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# COMPARATIVE

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**REGIONAL OVERVIEW**

## THE PANDEMIC SPREADS AND THE WORLD RESPONDS

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The COVID-19 pandemic challenged the international community's ability to respond, and looks to take a heavy and enduring toll on the global economy. International focus on the pandemic should not cause us to overlook other significant events: increased Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and toward Hong Kong and Taiwan, growing China-Australia tensions, the non-summit between President Trump and ASEAN leaders, South Korean elections, and a dispute over host nation support which raised questions about the ROK-US alliance. Meanwhile, the disappearance of Kim Jong Un from the public eye raised questions about how prepared the world is for dealing with a sudden leadership change on the Korean Peninsula.

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This trimester's regional overview focuses on the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on regional security affairs. But as the other chapters attest, international focus on the pandemic should not cause us to overlook other significant events that transpired during this reporting period: increased Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and vis-à-vis Hong Kong and Taiwan, growing China-Australia tensions, the non-summit between President Trump and the leaders of ASEAN, South Korean elections (with an outcome closely tied to its handling of the pandemic, but with far-reaching implications in other areas), and the dispute over host nation support, which has raised questions about the vitality (indeed, even the survivability) of the ROK-US alliance, to cite just a few. Meanwhile, the (somewhat) unusual but not unprecedented disappearance of Kim Jong Un from the public eye raised questions about how prepared the US (among others) is for dealing with a sudden leadership change on the peninsula.

The coronavirus pandemic is first and foremost a health crisis affecting virtually every corner of the globe. China's disingenuous attempts to divert attention from its near-certain Wuhan origin has instead raised questions as to where in Wuhan it was born: the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market (as originally suspected), or elsewhere (for instance, the Wuhan Institute of Virology lab). Beijing's heavy-handed diplomatic campaign to win international support for its efforts—and to suppress any criticism, real or anticipated—has alienated many around the world. While the medical community rushes to find effective treatments and a vaccine, economists are beginning to forecast the current and projected long-term impact on the world economy and globalization: it will be heavy and it will be enduring.

Finally, in case you missed it, the USAF ended its permanent presence of strategic bombers on Guam in April, raising questions (and suspicions) about Washington's commitment to this "top priority" region.

### **The "Wuhan Pneumonia" and Its Global Spread**

As of May 1, over 3.5 million individuals had been sickened and almost 250,000 had died worldwide (in at least 177 countries) from the novel coronavirus (dubbed severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 or SARS-

CoV-2); most experts believed these numbers, representing confirmed cases, were likely well below reality. The latest figures, compiled daily, by *The New York Times*, can be found at its [Coronavirus Map](#).

Unless and until better evidence surfaces, we are inclined to believe the April 30 "US Intelligence Community Statement on Origins of COVID-19" which [concludes](#) unequivocally that the virus "originated in China." It also "concurs with the wide scientific consensus that the COVID-19 virus was not manmade or genetically modified," debunking conspiracy theories that this was a manmade biological weapon that inadvertently (or otherwise) escaped from a Chinese military lab. This has not laid to rest controversy over the virus' origin, however. The press release continues, "The IC will continue to rigorously examine emerging information and intelligence to determine whether the outbreak began through contact with infected animals or if it was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan." Many, including both Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, seem to support the latter explanation but the jury (at least in the eyes of the US Intelligence Community) remains out as of this writing.

A global challenge presents an opportunity for global cooperation and, to a certain extent, this is emerging, led by the World Health Organization (WHO) and many individual national leaders. The May 4 online "[virtual vaccine summit](#)," led by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and involving, among others, heads of state or government from Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Israel, Japan, Jordan, and Turkey, aimed to raise money "from governments, philanthropies and the private sector to fund research and mass-produce drugs, vaccines and testing kits to combat the virus." While prominent US philanthropist Bill Gates was among those participating, conspicuous by their absence were President Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping. (Chinese Premier Li Keqiang was initially scheduled to attend but was replaced at the last minute by Zhang Ming, Beijing's ambassador to the EU.) A senior Trump administration official reportedly said the US "welcomes" the effort, noting the "very significant funding and support from the US government and private sector" that already exists, but did not provide a rationale for Washington's absence despite repeated direct questions from the [media](#). Others were quick to

attribute it to Trump's "America First" policy and cite it as yet another example of US disengagement and/or Washington's failure to play its traditional global leadership role.

If Asia has tried to deal multilaterally with the pandemic, we have missed it. Most ASEAN-led multilateral institutions, like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meetings, postponed or cancelled working-level meetings in the wake of the pandemic; summits usually occur in the fall. ASEAN Leaders, under Vietnam's leadership, did conduct a virtual ASEAN Special Summit on COVID-19 to create an ASEAN Response Fund, to allow members to pool resources and to provide a mechanism for foreign donors. Later that day, their "Plus Three partners" (China, Japan, and South Korea) [joined them](#) in pledging to cooperate with one another while jointly expressing their support for the efforts of the WHO. However, the planned US-ASEAN Summit, scheduled for Las Vegas in late March, was put on hold as a result of the pandemic, sparing Trump possible embarrassment as a number of Asian leaders had indicated they would not show up. Pompeo did meet separately with his fellow foreign ministers via teleconference on April 23, with the joint statement [reportedly](#) being delayed by three days over Pompeo's insistence that there be a strong statement regarding China's handling of the pandemic. While many ASEAN leaders no doubt share US discontent over Beijing's handling of the crisis, it is not in ASEAN's style to allow any dialogue partner to attack a third party in its joint statements.

