his dinner with Kim to fly to China for the second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, leaving his Korean guest for some sightseeing in Vladivostok for the next few days. Kim Jong Un, however, “[suddenly](#)” ended his stay in Vladivostok on April 26.

Russian media described the Putin–Kim summit as “[historic](#).” Prior to this, the Moscow–Pyongyang relationship seemed to be hibernating after the early years of Putin’s presidency when Putin visited [Pyongyang](#) July 19–20, 2000 and Kim Jong Il visited [Vladivostok](#) on Aug. 23, 2002. In-between those visits and the current flurry of summit diplomacy regarding the Korean nuclear issue, President Dmitry [Medvedev](#) and Kim Jong Il met only once in 2011 in Ulan-Ude (Улан-Удэ), the capital of Buryatia (Бурятия) 3,000 miles east of Moscow.

Russia’s “eclipse” in the Korea issue paralleled President Obama’s “strategic patience” strategy toward North Korea. The Putin–Kim Vladivostok meeting, however, may be the beginning of Russia’s reentry into Korean nuclear diplomacy. It is timely given that Kim Jong-un has visited China four times, met South Korean President Moon Jae-in three times, and President Trump twice in the past 13 months. Several times during this period, the Russian side extended invitations to Kim for an official visit, including the one delivered by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov when he visited Pyongyang on May 31, 2018. It seems that Kim finally turned to Russia when both were encountering an impasse in their relations with Washington, according to [Zheng Jiyong](#) (郑继永), a veteran Korea observer in Fudan University in Shanghai. Both sides were looking for a [new mechanism](#) beyond the current framework.

The past, however, is relevant for Russian and Korean leaders. At the dinner on April 25, Putin told Kim about [his encounters](#) with Kim Jong Il in 2000 and 2002. They also talked about the long-envisioned oil, gas, and rail lines through the Korean Peninsula and Russia’s far eastern territories. Putin attributed the lack of progress on infrastructure projects to South Korea’s “shortage of sovereignty,” meaning US objections to intra-Korea and Korean-Russian connectivity. “We will work on this steadily, intensively and patiently. I hope that we will be able to accomplish this someday. The sooner we do this, the better,” promised Putin.

Russia’s late entry into, or final return to, the current Korean nuclear dialogue seemed to be driven by a combination of [factors](#):

- Russia’s limited ability to influence various parties involved;
- the relatively high stakes for Russia’s interests; and
- its pessimistic assessment of the prospect for Korean denuclearization, meaning a fundamental mismatch of North Korea’s interest in nuclear weapons as the only guarantee of its regime’s survival and the US interest in regime change.

After the collapse of the second Trump–Kim summit in Vietnam in late February, Putin seized the moment with the goal of putting Russia back into the role of a relatively independent and indispensable player.

China’s immediate reaction to Kim’s visit was made public shortly before Kim arrived in Vladivostok. “China favors high-level exchange between the DPRK and Russia, which will enhance their cooperation. China believes that this helps Korean-Russian bilateral relations and peace and stability of the peninsula and the region,” said Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang (耿爽). The Vladivostok summit was a “good card game played by two extremely skillful players from their respective position of weakness” (两个善于打烂牌高手之间的合作) commented [Dong Jian](#) (董健), a veteran observer of Northeast Asian affairs.

Xi’s dream (BRI) and Putin’s pride (EEU)

Immediately after his dinner with Kim in Vladivostok, Putin flew to Beijing to attend the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) in Beijing on April 25–27, which also doubled as a “[working visit](#)” for talks with counterpart Xi Jinping.

The [second BRF](#) in Beijing hosted 5,000 participants from more than 150 countries and 90 international organizations, including 40 heads of state/government and international organizations. After the three-day conferencing (a leaders’ roundtable, a [high-level meeting](#), a CEO meeting, etc.), agreements valued at more than \$64 billion were signed, [283 deliverables](#) (or “practical outcomes”) were reached, and a joint communique was issued. Despite the size

of the BRF crowd, Putin was prominently featured and treated with respect.



Figure 1 Chinese President Xi Jinping (left) and Russian President Vladimir Putin arrive for the opening ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. Photo: AFP



Figure 2 Chinese President Xi Jinping takes a group photo with foreign leaders and heads of international organizations. Photo: Xinhua

China's Belt and Road Initiative ([BRI](#)) – initiated by President Xi Jinping in 2013 – borrows the historical symbol embodied in the ancient Silk Road and incorporates new connotations of the times for the construction of an international platform for promoting trade, connectivity, and social exchanges. According to China's statistics, as of April 20, 2019, China has inked 174 cooperative documents with 126 countries and 29 international organizations. From 2013 to 2018, the total trade volume of goods between China and the countries along the BRI routes has exceeded \$6 trillion. Of the 1,400 BRI investment items above \$1 million in the past five years, only 100 are somewhat "problematic," according to a [Boston University survey](#).

"This is of fundamental importance both for Russia and, I am sure, for many of our colleagues who have gathered here in Beijing today," said the Russian [president](#) at the

opening ceremony of the second BRF. Putin's public endorsement was in contrast to consistent [opposition](#) from the US ("[predatory economics](#)" according to former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson). Indeed, Putin has consistently voiced his support for the BRI since 2015 when he and Xi signed a joint communique to [connect \(对接\)](#) BRI and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

Despite Putin's endorsement, Russia's policy and research community seems to have undergone considerable [mood changes](#) about BRI between 2013–2018: from initial "uncertainty and a high degree of suspicion" (2013–14), to an engaging and supportive posture (2015), and now disappointment and skepticism (2016 onward) for lack of quick results.

Part of the reason for such a shift may be Russia's excessive expectations in the aftermath of the Ukraine/Crimea crises and mounting Western sanctions against Russia. A deeper reason for the lack of progress in China's economic activities with and in Russia is perhaps the overall weakness of Russia-China economic ties, which are considerably smaller and less developed than China's economic ties with many other countries. As of January 2018, China and Russia had invested only [\\$4.5 and \\$0.25 billion](#), respectively, in each other's economy. This state of affairs cannot improve in just a few years. The emerging environmentalist movement in Russia, coupled with widespread corruption and [anti-China sentiment](#), particularly in Russia's Far East (the [Lake Baikal](#) water bottle case, etc.), continue to discourage Chinese [investors](#). Finally, Russia's geostrategic concerns for its [traditional influence](#) not just in Central Asia, but also in East Europe and even in Ukraine, remains a constant neutralizer in Russia's thinking about the BRI. Ultimately, there is an asymmetry between the BRI and EEU in that the former is an open-ended project while the latter is a traditional trading bloc for member states.

