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PACIFIC  FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

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C O N N E C T I O N S

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

EDITED BY  
ROB YORK  
BRAD GLOSSERMAN

JANUARY – APRIL 2020  
VOL. 22, NO. 1  
MAY 2020



# 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

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

### THE PANDEMIC SPREADS AND THE WORLD RESPONDS ... 1

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

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.

## US-JAPAN RELATIONS

### COVID-19 OVERTAKES JAPAN AND THE UNITED STATES .. 15

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

It took time for Tokyo and Washington to understand the scope of the COVID-19 crisis, as the virus continues to spread in both Japan and the United States. The routine that would normally define US-Japan relations has been set aside, but it is too early to draw inferences about what this pandemic might mean for the relationship, for Asia, or indeed for the world. At the very least, the disease confounded plans in the United States and Japan for 2020. COVID-19 upended the carefully developed agenda for post-Abe leadership transitions in Japan and threw President Trump, already campaigning for re-election in the November presidential race, into a chaotic scramble to cope with the worst crisis in a century.

## US-CHINA RELATIONS

### US-CHINA RELATIONS HIT NEW LOWS AMID PANDEMIC .27

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

The COVID-19 virus sent US-China relations into a tailspin as 2020 opened. Recriminations flew over who was responsible for the virus that killed hundreds of thousands of people and brought economic activity to a halt. The Trump administration took a series of measures against Chinese media organizations and journalists in the United States, which provoked Beijing to expel US journalists working in China. The Phase 1 trade deal was signed, and some tariffs were lifted, though the COVID-19 outbreak hampered China's ability to purchase the promised amount of US goods and services. With the 2020 US presidential election picking up speed, Trump campaign strategists are actively targeting China.

## US-KOREA RELATIONS

### **FAILING TO FIND COMMON CAUSE..... 43**

**BY ROB YORK, PACIFIC FORUM & HARRY KAZIANIS, CENTER FOR NATIONAL INTEREST**

The US impasse with both Koreas carried over into 2020, with little official contact with North Korea and negotiations with South Korea over troop burden-sharing going into overtime. The global pandemic forced all three governments to make sharp adjustments, with President Trump reaching out to both Seoul and Pyongyang to either offer or solicit assistance. But in both cases, the rifts appear too deep to forget, even in the face of a shared catastrophe like COVID-19.

## US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

### **FIGHTING THE PANDEMIC, ASEAN BRACES FOR ECONOMIC PAIN ..... 53**

**BY CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY**

Many Southeast Asian countries' growth rates have been stripped to near zero by COVID-19, and leaders expect a crisis that could exceed that of the Asian Financial Crisis. The pandemic defined Southeast Asia's diplomatic relations from March, with high-level meetings moved to video conferences. The US-ASEAN summit, scheduled for March 24, was postponed but no new date has been announced. With US elections ramping up and questions about the COVID-19 pandemic outstanding, a 2020 US-ASEAN summit appears unlikely.

## CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

### **FROM LOW PRIORITY TO HIGH TENSIONS ..... 63**

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

For most of the first four months of 2020, China's generally low priority treatment of Southeast Asia featured cooperation on the coronavirus, standard treatment of South China Sea issues, and a visit by Xi Jinping to Myanmar. However, April saw tensions rise in the South China Sea, with an increase in US criticism of Chinese actions and US military moves against Chinese challenges as well as Chinese initiatives and ongoing provocations.

## CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

### CORONAVIRUS EMBITTERS CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS. 73

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

After President Tsai Ing-wen won re-election and her Democratic Progressive Party retained its legislative majority, COVID-19 dominated the news, further embittered cross-strait relations, and provoked a sharp confrontation over Taiwan's involvement in the World Health Organization. Beijing conducted more military operations near the island in response to concern that Taiwan is pushing independence, and the Trump and Tsai administrations strengthened ties. The opposition Kuomintang chose a younger, reform-minded leader following the latest in a series of defeats.

## NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

### TESTING TIMES ..... 83

BY AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

Inter-Korean relations stayed frozen in the early part of 2020. ROK President Moon Jae-in's outreach was hardly reciprocated by Kim Jong Un, whose sister snapped back when Seoul mildly criticized Pyongyang's missile launches in March. For both Koreas the challenge of COVID-19 was overwhelming, yet the North refused any cooperation on this. In April Moon's liberal party scored a big win in parliamentary elections; two DPRK defectors gained seats for the conservative opposition. Kim caused a global media frenzy by briefly vanishing from view. Moon has less than two years left in office, so Kim's shunning of him looks short-sighted.

## CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

### CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS UNDER QUARANTINE..... 97

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

The outbreak of COVID-19, first in China and then in South Korea, placed plans for a highly anticipated summit between Xi Jinping and Moon Jae-in on hold. Beijing and Seoul's priorities focused on fighting the virus together through aid exchanges, a new inter-agency mechanism led by their foreign ministries, and multilateral cooperation with Japan and ASEAN. As cases spread across borders, political frictions emerged over entry bans and relief supplies. The public health crisis triggered efforts to mitigate its socioeconomic repercussions, raising questions over long-term US influence. The virus also dramatically interrupted the normal diplomatic and economic interactions between China and North Korea.

## **JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS**

### **SINO-JAPANESE RELATIONS: IN A HOLDING PATTERN .... 109**

**BY JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI**

Politically, the major news in Japan-China relations was that Xi Jinping's long-anticipated state visit was postponed. While the coronavirus was a factor, the two sides had also been unable to agree on the text of the Fourth Communiqué, and there was considerable opposition within Japan to the visit due to issues between them. Several major Japanese companies announced major investments in the People's Republic of China, even as the Japanese government agreed to subsidize companies to move their supply chains out of the country.

## **JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS**

### **PRAGMATIC STABILITY, LATENT TENSIONS .....119**

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

In the first months of 2020, Japan and South Korea maintained pragmatic stability despite a brief flare-up over travel restrictions. The need to prioritize recovery from COVID-19 pushed both countries to focus on domestic issues. With the landslide victory of the ruling Democratic Party in April parliamentary elections in South Korea, it is not likely that Seoul's approach to bilateral disputes with Tokyo will undergo fundamental change anytime soon. With the US presidential election six months away, stalemate in US-South Korea military cost-sharing talks and volatility surrounding North Korea form an important backdrop to uncertainties in the South Korea-Japan bilateral relationship. By September, we may know whether it is pragmatic stability or latent tension that is the defining force in South Korea-Japan relations in 2020.

## **CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS**

### **ENDING STRATEGIC DISTANCING IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL DISTANCING.....127**

**BY YU BIN, WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY**

In the first four months of 2020, as COVID-19 raged throughout the world, Russia and China increased, and even intensified, their diplomatic interactions, mutual support, and strategic coordination. Patience for maintaining an informal entente, rather than an alliance, seemed to be running thin. This happened even as the city of Moscow's own brief "Chinese exclusion" policy evoked sharp dissonance in China's public space. These developments occurred against the backdrop of a Middle East crisis and political shakeup in Russia. As the rest of the world sank into a state of despair, disconnect, and devastation, the two large powers moved visibly toward each other amid an increasing backlash from the US, particularly regarding China's early actions in the pandemic.

**GREAT DISRUPTION: UNCERTAINTY OVER THE INDO-PACIFIC .....137**

**BY KEI KOGA, NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY**

Japan and Southeast Asia faced completely different situations in 2019 and 2020 because of the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, Japan-Southeast Asia relations were continuously positive. One of the major developments among Southeast Asian states was the creation of the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” (AOIP) which resonated with the principles in Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) concept. As a result, Japan expressed explicit support for AOIP. Functionally, they made progress, particularly in the fields of defense, infrastructure development, and digital, as illustrated by various Japanese initiatives—“Vientiane Vision2.0,” “Initiative on Overseas Loan and Investment for ASEAN,” and “Data Free Flow with Trust.” As such, both Japan and Southeast Asian states began to synthesize their respective visions of the Indo-Pacific and to establish concrete cooperative mechanisms. Diplomatic momentum was put on halt in 2020 as COVID-19 spread. While Japan, Southeast Asian states, and ASEAN made efforts to coordinate counter-measures, share information and best practices, and provide mutual assistance through teleconferences such as the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 in April 2020, each state faces different social and political situations, making it difficult to cooperate. As such, great uncertainty looms over Japan-Southeast Asia cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

**ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS ..... 149**

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**REGIONAL OVERVIEW**

## THE PANDEMIC SPREADS AND THE WORLD RESPONDS

**RALPH A. COSSA, PACIFIC FORUM**

**BRAD GLOSSERMAN, TAMA UNIVERSITY CRS/PACIFIC FORUM**

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."

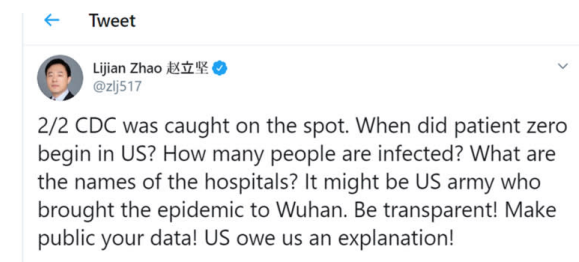


Figure 1 Lijian Zhao's tweet that "it might be [the] US army that brought the epidemic to Wuhan." Photo: Nikkei Asian Review

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 outsize 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 good 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 Webin [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.*

PACIFIC  FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

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## 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

## COVID-19 OVERTAKES JAPAN AND THE UNITED STATES

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It took time for Tokyo and Washington to understand the scope of the COVID-19 crisis, as the virus continues to spread in both Japan and the United States. The routine that would normally define US-Japan relations has been set aside, but it is too early to draw inferences about what this pandemic might mean for the relationship, for Asia, or indeed for the world. At the very least, the disease confounded plans in the United States and Japan for 2020. COVID-19 upended the carefully developed agenda for post-Abe leadership transitions in Japan and threw President Trump, already campaigning for re-election in the November presidential race, into a chaotic scramble to cope with the worst crisis in a century.

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The pandemic has confounded virtually all political, economic, and diplomatic activity. Borders closed, states imposed lockdowns or stay-at-home orders on their citizens, and economic activity screeched to a halt. It took time for Tokyo and Washington to understand the scope of this crisis, and the virus continues to spread in both Japan and the United States. The routine that would normally define US-Japan relations has been set aside, but it is too early to draw inferences about what this pandemic might mean for the relationship, for Asia, or indeed, for the world. Some believe that [everything has changed](#), while others argue that the outbreak of COVID-19 has simply [accelerated an already shifting geopolitics](#).

At the very least, this spreading disease confounded plans in the United States and Japan for 2020. COVID-19 upended the carefully developed agenda for the post-Abe leadership transitions in Japan and threw President Trump, already campaigning for re-election in the November presidential race, into a chaotic scramble to cope with the worst crisis in a century. Japan [confirmed](#) its first case of COVID-19 on January 16, followed five days later by the US [announcement](#) of its first case. The governments of Japan and the United States, like every other government around the globe, struggled with the lethality of this virus as it became increasingly obvious it could not be contained.

The impact of the pandemic on Japan and the United States has differed considerably, with Japanese infections and deaths far lower than those in the United States. The US-Japan relationship was [tested](#) early on with the arrival in Japan of a cruise ship with [thousands of international passengers](#), 416 of them Americans. But it was the larger challenges posed by the global spread of the virus that were noteworthy. Tokyo and Washington's relationship with China, the site of the original breakout, revealed some differences in the longer-term preferences of each ally. While too early to know the full extent of the virus's damage, the US and Japan will face protracted economic recoveries and will likely have to cope with a massive global economic downturn that will add to their misery.

Even as the pandemic absorbs the attention of the president and the prime minister, there is a continuing need for ever-closer security cooperation. It is too early to tell if this broader

crisis will undermine alliance strategic cooperation, but there are hurdles on the horizon. Host Nation Support [talks](#) are on the calendar this year, and the Trump administration has dug its heels in with its demand for a [five-fold increase](#) in spending for US forces from its other Northeast Asian ally, South Korea. US-Japan talks could be similarly acrimonious. The tempo of Chinese PLA activities in the South and East China Seas continued unabated, raising the pressure on Japan's SDF, and rumors of Kim Jong Un's demise, while seemingly inaccurate, suggest that the United States and its regional allies are unprepared for serious instability on the Korean Peninsula. As both the Abe Cabinet and Trump administration are focused on managing the public health crisis, Asia's complex geopolitics continue to challenge the US-Japan alliance.

### Early COVID-19 Responses

As the year opened, the emergence of a new, lethal virus caught Tokyo and Washington by surprise. Each encountered the virus differently. As news of this virus found in Wuhan, China, was shared across the globe, both the Abe Cabinet and the Trump administration looked to their citizens who had traveled to China. For Japan and the United States, two considerations emerged. The first was how this would affect not only those who had recently been in China, but also economic ties between the two countries. In January, all four cases of Japanese with COVID-19 had some direct exposure in China. The United States similarly began to examine those who had traveled to China. Both Tokyo and Washington banned travel to China, and quarantined those who arrived in their respective countries from China. On January 31, the United States [limited](#) all travelers from China, whereas Japan [focused](#) only on those from Hebei Province and its capital, Wuhan. A few days before the announcement, both countries sent [chartered flights](#) to get their citizens out of Wuhan and back home to quarantine in their respective countries.

The US and Japanese governments had to cooperate in February in dealing with the contagion of passengers on a cruise ship in Japan after a passenger who left at Hong Kong [tested positive](#) for the virus. The *Diamond Princess* [docked](#) at Yokohama harbor on February 3 and its passengers were subjected to a 14-day quarantine. Japanese authorities began [testing](#) the 2,666 passengers and 1,045 crew members.



Those who tested positive were taken off for quarantine in Japanese medical facilities. As the days dragged on and the number of infected grew, the Trump administration requested that US citizens on the ship who wanted to return to the United States for quarantine be transported out of Japan. Two charter flights were organized. [Controversy](#) over how passengers were taken off the ship and transported to Haneda International Airport soon surfaced when it became known just prior to boarding that some on the flight had tested positive for the virus. A makeshift curtain was put up on the aircraft, but the impression of helter-skelter disembarkation from the *Diamond Princess* went beyond the US evacuation. A Japanese epidemiologist went public on February 18 in a *YouTube* video about what he saw as [unacceptable](#) quarantine practices on board, triggering a public backlash against the Abe government.

Infectious disease experts at the Ministry of Labor, Health, and Welfare, who argued for tracing the contacts of those who tested positive, guided Japan's initial response. This cluster approach was [embraced](#) by the panel of experts later convened by the prime minister on February 17, led by Wakita Takaji, chief of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases. One early cluster, identified in Hokkaido, prompted the local governor to [order](#) a shutdown on February 28, but for the most part the country went about its business as usual. But testing was limited to only those with direct contact with China or others who had tested positive for COVID-19, which beyond the *Diamond Princess* cases was a small number even as late as the end of February.



Figure 1 The *Diamond Princess* off Yokohama Port on February 4, 2020. Photo: Asahi Shimbun

However, when it became clear that Japanese who had neither travelled to China nor had contact with anyone on the cruise ship were

coming down with the virus, the Abe Cabinet had to switch gears. March was also the season for cherry blossom viewing, and even though Emperor Naruhito in February had set the tone by [canceling](#) his birthday celebration, many Japanese did not stay home, nor did they abandon large gatherings and busy subways. Gov. Koike Yuriko of Tokyo also began to urge the capital's residents to remain at home. Governors in Japan, unlike those in the United States, had no authority to compel their citizens to stay at home.

By the end of March, Tokyo's numbers were accelerating and made up 30% of Japan's total cases. New legislation was drafted to manage the COVID-19 outbreak, and the new law was [enacted](#) on March 13, clearing the way for Abe to [declare](#) a state of emergency for Japan's urban centers and their suburbs on April 6. Seven prefectures were included: Tokyo, Chiba, Saitama, Kanagawa, Osaka, Hyogo, and Fukuoka. A week later, as the number of cases in Tokyo accelerated and others around Japan began to see an uptick in the number of infections, Abe [extended](#) the emergency to the entire country. Nonetheless, even Japan's prime minister did not have the authority to enforce a lockdown, and instead promoted what the Cabinet called the "Three Cs" that the public should try to avoid: closed, crowded, and close-range conversations. As of May 1, Japan [announced](#) a total of 14,281 cases and 432 deaths, suggesting that while the infection is still spreading, the rate of growth in Japan's numbers may have stabilized.

A delay in recognizing the dangers of community transmission of the disease was also evident in the United States, but with far greater losses of life. Additionally, the US government response was chaotic, and the number of infections, as well as deaths, far outpaced Japan's. Trump's [initial dismissal](#) of the novel coronavirus as less lethal than the flu ran counter to medical expert concerns about the spreading infection. At the end of January, the Trump administration [declared](#) the coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency and restricted travel from China, but with just six cases confirmed the administration did not seem ready to acknowledge a threat to the United States. But by February 26, as the number of known cases grew to 60 and the CDC reported a person [without any known exposure](#) became infected in Northern California, the president [ordered](#) the formation of a new task

force, led by Vice President Mike Pence, comprised of senior medical advisors such as [Dr. Deborah Birx](#), US Global AIDS Coordinator at the Department of State, and [Dr. Anthony Fauci](#), director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes for Health (NIH). Two weeks later, on March 13, Trump finally [declared](#) a national emergency over the outbreak as confirmed cases climbed to more than 2,100. A second, unofficial group was then ostensibly [assigned](#) to oversee federal government cooperation with private companies to address the shortage of test kits, PPE for medical personnel, and ventilators under the direction of the president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Despite promises of immediate results, the president [resisted](#) calls to use the Defense Production Act to ramp up production in the United States of much-needed medical supplies.

Unprecedented in the United States was the absence of federal government coordination of the pandemic response, and the deliberate devolution of responsibility to state governors. [Washington](#) Gov. Jay Inslee and [New York](#) Gov. Andrew Cuomo led the initial US public response as Seattle and New York City cases jumped in March. The National Governor's Association, chaired by Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan, also began to [coordinate](#) and compare notes on COVID-19 best practices, drawing not only on the experiences of other states but also reaching out to countries such as South Korea, China, and Taiwan that had successfully stabilized outbreaks of the deadly virus. Complaining that the lack of a coordinated federal government response led to competitive strategies between states, Cuomo [called](#) for a greater federal role in coordinating the overseas purchase of medical supplies. Yet even as states ordered supplies from abroad, the federal government took a different tack, intervening and reportedly [confiscating](#) supplies on order by state governments. In an [interview](#) with the *Washington Post*, Hogan bluntly acknowledged the need to assign national guard troops to protect his supply of 500,000 masks purchased from South Korea.

As of May 1, whereas the number of Japan's new COVID-19 cases seems to be slowing, the CDC had [confirmed](#) over 1 million cases in the United States and more than 64,000 deaths. Major metropolitan areas surrounding economic hubs such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle, Detroit, Miami, and New Orleans have the

[highest concentration of cases](#). All are struggling to handle the public health crisis, and the burden of the disease on the [African-American community](#) has been particularly heavy. Governors and state legislators deliberating the decision to extend the shutdown in [Michigan](#), [Minnesota](#), [North Carolina](#), [Ohio](#), and [Washington](#) have been met with protestors, many of them armed, demanding to be released from government control. The Trump administration has begun to emphasize its interest in reopening the US economy even as scientists warn that a premature end to the stay-at-home orders could result in a serious acceleration of infections. Public opinion also seems to be [cautious](#) about lifting social isolation practices, revealing some distance even between the White House and the president's supporters. The political divisions characterizing US politics have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and will likely prevent a consensus on an effective national public health response prior to the November election.

### Blaming China?

The COVID-19 crisis also complicated each country's relations with China; it accelerated an already poisonous relationship between Washington and Beijing while it derailed a carefully scripted effort at bilateral summitry between Japan and China. Trump initially praised President Xi Jinping for his handling of the outbreak, but the president shifted gears in March as the US epidemic took off. In contrast, Prime Minister Abe has not been willing to enter into the blame game, instead looking to shore up global cooperation in managing the pandemic.

Japan's diplomacy with China suffered a significant setback, however. Xi was due to arrive in Tokyo in April for a much-anticipated state visit, culminating a long and carefully choreographed effort at improving Japan-China ties. Neither Beijing nor Tokyo wanted to call off the visit in the early weeks, but by March 5 both governments announced that the epidemic required [postponement](#).

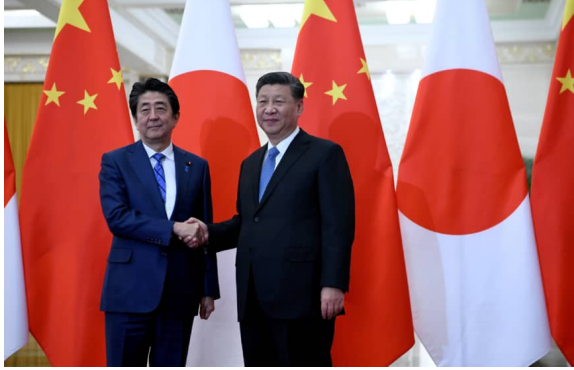


Figure 2 Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President Xi Jinping in Beijing in December 2019. Photo: Reuters

In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic has hastened a showdown between the United States and China. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [urged](#) his counterparts at the G7 meeting to identify it as the “Wuhan virus,” but European and Japanese foreign ministers declined and the meeting ended without a joint statement. Some have [attributed](#) this effort to pin blame on China to the anti-China hawks known to be on the president’s staff. A *Washington Post* article, however, [assigns](#) responsibility for laying blame on China for COVID-19 to Deputy National Security Advisor Matt Pottinger, the Asia policy lead. Wrangling over what to do about China’s effort to turn this into an opportunity to assert regional and global influence also comes from within Japan’s foreign policy makers.

The US election campaign will focus heavily on China. Trump is expected to campaign on his success in bringing China to heel on trade, and the global pandemic will also provide ample fodder for depicting China as being hostile to US interests. An article in the *American Interest*, attributed to a senior foreign policy official in the Japanese government, [laid out Japanese fears](#) about going back to the policy of engagement used by the Obama administration to deal with China. As Obama’s Vice President, Joe Biden and his campaign team seemed to be the author’s main audience. While Tokyo pursues its own engagement with the government of Xi Jinping, strategic competition between the United States and China offers Japan an opportunity to [deepen ties with others in the Indo-Pacific](#). The complex interplay between Tokyo and Washington on how best to confront authoritarian China continues to shape alliance dynamics.

## Staggering Economic Impact

Within Japan, the staggering economic impacts of COVID-19 fed into an already laggard economy. The consumption tax had dimmed growth in the fourth quarter of 2019, as GDP [shrank](#) at an annualized rate of 6.3% from the previous quarter (a number later revised to an [even greater](#) drop). COVID-19 was set to have a far greater impact. By February, tourism to Japan had [dropped](#) by 58.3% compared to a year earlier, and in March, by 93%. This marked the [biggest decline](#) ever recorded, topping the previous record set by a 62.5% drop in April 2011, the month after the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear triple disasters hit Japan. Figures for tourism in the United States were similarly stark. The US Travel Association estimated that the decline in travel could lead to a loss of \$910 billion in economic output, [“more than seven times the impact 9/11 had on travel sector revenue.”](#)

While tourism is among the hardest hit industries, the effects of COVID-19 have been widely felt across both economies. Stock markets in both the United States and Japan saw [huge falls](#) in the first quarter of the year, plunging the most since the 1987 “Black Monday” crash, although since then stocks have [rebounded](#). Oil prices tanked as a result of drastically reduced demand, and even [fell below zero](#) for the first time in history. In the United States, the number of people seeking work hit a record high, as 30 million Americans [filed for unemployment](#) between mid-March and the end of April, representing over 18% of the labor force. Japan, known for its relatively low unemployment rate, has seen less impact thus far on jobs, although there are [worries](#) about what will happen in the coming months to nonregular employees, who account for nearly 40% of workers but may not be eligible for unemployment insurance. All in all, the International Monetary Fund has estimated that the global economy will [shrink](#) by 3% this year, marking the sharpest downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Governments in the United States and Japan have responded to COVID-19 with record-setting stimulus packages. The US government enacted a set of bills, beginning with the \$8.3 billion [Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act](#) on March 6 and the \$192 billion [Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#) on March 18. It was the third phase



of Congress' coronavirus response, however, that got the most attention, when the government enacted the \$2.3 trillion (11% of GDP) [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security \(CARES\) Act](#) on March 27, the largest stimulus bill in US history. The stimulus package included loans for businesses, assistance for hospitals, transfers to state and local governments, expanded unemployment benefits, and provided [one-time cash payments](#) of up to \$1,200 for Americans below a set income level. The \$359 billion set aside for loans for small businesses [proved especially popular](#), and quickly ran out. On April 24, the government implemented the \$484 billion [Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act](#), which provided an additional \$310 billion in loans for small businesses.

Japan's own fiscal stimulus package was similarly unprecedented. On April 7 (revised April 20), the government adopted the 117.1 trillion yen (\$1.1 trillion) Emergency Economic Package Against COVID-19, representing a staggering 21.1% of Japan's GDP. The package included subsidies for small- and medium-size businesses, transfers to local governments to provide financial aid for companies, medical assistance, and [universal cash handouts](#) of 100,000 yen (\$936) per individual, a revision from the original plan to give out 300,000 yen (\$2,808) to the most affected households that [reportedly](#) came as a result of pressure from the LDP's coalition partner, Komeito. The stimulus was more than double the size of the 58.6 trillion (\$548.7 billion) yen package passed in April 2009 to respond to the global financial crisis, and over four times the size of the 26 trillion yen (\$243 billion) stimulus bill enacted in December 2019 to help the economy recover from the consumption tax hike. In addition to its size, the Japanese government's funding for companies to relocate out of China was also noteworthy. The coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan affected Japanese manufacturers' supply chains, diminished imports to Japan, and made companies operating there uneasy about the future. A survey by Tokyo Shoko Research in February [revealed](#) that 37% of the 2,600 companies doing business there were looking for ways to leave and relocate their businesses. Abe's stimulus [included](#) 243.5 billion yen (\$2.2 billion) to help them do so.

The most painful blow for the Abe administration, however, may be the postponement of the 2020 Olympic Games.

While the government initially held out hope that the games could go ahead as planned, after Canada and Australia announced that they would skip the games in mid-March due to concerns for the health of their athletes, Japan and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) [announced](#) on March 24 that they would postpone the games to July 23–August 8, 2021. Early estimates of how much the yearlong delay will cost Japan range from [\\$2 billion](#) to [\\$6 billion](#). Officially, the Japanese government has said that it is spending \$12 billion on the games, but [government auditors](#) said back in December that it would likely cost twice as much. As new expenses and logistical challenges accumulate, at issue too is to what extent the Japanese government will have to [shoulder the costs](#) of delay compared to the IOC. Moreover, while Japanese officials have referred to the rescheduled Tokyo Olympics as a potential “[beacon of hope](#)” for the world, there is also a lingering worry that the games might have to be [cancelled](#) altogether, a prospect some analysts [suggest](#) would cost Japan more than \$42 billion.