Internationally, G20 members, led by Saudi Arabia, did hold a "Virtual Leaders' Summit" on March 26, in which they [pledged](#) "to do whatever it takes to overcome the pandemic." It called for a "transparent, robust, coordinated, large-scale, and science-based global response in the spirit of solidarity." An [assessment](#) of the meeting shows little of substance was actually done however. G20 health ministers subsequently met on April 26. Apparently, a draft statement from the meeting was [scuppered](#) by the US which rejected positive references to the WHO. Trump had announced on April 14 that the US was suspending its payments to the WHO, which "failed to adequately obtain and share information in a timely and transparent fashion" regarding the pandemic. More specifically, the WHO "failed to investigate credible reports from sources in

Wuhan that conflicted directly with the Chinese government's official accounts." A G7 virtual ministerial meeting on March 25 also failed to issue a joint communique, [reportedly](#) over Pompeo's insistence on including reference to the "Wuhan virus," an allegation [refuted](#) by the secretary of state.

True or not, there is no denying that the pandemic has exacerbated China-US tensions. As chronicled in our [US-China chapter](#), Trump was at first a big fan of Xi's handling of the crisis. This changed after Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian disingenuously [tweeted](#) on March 12 that "it might be [the] US army that brought the epidemic to Wuhan." Trump and Pompeo immediately went on the offensive. Trump began [tweeting](#) about the "Chinese Virus" and Pompeo began insisting on using "Wuhan virus" in describing the outbreak, prompting China's hardline nationalist *Global Times* to [accuse](#) both men (as well as other American officials and politicians) of being "racist."

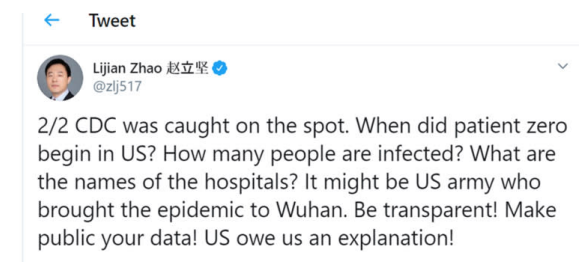


Figure 1 Lijian Zhao's tweet that "it might be [the] US army that brought the epidemic to Wuhan." Photo: Nikkei Asian Review

Ironically, a Google search on the subject can find numerous reference to "Wuhan pneumonia" in *Global Times* reporting on the pandemic in January and February. However, all such titles have conveniently been changed to "novel pneumonia" in its archives, yet another example of China's attempts to manipulate coverage on the subject.

Washington and Beijing each seem to be its own worst enemy in their dispute over the virus. At a time when Beijing was largely being applauded for its effective handling of the pandemic, China unconvincingly started a diplomatic campaign aimed at blaming others for the virus and/or conditioning Chinese assistance to a nation's praise of Beijing's efforts. Meanwhile, the US decision to cut funding to the WHO in the midst of a pandemic, followed by immediate signals of support to the organization from Beijing,

Moscow, Tehran, and elsewhere, appeared to be a US own goal feeding the “America First equals America alone” narrative that Washington has been trying to put down.

As the US presidential campaign heats up, the situation between Washington and Beijing is likely to worsen. It’s already clear that the China debate between the two primary candidates will not be the traditional “engage versus confront” question but will instead focus on who is prepared to be tougher on China. This bodes ill for China-US relations at least between now and November.

### ‘A Crisis Like No Other...’

While the world economy has experienced crises like the COVID-19 outbreak before, the impact has never been as sudden or as severe. Kristalina Georgieva, managing director of the IMF, has [concluded](#) that “This is a crisis like no other ... this is way worse than the [2008] global financial crisis,” an assessment consistent with Oxford Economics’ [characterization](#) of the outbreak as “an unprecedented threat to both human health and to prosperity in countries in the Asia Pacific region and globally.”

Estimates of the economic impact of the pandemic vary, but all agree that it will be painful and the duration and intensity of the pain depends on the measures that governments take—both medical and economic—to address the outbreak. Tough measures may heighten pain in the short term but they could accelerate recovery. Many governments are adopting that approach: Oliver Blanchard, former chief economist at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) who is currently associated with the Peterson Institute of International Economics, observed that one-third of global economic activity has been halted in just months, a figure consistent with the Oxford Economics estimate that by the end of April, 37% of Asia-Pacific GDP was under some form of lockdown.

An April [report](#) by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) explained the tsunami-like effects of economic dislocation which it calls a “feedback reinforced spiral.” It begins with mass production disruptions created by China’s campaign to isolate the contagion. This effort reduced supplies of goods and services, which cut hours worked and lowered incomes. Supply fell and domestic demand in China plunged as well. A global

pandemic further reduced demand in consuming countries, and darkening expectations about the economic outlook accelerated the downward spiral. Social distancing measures enacted around the world disrupted highly integrated trade links and value chains. Soon, pain in the real economy spread to the financial sector, which threatened a liquidity crisis as credit dried up and asset prices plummeted. To summarize, lockdown measures cut domestic demand and their impact is compounded by a collapse in world trade as consumers elsewhere experience their own lockdowns and businesses in response delay investment plans because of uncertainty over when recovery might begin.

This means that while economic analysis in this section (such as it is) normally focuses on Asia-Pacific economies, it is worthwhile to start with global numbers since they impact economic activity despite being half a world away. But enough foreplay; now for the numbers.