As a result of these constant and complicated settings and thoughts, Xi and Putin struck quite different tones at Beijing's BRI extravaganza. In his keynote speech, Xi reiterated his "six-words" principles of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits (共商共建共享) and open, green, and sustainable approaches. One of the key [takeaways](#) from Xi's

speech is the nearly ubiquitous emphasis on “joint,” “shared,” “common” and “co-development,” indicating that China intends to be one of many players rather than dominate the BRI.

Xi also promised more market access, more intellectual property protection, more import of both commodities and service without intentionally seeking trade surpluses, no devaluation of the yuan, and more effective implementation of bilateral and multilateral economic and trade agreements it has signed with other parties. Xi never mentioned the US, though some significant parts of his speech seemed to respond to US criticism of China’s trade practices (market access, intellectual rights, trade surplus, etc.). In other words, BRI sets its goals in terms of global operations, not just Russia.

Xi addressed Russian concerns in talks with Putin on the sidelines of BRF. Stressing that Russia is an important partner in the joint development of BRI, Xi said the alignment of the BRI with Russia’s EEU is a model for regional economic cooperation. Meanwhile, the two sides should continue to promote cooperation in economy and trade, energy, science and technology, aerospace, connectivity, as well as cooperation at subnational level and people-to-people and cultural exchanges, Xi said. While much of this was boilerplate, Xi carefully framed the interaction between the BRI and EEU as one of “alignment” but not “integration,” which embodies a sense of equality and dignity between the two large Eurasian groupings.

Putin’s speech at the BRI opening session offered a sharp critique of the “[negative trends](#) that feed terrorism, extremism and illegal migration flows, causing old regional conflicts to resurface and new ones to emerge.” It was therefore “important that we come up with effective ways of responding to the risks of a fragmented global political, economic and technological landscape and growing protectionism, with illegitimate unilateral restrictions imposed bypassing the UN Security Council or, even worse, trade wars as its most dangerous expressions,” urged the Russian president in the opening ceremony of the BRF.

A significant part of Putin’s speech was devoted to a vision of establishing “a Greater Eurasian Partnership” (GEP), a superstructure to “integrate integration frameworks” including

the BRI and the EEU. The GEP represents Russia’s conceptual answer to the BRI with deliberately “vague and elusive” wording, according to Alexander [Gabuev](#) of the Carnegie Moscow Center. Meanwhile, Russia continues to build the EEU with its partners (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) on the principles of the “unshakable principles of respect for the sovereignty, rights and legitimate interests of each state,” said Putin. The implication was that the same principles of respect of sovereignty should also be applied to BRI.

Russia’s defensive, if not evasive, actions regarding BRI are understandable within the overall framework of its economic [strategy](#) of constructing a productive relationship with China while avoiding over-dependence on it. For Russia, [pride](#) in being an independent and sovereign power is perhaps as important as obtaining friendly prices for materialist gains. For China, however, the challenge is to steer the BRI through a narrow space between the “too-much” perception of the US and the “too little” BRI input into Russia.

Joint Sea 2019: new “wine” in old bottle?

While the chemistry, or lack of it, between BRI and EEU/GEP remains a challenge for both Beijing and Moscow, there was a surge of interactions between Russian and Chinese militaries in April. The overlapping military activities may have been a matter of convenience. The annual *Joint Sea* naval exercises were right after China’s naval parade for the PLAN’s 70th anniversary, in which Russian naval vessels joined the multinational gathering in Qingdao. The defense ministerial meeting in Moscow was on the sidelines of the Moscow International Security Conference. For *Joint Sea 2019*, the number of naval vessels, aircraft, and marines involved was modest (13 surface ships, two submarines, 11 fixed-wing aircraft, and 80 marines). The drills, however, were said to have achieved “[historical breakthroughs](#)” (历史性突破) in both the degree and scope of interoperability between the two navies.

The Russian Pacific Fleet dispatched a *Steregushchiy*-class frigate, a *Slava*-class guided-missile cruiser, a *Ropucha*-class large landing ship, an *Igor Belousov*-class maritime search-and-rescue support vessel, and a *Kilo*-class diesel-electric attack submarine. The

PLAN sent two guided-missile destroyers, three guided-missile frigates, a submarine rescue ship, and presumably one of the eight Russian-made *Kilos*. The ships formed two mixed “red teams” and one “blue team” and conducted a series of [first-ever](#) joint air defense, joint anti-submarine, and joint submarine rescue operations, etc.

Joint Sea 2019 started with land/beach drills by the [marines](#) of the two navies on April 30. On May 2, sea drills began with the two navies practicing submarine rescue missions of each other’s “damaged” subs. This was a significant elevation of interoperability of the two navies. In *Joint Sea 2017*, the Chinese deep-sea rescue underwater vehicle only “coupled” with a Russian submarine. This time, crew members were rescued and transported by each other’s [rescue teams](#). “This is a major step toward step beyond the 2017 operation,” remarked Du Changyu, commander of the Chinese deep-sea rescue operation. “It requires very high mutual trust between the two militaries for such a high-risk operation requiring high degree of coordination,” he added. This meant the Chinese and Russian submarine crews would put their lives and combat potential in the hands of each other’s rescue team, commented [Global Times](#).



Figure 3 Two Russian submarine sailors are coming out of China’s deep-sea rescue underwater vehicle to be transferred to the Chinese deep-sea rescue ship *Ocean Island* (海洋岛号援潜救生船). Photo: *Global Times*

Joint anti-submarine exercises were conducted on May 3 when two Russian *Tu-143MZ* anti-submarine planes joined a Chinese *Yun-8* anti-submarine plane spotted and locked two “blue team” subs: a Russian *Kilo*-class sub and a compatible PLAN [Type 039A](#) diesel-electric attack sub (*Yuan*-class by NATO’s identification). They were then attacked and destroyed by anti-submarine helicopters and

surface ships of the “red team.” The joint anti-submarine operation requires very high-level of tactical coordination,” said Zhao Yao (赵曜), deputy director of the “red team.” “All of the anti-sub techniques were used in the drills in which the Chinese and Russian surface ships searching each other’s submarines. The shipborne helicopters ([2 Russian Ka-27 and 3 Chinese ones](#)) flew through the same air space. All of this requires a very high degree of coordination,” noted Zhao.