Figure 3 Tokyo 2020 Olympics President Yoshiro Mori holds the Olympic Flame at a ceremony in Higashi-Matsushima, Miyagi prefecture in March. Photo: Reuters

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have lasting impacts on international trade, not only between the United States and Japan but also between the two allies and China. Japan's exports [fell](#) by 11.7% in the year to March, including an 8.7% decline in exports to China. Shipments to the United States sank further, falling 16.5% year-on-year in March, the sharpest decline since April 2011. Import shocks were even larger: Japan's total imports shrunk by 14%, including a steep [47.1% drop in imports from China](#) over the previous year. On the US side, trade with China took a similar hit, as imports [fell](#) by 20.8% in March compared to last year and exports declined 12.6%.

At the end of 2019, it had looked as though 2020 might be the [make-or-break year](#) for the Trump administration to finalize new bilateral trade agreements with both China and Japan. As COVID-19 continues to dominate the attention of policymakers in all three countries, however, it remains to be seen how much appetite there is to resume tough negotiations on trade deals.

### Keeping an Eye on US-Japan Military Cooperation

Both national militaries have been put to work to cope with the coronavirus outbreak. In Japan, the Self-Defense Force hospitals were used to help with the caseload, and SDF medics were sent to help *Diamond Princess* passengers disembark. In the United States, Trump sent two military hospital ships, one to New York and another to Los Angeles, to help alleviate pressures on local hospitals. On May 1, Trump [announced](#) that the United States would deploy 1,000 medical military personnel to New York City to provide further assistance. In many states, the National Guard, under the authority of the governors, were mobilized to help.

While the number of SDF personnel affected by the virus is unclear, US forces stationed in and around Japan have been affected. US Forces Japan [reported](#) its first infection on March 26, but by late April cases [appeared](#) to be dropping, with fewer than 30 cases at Yokosuka Naval Base and 6 cases at Camp Zama. US Forces in neighboring South Korea also [reported](#) relatively few cases, with 14 personnel infected as of April 1. In a highly-publicized incident, the commander of the *USS Theodore Roosevelt* ordered to quarantine his ship offshore Guam, [appealed](#) for more help when more than 100 of the over 4,000 sailors on the ship were infected. Then Acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas Modly [fired](#) the captain, who later turned out to test positive himself for COVID-19, and traveled to Guam on April 6 to [tell](#) the crew that if Crozier thought his letter wouldn't become public, then he was either "too naïve or too stupid to be a commander of a ship like this." Modly [resigned](#) the next day amid criticism of his remarks, and the US Navy has [recommended reinstatement](#) of Capt. Crozier.



Figure 4 Capt. Brett E. Crozier of the *USS Theodore Roosevelt* addresses the crew of the aircraft carrier in 2019. Photo: US Navy via Reuters

Chinese officials have been quick to point out that their ability to contain the virus has resulted in the continued readiness of their forces, and activities in and around the South and East China Seas continued unabated. Already incidents between the PLAN and US and Japanese navies have been increasing, which led to the deployment of the *USS America*, an amphibious assault ship, to Malaysian waters to demonstrate presence. The East China Sea also had its share of incidents. Several naval vessels, one Japanese and another Taiwanese, reported collisions with Chinese fishing vessels in the East China Sea in March. The *JS Shimakaze*, a missile destroyer, was on a routine patrol from its home port of Sasebo when the incident happened. An [investigation is ongoing](#).

Finally, the US-Japan alliance awaits the initiation of talks on the renewal of the five-year Host Nation Support Agreement that provides Japanese contribution to the maintenance of US forces in Japan. To date, US-ROK talks on military cost-sharing have rattled Tokyo. The Trump administration's [demand](#) for a five-fold increase in Seoul's contribution, accompanied by threats of downgrading or even withdrawing US forces on the peninsula, have shown a hardline transactional approach to the longstanding burden-sharing deliberations between the US and its Asian allies. Even with the outbreak of a global pandemic and Korea's [offer](#) of a 13% increase in its spending on US forces there, Washington continues to demand more money from Seoul, and [implemented](#) Secretary of Defense Mark Esper's threat to furlough South Korean workers from US bases in South Korea unless the ROK increase its payments further. With bilateral talks expected to begin this summer or fall, Japanese officials

wait to see if and how these US demands will affect their security cooperation.

## Conclusion

Like elsewhere, the governments of Japan and the United States have been overtaken by the demands of responding to COVID-19 in the early months of 2020. Slow at first to grasp the public health crisis, the Abe Cabinet shifted gears in March to impose a national state of emergency, which has now been [extended](#) to May 31. The Trump administration, in contrast, directed governors to take the lead in determining local response, and has [issued guidelines](#) for reopening economic activity in areas where the public health crisis has abated. A more [detailed set of guidelines](#) issued by the CDC, however, was [reportedly rejected](#) by the White House over concerns that they were too severe and risked further hurting the economy.

The US-Japan relationship has fared better than other alliances in the Trump era, but the fate of the two leaders is now less certain. Abe's agenda has been derailed, as the postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics upset what was meant to be a celebratory end to his tenure as Japan's longest serving prime minister came to a close. The US presidential election looms large for the Trump administration as its handling of the public health crisis has [shaken](#) the president's approval rating. Criticism has been harsh, prompting some to conclude that the administration's handling of the public health crisis has revealed the US to be a "[failed state](#)."

Abe, too, has watched his approval numbers [drop](#) as even his supporters watched his handling of the virus. Both have been criticized for their delayed response. The [editorial board](#) of the *Yomiuri Shimbun* was quite blunt: "Even though there is a lot that we don't yet know about this new coronavirus, the Abe Cabinet's response to date has been far from strategic." Japanese social media targeted Abe's announcement that the government would send two masks to every family, a policy that was cynically dubbed as "[Abenomask](#)," and his [video](#) of being at home in self-isolation.



Figure 5 Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announces his plan to distribute cloth face masks to Japanese households at an April government task force meeting. Photo: Asahi Shimbun

Difficult decisions for Tokyo and Washington remain as few expect the pandemic to end soon, or easily. Neither government can yet claim to be on the other side of the curve of their country's COVID outbreak. Nor is there widespread confidence in how they will handle what comes next. Managing the transition between now and the production of a vaccine that can render Japanese and Americans safe from infection will take months if not years. The economic consequences will be devastating for both nations. A second wave of infections in the fall seems all but assured. Politics in both nations could become far more complex if Japanese and Americans remain dissatisfied.

The impact of COVID-19 on the geopolitics of Asia cannot be underestimated, but neither can it be fully anticipated. For Tokyo, managing its relationship with China has only grown more difficult, and the pandemic suggests even greater strain. The economic ties that largely allowed Tokyo and Beijing to weather the worst of their periodic storms may unravel. US-China ties are already worse, as the battle over blame for COVID-19 has [unleashed threats](#) of unprecedented economic sanctions from Washington. If the Trump administration imposes financial costs on China, some form of economic retaliation is all but guaranteed, with spillover effects for the global economy. This would be especially hard on Japan given the already severe economic consequences of the pandemic. The US presidential election could also rattle US-Japan ties. The economic impact, however, has only just begun, with warnings of consequences far worse than the Depression of the 1930s. 2020 is already far less predictable, and more threatening, than leaders in either Tokyo or Washington could have imagined. It could get far worse.



# CHRONOLOGY OF US-JAPAN RELATIONS

## JANUARY – MAY 2020

**Jan. 2, 2020:** United States International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), which consolidates OPIC and USAID's Development Credit Authority, officially [begins operations](#).

**Jan. 8, 2020:** Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun [meets](#) with National Security Secretariat Secretary General Kitamura Shigeru in Washington, DC.

**Jan. 10, 2020:** United States, Japan, and Mongolia hold trilateral meeting in Washington, DC. [Joint Statement](#).

**Jan. 14, 2020:** Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [meets](#) Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu in Palo Alto, CA

**Jan. 14, 2020:** Secretary of State Pompeo, Foreign Minister Motegi, and South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha hold a [trilateral meeting](#) in Palo Alto, CA.

**Jan. 14, 2020:** Secretary of Defense Mark Esper [meets](#) Defense Minister Kono Taro at the Pentagon.

**Jan. 16, 2020:** Japan [confirms](#) its first case of COVID-19.

**Jan. 19, 2020:** Motegi, Kono, Pompeo, and Esper issue a [joint statement](#) to mark the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States.

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

**Jan. 24, 2020:** Joint meeting of Japan-United States Strategic Energy Partnership is [held](#) in Washington, DC. [Joint Statement](#).

**Jan. 30, 2020:** WHO [declares](#) a global health emergency over the COVID-19 outbreak.

**Jan. 31, 2020:** President Trump [enacts](#) travel restrictions on foreign nationals who had visited China in the past 14 days.

**Jan. 31, 2020:** Prime Minister Abe Shinzo [announces](#) ban on entering Japan for foreign nationals from China's Hubei province.

**Feb. 1, 2020:** *Diamond Princess* cruise ship [stops](#) in Naha, Okinawa, and completes a short quarantine before departing for Yokohama.

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

**Feb. 3, 2020:** The *Diamond Princess* [docks](#) off Daikaku Pier in Yokohama Port and is immediately quarantined.

**Feb. 4, 2020:** US Forces Japan [implements](#) a 14-day quarantine for people returning from China.

**Feb. 5, 2020:** Trump is [acquitted](#) of two impeachment charges by the Senate.

**Feb. 5, 2020:** Authorities [extend](#) the quarantine for the *Diamond Princess* by 14 days after 10 people onboard test positive for COVID-19.

**Feb. 15, 2020:** US Embassy in Japan [announces](#) that the US government will charter an aircraft to evacuate its citizens off the *Diamond Princess*. [CDC Statement](#).

**Feb. 15, 2020:** Pompeo, Motegi, and South Korean Foreign Minister Kang hold a [trilateral meeting](#) on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference in Germany.

**Feb. 17, 2020:** Two charter flights carrying passengers from the *Diamond Princess* [depart](#) Tokyo for the United States.

**Feb. 17, 2020:** Emperor of Japan [cancels](#) his birthday celebration.

**Feb. 18, 2020:** Japanese epidemiologist Iwata Kentaro (Kobe University) [posts](#) a YouTube video criticizing unacceptable quarantine practices onboard the *Diamond Princess*.

**Feb. 19, 2020:** Disembarkation [begins](#) for passengers confirmed as not being infected on the *Diamond Princess*.

**Feb. 24, 2020:** White House [asks](#) Congress for \$1.25 billion in emergency funds to fight COVID-19.

**Feb. 27, 2020:** Abe [asks](#) all elementary, junior high, and high schools nationwide to close through the end of spring break in early April.

**Feb. 28, 2020:** Princess Cruises [reports](#) that all guests have disembarked from the *Diamond Princess*.

**Feb 28, 2020:** Governor of Hokkaido Naomichi Suzuki [declares](#) a state of emergency over coronavirus.

**March 1, 2020:** Final *Diamond Princess* crew members [disembark](#) from the cruise ship.

**March 3, 2020:** CDC [lifts](#) all federal restrictions on testing for COVID-19.

**March 5, 2020:** Japanese government [announces](#) postponement of Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Japan.

**March 6, 2020:** United States [enacts](#) an emergency spending package to combat the spread of COVID-19.

**March 6, 2020:** A report by SMBC Nikko Securities Inc. [projects](#) that cancelling the Olympic Games will reduce Japan's annual GDP by 1.4%.

**March 9, 2020:** Japan [implements](#) two-week quarantine and travel restrictions for visitors from China and South Korea.

**March 10, 2020:** Japan [adopts](#) a 1 trillion yen (\$9.6 billion) stimulus package to help businesses affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

**March 13, 2020:** Trump [declares](#) national emergency over the COVID-19 outbreak.

**March 13, 2020:** Pompeo and Motegi [hold](#) a US-Japan Summit Telephone Talk on COVID-19.

**March 13, 2020:** Japan [revises](#) existing law to allow Abe to declare a state of emergency for the COVID-19 outbreak.

**March 16, 2020:** Trump and Abe [attend](#) G7 Summit by video conference. [Leaders' Statement](#).

**March 20, 2020:** Motegi and Pompeo [speak](#) by telephone about COVID-19.

**March 22, 2020:** Canada [announces](#) that it will not attend the Olympic Games in Tokyo.

**March 23, 2020:** Australia [announces](#) that it will not attend the Olympic Games in Tokyo.

**March 23, 2020:** United States and Japan [expand access](#) for US and Japanese air carriers to fly between the United States and Tokyo's Haneda airport.

**March 24, 2020:** Japan and the International Olympic Committee agree to [postpone](#) the Olympic Games until 2021.

**March 25, 2020:** Trump and Abe [speak](#) by telephone about the Tokyo Olympics and COVID-19.

**March 26, 2020:** Japan [enacts](#) entry restrictions on travelers from the United States.

**March 26, 2020:** Trump and Abe [attend](#) the G20 Summit by video conference.

**March 26, 2020:** Pompeo and Motegi [attend](#) the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting by video conference.

**March 26, 2020:** First US Forces Japan active duty member [tests positive](#) for COVID-19.

**March 27, 2020:** Trump [signs](#) a \$2 trillion stimulus package into law in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**March 31, 2020:** A letter from Capt. Brett Crozier, captain of aircraft carrier *USS Theodore Roosevelt*, to Navy officials pleading for help with COVID-19 cases aboard his ship is [published](#) by the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

**April 1, 2020:** Abe [announces](#) plan to send two masks to every household amid growing concerns over shortages.

**April 5, 2020:** Capt. Crozier is [removed](#) from command of the *USS Theodore Roosevelt*.

**April 6, 2020:** Abe [declares](#) a state of emergency over COVID-19 for one month beginning April 7 in Tokyo, Osaka, Kanagawa, Saitama, Chiba, Hyogo, and Fukuoka prefectures.

**April 6, 2020:** US Forces Japan [declares](#) a public health emergency for the Kanto region.

**April 6, 2020:** Acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas Modly [travels](#) to Guam to explain his removal of Capt. Crozier to the crew of the *USS Theodore Roosevelt*.

**April 7, 2020:** Modly [resigns](#) as Acting Secretary of the Navy.

**April 14, 2020:** Trump [announces](#) that he will cut off funding for the World Health Organization (WHO) over its response to COVID-19.

**April 15, 2020:** US Forces Japan [declares](#) a Japan-wide public health emergency.

**April 16, 2020:** Abe and Trump [attend](#) the G7 Summit by video conference.

**April 16, 2020:** Abe [declares](#) nationwide state of emergency.

**April 17, 2020:** Trump [encourages](#) protests against social distancing restrictions in some US states.

**April 20, 2020:** Trump [announces](#) plan to suspend immigration to the US.

**April 24, 2020:** Navy officials [recommend](#) the reinstatement of Capt. Crozier.

**May 4, 2020:** Abe [extends](#) the state of emergency until May 31.



PACIFIC  FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

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C O N N E C T I O N S

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RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

**US-CHINA RELATIONS**

## US-CHINA RELATIONS HIT NEW LOWS AMID PANDEMIC

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The COVID-19 virus sent US-China relations into a tailspin as 2020 opened. Recriminations flew over who was responsible for the virus that killed hundreds of thousands of people and brought economic activity to a halt. The Trump administration took a series of measures against Chinese media organizations and journalists in the United States, which provoked Beijing to expel US journalists working in China. The Phase 1 trade deal was signed, and some tariffs were lifted, though the COVID-19 outbreak hampered China's ability to purchase the promised amount of US goods and services. With the 2020 US presidential election picking up speed, Trump campaign strategists are actively targeting China.

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## COVID-19 and the Blame Game

The novel coronavirus that spread worldwide in the first four months of 2020 could have catalyzed a period of cooperation in US-China relations. Instead, it led to even greater acrimony between Washington and Beijing, revealing the depth of mistrust and suspicion both sides harbor toward each other. Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping made countless attempts to control the narrative about an uncontrollable virus to shore up domestic support. With the US presidential elections looming in November, Trump often took to Twitter to either brag about close cooperation with China or to blame China for the virus. To silence any legitimacy doubts, Xi and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) strategically placed blame on individuals at the local level and spun China's handling of the virus as a success story. Despite glimpses of collaboration, the hostility injected into the bilateral relationship ensured that the impact of COVID-19 will be felt in US-China relations and around the world for a long time to come.

## The Discovery of a Novel Coronavirus

On December 31, health officials in the city of Wuhan in China's Hubei Province [reported](#) to the World Health Organization (WHO) multiple cases of "pneumonia of unknown etiology." One week later, Chinese scientists confirmed that they had identified and isolated a novel coronavirus as the cause of the illness. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [responded](#) by issuing a level 1 travel notice for those traveling to Wuhan, which simply encouraged travelers to "practice usual precautions." Further information about the outbreak was [released](#) by the WHO on a near-daily basis, from its suspected link to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan to the first confirmed case of the novel coronavirus outside China, in Thailand on January 13. As the number of confirmed cases multiplied and the first deaths were reported, the US CDC [ramped](#) up its response on January 17 to include enhanced screenings at three major US airports with the most passengers from Wuhan: New York (JFK), Los Angeles (LAX), and San Francisco (SFO).

Trump acknowledged the outbreak in a tweet on January 24, three days after the first confirmed case in the US, [complimenting](#) China's "efforts and transparency" in managing the outbreak. A

few days later, Trump [touted](#) his "very close communication with China concerning the virus" and publicly pledged to President Xi "any help that is necessary." It was later [revealed](#) that US CDC director Robert Redfield made a formal offer of support to China as early as January 4 and US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Alex Azar made subsequent offers to send a CDC team to China. All went unanswered by Chinese officials.

Nevertheless, both sides remained committed to a continued dialogue on the virus, as [evidenced](#) by a January 29 phone call between US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and China's Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi. The same day, after what he called "a briefing on the Coronavirus in China," Trump announced that the US was "working closely with China," a sentiment he [echoed](#) on Twitter the next day. Meanwhile, the WHO officially [declared](#) the virus to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, with HHS Secretary Azar declaring a public health emergency in the US shortly thereafter. On January 31, the US Department of State [elevated](#) its travel advisory for China to Level 4—Do Not Travel—[defined](#) as "the highest advisory level due to greater likelihood of life-threatening risks." The White House concurrently [announced](#) travel restrictions for any foreign national attempting to enter the US from China, which went into effect on February 2.

Within days of the travel restrictions taking effect, Trump and Xi spoke on the phone. According to the [readout](#) from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Xi expressed his "hopes that the US will evaluate the situation calmly and develop and adjust its response in line with the actual situation," an apparent reference to the US decisions to bar travelers from China and discourage all travel to the country. At the same time, the recap included vows to increase communication and collaboration on both sides. Trump [underscored](#) this positivity in his tweet exclaiming that the US was "working closely with China to help." The US Department of State [delivered](#) on that promise on February 7, when it "facilitated the transportation of nearly 17.8 tons of donated medical supplies to the Chinese people, including masks, gowns, gauze, respirators, and other vital materials." This goodwill gesture would later draw ire in the US after the domestic need for these items skyrocketed, but at the time it served as a testament to US-China cooperation to combat

the novel coronavirus (officially [named](#) COVID-19 and deemed a pandemic on February 11 by WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus). The US also pledged “up to \$100 million in existing funds to assist China and other impacted countries,” though China’s foreign ministry spokesperson later [said](#) “as a matter of fact, we haven’t received \$1 from the US government.”

### China’s Response Timeline Questioned

February 7 marked the death of Dr. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital, who had tried to [warn](#) the Chinese public on December 30 that multiple people in Wuhan had fallen ill from a coronavirus. Li’s death prompted a backlash against China’s handling of the virus from Chinese netizens as well as the US and other countries. Authorities in Wuhan had accused Li of spreading false information and forced him to sign a confession admitting his misdemeanor. Li ultimately contracted COVID-19 through a patient at his hospital, and succumbed to the disease. Beijing was quick to pin the accusations of a cover-up on the local authorities, with the state-sanctioned *Global Times* [writing](#) that Li and others “tried to warn other medics of the coronavirus outbreak but were reprimanded by local police.”



Figure 1 Mourners at a vigil for Dr. Li Wenliang. Photo: *The New York Times*

Li’s death resulted in stepped-up accusations in the US that China’s slow reporting and attempts to control information allowed the exponential spread of the deadly virus. Pompeo’s February 25 remarks to the press [criticized](#) China’s response, asserting that “had China permitted its own and foreign journalists and medical personnel to speak and investigate freely, Chinese officials and other nations would have been far better prepared to address the

challenge.” Another doctor at Li’s same hospital, Dr. Ai Fen, [came](#) forward in early March as the self-proclaimed “one who provided the whistle” in an interview with Chinese magazine *Renwu*. The interview exposed repeated actions to muzzle doctors in Wuhan attempting to warn others about the virus and take action, but was swiftly censored on Chinese social media. In remarks at the Heritage Foundation on March 11, National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien [referenced](#) the silencing of doctors like Li and Ai, declaring that “this outbreak in Wuhan was covered up” and “it probably cost the world community two months to respond.” These initial criticisms were just the tip of the iceberg in what was soon to turn into a war of words.

### Fanning the Flames

On March 12, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian [tweeted](#) the shocking accusation that “it might be [the] US army that brought the epidemic to Wuhan,” when 280 athletes from the US military participated in the Military World Games. In response, US Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell [summoned](#) Chinese Ambassador Cui Tiankai to rebuke Zhao’s unsubstantiated theory. A State Department spokesperson said that the meeting allowed the Trump administration to make clear that the US would not condone the spread of such “dangerous and ridiculous” rumors, and condemned Beijing for “seeking to deflect criticism for its role in starting a global pandemic and not telling the world.” A mutually acrimonious phone call between Secretary Pompeo and Yang Jiechi on March 16 further exacerbated tensions. China’s CGTN [reported](#) that Yang warned that US efforts to “slander and smear China’s efforts” would be countered, and defended China’s handling of the virus as “open, transparent, and responsible.” A US readout of the call [stated](#) bluntly that “Secretary Pompeo conveyed strong US objections to PRC efforts to shift blame for COVID-19 to the United States.”

Zhao’s attempt to pin blame on the US for the virus provoked a strong response from President Trump. In a tweet that evening, Trump [wrote](#), “The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus.” His description of the virus as “Chinese” subsequently came under fire in the US as racist and xenophobic, and likely to feed

discrimination against Asians and Asian-Americans who were being stigmatized due to fear and misinformation about the virus. Just over one week later, in a March 24 [interview](#) with Fox News, Trump notably signaled he would cease using that terminology. Insisting that he did not regret saying it previously, he declared that “everyone knows it came out of China, but I decided we shouldn't make any more of a big deal out of it.”

However, others in the Trump administration continued to heap blame on China. In remarks to the press on March 25 regarding that day's G7 ministerial meeting, Pompeo [renewed](#) the issue by referring to COVID-19 as the “Wuhan virus.” According to Pompeo, China's “intentional disinformation campaign” was a central topic of conversation among the G7 foreign ministers. While Pompeo glossed over the lack of a joint communique from the ministers after the meeting, European officials [allegedly](#) reported that Pompeo's insistence on including the “Wuhan virus” terminology was the source of disagreement that led to the failure to produce a statement. Pompeo later [refuted](#) that story, chalking it up to “some pretty bad reporting.”

### **An SOS for PPE**

The rapid spread of COVID-19 left countless hospitals, cities, and entire countries with a dire shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), including face masks, respirators, and rapid test kits. China's robust manufacturing sector sought to fill the void with large-scale exports of PPE, which some in the US saw as a move to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic for China's own political and economic benefit. The alleged push to score gains, however, quickly raised concerns about the quality of Chinese-produced medical supplies. In the Czech Republic and Spain in late March, doctors [found](#) over 300,000 rapid test kits in each country to be useless after discovering an alarmingly high rate of error. In a move to protect China's reputation, Chinese state-owned newspaper *China Daily* [responded](#) by attributing the low accuracy to “some doctors in Spain us[ing] the test kits the wrong way.” At the same time, the Chinese Embassy in Madrid distanced the government from the manufacturing company, Shenzhen Bioeasy Biotechnology, [insisting](#) that the company did not have an official license to sell their products. The very next day, the Netherlands Ministry of Health was forced to [recall](#) approximately 600,000 N95 masks

delivered to medical personnel due to poor fit quality.

The manufacturing blunders by these Chinese companies did little to change the views of many countries that China was behaving irresponsibly in its handling of the pandemic. One week later, Pompeo [announced](#) that the US would commit \$225 million toward a global response to the virus. In what some thought to be a dig at China, he emphasized the “high-quality, transparent, and meaningful assistance” the US was providing to its partners.

At the same time, the US, which had depleted its domestic supply of PPE resources, was forced to rely on China's dominant position in the supply chain for its stock. Through the “Project Airbridge” initiative, led by White House Office of American Innovation Director Jared Kushner, the US [received](#) a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)-funded plane of PPE from China on March 29, including approximately 130,000 N95 masks, over 70,000 thermometers, and millions of surgical masks, gowns, and gloves. Despite the positive PPE exchange between the two countries, White House Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy Director Peter Navarro still had harsh words for China on its previous quality control issues. He [criticized](#) China for globally exporting “fake tests and counterfeit tests” and “profiteering” from its PPE market domination. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang delivered a scathing critique of Navarro's credibility, [labeling](#) him a “habitual liar.”

### **Growing COVID-19 Deaths, Shrinking Opportunities for Cooperation**

President Trump appeared loath to allow the US-China relationship to spiral downward. On March 27, Trump and Xi [spoke](#) over the phone in what many thought was meant to be a verbal ceasefire after weeks of heated rhetoric. Trump [complimented](#) China's “strong understanding” of COVID-19 in a tweet and again trumpeted close collaboration between both countries. Just three days later, however, Pompeo was again making headlines [accusing](#) China of spreading disinformation, particularly “confusion about where the virus began.” When a March 30 phone call between HHS Secretary Azar and Chinese National Health Commission Minister Ma Xiaowei pointed toward [renewed](#) interest in cooperation, it was swiftly [followed](#) by the leak of a US intelligence community report that

alleged China's reporting on its COVID-19 cases was "intentionally incomplete" and not to be trusted.

Individual US states expressed anger toward China's alleged lies in various ways. In Wisconsin, the state senate [received](#) an ill-conceived request from the Chinese consulate to introduce legislation lauding China's response to the novel coronavirus, including its "unprecedented and rigorous measures for disease control and prevention." Wisconsin Senate President Roger Roth was irate and instead [introduced](#) a resolution stating just the opposite: that "the Communist Party of China deliberately and intentionally misled the world on the Wuhan Coronavirus." US Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas and Texas Congressman Dan Crenshaw [brought](#) their own bill to the US Senate floor that would "allow Americans to sue China in federal court to recover damages for death, injury, and economic harm caused by the Wuhan Virus." Both instances resurrected the controversial ascription of the virus to Wuhan. Missouri took things one step further on April 22, when the state's attorney general [sued](#) Beijing and the CCP for "the enormous death, suffering, and economic losses they inflicted on the world, including Missourians."