Start with the big picture. As of the spring—and estimates are continually being updated—the IMF (in its most optimistic scenario) [expects](#) a global contraction of 3% this year, with advanced economies shrinking 6.1% and emerging economies contracting 1%, although China and India will register some, much-reduced, growth. The IMF anticipates 90% of countries will experience negative growth in real GDP per capita this year. (In 2009, that figure was 62%.) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) [expects](#) global GDP to be reduced this year by \$2.0 trillion to \$4.1 trillion, or 2.3%-4.8% as a result of the coronavirus. Private economists have cut forecasts for global growth in 2020; at the start of March average projections were for about 3%. This means, in more concrete terms, that at the beginning of May the US recorded over 20 million claims for unemployment insurance, while McKinsey estimated that 59 million jobs are at risk in Europe, about 26% of total employment in the 27 member countries of the EU and UK. Even with a recovery anticipated next year—a constant across all forecasts—the IMF [warned](#) that most countries should expect their economies to be 5% smaller than planned in 2021.

### ‘Significant Economic Pain Seems Unavoidable’

Moving to the region, the World Bank [warned](#) in March that most Asia-Pacific economies were prepared for “normal tremors” in the economy,



but this ain't that. Its April 2020 Economic Update for East Asia and the Pacific concluded that while forecasts are tough given the range of potential responses and outcomes, "significant economic pain seems unavoidable in all countries." It offered two outcomes: in the baseline scenario, growth in the developing EAP region will drop to 2.1%; it shrinks to 0.5 in the lower-case scenario in 2020. (For comparison, growth in 2019 was an estimated 5.8%.) For many economists, the key to the regional outlook is the situation in China. The World Bank projected China's growth would drop to 2.3% in the baseline and 0.1 percent in the lower-case scenario in 2020, substantial reductions from the 6.1% growth registered in 2019.

The Asian Development Bank has a dark assessment as well. It [concluded](#) that emerging Asian economies would expand at their slowest pace this year in 22 years, with growth in developing Asia falling to 2.2% in 2020, the slowest since 1998, the year after the Asian Financial Crisis, when those economies grew 1.7%. Last September, the ADB forecast growth of 5.5%. It anticipates 2.3% growth in China, a little more than a third of last year's 6.1% expansion. Southeast Asian economies are anticipated to register 1.0% growth after growing 4.4% in 2019. Pacific economies will likely contract by 0.3%. After registering 5.1% growth last year, South Asia will slow to a 4.1% expansion in 2020, with India, the region's largest economy, setting the pace by growing 4.0%, although experts caution that the spread of COVID in that country has been slow and could be more widespread than currently known.

Oxford Economics' February forecast for Asia Pacific GDP growth in 2020 was 3.8%, a cut from 4.3% in the December 2019 forecast and a reduction that was more than twice the change in the global outlook. It blamed a 15% contraction in world trade this year (5 percentage points higher than the drop after the 2008 financial crisis), which will hammer the trade reliant economies of Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan: their GDP is forecast to drop 6%, 5%, and 0.6%, respectively.

Here is some perspective on what those numbers mean. The UNDP estimates that its baseline scenario means that nearly 24 million fewer people will escape poverty in the Asia Pacific in 2020 than would have in the absence

of the pandemic (with a poverty line of \$5.50/day). If the economic situation further deteriorates, then poverty will increase by another 11 million people. To put it another way, in the worst-case scenario, 35 million people who would have otherwise escaped remain in poverty because of the disease.

Meanwhile, the International Labor Organization (ILO) [reckoned](#) that COVID puts 25 million jobs at risk. It has forecast a 6.7% loss in working hours globally in the second quarter of 2020, which is equivalent to 195 million full-time workers—125 million of which are in Asia and the Pacific.

### 'A Rethink of How the World Does Business'

There is a widespread belief that the pandemic will permanently change the way business is conducted. With nearly 100 governments closing national borders, flows of people, for business and pleasure, have been stopped. Tourism is an immediate casualty of this decision and many small and emerging economies that rely on foreign visitors are being badly hurt. The UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs (DESA) [noted](#) that 11 of the 25 countries in which tourism contributes the most to the economy are in the Asia Pacific region; tourist arrivals in Sri Lanka and Vietnam fell by double-digits relative to February last year. It also noted that small- and medium-sized enterprises account for 80% of the global tourism sector which employs approximately 123 million people worldwide, and they will sustain outside damage.



Figure 2 Tourist arrivals in Vietnam fell by double-digits relative to February last year. Photo: New York Times

Beata Javorcik, chief economist at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, [insists](#) that COVID will "spark nothing less than a rethink of how the world does business."

Business travel will take a hit as organizations reassess the need for face to face encounters. But more significant is likely to be a rethink of globalization and international supply chains. Both were already under pressure as a result of the US-China trade war and the Trump administration's determination to marginalize Chinese participation in efforts at the frontiers of high-technology collaboration and production. The pandemic outbreak has driven home the risks associated with reliance on suppliers located in China, whether in the automobile industry or in production of protective personal equipment. When production in China stopped because of lockdowns there, companies recognized that they were exposed and had no alternative plans. A global economy built to maximize efficiency, operating on razor-thin margins and "just in time delivery" has proven to be fragile and brittle. In many cases, large companies may not have even recognized how exposed they were given the distance, both physical and contractual, of many suppliers and subcontractors.

The new key word will be resilience, and companies will be encouraged to be less efficient to ensure capacity in the case of accidents or disruption. This can cut two ways, however. While experts anticipate that companies will seek to contract supply chains—regionalization is one approach—concentration can be just as dangerous: The March 11, 2011 "triple catastrophe" reminded many Japanese (and foreign investors) that the country was vulnerable to natural disasters and they needed to look elsewhere for risk-free production. That same calculus will kick in as they reassess their supply chains.