Joint air defense was the last item of the exercises. On May 4, the PLAN *Harbin* (guided missile destroyer) and the Russian *Admiral Vinogradov* (anti-submarine warfare ship) each fired a short-range ship-to-air missiles and destroyed incoming “enemy” missiles (simulated by drones). This “first-ever” joint air defense was said not only to require close coordination of the two navies, but also the sharing of weapons’ technical and tactical data (性能参数).



Figure 4 *Harbin* fired its ship-to-air short-range missile. Photo: Pu Haiyang, *Global Times*

All these “first-ever” drill items were interfaced with an integrated command and data-sharing, (CDS) system developed by the PLAN. The CDS system allows real-time data sharing, postural display, operational coordination and command dissemination with simultaneous Chinese and Russian languages. Meanwhile, traditional communication and command methods were used as secondary means.

During *Joint Sea 2019*, the center of the CDS was located on the PLAN guided-missile destroyer *Harbin*, and was linked with other ship and aircraft (photo below) for communication and coordination down to the [tactical level](#) (战术协同), a significant upgrade from coordination at the

command level during previous Joint Sea exercises.



Figure 5 Source: CCTV

“Every Joint Sea exercise since 2012 has had its own ‘first,’” commented [Global Times](#) shortly after the naval drill. For this writer, however, progress in previous Joint Sea operations was more incremental. The 2019 drill represents real breakthroughs in terms of both interoperability, coordination, and mutual trust down to the tactical levels. “Unprecedented” (前所未有) was the word used to describe the level of interoperability for Joint Sea 2019 by Vice Adm. Qiu Yanpeng (邱延鹏), co-director of the drill and PLAN deputy commander.

Joint Sea Exercises, 2012-2019

Year/Month	Exercise Area
2012/4	Yellow Sea
2013/7	Sea of Japan
2014/5	East China Sea
2015/5	Black Sea/Mediterranean
2015/8	Sea of Japan
2016/9	South China Sea
2017/7	Baltic Sea
2017/9	Sea of Japan/Sea of Okhotsk
2019/4-5	Yellow Sea

Panda diplomacy and myth of “30-year” cycle of fate

BRI and Joint Sea seemed to be a perfect balance between “cold” economics and “warm” military-to-military ties. China and Russia, however, had many other shared interests. In their April 26 [talks](#) on the sidelines of the

second BRF, Xi and Putin covered a broad range of bilateral and international issues: Korea, Venezuela, trade, Xi’s upcoming visit to Russia for the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations, etc. Surprisingly, they did not discuss pending US sanctions on [Iranian oil exports](#).

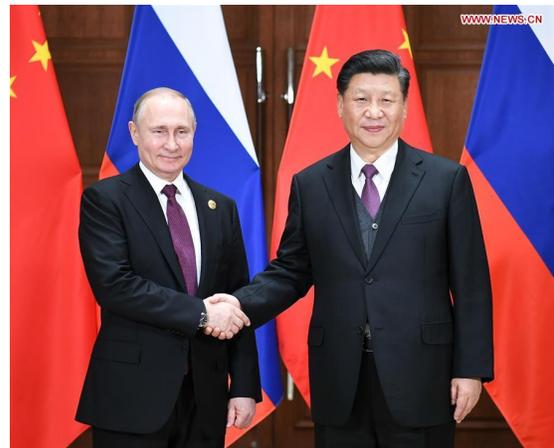


Figure 6 Source: CCTV

Xi defined the bilateral relationship between China and Russia as one of the “highest degree of mutual trust, the highest level of coordination and the highest strategic value” since 1949 when the two countries established diplomatic ties. “We should always regard each other as important development opportunities, support each other and draw on each other’s strength to achieve revitalization together,” Xi reportedly said to Putin.

To make Putin’s visit special, Xi chose BRI as the occasion to announce that China would send a pair of giant pandas to the Moscow Zoo for “joint research.” The last time China sent pandas to Moscow was in 1957 when Beijing and Moscow were still in the “honeymoon” phase of the Soviet-Chinese alliance. Three years later the alliance split (1960), leading to the US-China-Soviet strategic triangle in which Washington courted Beijing at Moscow’s expense.

In Chinese folk mythology, things always go in the opposite direction every 30 years (三十年河东，三十年河西). It has been 30 years since Beijing and Moscow normalized relations after Gorbachev’s historic visit to Beijing in 1989. Prior to this, the two largest Eurasian powers went through a 30-year enmity (1960-1989).

The past 30 years was a historic period in which the US gradually lost its pivotal posture within

the Washington-Moscow-Beijing strategic triangle by assuming a confrontational posture with both Russia and China. Regardless of the accuracy of this Chinese mythological forecasting for China-Soviet/Russia relations, President Trump has relentlessly pursued a “Russia-soft-and-China-hard” strategy to regain the pivotal position within the triangle. This was obvious throughout the 2016 presidential campaign.

In the first four months of 2019, the Trump administration seemed to be redoubling its efforts to lure Russia away from China, which is seen as the more “dangerous” strategic rival for the US. Trump pushed the [INF](#) button to alert Russia of the “China” factor, [escalated the trade war](#) with China, tightened the “screws” on Venezuela and Iran from which China imports significant amounts of oil, and had a “[long](#)” telephone call with Putin to clear both his name and that of Putin from the “Russian hoax” in the US. On the last day of April, a State Department policy planning official ([Kiron Skinner](#)) went so far as to reveal the draft of a George Kennan “Letter X”-type document depicting China as America’s “civilizational” foe. In contrast, the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union was “a fight within the Western family.”