### The Blame Game Continues

As April came to a close, the bad blood between the US and China only worsened. Earlier in the month, Trump [mused](#) on Twitter that the WHO was "funded largely by the United States, yet very China centric," and deemed their early recommendations in combating the coronavirus as "faulty." Trump later [announced](#) that the US would halt funding to the organization, accusing it of "push[ing] China's misinformation about the virus" and regurgitating the Chinese party line without verification.

By the end of April, Trump seemed to be losing patience with China. In an April 27 press briefing, he [told](#) reporters that the US was "not happy with China...because we believe [the virus] could have been stopped at the source." This was a far cry from his tweets flattering China's handling of the virus as recent as one month prior. The next day, Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Le Yucheng [spoke](#) to NBC News in a sit-down interview to defend China's reporting of the virus, deny a cover-up, and instead question the US government's domestic handling of the disease.

Inside the Trump administration, an all-out effort appeared to be underway to identify the cause of COVID-19. A rare statement by the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) issued on April 30 [maintained](#) that the virus originated in China and "was not manmade or genetically modified." The DNI statement noted that it was investigating "whether the outbreak began through contact with infected animals or if it was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan." Yet within hours, Trump [claimed](#) that he had been given definitive evidence that the virus was indeed from a lab, only adding to the swirl of rumors surrounding COVID-19.

### Spat Over Journalists

On February 18, the Trump administration declared that five state-run Chinese news organizations—Xinhua, China Daily, People's Daily, CGTN, and China Radio—would henceforth be regulated as foreign government functionaries. In other words, they would be officially treated as representatives of the Chinese party-state, not as journalists. The new designation would require the five organizations to report to the State Department the names and personal details of their staff, as well as whether they own or lease property in the United States.

Two weeks later, the Trump administration ordered four Chinese news outlets to reduce the number of staff they have working in the United States. The order would permit the four media outlets—Xinhua News Agency, CGTN, China Radio, and China Daily Distribution Corp.—to employ a total of only 100 Chinese citizens, which would require a cut of 40% of their staff. In addition, a senior Trump administration official anonymously [revealed](#) plans to restrict the length of time that Chinese citizens are allowed to work in the US on journalist visas. The goal, according to US officials, was to enforce reciprocity between the way the US and China treat each other's journalists, even as the Trump administration insisted that those working for Chinese media companies are not real journalists.

In retaliation against the US measures, China announced on March 17 that it would expel US journalists working for *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*. US journalists employed by those newspapers were not only banned from working in mainland China, but



were also prohibited from working in Hong Kong and Macao. It also required those three media outlets, as well as *Time* and the Voice of America, to provide the Chinese government with details about their operations in China. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs [asserted](#) that its actions were “reciprocal countermeasures that China is compelled to take in response to the unreasonable oppression the Chinese media organizations experience in the US.”

Pompeo said China’s decision was “unfortunate,” and added that he hoped Beijing would reconsider the expulsions. In a subsequent phone call with the publishers of the three major US newspapers, Pompeo reportedly [acknowledged](#) that the US actions had been poorly timed, and perhaps, even wrong. Yet, the Trump administration is apparently contemplating further [actions](#), including expelling specific Chinese journalists it believes are spies.

### Phase I Trade Deal Signed

On January 15, the US and China signed a trade deal that both countries described as the first phase of a more extensive agreement. The eight-chapter trade [pact](#) commits Beijing to purchase at least \$200 billion in goods and services from the US over the next two years and implement more effective measures to crack down on Chinese theft of US technology and corporate secrets. China also agreed to make “enforceable commitments to refrain from competitive devaluation” of its currency. In addition, the deal includes increased access to China’s financial services market for US companies.

The US agreed to cut by half the tariff rate it imposed last September 1 on \$120 billion of Chinese goods, bringing the rate down to 7.5%. The tariffs on nearly \$160 billion worth of Chinese goods that were scheduled to go into effect on December 15 were suspended indefinitely. However, the 25% import taxes on \$250 billion worth of Chinese products were kept in place.

China’s lead negotiator, Vice Premier Liu He, attended a signing ceremony at the White House along with US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin. Trump delivered [remarks](#) in which he maintained that the trade deal, which he termed “historic” and an “incredible breakthrough,” was “righting the wrongs of the past.” He

praised Xi, whom he described as “a very, very good friend of mine.” A letter from Xi that was read aloud by Trump at the signing ceremony said that the trade agreement proved that the two countries could work together to manage their differences.



*Figure 2 President Donald Trump and Vice Premier Liu He present the signed trade deal at the White House. Photo: Bloomberg*

Having closed a limited deal, the US was eager to launch negotiations on thornier matters like Chinese state subsidies to its companies and state-backed cyber espionage for commercial advantage. Trump told the attendees that “as soon as this kicks in, we’re starting phase two.” With the onset of the coronavirus, however, the trade agenda took a back seat to pressing domestic concerns in both countries. In early February, Beijing slashed tariffs on \$75 billion of US goods that had been imposed in retaliation against tariffs the US applied to Chinese goods in the fall. Observers viewed China’s action to be primarily about limiting the economic damage to China from the virus, rather than a gesture to the United States.

Senior Trump administration officials signaled that the US recognized that the outbreak could delay China’s purchases of American goods. For example, US Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue [said](#) on February 5 that the US would have to be patient if the spread of the coronavirus hampered Beijing’s ability to buy US farm products. Yet Trump appeared to be closely tracking Chinese purchases. On April 6, the US president [told](#) reporters that China was “buying anywhere from \$40 to \$50 billion worth of our agricultural product.”

At a press conference on April 14, a China customs spokesperson [said](#) that the US-China phase one trade deal was being gradually

implemented. Later that month, a US official [told](#) reporters that the US Trade Representative Office was in regular contact with Chinese counterparts to make sure that targets were being met. According to Chinese customs data, in the first quarter of 2020 China imported twice as many US soybeans and six times as much pork than a year ago. Uncertainty persists, however, regarding both US ability to produce large quantities of pork due to supply chain problems created by the pandemic, as well as China's ability to buy the pledged amount of soybeans. In late April, there were [reports](#) that China is exploring ways to accelerate purchases of farm products by asking state-owned firms to buy them for government reserves.

In a long-awaited move, the Trump administration proposed new restrictions on semiconductor production equipment and other high-tech exports to China with the aim of preventing the Chinese military from acquiring these advanced capabilities. The rules were posted for public inspection on April 29. If they go into effect, licenses will be required for US companies to sell numerous items to Chinese companies whose products support the People's Liberation Army. Announcing the action, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said "it is important to consider the ramifications of doing business with countries that have histories of diverting goods purchased from US companies for military applications."

A few weeks earlier, the Trump administration [granted](#) a license to General Electric to supply engines for China's COMAC C919 passenger jet. Trump rejected calls by some of his advisers to block the license. "I want China to buy our jet engines, the best in the World," President Trump [tweeted](#) on February 18, adding that he favors making it easy, not difficult, to do business with the United States.

### South China Sea Developments

The US Navy conducted four Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea in the first four months of 2020. On January 25, the *USS Montgomery*, a littoral combat ship, sailed near Fiery Cross and Johnson Reefs in the Spratly Islands. In response to a statement by the US Seventh Fleet spokesman that such missions are based on principle, conducted peacefully, and are not aimed at any particular country, China's South Theater Command spokesman [insisted](#) that the

US warship's operation was an "intentional provocation" and a "flagrant attempt at navigation hegemony."

Six weeks later, the *USS McCampbell*, a US *Arleigh Burke*-class guided missile destroyer, conducted a FONOP around the Paracel Islands. This time the spokesman of China's Southern Theater Command accused the US of entering Chinese territorial waters without permission, which suggests the US warship likely challenged the straight baselines that China established in the Paracels in 1996. The US Navy maintained that the destroyer was conducting "security and stability operations while transiting through the South China Sea."

On two consecutive days in late April, the guided-missile destroyer *USS Barry* conducted a FONOP near the Paracel Islands and the US guided-missile cruiser *USS Bunker Hill* sailed an innocent passage operation past Gaven Reef in the Spratly Islands. China's Southern Theater Command spokesman [condemned](#) the acts as "provocative" and warned that they "could easily trigger an unexpected incident."



Figure 3 *USS Bunker Hill* and *USS Barry* transit the South China Sea (April 18, 2020) Photo: US Navy

In an unusual episode, the US Navy dispatched two warships in mid-April to waters near Malaysia that are claimed by China, Vietnam, and Malaysia. The precipitating factor appeared to be the appearance of a Chinese flotilla of coast guard and maritime militia vessels as well as a Chinese survey ship, the *Haiyang Dizhi 8*, with the goal of coercing Malaysia's state-run energy company Petronas to halt energy exploration. The US Navy ships were apparently [conducting](#) joint exercises with an Australian frigate in the South China Sea. According to one [report](#), the US warships sailed within 50 nautical miles of the *West Capella*, a British drilling ship contracted by

Petronas conducting exploration activities off the Malaysian coast. The involvement of US warships was notable since the US did not send any vessels when the same Chinese survey ship was engaged in a standoff with Vietnam in 2019.

On April 24, Pompeo declared in a video call with Southeast Asian foreign ministers that China's actions were aimed at "intimidating other claimants from engaging in offshore hydrocarbon development." In a public statement, Pompeo accused Beijing of seeking to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to further its control over the South China Sea.

Rather than condemn US military interference, China's foreign ministry spokesman maintained that its survey ship was "conducting normal activities in waters under Chinese jurisdiction" and described the situation in the South China Sea as "basically stable." A US State Department spokesperson had previously condemned China for allegedly sinking a Vietnamese fishing vessel on April 2.

#### **US-China Military Ties: COVID and a Lasing Incident**

Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in mid-February, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper [charged](#) the CCP with stealing Western technology, intimidating its neighbors, and "seeking advantage by any means, and at any cost." He highlighted the risks of including telecommunication equipment manufactured by Chinese companies in 5G networks "that could render our partners' critical systems vulnerable to disruption, manipulation and espionage." Esper called on China to "change its policies and behaviors." He also insisted that the US hopes to cooperate with China where American and Chinese interests converge, including fighting COVID-19. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who also attended the forum, dismissed Esper's accusations as lies and part of a US government campaign to prevent the rejuvenation of China.



*Figure 4 Secretary of Defense Mark Esper speaks at the Munich Security Conference. Photo: Reuters*

In [testimony](#) before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission a few days later, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Chad Sbragia outlined PLA progress in developing capabilities to project power and offset US military advantages. Echoing Esper's remarks, Sbragia stated that "competition with China does not mean confrontation, nor must it lead to conflict." The DoD seeks to maintain a constructive, stable and results-oriented defense relationship with China that includes reducing the risk of miscalculation that could escalate to conflict, Sbragia emphasized.

As the coronavirus pandemic spread in the United States and around the world, Sbragia held a [briefing](#) at the Pentagon on April 9 to address the impact of COVID-19 on the US-China military relationship. Noting that the Chinese military has sought cooperation with the US military in fighting the virus, he asserted that "The US certainly welcomes China's call to combat the COVID-19 pandemic together." Sbragia emphasized that the leaders of the two militaries have a consensus that they should avoid issues relating to the virus "being militarized, instead remaining as an area of cooperation." He called China's attempt to blame the US for bringing COVID-19 to China last October when US military athletes competed at the military games in Wuhan "unfounded, futile, and really counterproductive."

On February 17, a Chinese *Luyang III*-class destroyer [lased](#) the pilot of a US Navy P-8A *Poseidon* maritime patrol aircraft that was operating over international waters about 380 miles west of Guam. The Pacific Fleet called the action "unsafe and unprofessional" and a formal protest was issued to China over the incident. Although the US previously called out



China for using lasers against US military operators in Djibouti, this is the first time that a Chinese warship lased a US Navy aircraft. A spokesman from China's Ministry of Defense denied the charge, [saying](#) that the US claim did not "accord with reality." On the contrary, he insisted that the US aircraft's actions were "unfriendly in intention and unprofessional by operation."

On March 3, Esper held a phone call with his counterpart Chinese Defense Minister Gen. Wei Fenghe. According to the Chinese [readout](#) of the call, the discussion focused on the pandemic and the steps being taken to control it, including efforts by the Chinese armed forces. The Chinese account included Esper's offer to "enhance dialogue and consultation between the two militaries and strengthen exchanges and cooperation in areas including epidemic prevention and control." The US side indicated that the lasing incident was also discussed on the call.

### Taiwan Tensions Simmer

Almost a month after Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen was re-elected in a landslide victory, her Vice President-elect William Lai attended the annual National Prayer Breakfast hosted by President Trump in Washington DC. Lai's participation was widely publicized and he was honored with a [seat](#) in the first row, near the highest-ranking US officials. During his 8-day visit, the former Taiwan premier and vice president-elect had a meeting at the National Security Council and met senior members of Congress. China was irked and demonstrated its ire by conducting two consecutive days of provocative military exercises with dozens of bombers, jets, and early warning aircraft crossing the centerline of the Taiwan Strait. In one instance, a Chinese fighter jet's radar reportedly locked on to one of Taiwan's F-16 aircraft. A spokesman for mainland China's Taiwan Affairs Office [insisted](#) that the PLA was protecting the country's national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and preserving cross-Strait peace.

In a clear signal to China of US concern, a few days later two B-52 bombers [dispatched](#) from Guam flew along Taiwan's east coast while an MC-130J special mission aircraft from Kadena Air Base in Okinawa flew from north to south across the Taiwan Strait. Persistent Chinese military activities near Taiwan may have also

prompted the US to increase its transits through the Taiwan Strait. After conducting one transit per month in January, February, and March, the US Navy sent the USS Barry guided-missile destroyer through the Taiwan Strait on April 10 and again on April 22.

On March 26, Trump signed into law the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act, known as the [TAIPEI Act](#), after both houses of the US Congress passed the bill unanimously. The legislation is aimed at promoting Taiwan's ties with other countries and its participation in international organizations. Much of the language in the law is "sense of Congress" language, meaning that the law contains Congress' recommendations; the executive branch is not obligated to implement them. For example, the Act calls for the executive branch to consider "increasing its economic, security, and diplomatic engagement with nations that have demonstrably strengthened, enhanced, or upgraded relations with Taiwan" and also consider downgrading relations with countries that "take serious or significant actions to undermine the security or prosperity of Taiwan." The Act requires the secretary of State to report to Congressional committees annually for the next five years on the steps taken to implement it.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesman denounced the legislation as a violation of Beijing's one-China principle and the three US-China joint communiques. He "strongly urged the US to correct its mistake, refrain from implementing this act and obstructing other countries' pursuit of relations with China" or face "resolute countermeasures."

### Looking Ahead

The downward slide in US-China relations will probably continue unabated for many months to come. The race for a COVID-19 vaccine is widely viewed as crucial to the broader competition for global power and influence. Rejuvenating economic growth as countries ease social distancing and return to work will be another arena of competition involving supply chains and advanced technology. With both Washington and Beijing having taken off the gloves and hurled spiteful attacks at each other, it will be impossible to restore a modicum of civility and decorum to the bilateral relationship in the near term.



In the coming months, the US presidential campaign will pick up speed. With nine-of-10 Americans now [holding](#) the view that China poses a threat—up from 48% in 2018—Trump campaign strategists are actively targeting China. Efforts to uncover how and where the virus started are aimed at pinning blame on China and paving the way for efforts to compel Beijing to pay reparations. Trump’s campaign messaging is already attacking the Democratic candidate, Vice President Joe Biden, as soft on China. Beijing will try to stay out of the fray, while taking advantage of opportunities to advance Chinese interests.

# CHRONOLOGY OF US-CHINA RELATIONS

## JANUARY – MAY 2020

**Jan. 3, 2020:** Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [speaks](#) to Chinese Politburo Member Yang Jiechi about President Trump's decision to take defensive action to eliminate Qasem Soleimani.

**Jan. 7, 2020:** Pompeo reaffirms US support for Hong Kong's autonomy and calls on the international community to [condemn](#) China over its "brutal treatment" of Uygur Muslims.

**Jan. 8, 2020:** US Rep. James P. McGovern of Massachusetts and Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, chair and co-chair of the bipartisan and bicameral Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC), issue the Commission's [2019 Annual Report](#) on human rights and the rule of law in China.

**Jan. 13, 2020:** US Department of the Treasury [drops](#) its designation of China as a currency manipulator.

**Jan. 13, 2020:** Pompeo [speaks](#) to the Commonwealth Club about the national security consequences of doing business with China.

**Jan. 14, 2020:** US and Chinese defense officials [meet](#) in Beijing for the 15<sup>th</sup> US -China Defense Policy Coordination Talks.

**Jan. 14, 2020:** US Treasury Department announces [sanctions](#) on the Korean Namgang Trading Corp and China-based North Korean lodging facility Beijing Sukbakso for assisting in labor export.

**Jan. 15, 2020:** Trump and Chinese Vice-Premier Liu He [sign](#) the Phase 1 trade deal.

**Jan. 15, 2020:** Liu [tells](#) the press that Beijing does not want to rush into a phase two of the trade deal, following remarks by Trump that next stage talks would start soon.

**Jan. 15, 2020:** Chinese President Xi Jinping tells Trump in a [letter](#) that he welcomes the Phase 1 trade deal and that he is willing to stay in close touch.

**Jan. 15, 2020:** Deputy Secretary of State Stephen E. Biegun [speaks](#) by phone with China's Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng.

**Jan. 16, 2020:** Trump [tweets](#) "The farmers are really happy with the new China Trade Deal and the soon to be signed deal with Mexico and Canada, but I hope the thing they will most remember is the fact that I was able to take massive incoming Tariff money and use it to help them get through the tough times!"

**Jan. 16, 2020:** Trump [tweets](#) "One of the greatest trade deals ever made! Also good for China and our long term relationship. 250 Billion Dollars will be coming back to our Country, and we are now in a great position for a Phase Two start. There has never been anything like this in US history! USMCA NEXT!"

**Jan. 17, 2020:** Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) [confirms](#) that a US warship recently sailed through the Taiwan Strait, less than one week after Taiwan's 2020 presidential and legislative elections.

**Jan. 21, 2020:** In his [address](#) to the World Economic Forum, Trump says of Xi: "He's for China, I'm for the US, but other than that we love each other."

**Jan. 21, 2020:** Pompeo, at a press conference with President Alvarado of Costa Rica, [says](#) economic cooperation with the Chinese government often produces debt, dependency, and even the erosion of sovereignty.

**Jan. 22, 2020:** Trump [tweets](#) "One of the many great things about our just signed giant Trade Deal with China is that it will bring both the USA & China closer together in so many other ways. Terrific working with President Xi, a man who truly loves his country. Much more to come!"

**Jan. 22, 2020:** Trump [remarks](#) at a press conference in Davos that the United States has a great new deal with China and the relationship is the "best . . . that we've ever had."

**Jan. 22, 2020:** Pompeo, on a visit to Jamaica, [cautions](#) nations against taking “easy money” from China, warning it could be counterproductive.

**Jan. 23, 2020:** The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission holds a [hearing](#) on “China’s Quest for Capital: Motivations, Methods, and Implications.”

**Jan. 24, 2020:** Trump [tweets](#) “China has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus. The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American People, I want to thank President Xi!”

**Jan. 24, 2020:** US Defense Secretary Mark Esper [says](#) China’s Communist Party has created a surveillance state that uses artificial intelligence to repress Muslim minorities and pro-democracy demonstrators.

**Jan. 25, 2020:** US Navy [sails](#) a warship that conducts a freedom of navigation operation in the Paracels.

**Jan. 27, 2020:** Trump [tweets](#) “We are in very close communication with China concerning the virus. Very few cases reported in USA, but strongly on watch. We have offered China and President Xi any help that is necessary. Our experts are extraordinary!”

**Jan. 29, 2020:** Pompeo and Yang Jiechi discuss the coronavirus outbreak by [phone](#).

**Jan. 29, 2020:** Trump [tweets](#) “Just received a briefing on the Coronavirus in China from all of our GREAT agencies, who are also working closely with China. We will continue to monitor the ongoing developments. We have the best experts anywhere in the world, and they are on top of it 24/7!”

**Jan. 30, 2020:** Pompeo [says](#) China is the central threat of our time and the US and its allies must ensure they have the military and technological power to ensure that this century is governed by Western principles.

**Jan. 30, 2020:** Trump [tweets](#) “Working closely with China and others on Coronavirus outbreak. Only 5 people in US, all in good recovery.”

**Jan. 30, 2020:** US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross [says](#) that the coronavirus outbreak in China could “accelerate the return of jobs to North America,” including to the United States.

**Jan. 30, 2020:** US State Department [issues](#) a “do not travel” advisory to China due to the coronavirus.

**Jan. 31, 2020:** The US lifts [sanctions](#) on one of two units of the giant Chinese tanker company, Cosco, partially reversing its punishment of the company for transporting Iranian oil.

**Feb. 2, 2020:** Pompeo, in a visit to Kazakhstan, [tells](#) the country to be wary of Chinese investment and influence.

**Feb. 2, 2020:** New US restrictions go into [effect](#) that bar entry to foreign nationals who have recently visited China due to the coronavirus.

**Feb. 2, 2020:** In an interview with Fox News, Trump says the US is [offering](#) China “tremendous help” in dealing with the epidemic.

**Feb. 3, 2020:** Trump [tweets](#), “Republicans in Iowa, go out and Caucus today. Your great Trade Deals with China, Mexico, Canada, Japan, South Korea and more, are DONE. Great times are coming, after waiting for decades, for our Farmers, Ranchers, Manufacturers and ALL. Nobody else could have pulled this off!”

**Feb. 4, 2020:** In his State of the Union Address, Trump [says](#) “for decades, China has taken advantage of the United States. Now we have changed that, but, at the same time, we have perhaps the best relationship we’ve ever had with China, including with President Xi.”

**Feb. 6, 2020:** China [announces](#) it will halve additional tariffs on \$75 billion of US products imposed late last year.

**Feb. 6, 2020:** US Attorney General William Barr [says](#) in a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies that “China has emerged as the United States’ top geopolitical adversary.”

**Feb. 7, 2020:** Xi and Trump [discuss](#) the coronavirus outbreak and the trade deal by phone.

**Feb. 7, 2020:** Trump [tweets](#) “Just had a long and very good conversation by phone with President Xi of China. He is strong, sharp and powerfully focused on leading the counterattack on the Coronavirus. He feels they are doing very well, even building hospitals in a matter of only days. Nothing is easy, but...[he will be successful](#), especially as the weather starts to warm & the virus hopefully becomes weaker, and then gone. Great discipline is taking place in China, as President Xi strongly leads what will be a very successful operation. We are working closely with China to help!”

**Feb. 7, 2020:** State Department [facilitates](#) the sending of 17.8 tons of personal protective equipment (PPE) to China to combat the coronavirus outbreak.

**Feb. 8, 2020:** Pompeo [warns](#) governors of Chinese infiltration into US in a speech on “US States and the China Competition.” to the National Governors Association Winter meeting.

**Feb. 10, 2020:** US Justice Department [charges](#) four members of the Chinese military with the 2017 hacking of Equifax.

**Feb. 10, 2020:** The US [revokes](#) WTO subsidy preferences for some developing nations, including China, India, and Singapore.

**Feb. 12, 2020:** After two consecutive days of PRC military aircraft flights that cross the centerline of the Taiwan Strait, the US [dispatches](#) two B-52 Stratofortress bombers on southward flights off Taiwan’s east coast, while a MJ-130J Commando II multi-mission combat transport plane flies over the Taiwan Strait, also heading south.

**Feb. 13, 2020:** Chinese telecommunications conglomerate Huawei and subsidiaries are [charged](#) in racketeering conspiracy and conspiracy to steal trade secrets.

**Feb. 15, 2020:** Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruiser USS Chancellorsville CG-62 [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait.

**Feb. 15, 2020:** Speaking to the Munich Security Conference, Secretary of Defense Esper [states](#) “The Communist Party and its associated organs, including the People’s Liberation Army, are increasingly operating in theaters outside its borders, including Europe, and seeking advantage by any means, and at any cost.”

**Feb. 15, 2020:** Speaking to the Munich Security Conference, Pompeo [states](#) “The United States has woken up to the world where China’s unfair trading practices impact us, the Chinese Communist Party’s newly aggressive turn, and its military and diplomatic efforts that confront.”

**Feb. 17, 2020:** During a joint press availability with Angolan Minister of External Relations Manuel Augusto, Pompeo [promotes](#) US investment as an alternative to Chinese loans.

**Feb. 17, 2020:** A Chinese destroyer [sinks](#) a US Navy P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft that is operating over international waters about 380 miles west of Guam.

**Feb. 18, 2020:** China [announces](#) it will allow importers to apply for exemptions to additional trade war tariffs on nearly 700 types of goods from the US, starting from March 2.

**Feb. 18, 2020:** Trump [tweets](#): “....product and goods to China and other countries. That’s what trade is all about. We don’t want to make it impossible to do business with us. That will only mean that orders will go to someplace else. As an example, I want China to buy our jet engines, the best in the World...”

**Feb. 18, 2020:** State Department [designates](#) five Chinese media outlets as official government entities under the Foreign Missions Act.

**Feb. 19, 2020:** China [revokes](#) the reporting credentials of three Wall Street Journal reporters and expels them from the Beijing bureau.

**Feb. 19, 2020:** Pompeo [delivers](#) a speech in Ethiopia’s capital in which he warns countries to “be wary of authoritarian regimes and their empty promises,” but doesn’t mention China by name.

**Feb. 20, 2020:** The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission [holds](#) a hearing on “China’s Military Power Projection and US National Interests.” Chad Sbragia, deputy assistant secretary of Defense for China, is among the witnesses.

**Feb. 21, 2020:** Trump [tweets](#), “IF OUR FORMALLY TARGETED FARMERS NEED ADDITIONAL AID UNTIL SUCH TIME AS THE TRADE DEALS WITH CHINA, MEXICO, CANADA AND OTHERS FULLY KICK IN, THAT AID WILL BE PROVIDED BY THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, PAID FOR OUT OF THE MASSIVE TARIFF MONEY COMING INTO THE USA!”

**Feb. 25, 2020:** In remarks to the press, Pompeo [criticizes](#) China’s media censorship and says it hindered their ability to address the coronavirus.

**Feb. 25, 2020:** US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue [sign](#) a letter praising China’s progress on the trade deal.

**Feb. 26, 2020:** House Ways and Means Committee holds [hearing](#) on US-China Trade and Competition.

**Feb. 27, 2020:** During a People’s Liberation Army Navy exercise, the Chinese allegedly use a laser against a US pilot of P8-A reconnaissance aircraft that is monitoring the exercise.