### **The Commodity Crunch**

Plunging demand is pummeling economies that depend on commodity exports, many of which are still recovering from a sharp commodity price decline in 2014–2016. The World Bank identified Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam as threatened. For those with high levels of external debt, such as Mongolia, where commodity exports account for a third of GDP and which has an external debt-to-GDP ratio that tops 220%, the crunch could be existential. Even Australia is being hit by falling coal and iron ore prices.

For many governments, falling prices are a blessing, however. Not only are business inputs cheaper, but consumers too benefit, especially as oil prices plummet. That fall was not a result of the COVID outbreak, but rather of a bizarre and short-sighted war between Russia and Saudi Arabia over the hits each would take as they sought to reduce production to shore up falling prices. While cognizant that lower prices reduce the revenues their governments rely on, both also wanted prices to fall to squeeze US shale oil producers, which need higher prices to be profitable, out of the market. Riyadh and Moscow seem to have come to some accommodation but not before prices fell as much as 65% and oil futures briefly entered negative territory—in theory, consumers would have been paid to take oil off producers' hands. Reportedly, Trump played a role in brokering the final deal, a move that showed a clear preference for US industry interests above those of consumers.

### **Australia-China Tensions Increase**

Our annual Australia-Asia chapter in September will no doubt have lots to say about growing China-Australian tensions in the wake of the pandemic. [Last year's issue](#) noted then newly reelected Prime Minister Scott Morrison's prediction that China-US relations would shift "from strategic engagement to strategic competition," while citing China's "forced technology transfer, intellectual property theft, and industrial subsidies promoting over-production" as the primary source of the problem. Beijing has made its discontent with Morrison's position clear since then and has been particularly vocal since Australia began demanding an investigation into the origins of the virus, in large part echoing Washington's demands and suspicions. Canberra, in return, has been [angered](#) by blatant Chinese interference in Australian domestic politics and its attempts at "economic coercion."

### **Guam Continuous Bomber Presence Ends**

On April 17, five B-52s *Stratofortresses* left Andersen Air Force Base on Guam, bringing an end to the Continuous Bomber Presence (CBP), a 16-year old mission once [touted](#) by the Pentagon as "a key piece of deterrence to potential adversaries and reassurance to allies in Asia and the Western Pacific." A US Strategic Command spokesperson explained that the "United States has transitioned to an approach

that enables strategic bombers to operate forward in the Indo-Pacific region from a broader array of overseas locations, when required, and with greater operational resilience, while these bombers are permanently based in the United States.” The move was in line with the Pentagon's 2018 [National Defense Strategy](#), which calls for US forces to be “operationally unpredictable.” Tactically speaking, the move makes sense since it complicates targeting for potential adversaries (read: North Korea and China) and thus decreases the bomber force’s vulnerability.

Those questioning the US defense commitment will see it otherwise, however, remembering Trump’s complaints about how expensive bomber flights from Guam were when justifying his cancellation of US-Korea “war games” after his Singapore meeting with Kim Jong Un. As one Australian critic [argued](#), “[T]he end of CBP sends a clear strategic message to US Pacific allies. Bit by bit the US is leaving. ... It is not reassuring. Instead it is more a remainder that the times are a’changing.” The critic continued: “US officials will need to work harder to reassure allies and the region that the temporary absence and unpredictability of the US presence represents an increase in the US commitment to the region, not a decrease.” Perhaps taking this admonition to heart, the Pentagon [announced](#) on May 1 that four B-1 bombers had redeployed to Guam on a “strategic deterrence mission,” part of “a plan designed to move the massive warplanes to spots around the world to demonstrate ‘operational unpredictability.’” [According](#) to a US Pacific Command spokesperson, the unpredictability of such random deployments will “complicate any bad actors’ decision-making assumptions.” Nonetheless, as another critic [noted](#), the only ones cheering the end of the CBP were Pyongyang and Beijing.

### Looking Ahead

As the foregoing should make clear, there are too many unknowns to predict with precision what lies ahead for the region politically or economically—except turmoil. If current trends and trajectories continue as expected, relations among Indo-Pacific governments will be tumultuous, especially if Washington and Beijing intensify their fight over strategic messaging in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. If either or both insist that others choose sides, this could further diminish any

prospects for broader multilateral cooperation. Meanwhile, most evidence suggests that China will be unable to live up to its commitments under Phase 1 of the trade deal, which will infuriate Trump and portend a further deterioration of bilateral relations, which will further complicate other governments’ decision making. Throw a US election on top and the mix becomes more combustible still. North Korea will demand attention—Pyongyang likes to think it can influence US elections—and its efforts will be viewed through the prism of the talks that the ROK has commenced over the US force presence and those that Japan is soon to begin. Trump has never shown much enthusiasm for engaging Southeast Asia, and the combination of a pandemic and a campaign will give him ample reason to seek distraction elsewhere, leaving regional diplomacy to Beijing or US partners worried about the US absence and eager to fill the gap.

# REGIONAL CHRONOLOGY

## JANUARY – APRIL 2020

**Nov. 17, 2019:** The first case of someone in China [suffering](#) from the novel coronavirus could have been a 55-year old Hubei man, the *South China Morning Post* reports in March

**Dec. 8, 2019:** The symptoms of confirmed cases of novel coronavirus [are first confirmed](#), according to a World Health Organization (WHO) report.