It remains to be seen how far the new round of triangular maneuvering will unfold in the months leading to the 2020 presidential campaign. Trump may have a chance to influence Russia’s policy discourse, not necessarily because of the 30-year cycle in the China-Russia strategic partnership. Rather, the Russian foreign policy community is undergoing a round of soul-searching regarding Russia’s global posture as well as the style and substance of Russia’s grand strategy. The discourse is mostly between two seemingly polarized schools of thought: those who champion “Putin’s Lasting State” ([Долгое государство Путина](#)) or “Putin’s large political machine” (Большая политическая машина Путина) by Vladislav Surkov (Владислав Сурков) and those who call for a major policy deliberation and reorientation with broader societal input ([Dmitri Trenin](#)). Although both schools value Russia as an independent player on the world stage, the latter explicitly calls for a Russia that is independent of China.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2019

Jan. 1, 2019: Russia-China trade in 2018 passes [\\$107 billion](#) for the first time, a 27% increase over 2017. Meanwhile, China's trade with the US, Japan, and South Korea registered \$634 billion, \$318 billion, and \$313 billion, respectively.

Jan. 1, 2019: Chinese President Xi Jinping sends a [message of condolences](#) to Russian President Vladimir Putin for the gas explosion in a residential building in Magnitogorsk, Russia. On the same day, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang also sent condolences to Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, conveying deep sorrow for the victims and sincere condolences to their families. 39 people died and dozens wounded in [a huge gas explosion](#) on Dec. 31, 2018.

Jan. 7, 2019: PM Medvedev visits Chinese Embassy in Moscow for Chinese New Year celebration and meets Ambassador Li Hui. Medvedev's visit is said to be the [first ever](#) time a Russian prime minister visited a foreign embassy in Moscow.

Jan. 25, 2019: Zhang Hanhui (张汉晖), assistant to the Chinese foreign minister, and Russian Ambassador to Beijing Andrey Denisov participate in a [New Year Spring Reception](#) jointly hosted by the Chinese Foreign Ministry and Russian Embassy in Beijing.

Feb. 16, 2019: Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi and Russian foreign minister meet in Munich on the sidelines of the 55th Munich Security Conference (Feb. 15-17).

Feb. 22, 2019: Deputy Chinese Foreign Minister Zhang Hanhui joins [reception](#) for the "Defender of the Fatherland Day," formerly known as the Soviet Army and Navy Day, hosted by the Russian embassy to Beijing.

Feb. 26, 2019: Chinese Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#) meets Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Wuzhen, China. They discuss the Indian-Pakistani conflict in Kashmir and a range of bilateral and international issues including Korea, Venezuela, Afghanistan, Iran, etc. They also sign a document for the 2019 plan for the consultations by the two foreign ministries in 2019.

Feb. 27, 2019: FM Lavrov, Minister of External Affairs of India Sushma Swaraj and FM Wang Yi hold 16th meeting of the Russia India Trilateral Conference in Wuzhen. A joint communique is issued after the meeting.

March 21-22, 2019: Special representatives of Russia, China, and the US meet in Washington DC for [consultations](#) on Afghanistan. They agree to continue efforts to promote Afghan peace process on the basis of Afghan "sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity."

April 10, 2019: Joint working group [meeting](#) is held in Beijing by the Commission for Economic and Humanity Cooperation between China's Yangzi River region and Russia's Volga River region. China's Deputy FM Zhang and Deputy Plenipotentiary Representative of the President of the Russian Federation in the Volga Federal District Oleg Mashkovtsev ([Олег Мапшковцев](#)) co-chair.

April 15-19, 2019: Russian and Chinese militaries hold [first round of consultations](#) in Beijing for the third joint missile defense computer simulation to be held in Russia sometimes this year.

April 17-18, 2019: Shanghai Cooperation Organization hold [14th Forum](#) in Beijing with more than 100 experts and diplomats of the SCO and other countries participating. Afghanistan is the main topic of discussion.

April 23-25, 2019: Chinese Defense Minister [Wei Fenghe](#) (魏凤和) travels to Moscow to attend the Eighth Conference on International Security. In a speech, he talks about China's "new security concept" (新安全观) of "common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security" and praises the China-Russia military-military relationship.

April 22-25, 2019: People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) conducts a large-scale naval parade off the coast of Qingdao marking 70 years since the founding of China's Navy. It featured 32 Chinese naval vessels and 39 aircraft, as well as warships from 13 foreign countries including Russia, India, Japan, Vietnam, and Australia.

April 24-25, 2019: North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un visits Vladivostok for summit with President Putin.

April 25-27, 2019: President Putin travels to Beijing for a "[working visit](#)" and to attend the second Belt and Road Forum. Putin and Xi meet separately on April 26 focusing on Korea and Venezuela. Putin also receives an honorary degree from China's top engineering university [Qinghua](#), which is Xi's alma mater.

April 29, 2019: SCO defense ministers hold their [16th meeting](#) in Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan.

April 29-May 4, 2019: Chinese and Russian navies conduct *Joint Sea 2019* naval exercise in the Yellow Sea.

PACIFIC FORUM

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

JAPAN-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

THE EMERGING INDO-PACIFIC ERA

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Japan-Southeast Asia relations have been largely positive over the past year and this trend will likely continue in a foreseeable future. Relations have gained new political traction since early 2018 from Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) concept, which has bolstered Japan's political, economic, and security engagement with Southeast Asia. There are three main positive trends: a synchronization of Indo-Pacific concepts, Japan's enhanced security commitment to Southeast Asia, and constructive development of bilateral relations between Japan and Southeast Asian countries, particularly Vietnam. However, these trends have been focused on short-term goals and have not yet cemented a strategic relationship between Southeast Asia and Japan. Accomplishing that longer-term goal depends on whether Japan and Southeast Asian states can effectively manage three emerging challenges: reconciling differences with the US approach to the FOIP, expanding economic connectivity, and developing digital infrastructure.

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Japan–Southeast Asia relations have been largely positive over the past year and this trend will likely continue in the foreseeable future. This is partly because Japan–Southeast Asian relations have gained [new political traction](#) from Japan’s “Free and Open Indo–Pacific”(FOIP) concept, which has bolstered Japan’s political, economic, and security engagement with Southeast Asia. Relations have reached a high point. According to the [2019 ISEAS survey](#), Southeast Asian states consider Japan (65.9%) the most trusted state; compared to the United States (27.3%) and China (19.6%). They also believe Japan (65.9%) would contribute to global peace, security, prosperity and governance whereas the US (27.3%) and China (19.6%) had much lower scores.