**Feb. 28, 2020:** Pompeo, in his speech to the American Conservative Union Foundation, [asks](#) partners to step up on the biggest challenges the US faces, including countering China.

**Feb. 28, 2020:** Acting US Navy Secretary Thomas B. Modly [tells](#) the Brookings Institution: “The Chinese navy is growing by leaps and bounds and are on target to be a real threat within a decade. No one should have any illusion about what their long-term objectives are.”

**Feb. 29, 2020:** In a press conference with the US Coronavirus Task Force, Trump [says](#) the relationship with China is very good and that he is in close contact with Xi.

**March 2, 2020:** State Department [announces](#) a personnel cap on designated PRC state media entities and Pompeo [says](#) the “goal is reciprocity.”

**March 3, 2020:** Chinese State Councilor and Defense Minister Gen. Wei Fenghe and Secretary of Defense Esper hold a phone call. They [discuss](#) the prevention and control of the coronavirus, bilateral military ties, and their respective concerns.

**March 3, 2020:** Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin [says](#) the US is not considering lowering tariffs on goods from China in response to coronavirus, and will look at all options as the situation evolves.

**March 4, 2020:** Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism [holds](#) a hearing entitled, “Dangerous Partners: Big Tech and Beijing.”

**March 4, 2020:** US House of Representatives [passes](#) the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act, which promotes Taiwan’s participation in the international community and reaffirms Congress’ strong support for a free, open and democratic Taiwan.

**March 4, 2020:** Federal law enforcement officials testify at a [hearing](#) of the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism titled “Dangerous Partners: Big Tech and Beijing.”

**March 10, 2020:** USS *McCampbell* missile destroyer [conducts](#) a freedom of navigation operation near the Paracel Islands.

**March 11, 2020:** Releasing the annual Department of State report on human rights in the world, Secretary of State Pompeo [says](#), “the CCP’s record in Xinjiang is the stain of the century. It tries to hide what it’s doing by intimidating journalists.”

**March 11, 2020:** National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien [says](#) that China’s response to the coronavirus “cost the world community two months two respond,” during an appearance at the Heritage Foundation.

**March 12, 2020:** Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian [accuses](#) the US military of bringing the coronavirus to Wuhan in October 2019.

**March 13, 2020:** US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell [delivers](#) a “stern representation” to Chinese Ambassador Cui Tiankai in response to Beijing’s suggestion that the US military brought the coronavirus to China.

**March 16, 2020:** Pompeo [holds](#) a phone call with Yang Jiechi about COVID-19.



**March 16, 2020:** Trump [tweets](#): “The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus. We will be stronger than ever before!”

**March 17, 2020:** Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs [announces](#) that journalists of US citizenship working with *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post* will no longer be allowed to work in the People's Republic of China, including Hong Kong and Macao Special Administrative Regions.

**March 17, 2020:** US Department of State [blacklists](#) nine entities, including Chinese entities, for engaging in “significant transactions” to trade in Iranian petrochemicals in violation of US sanctions. The US Commerce Department adds 18 corporations to the US Entity List for aiding Iran's nuclear programs, including two from China.

**March 24, 2020:** Trump [tells](#) Fox News that he will stop using the term “Chinese virus.” He says, “Look, everyone knows it came out of China, but I decided we shouldn't make any more of a big deal out of it. I think I made a big deal. I think people understand it. But that all began when they said our soldiers started it. Our soldiers had nothing to do with it.”

**March 25, 2020:** According to Pompeo, the Group of Seven (G7) economies [discusses](#) an “intentional disinformation campaign” by China on the coronavirus in a virtual meeting.

**March 25, 2020:** USS *McCampbell* guided-missile destroyer [sails](#) through the Taiwan Strait.

**March 26, 2020:** Trump [signs](#) into law the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019, which is aimed at supporting Taiwan's international presence.

**March 27, 2020:** Trump and Xi [hold](#) a phone call. They discuss the coronavirus and bilateral relations.

**March 27, 2020:** Trump [tweets](#): “Just finished a very good conversation with President Xi of China. Discussed in great detail the CoronaVirus that is ravaging large parts of our Planet. China has been through much & has developed a strong understanding of the Virus. We are working closely together. Much respect!”

**March 29, 2020:** The first of a series of airlifts bringing medical supplies from China to the US, termed “Project Airbridge,” [arrives](#) in New York.

**March 30, 2020:** In a phone interview with Asian media, Pompeo [accuses](#) China of spreading disinformation about the coronavirus pandemic and urges transparent sharing of crucial data on case numbers and mortality rates.

**March 30, 2020:** Ma Xiaowei, minister of China's National Health Commission, [holds](#) phone call with Alex M. Azar II, US secretary of health and human services, “to exchange ideas on the two countries' pandemic prevention and control efforts.”

**April 5, 2020:** Chinese Ambassador to the US Cui Tiankai [writes](#) op-ed in *The New York Times*, calling for greater cooperation between the US and China: “This is a time for solidarity, collaboration, and mutual support.”

**April 6, 2020:** Department of State issues a [statement](#) expressing concern about reports of a PRC Coast Guard vessel's sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands.

**April 7, 2020:** Trump [tweets](#) “The W.H.O. really blew it. For some reason, funded largely by the United States, yet very China centric. We will be giving that a good look. Fortunately I rejected their advice on keeping our borders open to China early on. Why did they give us such a faulty recommendation?”

**April 7, 2020:** Trump administration [grants](#) a license to General Electric Co. to supply engines for China's new COMAC C919 passenger jet.

**April 10, 2020:** USS *Barry*, a US Navy guided-missile destroyer [sails](#) through the Taiwan Strait.

**April 10, 2020:** Chinese consulate [requests](#) that the Wisconsin State Senate pass a resolution commending China's response to the coronavirus outbreak.

**April 15, 2020:** Pompeo [holds](#) phone call with Yang to discuss issues related to the COVID-19 epidemic.

**April 15, 2020:** US State Department publishes report [suggesting](#) China secretly conducted low-yield nuclear tests.



**April 17, 2020:** Trump [tweets](#): “China has just announced a doubling in the number of their deaths from the Invisible Enemy. It is far higher than that and far higher than the U.S., not even close!”

**April 18, 2020:** Department of State issues a [statement](#) condemning the arrest of pro-democracy advocates in Hong Kong.

**April 18, 2020:** State Department spokesperson [expresses](#) concern about “reports of China’s repeated provocative actions aimed at the offshore oil and gas development of other claimant states,” and calls for China to “cease its bullying behavior and refrain from engaging in this type of provocative and destabilizing activity.”

**April 20, 2020:** Department of State issues a [statement](#) calling on China to allow human rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang’s freedom of movement.

**April 22, 2020:** USS *Barry* guided-missile destroyer [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait.

**April 22, 2020:** Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt [files](#) lawsuit against China seeking to hold the CCP responsible for the coronavirus outbreak.

**April 25, 2020:** G20 virtual meeting [cancelled](#) because US-China tension over WHO.

**April 28, 2020:** US [publishes](#) new rules that require licenses for US companies to sell certain items to companies in China that support the military, even if the products are for civilian use.

**April 28, 2020:** US Navy destroyer, the *USS Barry*, [conducts](#) a FONOP in the Paracel Islands.

**April 29, 2020:** US guided-missile cruiser *USS Bunker Hill* [conducts](#) a “freedom of navigation operation” in the Spratly Islands.

**April 30, 2020:** Trump [threatens](#) to levy new tariffs on China in retaliation for the COVID-19 outbreak.

*Chronology prepared by CSIS research interns Aidan Powers-Riggs and Jocelyn Wang*

PACIFIC  FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

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## C O N N E C T I O N S

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL  
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US-KOREA RELATIONS

## FAILING TO FIND COMMON CAUSE

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The US impasse with both Koreas carried over into 2020, with little official contact with North Korea and negotiations with South Korea over troop burden-sharing going into overtime. The global pandemic forced all three governments to make sharp adjustments, with President Trump reaching out to both Seoul and Pyongyang to either offer or solicit assistance. But in both cases, the rifts appear too deep to forget, even in the face of a shared catastrophe like COVID-19.

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The United States [ended 2019](#) at an impasse with both Koreas, which, at least for now has largely carried over into 2020. After failing to make any headway in discussions over the North Korea's nuclear program and international sanctions in 2019, Washington and Pyongyang spent the first four months of this year with little official contact. Meanwhile, Washington's tensions with Seoul over troop burden-sharing have gone into overtime and reached a state of *ad absurdum*, with US President Donald Trump belittling a South Korean film's Oscar win and South Korean protesters seeing manifestations of colonial prejudices in the US ambassador's mustache.

Of course, none of the three governments entered 2020 expecting a global pandemic, and all three have had to make sharp adjustments both domestically and diplomatically as a consequence. US President Donald Trump has personally reached out to both Seoul and Pyongyang as the international climate worsened in the hopes of seeing greater cooperation. In both cases, though, the rifts appear too deep to forget, even in the face of a global trial like the Covid-19 pandemic.

The US' dispute with North Korea is the more obvious of the two, having outlived the Cold War from which it sprang. Pyongyang's take on its own survival is [profoundly realist](#), pushing it to embrace nuclear weapons as zealously as the US has committed to preventing their proliferation. Washington and Seoul, on the other hand, are long-time allies, but the dispute over troop burden-sharing has thrown the sensitivities of their constituent populations in stark relief: Trump was propelled to the presidency, in part, by a sentiment among the American public that the US contributions on the global stage have gone unappreciated. South Korea, for its part, has become a full-fledged middle power, but memories of colonial exploitation and treatment of the Korean Peninsula as a mere global strategic chess piece animate this, as well [as past dustups](#) with the US. Such disputes are deep-seated and will not easily subside, especially as long as voters in both countries continue to endorse these positions. While the international health scare may be an opportunity for cooperation, it looks unlikely to solve more fundamental issues between the parties involved.

## Global Crisis, Bilateral Maneuvers

The pandemic that brought economic activity to a screeching halt around the world similarly cast a shadow over diplomacy, US interactions with both Koreas being no exception. North Korea [shut its borders](#) completely and made defending against the Covid-19 a feature of [state media](#), while South Korea struggled through February and enacted sweeping measures, from closing schools to two-week quarantines on all new arrivals in the country. However, its commitment to comprehensive [testing and tracing](#) of those the infected, and those they have come into contact with, allowed life to proceed for most citizens without the lockdowns other countries have endured. The US, where stringent measures have been implemented on a state-by-state basis, attempted to use the pandemic as an opportunity for better relations with both Koreas – by either seeking or offering assistance.



Figure 1 A "drive-thru" Covid-19 screening center in Daegu.  
Photo: Reuters

In the case of South Korea, the US first issued a restriction on travel to and from the country in late February—a Level 3 travel advisory [issued](#) from the State Department, which it followed on March 8 by [suspending travel](#) to and from the country by military personnel and their families. This remains in effect, though Trump has said he may reevaluate it if the situation improves. On March 24, as the US' battle with the pandemic deteriorated, Trump [took part](#) in a phone conversation with South Korean President Moon Jae-in requesting medical equipment.

North Korea, for its part, still claims to have been unaffected by the virus, though this has been greeted with [broad skepticism](#). US State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortigas, as

early as Feb. 13, [identified](#) the northern half of the peninsula as facing a unique danger from the virus. Then, on March 21, Kim Jong-un's younger sister Kim Yo-jong [issued](#) a statement saying Trump had sent a personal letter to her older brother expressing well wishes and offering assistance on Covid-19. Still, North Korea at present appears uninterested in such aid, as doing would be an admission of that their strategy of sealing borders has not been as successful as claimed.

### Personally Warm, Officially Enemies

And for now, the differences of opinion between the two countries may be too entrenched for the virus to help bridge the gaps between them. Relations between North Korea and the US ended on a sour note in 2019, as the attempted rapprochement that began the previous year bore no fruit. Both sides blamed the other for refusing to concede more, and began hinting of a return to old hostility, with the “dotard” and “rocket man” epithets [briefly returning](#). However, tensions did not escalate significantly in the first four months of 2020, and the US president still speaks fondly of Kim and credits their personal warmth with preventing war on the peninsula. Regardless how the two leaders think of one another, though, tensions between their governments persisted, defined by missile tests and reports of illicit North Korea behavior.

As in the past, the year began with a statement from the North Korean leader. While in previous years messages sent around this [signaled an openness](#) to cooperation, Kim Jong-un words at the end of 2019 [called](#) US behavior “gangster-like,” taking them to task for demanding too much and threatening vague but severe consequences:

... forcing a demand against the fundamental interests of our state, the deadlock between the DPRK and the United States inevitably has to take on a protracted character. We will never allow the disgraceful United States to use the DPRK-US dialogue for dishonest purpose but go over to a shocking real action to make it completely pay for the sufferings our people have so far undergone and the deterred development.

The ominous tone continued, as the leader warned that North Korea would need to “more

actively develop strategic weapons.” But weapons of what sort? This remains to be seen—North Korea was hardly quiet during this period on the weapons front, but that does not mean its behavior [was unprecedented](#).

On March 2, South Korea's joint chiefs of staff said North Korea [fired](#) two short-range projectiles from Kangwon Province toward the East Sea, which it followed up by [firing](#) three more from Hamgyong Province toward the East Sea on March 9, and [firing](#) another two from Pyongan province presumed to be short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea. It has [been suggested](#) that North Korea chose to ramp up missile testing in March as much of the world had its eyes elsewhere, due to the pandemic, and it would be more difficult for the world to unite behind a statement of condemnation, much less new sanctions. But whether they would have resulted in a backlash from President Trump is hardly assured; the US president has paid little attention to [short-range missile tests](#) incapable of reaching the US mainland, and in early March [he said](#) that North Korea is not “on the minds of too many Americans,” though he insisted it ought to be.

But just because Trump himself devoted most of his attention elsewhere does not mean that his government did the same. On Feb. 14, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, along with the FBI, [released](#) six Malware Analysis Reports (MARs) and updated one MAR shedding light on malicious cyber activity from North Korea. Then, on April 15, three Cabinet-level US departments, again with the FBI, [released](#) a report detailing the North Korean cyber offensive campaign to launder money and extort companies to funnel resources for its nuclear weapons program.

Under the pressure of robust US and UN sanctions, the DPRK has increasingly relied on illicit activities—including cybercrime—to generate revenue for its weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs. ... The DPRK has the capability to conduct disruptive or destructive cyber activities affecting US critical infrastructure. The DPRK also uses cyber capabilities to steal from financial institutions, and has demonstrated a pattern of disruptive and harmful cyber activity that is wholly inconsistent with the growing international consensus on what

constitutes responsible State behavior in cyberspace.

Senior administration figures were not silent either: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [said](#) on March 15 that he called for renewed pressure and sanctions against North Korea at G7 teleconference, saying the world must “remain united in calling on North Korea to return to negotiations, and stay committed to applying diplomatic and economic pressure over its illegal nuclear and ballistic missile programs.” This did not go unnoticed by the North, as the director general of their foreign ministry rebuked Pompeo and, implicitly, Trump [six days later](#), for allowing this public criticism just days after the president’s letter offering Covid-19 assistance. “This makes us confused about who the real chief executive is in the United States,” the statement said.

And even though the regime has previously been willing to flatter Trump himself, calling the relationship he enjoys with Kim “[mysteriously wonderful](#),” this has its limits: on April 18 Trump [told](#) the press that he had received a letter from Kim, which he touted as evidence of their unprecedented relationship. However, on the following day the North Korean Foreign Ministry [denied](#) that any letter had been sent recently, and said that “relations between the top leaders of the DPRK and the US are not an issue to be taken up just for diversion nor should it be misused for meeting selfish purposes.”

### A North Korea Without Kim?

Under Trump North Korea-US relations has largely centered around the interactions between the two leaders—from their early [fiery feuds](#) to their later [love letters](#)—but the last two weeks of April left observers wondering what would happen if there were no leader to send letters to Trump. Following Kim Jong-un’s absence from a pair of notable public holidays, mysterious reports of serious health problems and even death sprang up, and [state media reports](#) that referenced the young leader but did not display him were of little help. The events that followed raised numerous questions about US and South Korean intelligence, the reliability of media coverage of North Korea and its young leader, but also whether the regime could survive Kim’s absence and what contingency plans the US and South Korea have in place if it cannot. Such questions did not have to be answered for the time being, as Kim returned at

the beginning of May, but policymakers may treat this a reprieve rather than a relief.

Observers did not know it at the time, but the saga of Kim’s disappearance began on April 15, celebrated in North Korea as Day of the Sun, the birth anniversary of founding leader Kim Il-sung. It is the country’s most important national holiday, an opportunity for all North Koreans from the incumbent leader on down, to pay respects to “Eternal President,” and outside observers frequently watch the date for provocative acts. This time, however, the event was noteworthy for what was not on display: for the first time since he became leader, Kim Jong-un [did not attend](#) the ceremonies.

Though this raised eyebrows at the time, it was not until five days later that rumors went into overdrive when the Seoul-based online newspaper *The Daily NK*, which makes use of an extensive defector network to report on events inside North Korea, [reported](#) that Kim had undergone a cardiovascular procedure on April 12, and was receiving treatment in Hyangsan County of the country’s northwestern North Pyongan Province. When the story was picked up by CNN, with the words “[grave danger](#)” thrown about, suddenly Kim’s well-being became international news, with both US and South Korean government sources questioned over what they knew. On April 25, Kim then missed public celebration of [Military Foundation Day](#).

In the days to come the US side was all over the map, with intelligence sources [telling](#) CNN only that they were watching the situation closely, and Trump himself [saying](#) he did not know how his on-again, off-again negotiations partner was doing, only stating that he wished him well. An MSNBC anchor tweeted, [then deleted](#), a claim that two US officials had told her Kim was “brain dead.” South Korean sources, however, all the way up to the presidential residence [stated](#) that they could see no unusual signs regarding Kim. Moon Chung-in, South Korean special adviser to the president and one of the leading advocates for engagement with the North, [chimed in](#) on April 26, saying that Kim was “alive and well.” By April 24 Trump had changed his tune, declaring not only that Kim was in no danger but that those saying he was were “[fake news](#)” and based off “old documents.” On April 27 he added that he had a “[very good idea](#)” about how Kim was doing but that he could not discuss it further. On April 28, the South Korean Unification Minister further fueled the fire by



[suggesting](#) Kim's absence was due to concerns over the Covid-19, rather than cardiovascular issues.

We may never know the explanation for Kim's lost weeks out of sight, but hints about his state could be found in abundance. For one, [satellite imagery](#) showed his personal convoy in Wonsan, Kangwon Province in late April, and even while out of sight the leader's exploits were never far from the pages of state media, as the *Rodong Sinmun* [described him](#) sending "appreciation" to workers of the Wonsan-Kalma tourist zone, as well as sending messages to friendly governments.

Then, on May 1, Kim [suddenly re-emerged](#) in state media, which publicized his appearance at a ribbon cutting for the Sunchon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factory. His sister, Kim Yo-jong, around whom much speculation centered, appeared at his side, dutifully carrying his ribbon-cutting scissors. No explanation for his time out of the public eye, including at the major festivities of the Day of the Sun and Military Foundation Day, was given, but his return was vindication for South Korean government sources, as well as Trump himself, who [tweeted](#) that he was glad to see Kim "back, and well" despite the absence of talks between them in recent months.



Figure 2 Kim Jong-Un reemerges at the opening of a fertilizer factory after weeks of speculation. Photo: KCNA via Reuters

This was not Kim's first long absence from the spotlight—in September and October of 2014 he [reappeared in public](#) after being gone for a month and a half, a disappearance that prompted similar speculation. Unlike that event five and a half years ago, Kim this time was not supporting himself with cane upon his return, but that did not stop North Korea watchers from

[scrutinizing the pictures](#) for signs of medical maladies.

The young strongman's health has been a concern for many North Korea observers over the years – a heavy smoker who stands 5'7 and weighs in at 300 pounds, Kim's well-being has long been questionable, especially as the children he reportedly has with wife Ri Sol-ju would be too young to succeed him. If he were to die or suddenly become incapacitated, it would therefore be the first time in North Korea's eight-decade history in which the country has not had a generational succession plan in place.

Kim's younger sister Yo-jong is the only family member in the upper echelons of government at the moment, and analysts say it is far from clear that a woman would be accepted as leader in North Korea's highly patriarchal society. His uncle Kim Pyong-il, last surviving son of Kim Il-sung, has served the country as ambassador to several European countries. However, Kim Jong-un, like his father Kim Jong-il before him, has seen fit to keep Kim Pyong-il far from the levers of power by [stationing him](#) a continent away. Other [key figures](#) like Choe Ryong-hae, president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, would likely have the most practical experience when it comes to leading the country, but this could be a tough sell in a country heavily invested in the "revolutionary lineage" of the [Mount Paektu bloodline](#) and without the descent of the "Eternal President" Kim Il-sung at the country's helm. If there is no clear leader, the possibility of a power struggle and regime instability comes into play, with questions of how the US, along with South Korea, would respond and what arrangement with China—which has long seen North Korea as a useful buffer zone against US influence—could be reached. The timing of such a development could hardly be worse, considering [the depths](#) the US-China relationship has sunk to in recent months.

More practically, even as their governments have maintained hostility toward one another, Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump have been at pains to maintain their cordial relationship. In Kim's absence, relations between the two countries might further deteriorate. Again, Kim's return does seemingly make this a moot point, but perhaps not for good. One medical expert [recently calculated](#) that Kim's poor health habits put him at a 30-33% risk of a



“cardiovascular disease event,” a significantly risk for a man in his mid-to-late 30s, and certain to go higher with each year barring a significant lifestyle change. It therefore behooves US policymakers to prepare for the possibility, and to coordinate with its partners in the region—particularly South Korea.

### **Mustaches, Movies, and Morass**

But that raises the question of how prepared Washington and Seoul are for coordination. South Korea-US relations in this period were defined primarily by their inability to come to terms over a troop burden-sharing arrangement. The Covid-19 was an opportunity to ease the tension, as South Korea’s response has been held out as an international model, and Seoul is well-positioned to export its experience in coping with the pandemic. However, relations were largely defined by the inability to break the stalemate in negotiations, and the disagreements sometimes turned petty.

The year did not get off to a promising start. On Jan. 16, US Ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris [warned](#) that time was short for the two sides to complete their Special Measures Agreement, after South Korea rejected the US request to increase its financial commitment to stationing US soldiers in Korea fivefold, to \$5 billion. Harris, a retired admiral, who was born in Japan to an American Navy officer and a Japanese mother, has frequently borne the brunt of Korean frustration with talks, with [some](#) claiming that his mustache is reminiscent of the governors-general who ruled the Korean Peninsula on Imperial Japan’s behalf before the end of World War II. Harris has taken the criticisms in stride, though, denying that he has bias against Korea but saying he will continue to represent the US government’s position in talks. He has also added that his mustache has nothing to do with his Japanese lineage, but is instead something he chose to do after he left military service in 2018.

President Trump, for his part, has frequently criticized not only the financial arrangement for stationing troops in Korea but also the free trade agreement his predecessor reached with Seoul. He likely did not help ease South Koreans’ sense that he bears a grudge against them when he ventured into film criticism in February. A week and a half after South Korea’s *Parasite* became the first non-English language film to win the Oscar for best picture, Trump told a venue full

of his supporters in Colorado Springs:

And the winner is a movie from South Korea! What the hell was that all about? We’ve got enough problems with South Korea with trade. On top of it they give them the best movie of the year? Was it good? I don’t know. ... Let’s get *Gone with the Wind*. Can we get *Gone with the Wind* back please?

While it is easy to fixate on the president’s words, it should also be noted that they drew both laughs and cheers from his audience in Colorado: a state Trump did not even win in 2016. While South Korean nationalism is strong—as is [their opposition](#) to a fivefold burden-sharing increase—it must be noted that Trump’s opinions on the US-South Korea alliance are not his alone. Indeed, ingrained public sentiment on both sides helps explain why the negotiations between the two sides show no sign of stopping. Signs of a [tentative agreement](#) have been announced—and been [announced again](#)—but nothing concrete produced as of early May.

Furthermore, the US cannot count on South Korean conservatives emerging as a counterweight to Moon administration and undermining its negotiating position either, as Moon’s Democratic Party achieved a historic triumph in the National Assembly elections of mid-April. South Korea’s ruling Democratic Party [won](#) 180 of 300 seats in National Assembly elections in a landslide victory, compared to the conservative United Future Party’s 103. It was the worst performance by the conservative bloc since South Korea’s democratic transition in 1987. The US relationship was not decisive in the campaign—conservatives criticized the Moon government’s early missteps in handling the outbreak, but this was never going to succeed while so much of the rest of the world is struggling more than Korea is—yet the sweeping victory gives the Democrats the authority to fast-track legislation and will likely be interpreted as a broad vote of confidence in their handling of affairs—including the alliance.



*Figure 3 Former South Korean Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon of the ruling Democratic Party celebrates his constituency victory in the National Assembly elections. Photo: Kyodo*

### **Conclusion: No Change Until November?**

While experts in Washington and Seoul will continually make predictions about the course of America's relations with both Koreas, one upcoming event will likely dominate the scope and tenor of how all three nations view each other: the 2020 US presidential election in November.

For Washington, the Trump administration will likely continue to hold true to its policy of "maximum pressure" on the North and offer very few concessions, fearing that any sort of diplomatic failure or additional summit perceived in a negative light would hurt Trump's political fortunes, meaning maintaining the status quo is the most likely scenario. There is, however, hope that Washington could lower its demands on Seoul for a new cost sharing agreement—a topic the American public knows little about. Sadly, at present, there seems to be little to no sense of urgency on the Trump administration's part to conclude any agreement anytime soon. Here once again, weighing the political stakes, the status quo is the least politically risky option.

North Korea also has strong incentives to wait until November's results are clear. With Kim likely worried that any deal he could make with Washington now could be scrapped if a Biden administration were to take office, Kim will clearly be cautious and wait to get an understanding of who his negotiating partner will be. That also means Kim will surely limit his interactions with Seoul, knowing that they would need to be blessed in large part by Washington, who under present circumstances

and timing would be leery of allowing the Moon government to vary from the current diplomatic approach and take any risks that could damage Trump's reelection chances, even if the risks are small.

As for Seoul, with Moon's party winning the recent April election, his government would like to use some of its hard-won political capital to try and further inter-Korean relations. However, with the US and North Korea likely in a diplomatic holding pattern, the best the Moon government can hope for is a policy of trying to create the conditions for a possible breakthrough once the November election results are clear. However, even that would be difficult at best as the Trump administration may see a large turnover in national security staff in key positions, as happens from time to time at the end of a first term. Additionally, if a president-elect Biden were to become a reality, the Moon government may be forced to consider what could be a renewed policy of Obama-era style "strategic patience."

# CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

## JANUARY – MAY 2020

**Dec. 31, 2019:** North Korean leader Kim Jong Un Calls US behavior “gangster-like,” and states that North Korea will deploy a new strategic weapon.