**Dec. 26, 2019:** An elderly couple [visit](#) a Hubei Provincial with symptoms of fever, cough, and fatigue. Their CT images are seen by Dr. Zhang Jixian, who noticed features different from flu or pneumonia. Zhang reports the discovery of the viral disease to be probably infectious.

**Dec. 30, 2019:** Chinese health authorities [investigate](#) 27 cases of “viral pneumonia” in Wuhan, linked to the seafood market in the city. Seven were in critical condition and “the cause of the disease is not clear.”

**Dec. 31, 2019:** WHO China Country Office [is notified](#) of cases of pneumonia of unknown cause in Wuhan.

**Dec. 31, 2019:** China’s National Medical Products Administration [approves](#) pneumonia vaccine developed by Chinese drugmaker Walvax Biotechnology.

**Dec. 31, 2019:** Hong Kong [increases](#) vigilance and temperature screenings at border checkpoints after the “mysterious outbreak of viral pneumonia” in Whuan.

**Jan. 1, 2020:** WHO maintains [ongoing](#) contact with authorities in China over an “unidentified outbreak of viral pneumonia” in Wuhan.

**Jan. 2, 2020:** Singapore’s Ministry of Health [takes](#) precautionary measures, warning medical practitioners to look out for suspected cases of pneumonia related to travel from Wuhan. Temperature screenings are implemented at Changi Airport for all travelers arriving from Wuhan.

**Jan. 2, 2020:** Helicopter crash in Yilan, Taiwan [kills](#) Taiwanese Gen. Shen Yi-ming.

**Jan. 3, 2020:** Malaysia officially [confirms](#) that it will reopen its embassy in North Korea.

**Jan. 3, 2020:** Wuhan police bureau [issues](#) letter to Dr. Li Wenliang to stop illegal behavior, alleging he spread “illegal and false” information and “severely disrupted social order,” by telling a group of doctors on the messaging platform WeChat that seven cases of SARS had been confirmed linked to a seafood market in Wuhan.

**Jan. 3, 2020:** Chinese health authorities [report](#) that they are trying to identify what is causing an outbreak in Wuhan, as the number of cases rose to 44 and rumors on social media suggested the outbreak could be linked to SARS.

**Jan. 5, 2020:** Chinese health authorities [report](#) 59 cases of an unknown viral pneumonia that is not SARS, MERS, or bird flu.

**Jan. 5, 2020:** WHO [publishes](#) its first Disease Outbreak News on the new unknown virus in Wuhan.

**Jan. 5-9, 2020:** Myanmar and Bangladesh [hold](#) a senior-level border conference, putting the spotlight on efforts to manage strained security ties.

**Jan. 6, 2020:** Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu and Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh [meet](#) in Hanoi. Motegi and Minh discuss the importance of maintaining freedom of navigation and the rule of law in the South China Sea, and agree to coordinate Japan’s push for a free and open Indo-Pacific with ASEAN’s efforts to promote stable growth.

**Jan. 7, 2020:** US Embassy in China [warns](#) Americans in China to avoid animals and contact with sick people.



**Jan. 8, 2020:** Chinese researchers [identify](#) a new virus as the pathogen behind the outbreak of a pneumonia-like illness in Wuhan as a new coronavirus.

**Jan. 9, 2020:** US Department of State [approves](#) the possible sale of 12 F-35Bs to Singapore. The sale is subject to congressional approval.

**Jan. 9, 2020:** Hong Kong [requests](#) that China provide genetic information on the “mystery virus” behind the Wuhan outbreak, after Chinese authorities identified the disease to be of a new coronavirus strain.

**Jan. 11, 2020:** A 61-year-old man [dies](#) from pneumonia in Wuhan and is cited as “the first victim of the outbreak that began in December.”

**Jan. 12, 2020:** China [shares](#) the genetic sequence of the novel coronavirus with the WHO.

**Jan. 13, 2020:** The United States and Japan [conduct](#) a one-day naval exercise in the East China Sea.

**Jan. 13, 2020:** Japan’s Defense Minister Kono Taro [visits](#) the Pacific Missile Range Facility on the Hawaiian island of Kauai.

**Jan. 13, 2020:** WHO [works](#) with officials in Thailand and China following reports of a confirmed novel coronavirus case outside of China, in Thailand.

**Jan. 14, 2020:** Thailand Army chief Gen. Apirat Kongsompong [visits](#) Indonesia Army chief Gen. Andika Perkasa in Aech, Indonesia. They extend their security cooperation and sign an intelligence pact.

**Jan. 15, 2020:** “Phase 1” United States–China trade deal is officially [signed](#) in a White House ceremony featuring President Trump and Vice Premier Liu He.

**Jan. 15, 2020:** Japan [confirms](#) its first case of the new coronavirus.

**Jan. 17–18, 2020:** Xi Jinping [visits](#) Myanmar for his first overseas visit of 2020. Xi and Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi sign 33 agreements related to infrastructure development, trade, manufacturing, and special economic zones.

**Jan. 17, 2020:** Vietnam’s largest telecommunications company, Viettel, [announces](#) it would move forward with development of domestic 5G technology.

**Jan. 17, 2020:** Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Sar Kheng [meets](#) Vietnamese Minister of Public Security To Lam, and signs a cooperation plan for 2020.

**Jan. 17, 2020:** The US [begins](#) additional screening procedures for passengers from Wuhan at three airports– San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles.

**Jan. 19, 2020:** Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo [pledges](#) to bolster Japan’s role under its security pact with the U.S. in “outer space and cyber space.”