Further, the warming relationship between Japan and China, which has been maintained since Premier [Li Keqiang’s visit to Japan](#) in May 2018, made it easier for Southeast Asian states to enhance their relations with Japan. Despite existing regional issues such as territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the most significant strategic concern for most Southeast Asian states is that they might be forced to align with a particular major power, either the US or China. Since Japan consistently sides with the US, improvement in China–Japan relations provides Southeast Asian states with more strategic space to flexibly manage relations with the major powers, at least in the short–term.

In this context, three main positive trends strengthened Japan–Southeast Asia relations: a synchronization of Indo–Pacific concepts, Japan’s enhanced security commitment to Southeast Asia, and the constructive development of bilateral relations between Japan and Southeast Asia states, particularly Vietnam. However, these are short–term trends. Ultimately, the relationship depends on whether Japan and Southeast Asian states can manage three emerging challenges: reconciling differences with the US approach to the FOIP, expanding economic connectivity, and developing digital infrastructure.

Three positive trends

Recent stability in Japan–Southeast Asian relations is well illustrated by three major positive trends. First, Japan and Southeast Asia’s concepts of the Indo–Pacific concept have gradually aligned in the past year. The basis for Japan’s FOIP concept is “[US in, China down,](#)

[ASEAN/India/Australia up.](#)” While encouraging a sustained US presence in the region and constraining China’s behavior with existing international rules and norms, Japan aims to empower ASEAN, India, and Australia through the enhancement of bilateral and multilateral ties. However, there is always a risk that Japan could face a situation where its FOIP concept is not endorsed by regional states.

Indeed, in May 2018, Singapore’s Foreign Minister Vivian Balkrishnan [stated](#) that unless ASEAN centrality was clearly defined in the FOIP concept, Singapore would not join related groupings such as the quadrilateral cooperative framework between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. This concern was generally shared by all ASEAN member states because such non–ASEAN arrangements would politically marginalize the association and prevent it from setting or controlling the agenda for regional multilateralism. This is one of the most compelling reasons why Indonesia began pursuing the idea of [developing](#) a separate ASEAN Indo–Pacific concept in 2018, resulting in [ASEAN’s formal discussion](#) on the concept in November. In March 2019, Indonesia hosted the first [High–Level Dialogue on Indo–Pacific Cooperation](#), emphasizing the basic principles that ASEAN values: openness, inclusivity, transparency, rules–based order, and ASEAN centrality.

Japan moved to mitigate ASEAN’s concern by incorporating the association’s principles into its FOIP concept between mid–2018 to early–2019. In August 2018, some ASEAN member states [argued](#) that it would be difficult to support the “strategy” as it would presumably target China. Accordingly, Japan eliminated the term “strategy” since it was seen as connoting that there were targeted actors to “defeat,” shifting from talking about the “[Free and Open Indo–Pacific Strategy](#),” to simply using “FOIP.” While the change in terminology does not have a strategic impact on Japan’s basic posture or policies, it sends a political signal that Japan is open to suggestions from external actors, particularly ASEAN.

A second, more important, change was Japan incorporation of the principle of “ASEAN unity and centrality” into its FOIP concept. [Japan’s initial FOIP framework in 2016](#) was rudimentary and did not include a reference to ASEAN. In 2018, Japan [incorporated](#) ASEAN in its FOIP conceptual map and publicly emphasized the

importance of ASEAN centrality and unity. The Quad states also publicized the importance of these principles: there is Indian Prime Minister [Narendra Modi's keynote speech](#) at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, Australian Foreign Minister [Marise Payne's speech](#) at the 2019 Australia-US Dialogue, and the [2019 joint statement](#) of the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee. Mitigating ASEAN's political concerns in the context of the emerging FOIP concepts have gradually aligned the concepts of Japan and ASEAN, creating a shared vision toward the Indo-Pacific region.

Japan has also started institutionalizing its defense commitment to Southeast Asia. Japan's "[Vientiane Vision](#)" in 2016 set the framework for cooperation to ensure regional security, including management of nontraditional security and maritime security, with ASEAN member states. As part of this effort, Japan has conducted joint military exercises and capacity-building programs.

Bilaterally, as the Philippines and Vietnam face acute strategic pressures from China over the South China Sea, Japan not only provided maritime law enforcement assets, such as coast guard patrol ships, but also conducted coordinated [capacity building programs](#) with the United States, aimed at strengthening Southeast Asian states' capabilities, including maritime domain awareness (MDA). In this connection, Japan also plans to launch new programs, such as the "[professional airmanship program](#)," which facilitates confidence-building measures between air services and nurtures shared values to adhere to rule of law.

While these programs illustrate the continuity of Japan's commitment, the most salient trend of Japan's policy in Southeast Asia from 2018 is its increasing defense presence in the region, despite its political limits and limited military capabilities. From August to October 2018, Japan conducted the [Indo-Southeast Asia Deployment 2018](#) (ISEAD 2018), in which approximately 800 Japanese personnel with *JS Kaga*, *JS Inazuma*, and *JS Suzutsuki* sailed through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, making port calls at Southeast Asian ports in Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines. While this operation is not formally institutionalized, Japan dispatched *JS Izumo* and other fleets for [Singapore's first maritime review](#) in May 2017, and in 2019, Japan plans to conduct [the Indo-Pacific Deployment 2019 \(IPD19\)](#), which is equivalent to ISEAD 2018,

from April to July, bringing *JS Izumo* and *JS Murasame* with approximately 590 personnel to visit Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore.

These operations are neither equivalent to US freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) nor guaranteed to be conducted every year given Japan's limited military assets. Also, if they not carefully managed, these operations could provide China justification to be more assertive in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, Japan's increased presence and visibility in the South China Sea has served to check [China's activities](#), which has been welcomed by some Southeast Asian states, especially Vietnam. Japan has also engaged with other potential partners, including France and the United Kingdom, to coordinate such operations. If a division of labor is established, this could offer a new strategic option that Southeast Asian states can rely on for ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea.