**Jan. 14, 2020:** US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa [hold](#) trilateral meeting with Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu; Pompeo urged South Korean cooperation in the Middle East, and Kang urged quicker reconciliation efforts with DPRK.

**Jan. 15, 2020:** US President Donald Trump [says](#) China has been “very helpful” with respect to Kim Jong Un, and says the US will be working closely with China on North Korea in luncheon remarks following US-China Phase One Trade Agreement signing with Chinese Vice Premier Liu He.

**Jan. 16, 2020:** US Ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris [says](#) further work needs to be done on Special Measures Agreement, but gaps are closing.

**Jan. 20, 2020:** Harris [responds](#) to criticism over his facial appearance, US Department of State spokesperson Morgan Ortagus also defends Harris.

**Feb. 13, 2020:** US Department of State spokesperson Ortagus [issues](#) a press statement expressing concern over the vulnerability of North Korea to COVID-19, offering support and aid.

**Feb. 14, 2020:** US CISA and the FBI [release](#) six Malware Analysis Reports (MARs) and update one MAR shedding light on malicious cyber activity from North Korea.

**Feb. 21, 2020:** Trump [decree](#)s *Parasite*’s Oscar win, saying “We’ve got enough problems with South Korea on trade. On top of that, they give them best movie of the year?”

**Feb. 29, 2020:** US Department of State [issues](#) a Level 3 travel advisory to South Korea due to COVID-19.

**March 2, 2020:** South Korean JCS says North Korea [fired](#) two short-range projectiles from Kangwon Province toward the East Sea.

**March 8, 2020:** US Department of the Army [suspends](#) travel to and from South Korea by soldiers and their family due to COVID-19.

**March 8, 2020:** South Korean JCS says North Korea [fired](#) three projectiles from Hamgyong Province toward the East Sea.

**March 12, 2020:** Trump, in an address to the nation, [says](#) the US may reevaluate travel warning to South Korea if the COVID-19 situation improves.

**March 20, 2020:** North Korea fires two projectiles presumed to be short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea.

**March 21, 2020:** Kim Yo Jong [issues](#) a press statement saying Trump sent a personal letter to Kim Jong Un expressing well wishes and offering assistance on COVID-19.

**March 21, 2020:** South Korean JCS says North Korea [fired](#) two projectiles from Pyongan province presumed to be short-range ballistic missiles (ATACMS or Russia's Iskander) toward the East Sea.

**March 24, 2020:** Trump [holds](#) phone call with South Korean President Moon Jae-in requesting medical equipment.

**March 25, 2020:** Pompeo [says](#) he called for renewed pressure and sanctions against North Korea at G7 teleconference.

**March 28, 2020:** North Korea fires what appear to be two short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea.

**March 31, 2020:** DPRK Director General of the Foreign Ministry [criticizes](#) Pompeo’s call for renewed sanctions, despite Trump’s letter, and warns against further provocations against North Korea.

**April 2, 2020:** North Korea's director of central emergency anti-epidemic headquarters Pak Myong Su [says](#) there are no cases of COVID-19 in the country.

**April 6, 2020:** US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper [says](#) he discussed importance of an "equitable" defense cost-sharing agreement with South Korean counterpart Jeong Kyeong-doo, following reports that a tentative agreement was reached.

**April 14, 2020:** South Korean JCS says North Korea [fired](#) two short-range projectiles believed to be anti-cruise missiles from Wonson province on eve of national founder Kim Il Sung's birthday and South Korean elections.

**April 15, 2020:** US departments of State, Treasury, and Homeland Security, along with the FBI [release](#) interagency report detailing North Korean cyber offensive campaign to launder money and extort companies to funnel resources for nuclear weapons program.

**April 15, 2020:** Kim Jong Un [is](#) notably absent from celebrations of country's founding father Kim Il Sung's birthday.

**April 16, 2020:** South Korea's ruling Democratic Party [wins](#) 180 of 300 seats in National Assembly elections in a landslide victory, to the United Future Party's 103.

**April 18, 2020:** Trump [says](#) he received personal letter from Kim Jong Un to press and during phone call with Moon.

**April 19, 2020:** North Korean Foreign Ministry [denies](#) that North Korean leader sent any recent personal letter to Trump.

**April 20, 2020:** North Korea-focused undercover media outlet *Daily NK* [reports](#) that Kim Jong Un's health is in jeopardy following cardiovascular procedure on April 12, and is receiving treatment in Hyangsan County.

**April 20, 2020:** South Korea's Blue House [says](#) there are no unusual signs concerning North Korean leader Kim's health.

**April 21, 2020:** Trump [says](#) he doesn't know about Kim's health and wishes him well.

**April 21, 2020:** CNN, citing officials, [says](#) US intelligence is closely monitoring reports on Kim's health.

**April 24, 2020:** Trump [says](#) reports concerning Kim's ailing health are "fake news," "incorrect," and are based off "old documents."

**April 25, 2020:** Satellite imagery analysis [emerges](#) depicting North Korean leader Kim's personal train at Wonson on April 21 and 23. Kim does not celebrate Military Foundation Day publicly.

**April 26, 2020:** South Korean special adviser to the President Moon Chung-in [says](#) Kim Jong Un "is alive and well," adding that the ROK government position is "firm."

**April 27, 2020:** North Korean media outlet *Rodong Sinmun* [releases](#) report stating North Korean leader Kim "sent his appreciation" to workers of the Wonsan-Kalma tourist zone.

**April 27, 2020:** Trump [says](#) he has a "very good idea" about the condition of North Korean leader Kim, but "can't talk about it."

**April 28, 2020:** South Korean Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [says](#) the ROK government is aware of Kim's location during parliamentary session, and that his absence could be because of "coronavirus concerns."

**May 1, 2020:** State media announces Kim's [public reappearance](#) at a ribbon cutting for the Suncheon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factory. Trump [tweets](#) the following day that he is glad to see Kim "back, and well!"

*Chronology prepared by Pacific Forum Korea Foundation Fellow Kangkyu Lee*



PACIFIC  FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

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## C O N N E C T I O N S

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

**US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS**

## **FIGHTING THE PANDEMIC, ASEAN BRACES FOR ECONOMIC PAIN**

**CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY**

Many Southeast Asian countries' growth rates have been stripped to near zero by COVID-19, and leaders expect a crisis that could exceed that of the Asian Financial Crisis. The pandemic defined Southeast Asia's diplomatic relations from March, with high-level meetings moved to video conferences. The US-ASEAN summit, scheduled for March 24, was postponed but no new date has been announced. With US elections ramping up and questions about the COVID-19 pandemic outstanding, a 2020 US-ASEAN summit appears unlikely.

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In the early months of 2020 China escalated activity in the South China Sea, apparently taking advantage of the distraction the pandemic offers. Indonesia and Malaysia offered relatively robust responses, while the Philippines continued to be conflicted by President Rodrigo Duterte's eagerness to forge [stronger economic relations](#) with Beijing. The United States stepped up maritime activity in the South China Sea, but Washington's broader security posture in Southeast Asia could be in flux if Duterte follows through on his intention to [terminate](#) the US-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement. A surprise political transition in Malaysia in February complicates that country's ability to combat COVID-19; in several other states, emergency powers granted to governments to fight the virus could strengthen a recent upturn in authoritarianism. The virus also defined Southeast Asia's diplomatic relations from March, with high-level meetings moved to video conferences. The US-ASEAN Summit, scheduled for March 24, was postponed but no date for a new meeting has been announced. With US elections ramping up and questions about the pandemic outstanding, a 2020 US-ASEAN summit looks increasingly unlikely.

### **China Surges, But Southeast Asia Pushes Back**

The final days of 2019 and early ones of 2020 saw developments that could alter, however subtly, the dynamic between China and Southeast Asian countries on maritime disputes. Malaysia [petitioned](#) the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) to extend its continental shelf. The petition was an attempt to stake Kuala Lumpur's sovereign claims to the northern portions of the South China Sea waters, since Malaysia presently occupies five of the Spratly Islands and claims 12 altogether. Ultimately, it was a direct challenge not only to some of China's claims in the Spratlys but also to its more sweeping claim of maritime rights according to its Nine-Dash Line.

The move represents a new assertiveness on Malaysia's part; previously, Kuala Lumpur had preferred to contradict China's claims in the South China Sea through inter-governmental protest notes that were not made public. The petition was also an attempt to raise the profile on international maritime law in the region and to mitigate the impact of the Philippines' apparent rejection of its own victory in the 2016

UNCLOS decision. The petition broadsided China, which prefers to deal with Southeast Asian claimants on a bilateral basis. Apart from asserting Malaysia's rights, Kuala Lumpur's petition is an invitation for other Southeast Asian maritime nations—Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Brunei—to join by acknowledging them as fellow claimants.

The second defining event in this new trend was outwardly [more dramatic](#). In early January a flotilla of Chinese vessels—reportedly 63 fishing boats and two Coast Guard ships—crossed into the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claimed by Indonesia around the Natuna Islands. Jakarta's response was brisk, deploying eight warships and F-16 fighter jets. Indonesian President Joko Widodo visited the area, boarding one of Indonesian naval vessels. The Chinese flotilla withdrew; the People's Liberation Army Navy conceded that the fishing boats had taken fish from the EEZ and reportedly instructed them to withdraw from the zone, at least temporarily.

In the wake of the confrontation, Jakarta made two broad moves. First, Indonesia increased its invitation to major regional powers—specifically Japan, the United States, and South Korea—to invest in the fishing industry on Natuna. Oil and gas resources are also reportedly located in the EEZ. Second, the Indonesian armed forces, specifically the Maritime Security Agency, announced that it will establish a new maritime information unit to track and intercept vessels entering Indonesian waters illegally. This is likely to result in further episodes with China which, despite the outcome of the Natuna incident, will continue to employ gray zone fishing operations and probe for weak spots in Southeast Asian EEZ's.

Neither Malaysia's petition nor the Natuna incident appeared out of the blue: both were reactions to steady incursions by China into the two countries' territorial waters. Chinese assertiveness—and Southeast Asian maritime tensions with China—are spreading beyond the Spratly Islands and into the EEZ's of Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, for example, does not make claims on the Spratlys). More Southeast Asian countries could be drawn into maritime conflict with China.

Nor has China abandoned its traditional maritime battlegrounds, particularly as the COVID crisis has spread across the region and governments become more inward-looking. In

April Chinese vessels [rammed and sank](#) a Vietnamese fishing boat near the Paracel Islands, an action that drew rare criticism from the Duterte administration. China also announced that it would establish new “research centers” on some of the disputed islands it has militarized.

### US Alliances: Rollercoaster Relations

In response to greater Chinese maritime activity, in April the United States conducted a series of operations, ranging from deployment of warships into Malaysian waters to fend off Chinese ships tailing Malaysian oil exploration vessels to joint sorties of bomber jets over the South China Sea from the US Indo-Pacific Command and the US Strategic Command Bomber Task Force.

These actions were intended to reassure Southeast Asian security partners, but longer-term alliance management proved more complicated for Washington in early 2020. The annual [Cobra Gold](#) exercises in late February and early March, co-hosted by Thailand and the United States, celebrated the return of full US-Thailand security relations after a five-year period of restricted ties after the 2014 coup. *Cobra Gold* continued during this period at reduced but at reduced strength; full exercises were restored in the 2020 exercises, following Thailand’s return to elected government in 2019.



*Figure 1 An amphibious beach landing at Hat Yao Beach, Thailand, during Cobra Gold 2020. Photo: Staff Sgt. Jordan E. Gilbert, United States Marine Corps*

However, on February 11 Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte made good on a longstanding threat and announced that his government would [terminate](#) the US-Philippine Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), a major element of the

US-Philippine security alliance, although by no means the entire alliance. The proximate cause of Duterte’s decision was his ire over the US [visa ban](#) on Ronald dela Rosa, a Philippine senator and former police chief who led Duterte’s infamous war against drug dealers. Tensions were exacerbated when the US Congress passed a resolution in January pushing for sanctions against Philippine officials involved in the detention of Senator Leila de Lima, a noted critic of Duterte’s drug war.

There are, no doubt, deeper reasons for Duterte’s decision, focused more broadly on the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT). One is continued uncertainty over the extent to which the United States would defend the Philippines in the event of an attack, more specifically if its fishing vessels were attacked by China, a frequent occurrence. In addition, Manila has periodically expressed discontent that the terms of the alliance do not mirror the status of forces agreements the United States has with Japan and South Korea, particularly on jurisdiction of US troops on Philippine soil. These concerns are deeply rooted and shared across the Philippine defense community: even defense officials who staunchly support a strong relationship with the United States have recently pressed for a re-examination of the alliance.

President Trump’s response to Duterte’s announcement was one of seeming indifference—primarily that terminating the VFA would be cost-saving for the United States—but Secretary of Defense Mark Esper expressed concern, albeit in low-key terms.

Under the terms of the agreement, the VFA cannot be terminated until 180 days, or six months, have passed after one side files formal notification of intent to terminate. If Duterte stays the course, this would put the end of the VFA at August 11, 2020. However, he can reverse course and withdraw the notice any time before that. His decision to terminate the VFA was the first step in an assumed two-step process, the other step being to build stronger security relations with China and Russia. In mid-February the Philippine government [acknowledged](#) that it was discussing a joint military technical cooperation agreement with Russia.

However much they might like to revise the alliance, there is little support for terminating the VFA among most Philippine military leaders.

Nevertheless, the working assumption in Manila Philippine government is that the VFA will be cancelled. Its proponents hope that an arrangement similar to the VFA will re-emerge under a new agreement, although it may be necessary to wait until Duterte leaves office in 2023. Most important, the VFA provides authorization for US support to counter-terrorism operations on Philippine territory. The six-week siege of Marawi City in 2017 was a reminder of the active threat of extremist insurgency in Mindanao, which has not abated even as the coronavirus has immobilized other aspects of Philippine life.

### **Mahathir Miscalculates**

In February new Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin came to power unexpectedly, when his predecessor Mahathir Mohamad launched a failed attempt to reshuffle his Cabinet. As his Pakatan Harapan coalition collapsed, the 94-year-old Mahathir [abruptly resigned](#), expecting to return to his ruling position with a new, hand-chosen Cabinet. In doing so, he aimed to avoid handing power over to Anwar Ibrahim—since the 1990s, alternately Mahathir's political rival and ally—which, as part of an arrangement that brought Mahathir to power in 2018, he had promised to do sometime in 2020.

However, Mahathir's ploy backfired. To cut short the growing political chaos, Sultan Abdullah Ahmad, polled the Parliament and, by a narrow margin (113 of the 222 MPs), determined that a majority of members were inclined to back Yassin, a former deputy prime minister during the prime ministership of Najib Razak (2009–2015), who is currently under charges of corruption related to the 1MDB scandal. Muhyiddin was duly appointed prime minister and inaugurated on March 1.

Legally, Muhyiddin's term extends to September 16, 2023, when general elections must be held, but Muhyiddin's appointed status will eat away at his political legitimacy if he does not call elections before that. Moreover, his tenure could be short if he does not ease major challenges and crises facing Malaysia: slowing the spread of the coronavirus and implementing a quick economic recovery afterward; dealing with the prosecution of top United Malays National Organisation (UNMO) officials for the 1MDB scandal; and maintaining communal equilibrium and security in the face of continued

threats from the Islamic State and other jihadist groups.

This last challenge could be undermined by Muhyiddin's role in race-based politics. He is a sworn advocate of the Malay Muslim community in Malaysia, and his appointment has stirred discontent in more liberal quarters that favor greater ethnic and religious harmony over the embedded racial and religious identities that defined Malaysian political parties. Muhyiddin's picks for his Cabinet only underscored their uneasiness: the largest Cabinet in Malaysian history with 68 members, it is dominated by ethnic Malay men.

### **Myanmar Drifts Closer to Beijing**

Another major political event in Southeast Asia in 2020, albeit an anticipated one, will be general elections in Myanmar at the end of the year. Aung Sang Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy is expected to retain its majority, although with a smaller margin. However, in contrast to 2015, Suu Kyi enjoys far less favor in the West, primarily because of the plight of 1 million Rohingya refugees still in camps in Bangladesh.

In January, Myanmar suffered another blow to its international reputation when the International Court of Justice issued a [provisional order](#) in the case brought by The Gambia charging the Myanmar armed forces with genocide against the Rohingya in the 2017 crackdown in Rakhine State. The order requires the government to take measures to prevent further genocidal acts against the Rohingya while the case proceeds. In her testimony before the ICJ at The Hague in December 2019, Suu Kyi argued that the government had already taken steps to bring abusers in the 2017 crackdown to account, and that external pressure would be counter-productive. Facing re-election this year, her government is unlikely to make major moves against the armed forces, not least because Myanmar's Buddhist majority has little sympathy for the Rohingya.

Napyyidaw's present estrangement from the West opened an opportunity for Beijing, and in mid-January Chinese President Xi Jinping made an [official visit](#) to Myanmar, his first-ever visit to the country in his capacity as president and the first Chinese head of state to visit in 20 years. He met both State Counselor/Foreign Minister Aung Sang Suu Kyi and Tatmadaw

Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing. In recent years Xi has made high-profile visits to smaller countries of the region, particularly those with geostrategic positions that are key to China's sweeping plans to transform transportation networks to their advantage; for example, Xi visited Laos in 2017.

Apart from capitalizing on the political moment, Xi hoped to strengthen Chinese-Myanmar partnership on infrastructure development, and more specifically to move some high-profile, stalled projects. In this regard, he scored some successes but also met with disappointment. In all, Xi was able to sign 33 documents—ranging from agreements to MOUs—on infrastructure projects as well as other investments, and on trade. By far, the prize in this process was a pair of documents—one a concessional agreement and the other a shareholders' agreement—to move forward on the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone and the all-important deepsea port project.

However, any mention of the Myitsone Dam project was conspicuously lacking in the final joint statement or in other documents. Public opposition to the dam has, if anything, grown: 40 civil society groups have issued a [public statement](#) calling for permanent cancellation of the project. Myanmar is still indebted to China for the partial cost of the Myitsone project, but no discussion on this issue between the two countries has been made public.

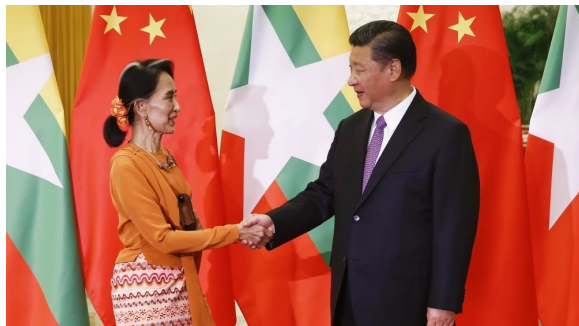


Figure 2 Chinese President Xi Jinping meets State Counselor Aung Sang Suu Kyi during his visit to Myanmar January 17-18, 2020. Photo: Damir Sagolj / AFP

### The Virus Upends—and Ends?—the ASEAN Growth Spurt

Like many governments, Southeast Asian administrations underestimated the gravity of the COVID-19 outbreak, and their initial responses were hesitant. Although the region

still has a low number of cases relative to Europe and the United States, infections are rising. Moreover, governments that historically pride themselves on tight social order—particularly Singapore—are discovering that even their best efforts cannot fend off a second wave of COVID-19.

Statistics across the region fluctuate rapidly, but by the end of April Singapore had the largest number of cases in Southeast Asia, exceeding 17,000, primarily because of its large number of migrant workers. Indonesia was in second place with over 12,000 cases and the Philippines third with approximately 10,000. Malaysia had over 6,500 cases and Thailand half of that, with 3,000.

Only Vietnam appears to have steadily held down their case numbers, with fewer than 300 cases and no deaths as of the end of April. Hanoi was quick to declare a nationwide epidemic and tamp down celebrations for the Lunar New Year. Employing techniques it had developed in the 2004-05 SARS epidemic, the central government stressed public information and mass mobilization against the virus.

But the economic impact of COVID-19 promises to be devastating, and reminds Southeast Asian leaders of the cost of dependence on a single trading partner, in this case China. In both China and Southeast Asia, consumer demand has fallen as populations are sequestered in their homes and, particularly important, not able to travel and support tourism. The closure of borders has greatly slowed border trade; mainland Southeast Asian countries that have borders with China (Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar) are particularly affected by this loss of revenue. The China-Southeast Asia supply chain has broken down in many places. In Cambodia, for example, garment factories are not able to source raw materials from China. The government estimates that as many as 200 factories could close, with over 100,000 workers unemployed.

The more developed ASEAN countries have followed similar paths in their responses to the COVID crisis in the face of plummeting economic growth rates: stimulus packages that attempt to shore up businesses (particularly medium and small enterprises); tax incentives; the postponement of debt obligations; lowered interest rates; and central bank purchases of government bonds. The swift outflow of capital



has caused markets to fall rapidly and depreciated exchange rates. Stock markets in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam have lost at least a quarter of their value, with Vietnam's down nearly 30%. Growth rate projections for the year have fallen by as much as 4% in many countries.

Southeast Asian leaders hope to recoup some of this economic loss with greater diversification of international investment away from China to other destinations, the intensification of a trend which began with the US-China tariff war of 2018-19. However, this is a long-term bet, since many of the stimulus packages of the major economies, such as the United States and Japan, are more focused on bringing production back to their own shores. In the near-term, Southeast Asia will have little choice but to hope that it can quickly revive its supply chains with China.

The COVID crisis also calls into question Chinese infrastructure and other investment projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing has currently suspended the BRI because it cannot be assured of the labor force and logistics of continuing projects, adding to Southeast Asian (and Chinese) unemployment. Work on China's signature project in mainland Southeast Asia, the China-Lao Railway has halted for the time being.

Once the COVID epidemic has abated, it is widely assumed that most projects in progress will resume. However, if the economic damage to China from the virus is significant enough, cash and credit from Beijing will not be as plentiful as it was previously. This would likely lead China to triage projects, ditching those that are less promising and retaining those with greater economic or strategic value.

### **ASEAN Responds**

With most national borders in Southeast Asia closed and populations (particularly in urban areas) under lockdown, ASEAN was caught flat-footed by the coronavirus. Until April, member states were primarily content with releasing statements of concern and vows to cooperate. Hanoi, the 2020 ASEAN chair, was forced to postpone the first ASEAN Summit of the year, originally scheduled for April; it has been tentatively scheduled for June, but that date may slip. No decisions have been made on the form and timing of the ASEAN Regional Forum, usually held in the late summer, or the East Asia

Summit, the final event of the ASEAN annual cycle, usually held in the fall.

Virtual bilateral and multilateral consultations among ASEAN members states about the virus have been frequent since the outbreak, but the content was confined to information about the spread of the virus and best practices in responding to it. Foremost in the minds of many governments was the need to coordinate short-term fiscal policy so as not to exacerbate economic distress in the region.

But no new initiatives to fight the virus and its economic aftermath were discussed until the ASEAN Special Summit on COVID-19, organized by Vietnam on April 14. The primary deliverable of that meeting was to establish the ASEAN Response Fund (ARF), to enable member states to pool some resources for collective action and, arguably more important, to provide a vehicle for foreign donors. The immediate aim of the ASEAN Response Fund is to create a regional stockpile of medical supplies.

In the near-term, ASEAN intends to boost e-commerce where possible; strengthen cooperation among defense sectors to facilitate the movement of medical assistance, particularly to remote or border areas; and to improve the exchange of medical data on the coronavirus. This last objective could prove both difficult and controversial, since a lack of transparency on confirmed cases and deaths—particularly in Indonesia, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia—led to initial denials that governments were forced to walk back.

ASEAN has also looked to its external partnerships and frameworks for assistance in fighting COVID-19. A particular draw is the ASEAN-Plus-Three (APT) group, comprised of the 10 ASEAN member states plus China, Japan, and South Korea. Beijing is a major player in the group, but is more than balanced by Tokyo and Seoul. Thus, Southeast Asian leaders are more safely able to raise issues of concern that may involve (or even cast criticism on) China than they would be if they were dealing with Beijing alone. Moreover, since trade, tourism, transportation routes, and migration connect Southeast and Northeast Asia to an increasing degree, the APT offers an opportunity for ASEAN to extend its own networks and frameworks. For example, ASEAN plans to enlarge its stockpile of medical equipment with an APT Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies.



ASEAN welcomes stronger coordination and assistance from the United States on COVID-19, but not at any price. Thus far this year, the United States has provided slightly over \$35 million in aid to Southeast Asia to combat the virus. As it has with the three APT countries, as well as with the EU, ASEAN made its pitch to Washington for a contribution to the [ASEAN Response Fund](#). However, the joint statement of the April 23 virtual ASEAN-US Foreign Ministers Meeting reveals that Washington pressed ASEAN to join it in demanding that China shut down its wildlife wet markets. ASEAN leaders have expressed frustration, even anger, over the possibility that China initially withheld information on the virus outbreak, but they view public efforts to censure or punish Beijing for it as counter-productive, particularly if those efforts are led by the United States. Billed as a special meeting to discuss the coronavirus, the ASEAN-US Foreign Ministers Meeting suggests that, for the time being, US relations with Southeast Asia will be confined to fighting the pandemic and to further iterations of US-China rivalry.

### **Looking Ahead**

Trade dependence on China may be a major contributor to economic pain in Southeast Asia, but the region's leaders are not sanguine that they will be able to forge a new and more stable path out of that dependence in the near future. For that reason, ASEAN will lean more heavily on the ASEAN-Plus-Three framework, rather than on relations with either the United States or the European Union for economic recovery, unless the outcome of US elections this year enable a move away from the "America first" approach to trade.

Indeed, the elections and the need to manage the COVID crisis in the United States will make Washington even more inward-looking for the rest of the year, and diplomatic relations with the ASEAN region will lag further. That could slow or even suspend the process by which Duterte hopes to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement, which would be an advantage for the US. However, the events of early 2020 signal a major challenge for the United States and Southeast Asia, post-virus and post-election, to define and possibly reshape their economic, security, and political relations.

# CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

## JANUARY – APRIL 2020

**Jan. 8, 2020:** President Joko Widodo visits a military base on the Nantuna Islands to underscore Indonesian sovereignty in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which includes the Nantunas, after Chinese vessels intruded into the EEZ.

**Jan. 14–15, 2020:** Acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas Modly makes his inaugural visit to Singapore and meets Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen; Chief of Singaporean Defense Forces Lt. Gen. Melvyn Ong; and Chief of Navy Rear Adm. Lew Chuen Hong.

**Jan. 17–18, 2020:** Chinese President Xi Jinping makes his first-ever visit to Myanmar in his capacity as president and the first Chinese head of state to visit in 20 years. He meets State Counselor/Foreign Minister Aung Sang Suu Kyi and Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing. His visit sparks agreement that the two countries will move forward with the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone and, most important, its planned deepsea port.