**Jan. 20, 2020:** Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Navy begins a [two-day introductory visit](#) to Singapore to meet the Singaporean Minister for Defense.

**Jan. 20, 2020:** First case of the “Wuhan coronavirus” [is reported](#) in the US. A traveler from China in Seattle is identified as the first case in the US. South Korea also reports [its first case](#).

**Jan. 20, 2020:** WHO [issues](#) its first situation report on the Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV). As of Jan. 20, there were 282 confirmed cases from four countries including China, Thailand, Japan, and South Korea.

**Jan. 20, 2020:** Singapore Ministry of Health [announces](#) that temperature screenings at Changi Airport will be extended to all travelers arriving from China.

**Jan. 21, 2020:** United States [confirms](#) its first case of COVID-19.

**Jan. 21, 2020:** China’s new envoy to ASEAN [arrives in Jakarta](#) as tensions rise over Chinese conduct in South China Sea.

**Jan. 21, 2020:** ASEAN foreign ministers agree to [hold summit](#) with Trump.

**Jan. 21, 2020:** Vietnam chairs [ASEAN-IPR meeting](#) in Jakarta.

**Jan. 21, 2020:** US [confirms](#) the first patient diagnosed with the new coronavirus in Washington state.

**Jan. 22, 2020:** ASEAN Secretariat [invites India](#) to attend a February 2020 RCEP meeting in Bali.

**Jan. 22, 2020:** WHO [issues](#) a statement suggesting human-to-human transmission of 2019-nCoV is taking place in Wuhan.

**Jan. 22, 2020:** Foreign tour agencies report that North Korea has closed its borders with China.

**Jan. 23, 2020:** UN's International Court of Justice [orders Myanmar](#) to prevent Rohingya Genocide.

**Jan. 23, 2020:** Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte [renews threat](#) to terminate accord that allows US forces to train in country unless Washington restores the visa of a political ally linked to human rights violations.

**Jan. 23, 2020:** Wuhan officials [announce](#) a complete travel ban on residents, suspending urban buses, subways, ferries, and long-distance passenger transport in the city.

**Jan. 24, 2020:** Malaysian watchdog [files a lawsuit](#) against Singapore home minister after it is accused of violating Singapore's fake news law.

**Jan. 24, 2020:** US [confirms](#) second case of coronavirus involving a Chicago women returning from Wuhan.

**Jan. 26, 2020:** US Department of State [confirms](#) efforts to extricate diplomats from virus-hit city of Wuhan.

**Jan. 28, 2020:** USS *Montgomery* conducts [first 2020 FONOP](#) in South China Sea.

**Jan. 28, 2020:** WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus [meets](#) Xi Jinping to share latest information on the novel coronavirus outbreak.

**Jan. 29, 2020:** US military begins [issuing furlough warnings](#) to almost 9,000 civilian South Korean employees as cost-sharing negotiations remain at an impasse.

**Jan. 29, 2020:** Democratic US senators [urge administration officials](#) to reconsider demands in defense talks with South Korea, highlighting the risks of failing to reach an agreement.

**Jan. 29, 2020:** South Korea [sends \\$1 million](#) in aid and a government delegation to help Australia recover from bushfires.

**Jan. 30, 2020:** Singapore Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan makes [a working visit](#) to Malaysia, meeting with a variety of ministers on bilateral issues.

**Jan. 30, 2020:** China's new ambassador [pledges efforts](#) for "great" development of South Korea-China ties.

**Jan. 30, 2020:** North Korea and South Korea [close](#) Joint Liaison Office in Kaesong over concerns about the coronavirus outbreak.

**Jan. 30, 2020:** WHO [declares](#) the coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency and a significant threat beyond China.

**Jan. 30, 2020:** US State Department [issues](#) advisory to Americans to not travel to China because of the public health threat posed by coronavirus.

**Jan. 31, 2020:** Trump administration [announces](#) travel restrictions, barring entry by foreign nationals who recently visited China.

**Feb. 1, 2020:** China [reports](#) a total of 11,821 cases (cases reported includes Hong Kong, Macau, and Taipei) and 259 deaths. Worldwide, 132 cases of coronavirus were reported outside China in 23 other countries.

**Feb. 1, 2020:** Hong Kong government [announces](#) that a passenger on the *Diamond Princess* who disembarked on January 25 has tested positive for COVID-19.

**Feb. 3, 2020:** Brunei [carries out](#) military exercise in a rare display of how the state thinks about and acts with respect to its own defense.

**Feb. 3, 2020:** US and Japan conclude [2020 Iteration](#) of Exercise Forest Light Western Army.

**Feb. 3, 2020:** Commissioning of [three vessels](#) marks quick completion and operationalization of the program for Singapore's Navy.

**Feb. 3, 2020:** Japan [quarantines](#) Yokohama-bound cruise ship, the *Diamond Princess*, after a man who sailed on it tested positive for coronavirus.

**Feb. 4, 2020:** A Chinese field hospital, built in under two weeks, [opens](#) to coronavirus patients in Wuhan.

**Feb. 4, 2020:** Japan's Ministry of Defense [confirms plans](#) to procure new standoff missiles.

**Feb. 4, 2020:** Investigators from the International Criminal Court begin [collecting evidence](#) involving alleged crimes against humanity by Myanmar against Rohingya Muslims.

**Feb. 6, 2020:** Philippine foreign secretary [warns that](#) abrogating the Visiting Forces Agreement with the US would threaten crucial security, trade, and economic interests.

**Feb. 6, 2020:** Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen [visits](#) Beijing, making a public vote of confidence in China's ability to control the coronavirus epidemic.