While Japan's bilateral relations with each Southeast Asian state have been well managed, these efforts have been concentrated on a limited number of states, Vietnam in particular. The focus on Vietnam is partly because it is the ASEAN country coordinator for Japan from 2018 to 2021. However, with Vietnam becoming the ASEAN chair in 2020, it will also be able to shape the ASEAN agenda during its tenure. Vietnam welcomes this opportunity because Japan has been an important strategic partner for its economic and defense development. Additionally, 2018 was the 45th anniversary of Japan-Vietnam diplomatic relations, which gave both states traction to enhance bilateral ties.

President Tran Dai Quang visited Japan in May as a state guest and issued the [Joint Statement](#) with Prime Minister Abe Shinzo that touched on Japan's FOIP objectives that Vietnam shares: freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, adherence to international law, maritime security, and connectivity through quality infrastructure development based on international standards. Throughout 2018, both states frequently conducted high-level dialogues, confirming the continued importance of Japanese overseas development assistance (ODA) to Vietnam and joint efforts to facilitate free trade through the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). In December, Japan and

Vietnam began negotiating a mutual legal assistance treaty and extradition treaty, nurturing bilateral legal norms. These cooperative schemes support the rules-based international order.

Other bilateral relations have also steadily strengthened. In addition to issuance of [Indonesia's samurai bonds](#), Japan has pledged to issue samurai bonds in [the Philippines](#) (approximately \$1.4 billion – focusing on infrastructure linked to environmental protection) and [Malaysia](#) (approximately \$1.8 billion – focusing on education and transportation). For infrastructure development, Indonesia completed the first phase of the Jakarta [subway project](#) in March 2019 and has been constructing the Patimban Deep Sea Port using loans from Japan. Also, [Japan and Thailand](#) agreed to enhance areas of cooperation between the Mekong-Japan framework and the Thai-led Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) to promote subregional cooperation among Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Japan supported democratization and human rights protection in Cambodia and Myanmar through the Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youth (JENESYS) by [inviting younger politicians from Cambodia](#) and through the [Japan-Myanmar Human Rights Dialogue](#).

Some of these initiatives were in place long before Japan's FOIP concept emerged. Yet, under it, Southeast Asian states have received additional political, military, financial, and socio-cultural support from Japan, which facilitates interconnectedness between Japan and Southeast Asian states.

Three challenges: political values, economics influence, and digitalization

Despite these positive trends, three strategic challenges and risks remain in Japan-Southeast Asia relations: diverging approaches to the FOIP, limited economic connectivity, and uncertain prospects for digital infrastructure. These issues would not immediately threaten the entirety of Japan-Southeast Asian relations, but they could marginalize the relationship as they gradually diminish Japan's influence in Southeast Asia.

First, Japan's approach toward "fundamental rights" within the FOIP concept has diverged from the US approach, which could affect the

stability of the Southeast Asian strategic environment. While Japan and the US share the common objective of maintaining the existing international order led by the United States, Japan has emphasized rule of law at the international level while the US focuses on both the domestic and international levels, including the promotion of democratization and human rights protection as Alex Wong, deputy assistant secretary of Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs at the US State Department, has [explained](#).

Japan takes a softer approach toward nondemocratic Southeast Asian states, especially Cambodia and Myanmar. When Cambodia held a general election in July 2018, its election process was criticized as illegitimate by the United States and Europe because of political pressure imposed by Hun Sen, the prime minister from the Cambodia People's Party (CPP). Most notably, Hun Sen dissolved the opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), in November 2017, which had been rapidly gaining public support for the upcoming election. In Myanmar, despite the democratization process, the government has conducted counterinsurgency operations in Rakhine State since 2016, when it clashed with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). This incident resulted escalated the conflict and led to major human rights [violations against Rohingya](#), which triggered a refugee crisis.

While the United States imposed [sanctions](#) on individual human rights violators in Myanmar in 2018 and passed a [sanctions bill](#) targeting Hun Sen and senior officials in Cambodia in 2019, Japan continued to take a softer approach by providing ODA to these states to facilitate socio-economic stability while supporting infrastructure development. Japan expressed regret about Cambodia's election process and it showed a political interest in promoting [democratization](#). Yet, Japan avoided direct criticism; instead, it conducted educational exchange programs for young policymakers to learn about [Japan's democratic process](#).

This divergence in FOIP concepts has a long-term strategic implications for Japan and Southeast Asian states. Without a clear understanding of each state's policy and a political division of labor, diplomatic misunderstandings and tension between the US and Japan over these issues could emerge, further complicating relations between China,

Japan, and the United States. As major power competition intensifies in the Indo-Pacific region, states, including Japan, are likely to pay less attention to regional multilateralism and possibly marginalize ASEAN.

A second challenge is the clear limitations on Japan's [economic influence](#) in Southeast Asia in the long-term, in comparison with China. China surpassed Japan's GDP in 2010 and has been ASEAN's number one trading partner since 2009. In recent years, China's trade volume rapidly increased. In 2016, China increased its export of goods from \$144 billion in 2016 to \$186 billion in 2017; meanwhile, Japan increased exports from \$96 billion to \$105 billion. China's imports increased from \$224 billion in 2016 to \$254 billion in 2017 while Japan's increased from \$105 billion to \$113 billion. This trade imbalance is particularly glaring in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, where China's figure in 2017, \$113 billion, is approximately three times larger than Japan's figure, \$37 billion. For individual Southeast Asian states, China's exports are three to four [times larger](#) than Japan's. The figures are relatively close in Thailand's case, but even so, Japan's figure is \$27/29 billion in 2016 and 2017, respectively, while China's is \$37/38 billion. In terms of imports, Japan exceeds China in Brunei and Cambodia, but the absolute amount was still relatively small. Given the size of China's domestic market, this trend is likely to continue.

These figures do not capture the effect of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), however, which went into effect Dec. 30, 2018. The figures might change for Singapore and Vietnam, while waiting for Malaysia's and Brunei's ratification. However, given relatively stable trade trends, China's trade influence over Southeast Asian states will not likely shift in the near future. RCEP is another tool to bolster trade relations among member states. Yet, in 2018 the RCEP ministerial meeting postponed its deadline for completing the agreement from the end of 2018 to the end of 2019, which raised doubts about whether the framework can be implemented as scheduled.