**Jan. 23, 2020:** International Court of Justice issues a provisional order on the case against the Myanmar government for genocide against Muslim Rohingya in late 2017. In response to a request from The Gambia, Myanmar is ordered to prevent genocidal acts against the Rohingya while the case is in progress.

**Jan. 28, 2020:** Secretary of State Mike Pompeo meets Laotian Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith in Washington. Laos is the current ASEAN coordinator for relations with the United States. The two diplomats discuss plans for the (later cancelled) US-ASEAN Summit, scheduled for March 14 in Las Vegas, as well as strengthening the US-Laos Comprehensive Partnership.

**Jan. 30, 2020:** Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun meets with Philippines Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin in Washington.

**Feb. 11, 2020:** Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte announces that he intends to terminate the US-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), beginning a process that, if pursued, will conclude in late 2020.

**Feb. 12, 2020:** The European Union announces that it will suspend a portion of its trade preferences to Cambodia under the “Everything But Arms” (EBA) program that enables lower-income countries to export to the EU without tariffs or quotas, except for military weapons. The decision was based on the Hun Sen regime’s efforts to eliminate the political opposition as well as new curbs on the media and civil society organizations.

**Feb. 13, 2020:** The Philippine government announces it is in discussions with Russia on a joint military agreement. This is followed by a February 17 meeting between Igor Khavaev, Russian Ambassador to Manila, and Felimon Santos, chief of staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. The two countries are said to be moving toward completion of a joint military technical agreement.

**Feb. 18, 2020:** The *USS Paul Hamilton*, a guided missile destroyer that is part of the Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group, arrives in Singapore for a port visit.

**Feb. 19, 2020:** US Embassy in Manila hosts a flag-raising ceremony to commemorate the anniversary of Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s raising of the US flag over the embassy grounds during the Battle of Manila in 1945. It is one of a series of events to mark the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II.

**Feb. 24–March 6, 2020:** US Coast Guard conducts a “Train the Trainers” course in small boat operations with the Philippine Coast Guard, part of bilateral cooperation to enhance maritime law enforcement capability in the Philippines.

**Feb. 25–March 6, 2020:** The 39th iteration of *Cobra Gold* exercises are held in Thailand, with seven countries participating as full partners and numerous other countries as observers. The world’s longest-running military exercises, this year’s round focuses on amphibious assault, humanitarian civic action and defensive cybersecurity.

**Feb. 27, 2020:** Combined counter-terrorism exercises in Palawan between US Army Special Operations Forces and elite contingents of the Philippine 18th Special Forces Company conclude after a month. The exercises are held under the US-sponsored Joint/Combined Exchange Training (JEET) program.

**Feb. 28, 2020:** The Trump administration announces it is postponing the US-ASEAN Summit because of travel difficulties and other issues related to COVID-19. No date for a new summit is set.

**March 1, 2020:** Muhyiddin Yassin is sworn in as Malaysia’s eighth prime minister, although his predecessor, Mahathir Mohamed, claimed he had majority support in Parliament. Technically, Muhyiddin’s term will run until September 16, 2023, by which point general elections must be called.

**March 3, 2020:** The United States announces it will provide \$59 million additional aid for Rohingya refugees from Myanmar and host Bangladeshi communities, bringing the total of US humanitarian assistance to \$820 million since August 2017, when nearly 1 million Rohingya fled after a crackdown by the Tatamadow in Rakhine State.

**March 5–12, 2020:** *USS Theodore Roosevelt* Strike Group visits DaNang for an historic port call that marks the 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States. The ship is only the second carrier to visit Vietnam in more than 40 years. While in DaNang, the crew participates in several volunteer activities, including at the Agent Orange Center of DaNang.

**March 11, 2020:** The 6th Annual *Bersama Warrior* exercises open in Kuala Lumpur, bringing together US and Malaysian Armed Forces. This year’s meeting is a staff exercise to prepare for the 2021 Combined Post exercise.

**March 16, 2020:** State Department issues a statement criticizing the conviction of Vietnamese blogger and Radio Free Asia contributor Truon Duy Nhat, who is believed to have been seized in Bangkok in January 2019. Nhat is sentenced to 10 years in prison.

**March 26, 2020:** US Indo-Pacific Command announces cancellation of the 2020 *Balikatan* exercises with the Armed Forces of the Philippines, originally scheduled for May 4–15. They are cancelled due to concerns for the health and safety of participating forces and local populations.

**April 1, 2020:** The first ASEAN-US High Level Interagency Video Conference to Counter COVID-19 is conducted, co-chaired by Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Qoc Szung and Assistant Secretary of State David Stilwell.

**April 1, 2020:** State Department issues statement expressing concern over escalating violence in northern Rakhine and Chin states in Myanmar, citing thousands of locals that are displaced.

**April 3, 2020:** Chinese vessels ram and sink a Vietnamese fishing boat off the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. Although China has held the Paracels since 1974, Vietnam continues to assert its claim to the islands.

**April 6, 2020:** State Department expresses “serious concern” about reports of the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing vessel by Chinese ships in the South China Sea.

**April 8, 2020:** The Philippines publicly expresses solidarity with Vietnam after the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat, citing a need for all parties in the South China Sea to adhere to international maritime law.

**April 8, 2020:** Secretary of State Mike Pompeo talks with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, to discuss US assistance to Phnom Penh to combat COVID-19 and continued US concerns about the erosion of democracy and human rights in Cambodia.

**April 14, 2020:** In lieu of an in-person meeting for the first ASEAN Summit of the year, Hanoi conducts a video summit, chaired by Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc. The in-person summit is tentatively moved to June.

**April 14, 2020:** Following the virtual ASEAN Summit, Prime Minister Phuc hosts a video Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019, which includes China, Japan, and South Korea.

**April 21, 2020:** Two US warships—the *USS America* amphibious assault ship and the *USS Bunker Hill*, a guided missile cruiser—enter contested waters off Malaysia, where a Chinese naval vessel had been tailing a Malaysian state oil company ship conducting oil exploration.

**April 22, 2020:** State Department condemns attacks on World Health Organization (WHO) officials working to combat COVID-19 in Rakhine State, resulting in the death of one WHO worker.

**April 23, 2020:** United States and ASEAN members states hold a virtual Special ASEAN-US Foreign Ministers Meeting on COVID-19, co-chaired by Pompeo and Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister *Pham Binh Minh*.

**April 29-30, 2020:** Two US B-1B Lancers from the 28th Bomber Wing at Ellsworth Air Force Base fly a 32-hour roundtrip sortie over the South China Sea as part of a joint mission of the US Indo-Pacific Command and the US Strategic Command Bomber Task Force.

PACIFIC  FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

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C O N N E C T I O N S

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

**CHINA- SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS**

## FROM LOW PRIORITY TO HIGH TENSIONS

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For most of the first four months of 2020, China's generally low priority treatment of Southeast Asia featured cooperation on the coronavirus, standard treatment of South China Sea issues, and a visit by Xi Jinping to Myanmar. However, April saw tensions rise in the South China Sea, with an increase in US criticism of Chinese actions and US military moves against Chinese challenges as well as Chinese initiatives and ongoing provocations.

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As top Chinese leaders contained COVID-19 at home, restarted the economy, and sought global prominence in fighting the epidemic, they generally devoted secondary attention to relations with Southeast Asia. The cancelled Boao Forum for Asia and the National People's Congress precluded the usual authoritative Chinese leaders' statements on regional developments in these venues. For the most part, Southeast Asian countries received unexceptional coverage in Chinese publicity, which thanked foreign countries for their support for China and highlighted Chinese support for foreign countries. An exception was Cambodia and the extraordinary visit of Hun Sen to China and his meeting with Xi Jinping at the height of the health crisis in China in early February. Meanwhile, Xi's visit to Myanmar in January stood out as the last act of normal high-level diplomacy in the region.

China's low prioritization of the region showed when Foreign Minister Wang Yi, despite the pandemic, traveled to Europe to give a lengthy [speech](#) on China's view of the world at the Munich Security Conference in mid-February. Only one sentence of the address dealt with Southeast Asia, reiterating China's commitment to the proposed code of conduct and the settlement of South China Sea disputes through dialogue and negotiations by the relevant parties. In an interview in Berlin during that trip, Wang gave a long indictment of US coercive pressures against China, noting in passing US naval and air exercises along China's maritime border.

### Cooperating against the Coronavirus

Wang took a leadership role at the special China-ASEAN foreign ministers meeting on the novel coronavirus in Laos on February 20. He called for a special China-ASEAN leaders meeting to plan and guide cooperation at a higher level, noting that such a conference took place in 2003 in response to the SARS epidemic. The publicity surrounding the meeting included an ASEAN chairman's statement expressing support for China's efforts to fight the virus. The weeks prior to the meeting saw reported donations of supplies to China to fight the virus from several Southeast Asian countries. Earlier in February, China participated in a meeting on dealing with the epidemic led by public health ministers from ASEAN Plus Three—the 10 ASEAN members along with China, Japan, and South Korea—countries. On April 7, another

special meeting of the APT health ministers issued a statement during their videoconference to coordinate efforts to combat the virus.

Premier Li Keqiang participated in an April 14 special summit via videoconference of the ASEAN Plus 3 underlining close coordination and cooperation in dealing with COVID-19. Regarding Chinese assistance to ASEAN countries, Li said China will provide another 100 million face masks, 10 million protective suits, and other urgently needed medical supplies as grant assistance and via commercial channels. He added that China supports ASEAN in setting up a COVID-19 ASEAN response fund, and will provide necessary support through an ASEAN-China Cooperation Fund and APT Cooperation Fund.

Official Chinese media showed Xi, along with Li, making phone calls to a large number of world leaders concerning the coronavirus, and Xi participating in the videoconference G20 Extraordinary Leaders Summit on March 26. China's attention to Southeast Asian countries in these reports was generally low-key and unexceptional. By contrast, Hun Sen insured that Cambodia received special Chinese treatment by [visiting](#) a grateful Xi in Beijing on February 5, showing support for China at a time of need due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Subsequent Chinese media coverage and aid efforts gave top priority to Cambodia. With the dispatch of a special team of Chinese medical experts to Cambodia in late March, the country was highlighted as the first in the region to receive such support.



Figure 1 Cambodian Prime Minister Samdech Techo Hun Sen meets Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping in Beijing. Photo: China Daily News

In addition to fighting the epidemic, common themes of official Chinese commentary about Southeast Asia and the virus included the need to coordinate to resume economic activity and mutually beneficial trade and manufacturing, as well as revive production chains linking the countries. It also strongly supported the leadership of the World Health Organization in combating the epidemic and highlighted anti-Asian racism prompted by the virus in the United States.

Amid the pandemic, it appeared that China's public health diplomacy was yielding some dividends in the region. In an [opinion piece](#), Thai scholar and expert on Southeast Asian politics Thitinan Pongsudhirak argued that a number of Southeast Asian countries, especially those most dependent on China for trade and aid, including Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand, were minimizing their criticism of China. He said, "even if their nationals face more ravages from the virus, their governments will want to be seen as suffering with, not against, China." Southeast Asian countries affected by the pandemic were seeing and projecting signs of a regional recession and thus keen to reopen their borders and ease travel restrictions, all the while maintaining solidarity with China to respond to the coronavirus outbreak.

### **South China Sea disputes: Rising Tensions, Relevant Context**

#### *Rising Tensions*

April saw an escalation of tensions over the South China Sea, pitting the United States against China. First, Vietnam on April 3 issued a formal protest, accusing a Chinese Coast Guard ship on April 2 of pursuing, hitting, and sinking a Vietnamese fishing boat off the Paracel Islands and detaining the crew. The Chinese version of the incident insisted that the Vietnamese boat rammed into the Coast Guard ship after being warned to stop its illegal fishing and leave the area. On April 8, the Philippine foreign ministry expressed "deep concern" over the collision, recalling the Chinese sinking of a Philippines fishing boat last year. The US State Department issued a press statement on April 6 siding with the Vietnamese and expressing serious concern over the sinking and what it called a long string of Chinese actions to assert unlawful maritime claims disadvantaging Southeast Asian neighbors. The State Department also took issue

with China recently establishing two new "research stations" on land features in the outposts it built on Fiery Cross Reef and Subi Reef, as well as special military aircraft landings on Fiery Cross Reef. It highlighted China taking advantage of international preoccupation with the coronavirus to build facilities and advance control in the disputed South China Sea. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson rejected the US statement and the linkage of South China Sea issues with the fight against the coronavirus. South China Sea disputes were not mentioned in Chinese reports that, on the afternoon of April 2, Prime Minister Li took a call from the Vietnamese prime minister in which the virus, Vietnam's chairmanship of ASEAN, and China-Vietnam and China-ASEAN relations were discussed.

China's practice in recent years, of [harassing](#) other South China Sea claimants' efforts to explore for oil and gas in areas falling within China's expansive South China Sea claims, centered in recent months on the operations of a Malaysian survey ship. Following a pattern used last year to intimidate Vietnamese-directed explorations, Beijing deployed a large Chinese survey ship backed by escorting Chinese Coast Guard vessels to run in parallel with the Malaysian survey ship beginning in mid-April. The Malaysian Navy at times deployed a warship to monitor the intimidating Chinese Coast Guard ships and China reportedly deployed a destroyer as well. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesman rebutted initial US criticism of the move and the State Department followed with a focused criticism after the Chinese survey ship's arrival near the Malaysian survey ship. On April 20, a Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman's statement criticized a US Defense Department statement on Chinese involvement in the sinking of the Vietnamese fishing boat to warn against US efforts to create an excuse for military involvement in South China Sea disputes.



Figure 2 A CH-53E Super Stallion helicopter takes off from the amphibious warfare ship, USS America (LHA-6). Photo: USNI News

More importantly, on April 20 US and foreign media reports said that a large US amphibious warfare ship (weighing 45,000 tons) and an accompanying US cruiser were moving in the South China Sea toward the location of the Malaysian-Chinese faceoff. The US Navy group soon added a US destroyer and a warship from Australia in a show of force. Initial reaction by the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman on April 21 was carefully measured and moderate, claiming to not know the US warships' movements. He [insisted](#) the Chinese survey ship acted appropriately and there was no "stand-off" with Malaysia, and advised that the situation in the South China Sea is "steadily improving." Beijing also had no immediate harsh reaction to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's sharp criticism of Chinese bullying in the South China Sea and Pompeo's strong affirmations of US resolve to counter it—including his reference to recent US military flight operations in the South China Sea—prior to the secretary's meeting with ASEAN foreign ministers on April 22.

In a report on April 30, the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) reported information it had detailing movements of the US ships; they reportedly were 50 miles from the drilling ships on April 21; their location after that was not specified in the AMTI report. AMTI did note that another US warship, a littoral combat ship, left Singapore on April 25 and passed close to the Chinese survey vessel on April 26. When the US destroyer among the four ships deployed to the South China Sea conducted a freedom of navigation operations near the Paracel Islands on April 28, the usual criticism by the spokesperson of the PLA's Southern Command followed. The US cruiser in the group of four ships carried out a freedom of navigation

operations exercise in the Spratly Islands on April 29. The Southern Command's spokesperson's usual criticism again followed. In addition, the spokesman of China's Defense Ministry spokesman in the regular monthly press conference on April 30 strongly criticized the two freedom of navigation operations and the US-Australian joint navy exercise. *USNI News* reported on April 29 that the destroyer and cruiser along with the large US amphibious warfare ship "had been operating off the coast of Malaysia near an ongoing dispute over mineral exploration between Malaysia and China earlier this month," thereby suggesting that US operations near Malaysia were concluded.

Meanwhile, Beijing advanced administrative control of its expansive holdings in the South China Sea with the [announcement](#) on April 18 that China's State Council had approved the establishment of two districts, below the current administrative unit, Sansha City -- one to deal with matters including the Paracel Islands, and one to deal with matters including the Spratly Islands. The move prompted protests from Vietnam and the Philippines. Additionally, on April 20, China's Natural Resources Ministry and Civil Affairs Ministry released a joint statement giving names to features in the Paracel and Spratly islands. These included what were said to be 25 islands, shoals, and reefs and 55 oceanic mountains and ridges. The last such exercise was carried out in 1983, when China named 287 features in the area.

Targeting challenges from Vietnam, Yan Yan, director of the Research Centre of Oceans Law and Policy in the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, [said](#) China took this action to assert its sovereign rights because "China is faced with an increasingly aggressive Vietnam as the country continues to fish illegally and conduct oil and gas exploration unilaterally in the South China Sea." In a related move, China's foreign ministry spokesman on April 21 said that China's Mission at the United Nations on April 17 sent a diplomatic note to the UN General Secretary opposing several diplomatic notes sent to the UN General Secretary by the Vietnamese mission since late March affirming Vietnam's claims in the South China Sea.

#### Relevant Context

The rising tensions in April came against the background of disputes noted below reflecting



continuity in China's determined efforts to slowly, but surely, counter challenges and weaken opposition to its South China Sea ambitions. Disputes ranged from Chinese complaints against US Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) challenging Beijing's contested South China Sea holdings to diplomatic and military moves by other claimants to assert their claims against China.

#### *US FONOPS and US, China Military Exercises*

A US Littoral Combat Ship challenged Chinese claims as it passed near Chinese held Johnson Reef and Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly Islands in January, and a US destroyer challenged Chinese claims as it passed near the Chinese held Paracel Islands in March. Both prompted the usual complaints from PLA Southern Theater Command. *The South China Morning Post* [reported](#) that US FONOPS in the South China Sea occurred nine times in 2019, an increase over the five in 2018, and six in 2017. Earlier numbers were three in 2016, two in 2015, and none in 2014. The Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman on March 26 rebuked the FONOPS in March, along with the large US exercises that month carried out in the South China Sea by the *Theodore Roosevelt* Carrier Strike Group and the America Expeditionary Strike Group, plus exercises by US B-52 bombers and other aircraft operating in Chinese-claimed South China Sea airspace. China for its part held small anti-submarine exercises in March and a large aircraft carrier task group exercise in April.

#### *Harassing Malaysian Oil and Gas Operations*

The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) in February 2020 recalled Beijing's use in 2019 of coast guard vessels and maritime militia in protracted harassment and intimidation of Malaysian and Vietnamese oil and gas enterprise activities seen to infringe on Beijing's wide-ranging claims in the South China Sea as background for its [report](#) on another ongoing protracted standoff in the disputed South China Sea. The standoff this year involved Malaysian exploration for oil and gas, sometimes with the protection of a Malaysian warship, and what was depicted as ongoing harassment by Chinese Coast Guard vessels. Vietnam also claims the area and was seen to have deployed some maritime militia ships to monitor developments. As noted above, AMTI provided an updated report on the situation on April 30, noting the coming and going of the US Navy group sent to the area early in the month,

along with the continued presence of the Malaysian survey ship and a nearby Malaysian warship and a nearby Chinese survey ship accompanied by Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia fishing boats.

#### *Malaysia, China, Philippines, and Vietnam: Affirming South China Sea Claims*

The Thayer Consultancy Background Briefs clarified the meaning and significance of Malaysia's new submission on its South China Sea claims on December 12, 2019 to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). As noted in the [previous Comparative Connections](#), that submission was accompanied by the Malaysian foreign minister labeling China's nine-dash line territorial claim as "ridiculous." Subsequent developments included the following:

- Malaysia's submission precipitated a response by China on the same day. In a diplomatic note to the commission, China reiterated its longstanding claim to the South China Sea and all its land features. China also called on the CLCS not to consider the submission by Malaysia.
- The Philippines responded to the submissions by China and Malaysia with two separate diplomatic notes both dated March 6, 2020. The Philippines relied on the ruling of the UNCLOS Arbitral Tribunal of July 12, 2016 to argue that China's claims were illegal under international law. This Philippine assertion represented a marked change in the Philippines' public position since President Rodrigo Duterte set aside the tribunal ruling to improve relations with China.
- This chain of diplomatic notes to the CLCS set the stage for Vietnam to join other claimant states in protesting a Chinese note reiterating its claim on March 23, 2020 with a Vietnamese diplomatic note on March 30.

The Thayer consultancy advised that the CLCS has no authority to consider or resolve disputes between states over the outer limits of the continental shelf. Such disputes must be resolved between the states concerned. And it noted that Malaysia's submission in December

left the door open for talks with the Philippines and Vietnam to agree to delimit overlapping areas of their proposed extended continental shelves. As noted below, there was some speculation that Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam could make a tripartite submission in the future.

#### *Indonesia Counters Chinese Challenges—Prospects for United Resistance, Conflict*

Indonesia protested strongly the perceived intrusion of over 60 Chinese fishing boats accompanied by two Chinese Coast Guard vessels into its claimed Exclusive Economic Zone in late December. Indonesia followed in early January by sending warships and jet fighters to patrol the waters concurrent with President Joko Widodo's visit to the area affirming Indonesia's claim. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesman on January 6 called on both sides to manage their differences and maintain regional peace, while he affirmed that China's sovereignty over the Spratly Islands in the southern South China Sea and implied such sovereignty justified Chinese fishing in "nearby waters." The Indonesian military told the media on January 9 that the offending Chinese Coast Guard and fishing vessels had left the disputed areas. However, later media reports including a *New York Times* feature article, [said](#) the offending Chinese ships soon returned and stayed for days before leaving. *The Times* report portrayed the Indonesian government as reluctant to confront China over the issue, fearing loss of economic benefits from China.

The at least initially strong Indonesian reaction in January and diplomatic steps to counter China's claims by Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, reviewed above, prompted [forecasts](#) of a possible united front against China's territorial ambitions on the part of impacted Southeast Asian states. A [counterargument](#) held that all these states sought to benefit from economic interchange with China and were reluctant to risk confrontation with the powerful Chinese security forces.

Meanwhile, China's prominent South China Sea expert Shicun Wu [argued that](#) the overall South China Sea situation was volatile and potentially dangerous. While he blamed the United States for efforts to "contain" China in the South China Sea, he averred that "unilateral actions by claimants will continue to be a major factor leading to instability." Singapore's Collin Koh

[forecast](#) that the Chinese South China Sea disputes with Vietnam, Malaysia, and the United States head the list of reasons why "there is little to be sanguine about" regarding stability in the South China Sea. For their part, US analysts Bonnie Glaser and Jeff Benson [highlighted the risk](#) of a military incident caused by China's lax adherence to rules on avoiding collisions at sea.

#### **Xi Jinping visits Myanmar**

Xi Jinping's January 17–18 [visit to Myanmar](#) was the first by a Chinese president in 19 years. It also was the Chinese leader's first trip abroad in 2020. Given the massive impact of the coronavirus and the abrupt halt of China's economic growth, the visit seemed likely to be the last conducted with normal Chinese publicity for some time. Xi met with Aung San Suu Kyi and with the commander in chief of the politically powerful armed forces. Signed agreements involved finalizing building a deep-sea port at Kyaukphyu in Rakhine state and planning for other elements along the so-called China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, an important component of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Nearly a third of Myanmar's foreign trade is with China and was valued at over \$15 billion for 2019. China was the country's largest foreign investor, with annual investments of close to \$5 billion in 2018 and 2019. China is Myanmar's most important international supporter in the face of sharp criticism from western countries about its cruel oppression driving hundreds of thousands of Muslim Rohingya out of the country and into massive refugee camps in Bangladesh. Beijing also has important influence with the Wa state army and other militant groups along the China-Myanmar border and sometimes plays the role of mediator between the groups and the Myanmar government. Against this background, Xi and the Myanmar leaders emphasized the positive and sidestepped continued mutual wariness caused by differences over how to settle issues involving the armed groups along the China border, the continued halt on work on the controversial Myitsone dam since 2011, and the viability of other largescale Chinese infrastructure projects in the country.



## China and Mekong Drought

Wang Yi's trip to Vientiane, Laos for the China-ASEAN foreign ministers meeting on the coronavirus on February 20 also involved his leadership role in the Fifth Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Foreign Ministers' Meeting in the Laotian capital. His remarks to the group gave top priority to encouraging mutual efforts to support China's drive to promote smoother trade, infrastructure connectivity, and economic development in the Mekong region, part of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor, one of several corridors in China's ambitious BRI. His second priority was working together to combat the coronavirus. The third was dealing with recent drought in the Lancang-Mekong region.

Extensive Chinese dam building on the long upper Mekong River, known as the Lancang River in China, gave China control of how much water and how fast the river flows to down river countries. Control of river flow has become an unconventional but nonetheless important source of recent Chinese influence on down-river countries: Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Those countries depend on the water flows for hydroelectric power, fishing, and agriculture. This control was particularly important during recurring periods of drought in recent years. Though different regional groupings discussed mutual use of the river, Beijing was careful to remain in control of the flow of the river waters. The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation group does not have the power to compel China to share the river water. Recent drought has been very hard on the downstream countries.

Though China argues that it too suffers from drought, *The New York Times* [cited](#) a study that showed China's Lancang River watershed receiving good annual rainfall during the past year, filling capacity behind its dams, whereas the lower river Mekong suffered drought. The study argued that China's reservoirs were full and could provide a lot more water downstream but for various reasons Beijing has done little to ease the water shortage on the Mekong. The down-river countries have little recourse and are reluctant to risk China's ire and a possible continued cutoff of water. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesman on April 21 labeled *The Times* report as "groundless."

It has been recently [reported](#) that Thailand would no longer participate in the Lancang-Mekong Navigation Channel Improvement Project, a Chinese-led development plan that would dredge and open up a key part of the Mekong River as a regional river trade link. The Thai government initially cited the lack of sufficient funding for the project, but environmental groups have also lauded the effectiveness of their pressure on the Thai government to withdraw from the project over the environmental impact and concerns.

## Outlook

The sharp rise in US-China tensions over the South China Sea complicates Chinese and regional calculations on how to deal with China's rise and related regional concerns. It adds to uncertainty as to whether China's regional influence in 2020 will be accompanied by regional support, acquiescence, or resistance. An authoritative [annual survey](#) of elite opinion in Southeast Asia released in January found that a large majority viewed China as the region's most influential economic power and a narrow majority judged that China was the most influential political and strategic power in Southeast Asia, followed by the United States as a distant second. But 85% who viewed China as most influential were concerned about this influence. And over 60% of those polled had little or no confidence that China would "do the right thing" to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity and governance. In sum, Chinese behavior led to a big increase in both the perception of Chinese relative influence and a big increase in Southeast Asian elite's distrust of China, suggesting serious obstacles impede China's ascendance. Increased friction with the United States exacerbates those obstacles.

# CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

## JANUARY – APRIL 2020

**Jan. 3, 2020:** China and Indonesia [become embroiled](#) in a diplomatic dispute following Chinese coast guard vessels' activities in the Natuna islands, an area that is part of Indonesia's exclusive economic zone. Indonesia summoned the Chinese ambassador to lodge a formal protest while the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson asserted China's longstanding rights and interests in the contested waters.

**Jan. 7, 2020:** Chinese President Xi Jinping meets visiting Laotian Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith in Beijing. The two sides pledge to deepen bilateral infrastructure and economic cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative.