**Feb. 7, 2020:** UN Security Council panel [approves sanctions](#) exemptions to three aid agencies allowing humanitarian assistance to North Korea.

**Feb. 7, 2020:** Coronavirus [allegedly kills](#) Li Wenliang, who had been reproached by Wuhan police for "spreading rumors" about the coronavirus.

**Feb. 8, 2020:** Hong Kong [imposes](#) a mandatory two-week quarantine on all arrivals from mainland China, including daily phone calls and spot checks.

**Feb. 9, 2020:** US State Department official involved in nuclear talks with North Korea [arrives in South Korea](#) for a meeting of a bilateral policy coordination working group on the regime.

**Feb. 9, 2020:** South Korean Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [reaffirms the need](#) for inter-Korean cooperation in railways, roads, and tourism, as South Korea seeks to expand cross-border exchanges as part of efforts to continue its engagement with North Korea.

**Feb. 9, 2020:** The coronavirus death toll in China [climbs](#) above 1,000.

**Feb. 10, 2020:** Chinese PLA Air Force [flies into Bashi Channel](#) during exercise, prompting a Taiwanese response.

**Feb. 10, 2020:** South Korea and the US hold [working group meeting](#) in Seoul spotlighting issues of policy coordination on inter-Korean exchanges between North and South Korea.

**Feb. 10, 2020:** Thailand [bars](#) passengers from Holland America's *MS Westerdam* cruise ship from disembarking, amid fears of the coronavirus.

**Feb. 11, 2020:** Philippines declares [intent to terminate](#) major security pact that has allowed US forces to train in the country.

**Feb. 11, 2020:** WHO [proposes](#) "COVID-19" as official name for the illness caused by the new coronavirus.

**Feb. 13, 2020:** Director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office Zhang Xiaoming [is replaced](#) by Xia Baolong, chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

**Feb. 13, 2020:** Japan [reports](#) its first death related to coronavirus.

**Feb. 14, 2020:** South Korean and Canadian Foreign Ministers [agree on efforts](#) to expand bilateral economic cooperation and bolster exchanges of high-level officials at Munich Security Conference.

**Feb. 15, 2020:** UN experts [accuse North Korea](#) of increasing imports and exports of banned and restricted goods such as coal and petroleum products despite explicit sanctions.

**Feb. 15, 2020:** US and Europe reach [a general agreement](#) on confronting China.

**Feb. 16, 2020:** South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha [meets with](#) Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to discuss cooperative measures to combat COVID-19, as well as the potential delay of Xi's planned Seoul.

**Feb. 17, 2020:** Malaysia declares that it will [choose a 5G partner](#) based on the country's own security standards amid strong pushes from the US to exclude Huawei.

**Feb. 20, 2020:** Researchers from Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanic Garden, led by Dr. Yu Weibin [publish](#) research suggesting that the coronavirus was introduced from outside the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, but then spread rapidly within it.

**Feb. 24, 2020:** Malaysia's king installs Mahathir Mohamad as [interim prime minister](#) following his shock resignation.

**Feb. 24, 2020:** President Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi [meet](#) in Ahmedabad, India.

**Feb. 25, 2020:** US Defense Secretary Mark Esper says that South Korea should [contribute more](#) financially to its own defense.

**Feb. 25-March 6, 2020:** Thailand, the US, Singapore, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and South Korea [participate](#) in *Exercise Cobra Gold 2020*. *Cobra Gold* focuses on "humanitarian civic action, a cyber exercise, an amphibious assault exercise, a humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercise, culminating in the combined arms live fire exercise."

**Feb. 26, 2020:** New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern [meets](#) Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama in Suva, Fiji.

**Feb. 26, 2020:** Indonesian House of Representative commission on defense, intelligence, and foreign affairs [approves](#) previous defense arrangements between Indonesia and the United States, including "a plan for the navy to receive up to 14 *ScanEagle* unmanned aerial vehicles and upgrades for three Bell 412 helicopters from the U.S. government."

**Feb. 27, 2020:** US and South Korea [decide](#) to postpone joint military exercises over coronavirus concerns.

**Feb. 27, 2020:** New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Arden [meets](#) Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison in Sydney, where she criticizes Australia's policy of forcible deportations of New Zealand citizens.

**Feb. 29, 2020:** Malaysia [names](#) Muhyiddin Yassin prime minister.

**Feb. 29, 2020:** US [elevates](#) warnings against travel to regions in Italy and South Korea.

**March 2, 2020:** US [imposes](#) restrictions on the number of Chinese state-owned media employees allowed to work in the US.

**March 2, 2020:** North Korea fires what appears to be two short-range ballistic missiles into the East Sea. China's foreign ministry calls for dialogue.

**March 2, 2020:** US Department of Justice [announces](#) charges against two Chinese nationals for money laundering conspiracy and operating an unlicensed money transmitting business. The defendants, Tian Yinyin and Li Jiadong, allegedly laundering "more than \$100 million in cryptocurrency that had been stolen by 'North Korean actors.'"

**March 2, 2020:** South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff [reports](#) that North Korea launched two short-range ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan.

**March 3, 2020:** Chinese research scientists [allege](#) that their research shows the new coronavirus evolved into two strains.

**March 4, 2020:** President Trump and the US [skip](#) the [virtual vaccine summit](#) hosted by EU.

**March 7, 2020:** US defense contractor Lockheed Martin temporarily [suspends](#) production of fifth-generation *Lightning II F-35A* stealth fighter aircraft at a facility in Nagoya over coronavirus concerns.