On foreign direct investment (FDI), Japan has been a dominant player in Southeast Asia, but this trend is also shifting. According to [the 2018 ASEAN Investment Report](#), Japan's share of total investment in ASEAN was 9.6% (\$13.2 billion) in 2017, passing the United States, which lagged

behind in 2017 with 3.9% (\$5.4 billion – significantly decreasing from \$18.8 billion in 2016 due to large divestment). China maintained its investment level, providing \$11.3 billion and moved up from fourth in 2016 to third in 2017, just behind ASEAN and Japan. As such, Japan maintained its dominant position. However, the situation in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar is different. China surpassed ASEAN in 2017, raising its share from 22% to 22.6%, and became the top investor (Japan was at 8.7% in 2016 and 8.3% in 2017). China has been the largest investor in Laos, dominating with a share of 66% in 2016 and 77.5% in 2017. (Japan was at 4.1% in 2016 and 2017). In Myanmar, neither China nor Japan was the dominant player in 2016 and in 2017 while ASEAN and the Republic of Korea played a significant role, dominating with 56.3% and 19.7% in 2016 and 18.2% and 48.2% in 2017, respectively. In these countries, investment gaps between Japan and China were not narrowed. Furthermore, since China's overall FDI has rapidly increased, it would not be surprising if China becomes the top investor in Southeast Asia in the near future.

From this regional economic trend, it is understandable why the 2019 ISEAS Survey indicated that Southeast Asian states consider Japan to be the most trustworthy country while China was seen as the most influential state in Southeast Asia.

A third challenge, digital infrastructure, has added strategic uncertainty in Southeast Asia. Industry 4.0 has gained attention from the international community as it has the potential to alter ways of life through automation and digitalization of society primarily based on a new 5G telecommunications system. Digital infrastructure becomes the key to advancing society, and it has been greatly contested as seen in the [2018 Huawei incident](#), which intensified the technological rivalry between China and the US. This issue also affects Japan-Southeast Asia relations because Japan has followed the US lead in this field while many Southeast Asian states have yet to clarify their stance.

Japan is concerned about incorporating Chinese products into its 5G system due to security reasons, including cyberattacks, influence operations, and information security. [Four Japanese companies](#) – NTT Docomo Inc., KDDI Corp., SoftBank Corp., and Rakuten – have been distributed Japanese 5G frequencies and decided to refrain from using Chinese products,

including Huawei and ZTE. While Southeast Asian states have yet to establish 5G guidelines, it is unlikely that they will exclude Chinese products despite the security risks. For developing economies, cyber security risks are lower priority. Since they cannot technically control information security, they might well purchase Chinese products because of their lower cost and better performance. These choices have long-term implications for state security. Nevertheless, socio-economic development is likely to be their short-term priority.

Some Southeast Asian states are concerned about digital influences and information security. For example, Vietnam is now considering development of its own 5G system through [Viettel](#), the largest mobile network provider in Vietnam. Singapore has sought to maintain a neutral position by including Ericsson, Nokia, and Huawei through its three telecommunication companies, [Singtel](#), [Starhub](#), and [M1](#). A problem would arise if the US takes a tougher stance against China's 5G system to force countries to exclusively select a system. This would make it difficult for Japan to cooperate in not only the digital field but also other areas related to Industry 4.0 with Southeast Asian states that adopt Chinese systems.

Although the issue remains largely speculative, the development of digital infrastructure in Japan and Southeast Asian states creates strategic uncertainty in their relations, which needs to be closely watched in 2019/2020.

Looking ahead: 2019 and beyond

From the mid-2018 to early 2019, Japan-Southeast Asia relations remained stable and ties have gradually strengthened. Japan conducted careful diplomacy to avoid disrupting bilateral and collective relations with Southeast Asian states while steadily strengthening its security presence in the South China Sea through ISEAD 2018 and providing quality infrastructure to the region through developmental assistance. Southeast Asian states nurtured amicable relations with Japan without antagonizing China, essentially hedging against being forced to choose between the US or China.



Figure 1 ISEAD 2018. Photo: MilitaryLeak.com

These strategic trends are not destined to continue in the longer term, considering the potential intensification of competition between the United States and China. Then, Japan and Southeast Asian states would likely face the above-mentioned challenges more acutely, which could create tensions in the relationship. The key to making the Japan-Southeast Asia relationship more resilient and a pivotal part of the Indo-Pacific region is to include risk-management dialogues to address the challenges. For Japan, 2019 is the “[year of action to realize a free and open Indo-pacific](#),” which should help consolidate and elevate Japan-Southeast Asian relations.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

MAY 2018 – APRIL 2019

May 11, 2018: Ninth Japan-Cambodia Human Rights Dialogue is held.

May 21, 2018: Japanese Foreign Minister Kono Taro meets Indonesian counterpart Retno Marsuda meet in Indonesia.

May 25-June 11, 2018: Japan's Ground Self-defense Force (JGSDF) conducts capacity building program in Cambodia, providing a two-week survey training course to 17 Royal Cambodian Army Force personnel.

May 30, 2018: FM Kono meets Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Binh Minh.

May 31, 2018: Japan-Vietnam Summit held in Japan during 45th anniversary of Japan-Vietnam diplomatic relations. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and President Tran Dai Quang issue a [Japan-Viet Nam joint statement](#).

June 11, 2018: Japanese FM Kono meets Laotian FM Saleumxay Kommasith in Japan.

June 12, 2018: Japan-Laos Summit held in Japan between PM Abe and PM Thongloun Sisoulith.

June 12, 2018: Japan-Malaysia Summit held in Japan between PM Abe and PM Mahathir Mohamad.

June 12-15, 2018: GSDF conducts capacity building program – the use and maintenance of water purification equipment – with Royal Thai Army personnel who will be deployed to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).

June 18-22, 2018: Japanese Ministry of Defense (JMOD) provides capacity-building project for Vietnamese Air Defense and Air Force officers.

June 20, 2018: Japanese FM Kono meets Philippines Secretary of Foreign Affairs Alan Peter Cayetano in Tokyo.

June 20, 2018: Fifth meeting of the Japan-Philippines Joint Committee on Infrastructure Development and Economic Cooperation is held in Tokyo.

June 25-29, 2018: JMOD and Japan Air Self Defense Force (JASDF) organize a technical exchange program on aviation meteorology for Myanmar Air Force (MAF) officers.

June 25, 2018: FM Kono meets Indonesian FM Retno.