**Jan. 17-18, 2020:** Chinese President Xi [visits Myanmar](#) and meets senior Myanmar leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi. China signs a total of 33 agreements and memorandums of understanding to enhance bilateral investment cooperation, including development of a deep-sea port in the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone in western Myanmar.

**Jan. 18, 2020:** Foreign ministers from ASEAN [meet in Vietnam](#) to discuss the latest developments in the South China Sea. The regional diplomats underscored collective concerns over land reclamations and other activities that are affecting regional stability, but they remain encouraged by the progress of substantive negotiations over the early conclusion of an "effective and substantive Code of Conduct (COC) that is consistent with international law."

**Jan. 19-31, 2020:** According to a report issued by the South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative, a research unit at Peking University, at least 34 Vietnamese trawlers, some of which are armed with maritime militia, enter and are active in China's territorial sea in Hainan island. China maintains a major naval and air force base in Hainan island.

**Feb. 5, 2020:** Chinese President Xi [meets](#) visiting Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen in Beijing. The two leaders pledge closer bilateral support to curb the coronavirus outbreak.

**Feb. 6, 2020:** Thailand announces it would no longer participate in a Chinese-led development plan that would dredge and open up a key part of the Mekong River as a regional river trade link connecting China's Yunnan province with parts of Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam. There are increasing concerns over the environmental impact such a large-scale project would have on the ecosystem, especially on decreasing fish stock, sediment flow, and further exacerbation of droughts and floods caused by upstream dams and dredging activities along the Mekong River.

**Feb. 20, 2020:** Chinese Foreign Minister and State Councilor Wang Yi [meets](#) Southeast Asian counterparts in Vientiane for the "Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting on Coronavirus Disease." The multilateral forum discusses collective measures to help combat the epidemic and closer coordination between regional public health officials.

**Feb. 27-28, 2020:** Border management authorities from China and Vietnam patrol their joint border in the Lao Cai area to strengthen security at points of entry amid the coronavirus outbreak. The two forces agree to take turns leading joint patrol efforts once a month to prevent illegal border crossings and to increase information campaigns targeting border residents to prevent the spread of community transmission of the coronavirus.

**March 15, 2020:** China and Cambodia [carry out](#) the "Dragon Gold 2020" exercise, the fourth joint counterterrorism and humanitarian rescue drill. The exercise began in 2016 as part of an effort to deepen bilateral military and security cooperation.

**March 20, 2020:** Beijing installs two new facilities in the Fiery Cross and Subi Reef to support the research of oceanographers and marine scientists.

**April 2, 2020:** A Chinese coast guard ship and a Vietnamese fishing vessel [collide](#) near the Paracel Islands, raising tension between the two countries as each side lays blame on the other for the incident. China and Vietnam are building up paramilitary forces and fishing fleets to stake claims in the disputed South China Sea.

**April 14, 2020:** Chinese Premier Li Keqiang participates in a videoconference of ASEAN Plus 3 leaders to discuss China's medical assistance to its neighbors, closer regional coordination on public health measures, and support for a regional cooperation fund to combat the pandemic.

**April 17, 2020:** Malaysian officials report that *Haiyang Dizhi 8*, a Chinese government survey ship, is in Malaysia's exclusive economic zone and tagging an exploration vessel operated by Petronas, Malaysia's state oil company.

**April 18, 2020:** China's State Council announces the establishment of two administrative units, one on the Paracel islands and another on the Spratly islands, to manage the day-to-day affairs on the respective islands.

**April 20, 2020:** In a strategic move to further cement China's claims in the South China Sea, China's Natural Resources Ministry and Civil Affairs Ministry release a joint statement with names to 80 geographical features in the Paracel and Spratly islands.



PACIFIC  FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

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## 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

# CORONAVIRUS EMBITTERS CROSS- STRAIT RELATIONS

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STUDIES

After President Tsai Ing-wen won re-election and her Democratic Progressive Party retained its legislative majority, COVID-19 dominated the news, further embittered cross-strait relations, and provoked a sharp confrontation over Taiwan's involvement in the World Health Organization. Beijing conducted more military operations near the island in response to concern that Taiwan is pushing independence, and the Trump and Tsai administrations strengthened ties. The opposition Kuomintang chose a younger, reform-minded leader following the latest in a series of defeats.

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President Tsai Ing-wen won re-election and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) retained its majority in the Legislative Yuan (LY) in the January election—a result that represents a challenge for Beijing. COVID-19 has dominated news and embittered cross-strait relations. It has also provoked a sharp confrontation over Taiwan's involvement with the World Health Organization (WHO). Concerned that Taiwan is taking advantage of the virus to promote independence, Beijing has conducted military operations around the island to signal its resolve. In response, the Trump and Tsai administrations have strengthened ties, and the US has increased military activity near Taiwan to signal its support. After a serious electoral defeat, the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) has elected a younger leader committed to reform.

### Election Results

Tsai scored a stunning victory in the January 11 election, winning 57% of the vote and becoming the first presidential candidate to win over 8 million votes.



Figure 1 President Tsai Ing-wen and vice-president-elect Lai Ching-te wave to supporters on the night of their election victory. Photo: Financial Times

In addition, the DPP retained its majority in the LY, winning 61 of 113 seats. The opposition KMT increased its share, however, winning 38 seats. Two small parties that share the “green” (progressive) side of the political spectrum also won seats in the LY. None of the other “blue” (conservative) parties won seats. The new Taiwan People's Party (TPP) associated with Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je won five seats.

Tsai's win and the DPP's retention of its LY majority represented a worst-case outcome for Beijing and a significant challenge for General Secretary Xi Jinping's policy. The extent of Tsai's victory appears to have taken Beijing by surprise. The initial reaction in the official

media and from the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) was simply to take note of the outcome and [to reiterate](#) Beijing's commitment to peaceful reunification. The following day, *Xinhua* carried a [commentary](#) blaming the outcome on campaign corruption and foreign interference, by implication that of the United States. What was not mentioned was the fear underlying the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's view of the election: that the election would give Tsai freedom in her final term to pursue an independence agenda without any constraint from the LY.

Within a month, events appeared to embody those fears: Vice President-elect Lai Ching-te [arrived](#) in Washington on February 3. Lai is a “red flag” personality for the CCP because, even after becoming Tsai's running mate, he reiterated that he was a “political worker for Taiwan independence.” Lai's visit had been proposed by a Christian leader in Taiwan so that Lai could participate in the annual Prayer Breakfast in Washington. While Lai is VP-elect, he does not hold a current official position and therefore his visit was not technically inconsistent with Washington's policy. During a week in Washington Lai had a busy schedule, including calls at the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), the NSC, Congress, and think tanks, as well as participating in the Prayer Breakfast, which was attended by the president and other Washington leaders.

Beijing's initial response was to reiterate that its diplomatic partners, meaning the US, should not have any official contact with Taiwan officials. In the middle of the visit, the TAO published a brief commentary saying that Lai was exploiting his visit to engage in “vicious tricks” to promote Taiwan independence. On February 9 and 10, People's Liberation Army fighters, bombers, and surveillance air craft [conducted exercises](#) around Taiwan. A six-month hiatus in such exercises during the campaign had ended in January. The TAO stated that the exercises in early February were a warning that the Tsai administration was playing with fire, by making “two states” statements, promoting Taiwan independence, and dispatching Lai to Washington.

### A Brief Glimmer of Cooperation

News of a coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan first appeared publicly December 31 based on WeChat posts from doctors in Wuhan. Soon thereafter,

Taiwan asked to send medical experts to Wuhan. On January 13 and 14, two Taiwan CDC medical personnel made an [unpublicized visit](#) to Wuhan at the invitation of the Wuhan Health Department. This was a welcome sign that Beijing might use the outbreak as an opportunity for cooperation with Taiwan. As medical experts from Hong Kong and Macau were visiting at the same time, it appears the invitation to Taiwan was extended based on Beijing's one-China principle. Taipei ignored this. Their visit occurred while the CCP was still clamping down on news concerning the outbreak. After Beijing announced Wuhan was being locked down, President Tsai offered to provide assistance.

The CDC experts' early access convinced Taipei to institute a level-two alert requiring all passengers arriving from Wuhan to submit health forms and conduct 14 days of self-monitoring. These and other early actions contributed to Taiwan's remarkably [successful response](#) to COVID-19. Unfortunately, Beijing did not follow-up on this early cooperation.

### Covid-19 Embitters Cross-Strait Relations

The novel coronavirus (SARS CoV-2) and its disease (COVID-19) have dominated the news on both sides of the Strait and embittered cross-strait relations. This story has several interrelated elements. One has been Beijing's pressure on the WHO to sideline Taiwan. The WHO [did not allow](#) Taiwan medical experts to attend its first meeting on the coronavirus on January 22. This provoked a wave of anger in Taiwan against Beijing and the WHO. The WHO chose to include information on the outbreak in Taiwan on its website under China and compounded this by using inaccurate statistics about Taiwan obtained from China and using names offensive to Taiwan. International pressure during the WHO Executive Board meeting in early February led to the WHO allowing Taiwan experts to participate in a second WHO meeting on COVID-19 testing, therapeutics, and vaccines in mid-February. However, the Taiwan experts were only allowed to join the meeting online.

In April, Taiwan complained that the WHO was denying Taiwan the ability to share its successful experience in containing COVID-19 because it was too accommodating to China. WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom [accused Taiwan](#) of orchestrating a campaign against him

and of using "racist slurs." President Tsai rejected this criticism and invited Tedros to Taiwan. The TAO in Beijing joined the fray, defending Tedros and accusing Taipei of exploiting COVID-19 to pursue its independence agenda. The WHO secretariat released a statement describing how it worked with Taiwan. Taipei in turn released a statement indicating that it had been denied participation in over 70% of the WHO technical meetings it had asked to join over the previous decade. On April 16, a WHO epidemiologist belatedly held an hour-long discussion with officials in Taiwan's Central Epidemic Control Center to learn in detail about Taiwan's COVID-19 response. The following day, WHO Executive Director Michael Ryan [praised Taiwan's response](#) at a press conference. Ryan said that on technical matters there are a range of ways that the WHO can work with Taiwan on the pandemic and other issues.

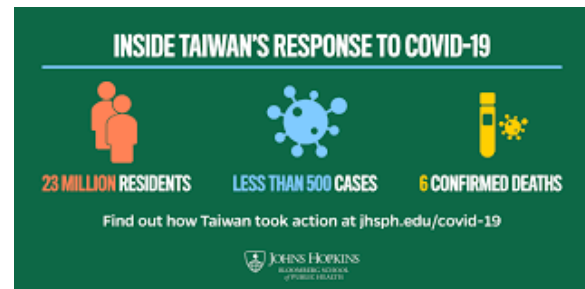


Figure 2 Overview of Taiwan's response to COVID-19. Photo: Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

A second element grew out of Taiwan's request in late January to send a plane to evacuate Taiwanese locked down in Wuhan. Beijing responded by arranging an evacuation flight using China Eastern Airlines without adequate coordination with the Tsai administration. Beijing apparently did not want to allow a Taiwan plane because it might be interpreted as implying Taiwan was a country if Taiwan evacuated its citizens in the same way foreign countries repatriated theirs. To further limit the Tsai administration's ability to claim credit for the evacuation, the Wuhan TAO office gave a KMT businessman a role in arranging the manifest. When the China Eastern flight arrived on February 2, some of the passengers were not Taiwan citizens and one proved to be infected with the virus. This caused another outburst of anger against Beijing. Nevertheless, shortly thereafter, Beijing announced that it would send three additional flights with evacuees. The Tsai administration rejected this offer, stating that flights could not occur until it was agreed to give

priority to the most vulnerable and on rigorous health procedures to avoid infected people being sent to Taiwan. It was not until a month later after difficult negotiation that it was agreed that China Eastern and Taiwan's China Airlines (CAL) would each conduct evacuation flights on March 10 and 11. That agreement was reached was itself a positive development. However, Taiwan's offer to send medical supplies on the CAL flight to Wuhan was not accepted.

Third, the pandemic response developed as the WHO is preparing for its annual general meeting, the World Health Assembly (WHA), scheduled for May 17-21. The pandemic has highlighted the global health rationale for Taipei's desire to join the WHA meeting as an observer. On February 2, the TAO reiterated that Taiwan cannot participate unless the Tsai administration accepts the 1992 consensus on one China, which Tsai is not willing to do. At the WHO executive board meeting on February 6, the US and 14 other countries [voiced support](#) for Taiwan's participation. Taiwan, with US support, has been marshalling international support for its position; Beijing has been working diplomatically to block Taiwan, while repeatedly criticizing Taipei for exploiting the issue to promote independence. In late April, US Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar held a half-hour telephone [conference meeting](#) with Taiwan's Health Minister Chen Shih-chung and used the occasion to express the administration's full support for Taiwan's participation in the WHA.

Beijing's efforts to sideline Taiwan during the pandemic have damaged cross-strait relations. Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) has been polling public attitudes toward the mainland for a quarter century, including whether people view Beijing as being hostile toward the people or government of Taiwan. The share of those viewing Beijing as hostile toward Taiwan's people, which had seldom reached 50% in the past, [registered](#) 61% in the poll conducted in March. Those viewing Beijing as hostile toward the Taiwan government, which has not reached 70% in the past, registered 76% in March.

Finally, the pandemic has prompted a debate about whether authoritarian states like China are better able to contain epidemics. Taipei has accused Beijing of covering up the initial outbreak in Wuhan. Statements in Taiwan, continue to refer to the virus as the "Wuhan virus," though some government statements

use "virus originating in Wuhan" and occasionally "COVID-19." In late March, the Tsai administration began actively explaining how its open, transparent democratic society has been remarkably successful in containing the pandemic. Foreign Minister Jaushieh Wu made this case effectively in a teleconference on April 9 with the Hudson Institute in Washington. For its part, Beijing has been diverting attention from the virus's outbreak by highlighting the CCP's dramatic mitigation actions that quite quickly brought the virus under control, arguing that this was only possible because of the CCP leadership. It seems clear on Taiwan that the pandemic has for the time being strengthened many people's determination to maintain Taiwan's democratic way of life and its autonomy from China.

### PLA Exercises

Since resuming exercises in January, Beijing has continued conducting air and naval activities around Taiwan. A week after the lockdown of Wuhan, the PLA air force conducted a couple of exercises near Taiwan. One purpose of these exercises may have been to demonstrate that even in the midst of the virus outbreak the military was vigilant and capable. On March 16, the PLA conducted its first [night-time exercise](#) near Taiwan, involving H-6 bombers, accompanying fighters, and a KJ-500 Electronic Warfare plane. In mid-April the *Liaoning* carrier group sailed through the Miyako Strait, then around Taiwan and through the Bashi Strait toward the South China Sea. At about the same time, the PLA air force flew through the Bashi Strait to conduct exercises in the western Pacific. The MND commented that the *Liaoning* was conducting routine exercises, which would continue. These exercises represented a continuation of the pattern of gradually increasing military activity around Taiwan that has occurred since November 2016, with the exception of two long pauses during the Taiwan election campaigns. Twice this year, PLA aircraft engaged in particularly dangerous actions when they briefly crossed the mid-line in the Taiwan Strait.

### Strong US-Taiwan Ties

Relations between Washington and Taipei remain excellent as Tsai begins her second term in May. Vice President-elect Lai's visit to Washington in February underscored the high level of trust between the two sides, as well as

the importance the Trump administration attaches to its partnership with Taiwan.

Washington promptly responded to increased Chinese military activity around Taiwan at the beginning of this year, not allowing itself to be distracted by the COVID-19 epidemic within its own borders. In response to PLA exercises occurring soon after Lai Ching-te's visit to Washington in early February, two US B-52 bombers flew near Taiwan's coastline facing China on February 12 and a US destroyer transited the Taiwan Strait on February 15. Another [US destroyer](#) sailed through the Taiwan Strait on March 25, a week after the PLA's nighttime training exercises southwest of Taiwan. Yet another US destroyer transited the Taiwan Strait one day after the PLA's April 10 air drills over the Bashi Strait. Since late March, US reconnaissance aircraft have also increased the frequency of their operations around Taiwan, especially as the *Liaoning* sailed past Taiwan in early April in route to its South China Sea training mission.

As Washington and Beijing traded accusations over the origins of COVID-19 and their respective handling of the outbreak, the US and Taiwan issued a [joint statement](#) on March 18 to share medical supplies and scientific expertise. On April 1, Taiwan announced it would donate 2 million surgical masks to the United States, with 400,000 masks having already been delivered by mid-April. In a tweet, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo thanked Taiwan for its donation, praising Taiwan as a model of "openness and generosity" in the global battle against the virus.

On March 28, US President Donald Trump signed into law the [Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative \(TAIPEI\) Act](#), which advises the executive branch to leverage US influence to help Taiwan retain its remaining diplomatic partners. Earlier in March, the House of Representatives had unanimously passed the Senate-initiated bill. The law also makes clear it is US policy to support Taiwan's participation in international organizations where statehood is not a requirement. As most of the law's provisions are nonbinding and with the Trump administration already making efforts to support Taiwan's international relations, the TAIPEI Act is mostly a symbolic affirmation of broad US support for Taiwan's international role. Still, the law's passage came at an opportune time as Beijing

strategizes how to poach additional Taiwan diplomatic partners in Tsai's second term.

While Taiwan has emerged relatively unscathed from the US-China trade war, intensifying US efforts to undermine China's Huawei Technologies Co. could harm TSMC, the island's dominant chip manufacturer. The Trump administration is considering revisions to the Direct Product Rule that would restrict the ability of foreign companies to employ US technology in manufacturing chips for HiSilicon, Huawei's chip-making arm. TSMC has hitherto been the principal supplier of chips to HiSilicon. Cognizant of looming US export controls, Huawei has already begun to shift procurement of some of its chip technology from TSMC to a domestic Chinese supplier.

In early April, the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) [approved](#) Google's request to operate an undersea fiber-optic cable between Los Angeles and Taiwan that was completed late last year. Backed by Google and Facebook, the Pacific Light Cable Network initially sought to connect data centers in Hong Kong with those in the United States, with Taiwan as a traffic node. But upon revelation that a Chinese businessman had provided financial backing to the project, and given Justice Department concerns over Hong Kong's ability to protect US data, the FCC did not approve the link-up with Hong Kong. The cable will buttress US-Taiwan technological links, building upon Google's existing data centers in central Taiwan.

An unusual example of the Trump administration not supporting Taipei occurred on February 5, when Taiwan was not included in the inaugural meeting of the International Religious Freedom Alliance in Washington. *The Washington Post* [reported](#) on February 11 that Beijing had pressured some participants to threaten not to join if Taiwan attended. On February 13, Taipei's Foreign Ministry stated that before that story was published, the State Department had invited Taipei to be an observer in the Religious Freedom Alliance.

### International Developments

Having lost six diplomatic partners to China in her first term, Tsai seek to retain Taipei's 15 remaining allies over the next four years, even as Beijing has earlier threatened to slash that number to zero. Taipei switched out its ambassadors in Haiti and Paraguay in March



and April, respectively, giving rise to speculation in Taiwan that relations with the two nations were tenuous. Foreign Minister Wu said the diplomatic “rotations” were normal, and that Taipei’s relations with Port-au-Prince and Asuncion remain stable. Meanwhile, Taiwan has allocated 1 million face masks for donation to its diplomatic allies as they confront COVID-19.

In late January, the International Civil Aviation Organization aroused controversy when it banned from its Twitter page US users calling for Taiwan’s meaningful participation in the UN agency. The US State Department issued a [statement](#) on February 1, calling ICAO’s action “outrageous, unacceptable, and not befitting of a UN agency” and demanded that it reverse its practice of blocking discussion about Taiwan on its Twitter page.

Taipei and Prague became [sister cities](#) in mid-January, with Mayor Ko Wen-je attending the signing ceremony in the Czech capital. Prague’s mayor is a known critic of Beijing, having also spent time in Taiwan in his youth. The Shanghai municipal government severed its sister-city relationship with Prague last year after Mayor Hrib excised from the agreement language affirming the one-China principle.

### Reform in the KMT

On election night, KMT presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu apologized for his loss, and Chairman Wu Dun-yih indicated he would resign to assume responsibility. Despite the setback, the KMT’s results in the LY election were respectable. In the LY party list vote, the KMT secured 33% vs. the DPP’s 34%. In the LY district races taken together, the KMT won nearly 41% of votes to the DPP’s 45%. Calls for a generational change in leadership and for reforming both KMT policy and policymaking came from many quarters, as was the case four years earlier following the KMT defeat in 2016—which ultimately had no effect. Would things be different this time?

The KMT Central Standing Committee (CSC) accepted Wu’s resignation and appointed an interim leadership tasked with holding a party by-election to fill the remaining portion of Wu Dun-yih’s term as chairman. The CSC scheduled the election for March 7. None of the older generation leaders joined the contest. In the end, two candidates stood: Hau Long-bin (age

67), the former mayor of Taipei, and Johnny Chiang Chi-chen (age 48), a LY member from Taichung.

Debate and discussion within the party focused primarily on two issues: how to change the tradition within the KMT of top-down leadership by a dominant chairman and on whether and how to adjust policy toward the mainland. Opinion within the party is divided on whether to continue basing party policy on the 1992 Consensus on One China. Proponents of adhering to the 1992 consensus include: Su Chi, former President Ma Ying-jeou’s NSC director, Chang Ya-chung, an advisor to former Chairman Hung Hsiu-chu, and Professor Chao Chien-min, who had advised Han Kuo-yu on cross-strait policy. Members of the party’s youth wing, including Legislator Chiang Wan-an, and Taipei City Councilor Lo Chih-chiang have advocated scrapping the ‘92 Consensus. The two candidates avoided taking clear positions on this issue in their formal debates. Hau Long-bin said policy should be based on defending the Republic of China (ROC) and opposing independence. Chiang Chi-chen simply emphasized the necessity of reform.

The KMT went ahead with its by-election despite the COVID-19 risks. Chiang Chi-chen won with 69% of the vote.



Figure 3 Chiang Chi-chen’s swearing in as the new KMT chairman. Photo: China Times

At his swearing in, Chiang emphasized again the imperative of reform, saying that his role was to listen, collect opinions, and to turn people’s expectations into visions. On mainland policy [he said](#), “My basic principle is to stick to the values of the Republic of China’s free and democratic system and strive for cross-strait peace and common well-being.” It has long been the practice for the CCP general secretary to send a congratulatory message to a new KMT Chairman, but Xi [did not](#) send a message to



Chiang. The TAO issued a statement urging Chiang to adhere to the 1992 consensus, a clear indication of Beijing's doubts about Chiang on this core point.

Chiang moved expeditiously to appoint a completely new roster of officials to the KMT Headquarters. He chose a veteran KMT organizer, Lee Chien-lung, former head of the KMT organization in New Taipei City, as secretary general. In addition, he established a new 11-member "decision-making platform" advisory committee symbolizing his intention to consult widely. He appointed a widely representative group of younger generation office holders to this committee. Chiang appointed Taipei Council member Lo Chih-chiang as new head of the KMT training center, the Revolutionary Practice Institute, and tasked him with training young leaders for the party. Finally, Chiang appointed a 62-member reform committee to review policy in four areas. The cross-strait policy group consists of 16 members, representing the full range of opinion within the party and therefore it will have difficulty in forging consensus.

Chiang has been careful in speaking about cross-strait relations in part because the policy review process lies ahead. Chiang has avoided mentioning the 1992 Consensus, which the TAO continues to insist is the basis for cross-strait relations. He has said that ROC territory is defined in the constitution and this should be respected—an indirect reference to one China. With respect to identity, Chiang has said that he is Taiwanese, and also Chinese. He has spoken of listening to voices on Taiwan and also of the need to rebuild trust with the mainland. His cross-strait policy is yet to be developed.

The January election represents a challenge for the CCP not only because of Tsai's re-election but also because it has led to the KMT choosing a younger generation of leadership that may well adopt policies more clearly at odds with those [enunciated](#) by Xi Jinping in January 2019, when he called Taiwan's unification with China "the great trend of history."

## Looking Ahead

Although Tsai has decided against holding the usual inaugural events with invited guests from abroad, her May 20 address will set the tone for her handling of cross-strait relations during her second term. It appears that the WHO is

planning to conduct its annual WHA as a short virtual meeting rather than the week-long conference originally scheduled for May 17–21. This may make it easier for the US and like-minded countries to overcome Beijing's objections to Taipei being an observer at a virtual meeting, but that still seems unlikely. This year's meeting also provides an opportunity for the WHA to loosen the restrictions that Beijing imposes on the WHO's technical level engagement with Taiwan. As time passes, it will become clearer what the long-term impact of the COVID-19 outbreak will be on cross-strait relations.

# CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

## JANUARY – MAY 2020

**Dec. 30, 2019:** Rumors on WeChat of a SARS-like pneumonia in Wuhan.

**Jan. 1, 2020:** President Tsai Ing-wen defends Anti-Infiltration Law (AIL) in New Year's Address.

**Jan 2, 2020:** Chief of General Staff Gen. Shen Yi-ming dies in *Black Hawk* helicopter crash.

**Jan 5, 2020:** Taiwan CDC: Eight passengers on flights from Wuhan have developed fevers.

**Jan. 11, 2020:** Tsai wins reelection; DPP retains majority in Legislative Yuan (LY).

**Jan. 13, 2020:** Two Taiwan CDC experts visit Wuhan to investigate new virus.

**Jan. 22, 2020:** Taiwan is excluded from WHO experts meeting on novel coronavirus.

**Jan. 29, 2020:** Taipei asks Beijing to permit evacuation of citizens from Wuhan.

**Feb. 3, 2020:** China sends first flight of Taiwanese from Wuhan to Taipei without coordination.

**Feb. 3, 2020:** Vice President-elect Lai Ching-te begins visit to Washington.

**Feb. 6, 2020:** Lai attends National Prayer Breakfast

**Feb. 6, 2020:** WHO Executive Board meets; US and 14 others urge including Taiwan in COVID-19 response.

**Feb. 11, 2020:** Taiwan experts join two-day WHO coronavirus research meeting via online.

**Feb. 21, 2020:** LY issues nonpartisan resolution concerning Taiwan's exclusion from WHA.

**March 5, 2020:** AIT Chairman James Moriarty visits Taiwan; meets President Tsai.

**March 7, 2020:** Kuomintang (KMT) elects Johnny Chiang Chi-chen as its chairman.

**March 10, 2020:** Taiwan's China Airlines (CAL) evacuates Taiwan citizens from Wuhan.

**March 11, 2020:** China Eastern Airlines evacuates Taiwan citizens from Wuhan.

**March 16, 2020:** People's Liberation Army KJ-500 AEW aircraft and fighters conduct first night exercise south of Taiwan.

**March 26, 2020:** US President Donald Trump signs TAIPEI Act.

**March 29, 2020:** Taiwan citizens in Hubei return on a designated CAL flight from Shanghai.

**March 31, 2020:** US and Taiwan officials hold virtual meeting on Taiwan's international space.

**April 8, 2020:** WHO Secretary General Tedros Adhanom accuses Taiwan of organizing a campaign against him and making racists slurs.