**March 8, 2020:** North Korea [launches](#) three short-range projectiles.

**March 11, 2020:** WHO officially [labels](#) COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic.

**March 11, 2020:** Trump [announces](#) measures to tackle COVID-19, including by suspending most travel from Europe.



**March 12, 2020:** Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Lijian Zhao [implies](#) on Twitter that US military brought coronavirus to Wuhan.

**March 18, 2020:** Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs [announces](#) that it will revoke press credentials of Americans working for *The Wall Street Journal*, *the New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*.

**March 14–April 1, 2020:** China and Cambodia [participate](#) in third annual *Golden Dragon* exercise in Cambodia's Kampot province, focusing on counter-terrorism and humanitarianism.

**March 18, 2020:** China [reports](#) zero new local infections of COVID-19.

**March 20, 2020:** Indonesian and Malaysian foreign ministers [discuss](#) virtual cooperation and collaboration amid COVID-19 pandemic.

**March 20, 2020:** South Korea's armed forces [track](#) two North Korean short-range ballistic missiles launched into the Sea of Japan.

**March 24, 2020:** Abe and International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach [agree](#) to reschedule the Olympics for the summer of 2021 at the latest.

**March 24, 2020:** Modi [orders](#) nationwide lockdown in India, including a shutdown of all nonessential government offices and private businesses, and for all Indians to remain at home.

**March 25, 2020:** G7 virtual ministerial meeting fails to issue a joint communique, [reportedly](#) over Pompeo's insistence on including reference to the "Wuhan virus."

**March 25, 2020:** Secretary of Defense Mark Esper [signs](#) order freezing the movement of US military personnel for 60 days over concerns from the coronavirus pandemic.

**March 25, 2020:** G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting [is held](#) via video conference call, attended by the US, Italy, France, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

**March 26, 2020:** Trump [signs](#) the TAIPEI (Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative) Act into law.

**March 28, 2020:** North Korea [launches](#) two short-range ballistic missiles.

**April 3, 2020:** Vietnam [protests](#) China's of sinking a Vietnamese fishing boat near the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea.

**April 4, 2020:** China [is appointed](#) to a panel on the UN Human Rights Council, serving as representative of Asia-Pacific states.

**April 7, 2020:** Abe [approves](#) an economic stimulus package worth about \$1 trillion and plans direct payments to households and businesses in coronavirus emergency.

**April 8, 2020:** Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs [expresses](#) solidarity with Vietnam after protests over the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat by China in the disputed South China Sea.

**April 14, 2020:** North Korea [test-fires](#) short-range cruise missiles.

**April 14, 2020:** ASEAN and ASEAN Plus Three Summit on the COVID-19 coronavirus [are conducted](#) via video conference.

**April 14, 2020:** Trump [announces](#) the US will halt funding to the WHO while investigating its mismanagement of the coronavirus response.

**April 15, 2020:** US State Department report [speculates](#) that China secretly set off low-level underground nuclear test explosions.

**April 15, 2020:** North Korea celebrates the Day of the Sun, national founder Kim Il Sung's birth anniversary. Kim Jong Un does not attend.

**April 16, 2020:** G7 leaders [call for](#) a review and reform of the World Health Organization.

**April 16, 2020:** North Korean defector Thae Yong-ho, running with the conservative opposition party, [wins](#) a South Korean National Assembly seat despite a ruling party landslide.

**April 17, 2020:** UN report [finds](#) that North Korea evaded international sanction and has raised millions of dollars through hacking and smuggling.

**April 17, 2020:** USAF ends 16-year Continuous Bomber Presence on [Guam](#).

**April 19, 2020:** Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne [calls](#) for independent inquiry into the coronavirus outbreak and how it developed and spread.

**April 21, 2020:** Daily NK, a Seoul-based online journal run by activists and defectors with sources inside North Korea, [alleges](#) that Kim Jong Un is recovering from a medical procedure, setting off international speculation about the North Korean leader's well-being.

**April 22, 2020:** Trump [announces](#) 60-day suspension of immigration into the US, to ensure US workers are first to get jobs.

**April 22, 2020:** Australian frigate *HMAS Parramatta* [joins](#) three US warships in the South China Sea near an area Chinese vessels are suspected of exploring for oil.

**April 23, 2020:** Virtual US-ASEAN ministerial meeting is conducted, but the joint statement is reportedly [delayed](#) by disagreement over reference to China's handling of the pandemic.

**April 24, 2020:** China's space agency [names](#) its first Mars exploration mission *Tianwen-1*, which is expected to be launched this year.

**April 26, 2020:** Australian government [launches](#) coronavirus tracing app, using Bluetooth to log when people are close to each other, enabling health officials to trace people potentially exposed to the illness.

**April 26, 2020:** G20 health ministers online meeting; draft statement "[scuppered](#)" by US over positive references to WHO.

**April 27, 2020:** US Department of Defense [authorizes](#) release of three videos of unidentified aerial phenomena to "clear up any misconceptions," about videos already circulating.

**April 28, 2020:** US Department of Commerce [announces](#) new rules to tighten exports of certain sensitive technologies to China.

**April 29, 2020:** South Korea and China [agree](#) to start some business travel under a "fast-track" immigration arrangement.

**May 1, 2020:** Kim Jong Un [reappears](#).

**May 1, 2020:** Pentagon [announces](#) deployment of four B-1 bombers to Guam on a "strategic deterrence mission."

*Chronology prepared by Pacific Forum Program Manager Taryn Ino.*