June 27, 2018: Japan-Thailand Foreign Ministers Kono and Don Pramudwinai meet in Bangkok.

July 2, 2018: Japan-Brunei Foreign Ministers Kono and Dato Erywan meet in Tokyo.

July 11, 2018: Japan-Malaysia Foreign Ministers Kono and Saifuddin Abdullah meet in Malaysia.

Aug. 2, 2018: Japan-Brunei Foreign Ministers Kono and Erywan meet in Singapore.

Aug. 2, 2018: Japan-Vietnam Foreign Ministers Kono and Minh meet in Singapore.

Aug. 2, 2018: Japan-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting is held in Singapore.

Aug. 3, 2018: Japan-Indonesia Foreign Ministers Kono and Retno meet in Singapore.

Aug. 4, 2018: Japan-Cambodia Foreign Ministers Kono and Prak Sokhonn meet in Singapore.

Aug. 5, 2018: Japan-Singapore Foreign Ministers Kono and Vivian Balkrishnan meet in Singapore.

Aug. 6, 2018: FM Kono visits Myanmar and meets State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, Union Minister for International Cooperation Kyaw Tin, Commander-in-Chief of the Defense Services Min Aung Hlain, and Union Minister for the Office of the State Counsellor Kyaw Tint Swe.

Aug. 20-24, 2018: JMOD and Vietnamese Ministry of National Defense hold a PKO seminar on Japan's experiences in UNMISS as part of Japan's capacity-building programs.

Aug. 26 – Oct. 30, 2018: Indo Southeast Asia Deployment 2018 (ISEAD 18) is conducted.

Aug. 28 – Sept. 28, 2018: Japan GSDF joint Exercise *Harii Hamutuk 18*, a capacity-building program to Timor Leste, is held, providing a Survey and Heavy Equipment Maintenance Course. Australia and the US also participate.

Sept. 12, 2018: FM Kono pays a courtesy call on Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Sept. 12, 2018: FM Kono meets State Counsellor and Union Minister for Foreign Affairs of Myanmar Aung San Suu Kyi.

Sept. 13, 2018: Tenth Meeting of the Japan-Vietnam Cooperation Committee is held in Vietnam.

Sept. 13, 2018: Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) conducts anti-submarine warfare (ASW) exercise in South China Sea with submarine *Kuroshio* and three destroyers, *Kaga*, *Inazuma*, and *Suzutsuki*.

Sept. 23, 2018: Nikai Toshihro, secretary general of the Liberal Democratic Party (Japan), visits Vietnam as special envoy for PM Abe to attend a state funeral for President Tran Dai Quang.

Oct. 8, 2018: Bilateral summit meetings between Japan and Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, are held in Japan on the occasion of the 10th Mekong-Japan Summit Meeting.

Oct. 9, 2018: Tenth Mekong-Japan Summit Meeting is held in Japan.

Oct. 9, 2018: PM Abe meets Myanmar's State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi.

Oct. 15-20, 2018: JMOD and JASDF conduct Aviation Meteorology Seminar in Myanmar as part of capacity-building cooperation with MAF personnel.

Oct. 23-25, 2018: JMOD organizes third Seminar for Air Rescue as capacity-building program in Vietnam.

Oct. 19, 2018: Japan-Singapore Summit between PM Abe and PM Lee Hsien Loong held in Tokyo.

Nov. 6, 2018: Japan-Malaysia Summit between PM Abe and PM Mahathir is held in Tokyo, where Mahathir receives the Order of the Paulownia Flowers (*Toka sho*).

Nov. 14, 2018: ASEAN-Japan Summit is held in Singapore and commemorates the 45th Anniversary of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation.

Nov. 15, 2018: ASEAN Plus Three is held in Singapore while bilateral summits between Japan and Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam are also held.

Nov. 19-23, 2018: JMOD and JGSDF conduct HA/DR Training Program as part of its capacity-building program to the Lao People's Army.

Nov. 21, 2018: Sixth Meeting of the Japan-Philippines Joint Committee on Infrastructure Development and Economic Cooperation is held in the Philippines.

Dec. 4, 2018: Japan-Singapore Foreign Ministers Kono and Balakrishnan meet in Japan. They sign a revised Memorandum of Discussion (MOD) for the Japan-Singapore Partnership Programme for the 21st Century (JSP21).

Dec. 10-14, 2018: JMOD and JMSDF officers conduct the fourth Underwater Medicine Seminar in Myanmar as part of the capacity building assistance.

Dec. 14, 2018: First Japan-Vietnam negotiation on treaty on mutual legal assistance is held.

Jan. 23-24, 2019: First Japan-Vietnam negotiation on treaty on extradition is held.

Jan. 28-Feb. 1, 2019: MOD and JASDF hold a technical exchange on Aviation Meteorology in Japan for Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar.

Jan. 28-Feb. 1, 2019: JMOD and JSDF conduct second Japan-ASEAN Invitation Program on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR) with all ASEAN member states and the ASEAN Secretariat.

Feb. 10, 2019: Japan FM Kono and Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin meet in the Philippines and sign an Exchange of Notes concerning a loan to the Philippines on “a road network that supports the foundation of people’s lives in the conflict affected areas in western part of Mindanao.”

Feb. 21, 2019: Seventh meeting of the Japan-Philippines Joint Committee on Infrastructure Development and Economic Cooperation is held in Japan.

March 4, 2019: Sixth Japan-Myanmar Human Rights Dialogue is held.

March 11-15, 2019: JMOD holds an Undersea Medicine Seminar as part of Japan’s capacity-building program for the Vietnamese Navy.

March 13-15, 2019: Second Japan-Vietnam negotiation on treaty on mutual legal assistance held.

March 18-29, 2019: Second Japan-Vietnam negotiation on treaty on extradition is held.

March 20, 2019: High-Level Dialogue on Indo-Pacific Cooperation is held in Indonesia.

March 22, 2019: First annual iteration of a capacity-building project to enhance Japanese language skills at the Myanmar Defense Services Academy (DSA) is held.

March 24, 2019: First Jakarta Mass Rapid Transit (Jakarta MRT), which was built as part of Japan’s infrastructure development assistance, opens.

April 17, 2019: Japanese Defense Minister Iwaya Takeshi meets Philippine Secretary of National Defense Delfin Lorenzana in Tokyo.

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