**April 9, 2020:** Tsai rejects Tedros' allegations and invites him to visit Taiwan.

**April 11, 2020:** *Liaoning* carrier group sails east of Taiwan toward South China Sea.

**April 18, 2020:** Hong Kong government arrests 14 prominent democracy activists.

**April 20, 2020:** 231 Taiwanese from Hubei fly home on designated CAL flight from Shanghai.

**April 22, 2020:** *Liaoning* carrier group sails east thru Bashi Strait.

**April 25, 2020:** Former Hong Kong publisher Lam Wing-kee opens Causeway Bay bookstore in Taipei.

**April 27, 2020:** The Dutch government changes its office name in Taipei from the Netherlands Trade and Investment Office to "Netherlands Office Taipei."

**April 27, 2020:** US Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar holds teleconference with Health Minister Chen Shih-chung.

**April 30, 2020:** Ingrid Larson appointed managing director of the American Institute in Taiwan's Washington office.



PACIFIC  FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

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## 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**

## TESTING TIMES

AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

Inter-Korean relations stayed frozen in the early part of 2020. ROK President Moon Jae-in's outreach was hardly reciprocated by Kim Jong Un, whose sister snapped back when Seoul mildly criticized Pyongyang's missile launches in March. For both Koreas the challenge of COVID-19 was overwhelming, yet the North refused any cooperation on this. In April Moon's liberal party scored a big win in parliamentary elections; two DPRK defectors gained seats for the conservative opposition. Kim caused a global media frenzy by briefly vanishing from view. Moon has less than two years left in office, so Kim's shunning of him looks short-sighted.

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## Introduction

This journal's remit is to cover key bilateral relationships in the Indo-Pacific. If interpreted narrowly, that could beg an important question: how significant, actually, was this particular relationship, during the period covered, for the two states involved? And, relatedly: what was the wider context of global events, within which a given relationship needs to be understood?

All this varies over time, for the two Koreas more than most. In 2018, their suddenly revived relations took center stage. The Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, an unprecedented three inter-Korean summits, substantial-seeming agreements, and many other meetings, ensured that our topic was at the heart of politics in both Koreas, as well as making headlines worldwide.

2019 was very different, as North Korea in effect broke off what had begun so promisingly. The two Koreas remained significant to one another—as they always have, and always will—but more negatively, and with very little direct interaction. There was plenty going on, as we duly recorded in these pages, but it became more of a sideshow than center stage.

2020, so far, has added a further twist. North Korea continued to largely ignore or criticize the South, but both states were busy on other fronts. One major preoccupation they had in common, yet sadly failed to share: on the Korean Peninsula as across the planet, the first four months of 2020 were dominated, as the rest of the year threatens to be, by the challenge of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Each Korea tackled this in its own very different way—quite separately, since Pyongyang spurned Seoul's repeated offers of cooperation and assistance.

Also, for each Korea the period's top political story did not involve the other. South Korea held a parliamentary election—despite the virus—on April 15, which gave President Moon's ruling party an increased majority. Meanwhile, Kim Jong Un vanished from view, prompting feverish speculation amid rumors that he was gravely ill or even dead—until he reappeared on May 1. Strictly, these fall outside our bilateral remit, and of the latter story – enough already. But each has an interesting inter-Korean angle, so that will be our focus here.

## He's Just Not That into You

As noted in our [update](#) in January, the year began unusually. Kim Jong Un did not give his normal New Year address, evidently having nothing to add to the mammoth report he had just delivered at a key party meeting: the 5<sup>th</sup> Plenary of the 7<sup>th</sup> Central Committee (CC) of the ruling Workers Party (WPK), held December 28–31. Despite lasting for seven hours and otherwise ranging widely, this said absolutely nothing about inter-Korean relations, a topic that is usually a staple of the new year addresses, as well as of the joint editorials that served the same function during the reign (1994–2011) of Kim's speech-averse father, Kim Jong Il.

South Korea is used to Northern diatribes, but being ignored was new and unsettling. On January 2, the Ministry of Unification (MOU) said Seoul was “closely watching” whether this lacuna in Kim's speech meant that Pyongyang would be issuing a separate message on inter-Korean relations. Needless to add, they waited in vain. The obvious interpretation—he's just not that into you—was evidently too painful to admit.

This rather pathetic asymmetry sums up Moon's whole approach, whose pros and cons were debated in our [last update](#)—which also covered his own New Year [address](#), given on January 7. To summarize: Moon, unlike Kim, had a lot to say about inter-Korean relations—despite their current nonexistence. While expressing regret for the current impasse (which has now lasted for over a year), he did not blame the North, and reiterated his unswerving commitment to cooperation across the board. The nuclear issue went wholly unmentioned. Moon even called on both sides to make efforts to facilitate Kim Jong Un's visit to Seoul, promised in 2018. Yet he must know there is no prospect of that happening any time soon.

## Stop Meddling, Pyongyang Tells Seoul

It is not as though the North offers any encouragement. If Moon is constant in proffering olive branches, Pyongyang is equally consistent in rebuffing them. One case in point, trivial but revealing, occurred in early January. Chung Eui-yong, who heads the national security office in the Blue House (Cheong Wa Dae, the ROK presidential office and residence), fresh back from Washington, said that President Trump had asked Moon to wish Kim Jong Un a

happy birthday—the day was January 8, his likely age 36—on his behalf, and this had been done.

That claim promptly brought a withering retort from Kim Kye Gwan, a name familiar from the past, as North Korea's long-time chief nuclear negotiator at the Six-Party Talks (2003–09). Now an adviser to the DPRK foreign ministry, Kim sneered at “the excited south Korean authorities” for their “lingering hope for playing the role of ‘mediator’ in the DPRK-US relations,” which he called “presumptuous ... meddling.” He further warned the South not to “dream a fabulous dream that we would return to the dialogue with thankful feelings for the birthday greetings.” The US came in for a tongue-lashing, too. North Korea's stance can be hard to read sometimes, but not currently. There is really no ambiguity or room for doubt.

### A Seriously Daft Idea

Nonetheless Seoul persisted, with perverse consequences. Determined to find some scope for inter-Korean cooperation that did not fall foul of UN and other sanctions, Moon's government came up with the bright idea of individual (as opposed to group) tourism to Mount Kumgang, the ROK-developed but long-shuttered east coast resort just north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). That is baffling, since multiple obstacles render this impractical. First, it is not certain that this would avoid sanctions; legal opinions differ. Second, the North is refusing all cooperation with the South, in general. And in particular, third, as discussed in our last article, far from seeking to resume Kumgangs tourism, Kim Jong Un now wants the Southern-built facilities there torn down. Fourth, the DPRK has closed its borders due to COVID-19 concerns.

Fifth, is there even a market? In a thoughtful [article](#) for *NK News*, Jumin Lee is skeptical on several counts. At the outset (it began in 1998) Kumgang tourism had novelty value to South Koreans, but that soon wore off. With numbers falling, Kim Dae-jung's government began to subsidize the tours, a flagship of his ‘sunshine’ policy. They became so cheap that demand recovered, but then in 2008 a straying female tourist was shot dead. The North refused to apologize or permit an investigation, so then-ROK President Lee Myung-bak suspended the program. With that checkered history, why exactly in 2020 would today's sophisticated

globetrotting South Koreans plump to head for this rotting relic of a resort?

Despite all that, Seoul persisted and indeed still persists. As itemized in the chronology, pushing for individual tourism to Mount Kumgang has been a constant refrain, from Moon downward. That has consequences. When Harry Harris, US ambassador to South Korea, said on January 17 that Seoul should consult the US on any plans to engage Pyongyang, the Ministry of Unification retorted “Our policy with regard to North Korea comes under our sovereignty.” No doubt. Yet it is hard to fathom why Moon's government is letting a scheme that cannot possibly happen become a bone of contention between allies. What is the point?

### Enter the Virus

By end-January both Koreas had other urgent priorities, originating in Wuhan. As neighbors of China, with close commercial and other ties—Beijing is by far the largest trade partner of Seoul and Pyongyang alike—growing awareness of the coronavirus threat galvanized them both. But each reacted differently—and separately. During the honeymoon year of 2018, medical cooperation and disease prevention were on the inter-Korean agenda. Yet by 2019, when both Koreas were hit by outbreaks of African swine fever, the North—as discussed in our last issue—refused even to share information with the South, much less accept any help.

Regrettably, it has taken the same stance on COVID-19. The two Koreas' sole joint action on this came on Jan. 30, when they agreed to close their liaison office at Kaesong owing to virus concerns. The ROK's 58 staff returned home across the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) the same day. The closure is meant to be temporary, but this office had had little to do for the past year. Unless North-South relations somehow revive, it may well stay shuttered.

Elsewhere, the coronavirus had a small silver lining for Seoul. One day later, on January 31, North Korea said it is suspending its demand (discussed in our last issue) that the South remove its facilities from Mount Kumgang. Perhaps this too will now be quietly let go.

The wider impact and handling of COVID-19 in each Korea are beyond our scope here. The North shut its borders early and drastically, at high economic [cost](#). It still [claims](#) to have no cases,

but most observers [doubt](#) that. South Korea, meanwhile, has been on a roller-coaster. An early victim of the epidemic, it is now praised worldwide as a model of containing it. Many countries are keen to learn from Seoul, but North Korea is not among them—though Moon is eager to help, as indicated in the chronology. At stake are Pyongyang's pride, plus the probable puncturing of its pretense to be virus-free. The result is one more inter-Korean opportunity sadly lost.

### These Testing Times

March was a testing time for both Koreas, in more senses than one. Victor Cha [noted](#) the irony: "South Korea is exporting test kits to the world. North Korea is restarting missile tests to threaten the world." March was the month when South Korea, sorely tested at first by the coronavirus, morphed from victim to victor. Testing in the medical sense, as part of a 3T approach—test, trace, treat—was key to Seoul's turning its situation around. By the end of the month the ROK was exporting test kits, as well as its example, to other nations.

Pyongyang was busy testing too, but less usefully. After a lull since last year, North Korea resumed missile tests—and how. Two launches on March 2, three more on March 9, two again on March 20 and a final two on March 28, made this the DPRK's [busiest](#) month ever for missile tests. All were short-range ballistic missiles, plus other weapons such as multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS). As Shea Cotton has [noted](#), these are new types of missiles—and the tests appear to have been largely successful. This is ominous.

Being short-range, these new weapons clearly threaten South Korea, and also Japan. So, it is hardly unreasonable or unexpected if they react negatively. In fact, Seoul's remonstrations were mild, as usual under Moon. After the first tests on March 2 the South held an emergency videoconference of security chiefs. Expressing "strong concern," the Blue House urged the North to halt acts "not helpful to efforts to ease military tensions on the Korean Peninsula."

That could hardly have been worded more gently, yet it elicited a furious counterblast—from an intriguing source. Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong had never before issued a statement in her own name, but March saw two such. Later in the month, she would politely [decline](#) a

(previously undisclosed) offer of unspecified aid on the virus front from Donald Trump to her brother. In sharply different tone, her debut statement on March 3 savaged Seoul's criticisms of what she called a "firepower strike drill ... by the frontline artillerymen of the Korean People's Army," which she claimed "was not aimed to threaten anybody" (though "frontline" is rather a giveaway). Likening the Blue House variously to a frightened dog or a burnt child who dreads the fire, peppering her critique with terms like "shocking," "senseless," and "imbecile," she declared: "Such incoherent assertion and actions made by Chongwadae only magnify our distrust, hatred and scorn for the south side as a whole."



Figure 1 Kim Yo Jong with Moon Jae-in, in 2018.

Then her brother played good cop. On March 5, the Blue House said Kim Jong Un had sent Moon a personal letter. The text was not disclosed, but the tone was evidently sweeter than his sister's—or indeed his own in the past, as in April 2019 when he derided Moon as a "meddlesome mediator." As reported, Kim offered "quiet support" for South Korea's fight against the coronavirus (still raging at that point), and solicitude for Moon's own health amid the outbreak, assuring him of "his constant friendship and trust." Kim also offered his "frank" thoughts about the situation on the peninsula. It would be good to know what those were, but no one is telling. Overall it is hard to put much weight on this mysterious missive. (MOU denied a claim by the conservative daily *Chosun Ilbo* that Kim also asked for help fighting the coronavirus, and that Moon responded positively.)

### April Contrasts

This April 15 was a red-letter day on both sides of the DMZ. In the North it always is, being "Sun's Day," a public holiday for the birthday

(in 1912) of the DPRK's founding leader Kim Il Sung. This year's celebrations were low-key, given coronavirus concerns. And there was one notable absentee: Kim Jong Un missed the statutory obeisance at his late grandfather's mausoleum. That set tongues wagging, more so as days passed and he still failed to appear.

They do politics differently in South Korea, where leaders are rotated regularly rather than compulsorily venerated forever. Whereas the deceased Kim Il Sung [remains](#) the DPRK's "Eternal President," ROK presidents are elected every five years; no second term is allowed. Separate parliamentary elections are held every four years, in April. Coincidentally, this year the date fell on April 15. Remarkably, unlike other countries in the grip of coronavirus, there was little debate about postponing this poll, so much do South Koreans cherish their hard-won democracy, barely three decades old. Instead, with the thoroughness that has characterized the ROK's handling of the pandemic almost throughout, all efforts were devoted to ensuring that everyone could vote and vote safely, while maintaining social distancing.

With Moon Jae-in just past the halfway point of his presidency—he began in May 2017 and must quit in May 2022—this would normally serve as a mid-term verdict on the incumbent. Quite often such elections produce a swing to the opposition. Not this time. North Korea was hardly an election issue; it almost never is. As everywhere, the economy is what counts. On that front Moon had been struggling, with low growth and failure to create jobs as promised.

### **Viral Victory**

COVID-19 swept all that aside. In February or March this might have hurt Moon, but by mid-April not only was the virus under control, but South Koreans realized with some pride that they were tackling it better than many other countries. On the highest turnout (66.2%) since 1992, Moon's left-leaning Democratic Party (DP) and an affiliated party won 180 of the 300 National Assembly seats, enough to push through bills on their own, as they could not before.

With no second term allowed, most ROK presidents become lame ducks as their tenure draws towards a close. Moon, by contrast, enters his final two years in office strengthened. This election win will boost and embolden him on all

fronts, including North Korea. Whether Pyongyang will respond remains moot, but on at least one front Moon is not waiting to see.

On April 23 South Korea officially designated a planned 111-km railway, running north from the east coast port city of Gangneung to Jeju near the DMZ, as an inter-Korean project. This designation means that reconstruction can proceed without the normal feasibility study. This project has been mooted often over the years. Before 1945 a railway line ran along Korea's east coast, but this was sundered by partition and parts fell into disuse. The Sunshine era saw the west coast railway north of Seoul fully reconnected in 2006, but gaps remained on the east coast line. The Moon administration has resolved to build new track on its side of the DMZ in hopes that one day this can be relinked to the North. This will also boost the local economy in a remote and sparsely populated province (Gangwon) which in April voted mainly for the conservative opposition.

### **Watching the Defectors**

From the inter-Korean point, one notable feature of this election was the role of North Korean defectors. That had at least two strands. For the first time, defectors formed their own political group, launched in Seoul on March 6. The Inter-Korean Unification Party (IKUP) proclaimed two main policy planks: to liberate the North from autocracy and promote defector rights in the South. Laudable enough, yet defectors number barely 33,000 in a total population of 51 million, far less than the millions who fled south after 1945 and during the Korean War, forming a solid hard-core core of anti-communist rightwing voters in the ROK ever since.

IKUP may have been inspired by tweaks to electoral law, supposed to make it easier for small parties to win the 53 seats chosen by proportional representation (PR) from national lists. That hope proved vain, as the big parties gamed the system by creating satellites to contest the PR seats. On the day, IKUP garnered a paltry 10,833 votes (by contrast, each of the main parties polled over 9 million). Its future is uncertain.

Among those present at IKUP's launch was Thae Yong-ho, a high-profile former diplomat who defected from the DPRK's London embassy in 2016. Thae congratulated the new party, but did



not himself join it— he had other fish to fry. He fought and won a safe seat in wealthy Gangnam, in southern Seoul, for the main opposition United Future Party (UFP, its latest of many names). He too changed his name, to Tae Kumin. Tae is the first defector to win a constituency seat in the ROK. Others have entered the National Assembly via party lists—including Ji Seong-ho, elected this time for the UFP’s clone, the Future Korea Party.



Figure 2 Thae Yong-ho on the stump, pretty in pink. Photo: The Times

It will be interesting to see how they both fare, especially Tae who is able and ambitious. To their discredit, many ROK “progressives” are uncomfortable with the likes of Tae, who inject a blast of reality and lived experience into their 88ollyanna fantasies of peace and engagement. Right-wingers, by contrast, are more welcoming; yet from any perspective, a pan-Korean trajectory like Tae’s should surely be welcomed. He is a man to watch, even though he and Ji both tripped up in the matter of Kim’s imagined demise—to which we now turn.

### Kim Jong Un: ‘Death’ and Resurrection

The media circus around Kim Jong Un’s brief vanishing in April is doubtless fresh in readers’ memories, and also outside our remit. Like many others, this writer weighed in, arguing that 1. North Korea does have a potential [succession](#) problem if something happens to Kim; and 2. DPRK specialists thus need to [discuss](#) such issues. Here we confine ourselves to the inter-Korean aspects, of which there are at least three.

First, the original source of the rumor of heart surgery was the Seoul-based [Daily NK](#). Run by defectors and activists, this is an indispensable resource, with seemingly good if necessarily uncredited sources inside North Korea. Unlike CNN and some others, *Daily NK* never claimed

that Kim was gravely ill. But it did change its story twice, and to its credit flags this: from claimed multiple sources to just one, and from “heart surgery” to “cardiovascular procedure” (apparently a translation issue). That may still be true, as a new mark [spotted](#) by NK News (a totally different organization) on Kim’s wrist could indicate he had such a procedure recently.



Figure 3 Kim Jong Un resurfaces in Suncheon with a new mark on his wrist. Photo: NK News

Second, the aforementioned defector duo rashly smeared egg on their faces. Ji Seong-ho said he was “99% sure” Kim was dead on May 1, the very day he reappeared. Ji apologized, as [did](#) Thae Yong-ho, who had suggested Kim could no longer stand or walk. Naturally, their foes crowded, accusing them of attention-seeking, “fake news,” and worse. One DP lawmaker even urged, outrageously, that neither man should be allowed to join the National Assembly’s Defense or Intelligence Committees.

By contrast, thirdly, the ROK government was both steadfast and, as it turned out, correct in denying that anything was amiss with Kim or North Korea. This suggests good intelligence. Seoul’s claim that Kim was in Wonsan on the east coast, rather than Hyangsan north of Pyongyang as *Daily NK* said, seemed borne out when satellite photographs [analyzed](#) by 38 North showed his personal train parked at his personal station there. Yet Suncheon, where Kim reappeared on May 1, is somewhere else again. There is still much that we do not know.

### South-South Outreach Needed

Looking ahead, after his election triumph Moon Jae-in is riding high domestically—for now. But the ROK electoral calendar is unrelenting. He only has two more years to serve, and then what—or rather, who? So far, in a neat pendulum since democracy was restored in 1988, left and right have alternated in power every 10 years, each having two successive presidents. On that basis, another liberal may succeed Moon in 2022; his former premier, Lee Nak-yon, is one contender. With conservatives



in disarray even before their defeat in April, such continuity is quite likely. Then again, despite the DP's victory in the constituencies, in the national vote the conservative party's clone actually won more votes than the DP's, though it was close.

If Pyongyang remains recalcitrant, and Moon gets blamed for the job losses and fall in GDP already evident due to COVID-19—with worse surely to come—then in 2022 voters may swing back toward the Right again. In that case, as in 2008 when Lee Myung-bak succeeded Roh Moo-hyun, Pyongyang will face a much frostier foe in Seoul. As a fascinating [analysis](#) of their programs by Jeongmin Kim of *NK News* confirmed, South Korea's main parties espouse sharply different policies toward North Korea. If he is wise Kim Jong Un really should make nicer with Moon—while the latter is still there.

Equally, both political camps in Seoul should strive, as they have signally failed to hitherto, to forge a bipartisan policy consensus toward Pyongyang. Otherwise, prospects for engagement or even policy consistency in the long term look bleak. The real, or prior challenge may not be so much North-South relations as South Korea's internal divisions. But regrettably, in a winner-takes-all political culture, reaching out to overcome these entrenched South-South hostilities seems even less likely than a renewal of North-South détente any time soon.

# CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

## JANUARY – APRIL 2020

**Dec. 28–31, 2019:** North Korea’s ruling Workers’ Party (WPK) holds a major [meeting](#): the 5th Plenary of the 7th Central Committee (CC). Kim Jong Un gives a wideranging and hardline speech, lasting seven hours. (In view of this, Kim does not deliver his customary New Year address.) Personnel changes are announced, while others apparently go [unannounced](#).

**Jan. 1, 2020:** Official *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA) and other DPRK media publish [reports](#) on the just-concluded WPK CC Plenary. From these lengthy summaries (circa 3,000 words), it seems that Kim Jong Un, unprecedentedly, made no mention of South Korea or inter-Korean relations. (This is usually the topic of a substantial section of his New Year address; see [past issues](#) of *Comparative Connections*.)

**Jan. 1, 2020:** South Korea [urges](#) the North not to carry out Kim Jong Un’s threat to test a “new strategic weapon,” as this “would not help denuclearization negotiations and efforts to build peace on the Korean Peninsula.”

**Jan. 2, 2020:** *Yonhap*, the quasi-official ROK news agency, [quotes](#) the Unification Ministry (MOU) as saying that, given Kim’s silence about South Korea in his recent speech, Seoul is “closely watching” whether Pyongyang plans to issue a separate message about inter-Korean relations. This stance of watching and waiting is [reiterated](#) on January 7. The South waits in vain: no message is forthcoming from the North.

**Jan. 4, 2020:** The *Wall Street Journal* reports that US diplomats [intervened](#) with Vietnamese authorities in December to prevent 13 North Korean refugees—two of whom had attempted suicide—from being repatriated to Pyongyang. The ROK government denies allegations that it had been reluctant to assist. The 13 are said now to be safe in an undisclosed location.

**Jan. 6, 2020:** Seoul announces what it calls a major restructuring of MOU. This will create a new division within the ministry’s Office of Exchange and Cooperation to handle border cooperation issues, such as turning the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) into a “global peace zone.” The ROK Cabinet duly [approves](#) the reorganization on February 4.

**Jan. 7, 2020:** President Moon Jae-in delivers his New Year’s [Address](#). Unlike Kim, Moon has much to say about inter-Korean relations. Regretting the current impasse, but not blaming the North, he reiterates his commitment to cooperation across the board, and also to realizing Kim’s long-promised [visit](#) to South Korea. He does not mention the nuclear issue.

**Jan. 9, 2020:** MOU [tells](#) *NK News* that, despite the impasse in inter-Korean ties, it approved 612 contacts with North Korea last year, down 15% from 707 in 2018. A larger fall might have been expected, but these data are only for *applications* by South Koreans to meet, phone, fax, or email the North. They do not necessarily imply that such contact actually took place.

**Jan. 10, 2020:** *NK News* [reports](#) MOU as saying that Seoul is considering how to make it easier for South Koreans to visit the North—including, potentially, being issued DPRK visas. The spokesperson added: “It is our consistent stance that sanctions against North Korea [do] not apply to independent tours.” He added that North and South are “in discussions” on the resumption of tourism, while admitting “differences in stance” and continued concerns.

**Jan. 10, 2020:** Fresh back from Washington DC, where he briefly met President Trump, Chung Eui-yong, head of the Blue House (Cheong Wa Dae) national security office, [says](#) that the US president asked President Moon to wish Kim Jong Un a happy birthday on his behalf. (The DPRK leader turned 36—probably—on Jan. 8.) Chung adds that the birthday greeting was duly delivered, but does not reveal how it was transmitted.

**Jan. 11, 2020:** Reacting to the above, North Korea's ex-nuclear negotiator Kim Kye Gwan, now an adviser to DPRK foreign ministry, [chides](#) "the excited south Korean authorities" for their "lingering hope for playing the role of 'mediator' in the DPRK-US relations," which he calls "presumptuous ... meddling." He warns Seoul it "had better not dream a fabulous dream that we would return to the dialogue with thankful feelings for the birthday greetings."

**Jan. 14, 2020:** Moon at his New Year's press conference [insists](#) that it is premature "to be pessimistic about South-North dialogue and North Korea-US dialogue." Despite admitting that now is "not a stage to be optimistic" either, Moon says he will keep pushing to expand inter-Korean cooperation with an "optimistic prospect." He [adds](#) that such cooperation could help build momentum for easing sanctions against Pyongyang.

**Jan. 14, 2020:** In a thinly veiled criticism of Moon's push for individual tourism to Mount Kumgang, the US State Department [insists](#) that Washington and Seoul are committed to a unified approach toward Pyongyang.

**Jan. 15, 2020:** Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [affirms](#) that Seoul will look at ways to improve relations with Pyongyang without waiting for progress in US-DPRK talks. The same day his ministry [says](#) it is looking at "various formats" to allow South Koreans to visit Mount Kumgang. A day later MOU [adds](#): "We are making a list of what we can do on our own [in terms of joint projects with North Korea] with regard to inter-Korean relations"

**Jan. 16, 2020:** Citing unspecified ROK government sources, Yonhap [says](#) North Korea has again demanded that the South remove its facilities at Mount Kumgang. (But see January 31.)

**Jan. 17, 2020:** A day after US Ambassador to the ROK Harry Harris says Seoul should consult Washington on any plans to engage Pyongyang, MOU [retorts](#) that "Our policy with regard to North Korea comes under our sovereignty."

**Jan. 27, 2020:** MOU [says](#) that 1,048 North Korean defectors arrived in the South in 2019, the lowest figure in 18 years. As usual, females (845) outnumbered males (202). After peaking at 2,904 in 2009, since Kim Jong Un took power in 2011 numbers have fallen to below 1,500 annually.

**Jan. 30, 2020:** In a rare meeting at the now largely idle joint liaison office at Kaesong, North and South Korea [agree](#) to temporarily close the facility, due to concerns about the new Wuhan coronavirus strain. All 58 South Koreans working there—17 officials and 41 support staff—return home across the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) the same day. MOU says the two Koreas will set up new telephone and fax lines to maintain contact during the suspension.

**Jan. 31, 2020:** Via the new inter-Korean phone line (see Jan. 30), Pyongyang [notifies](#) Seoul that, because of coronavirus concerns, it is suspending plans to remove South Korean-built facilities at the Mount Kumgang resort on its east coast.

**Feb. 3, 2020:** ROK defense ministry (MND) [insists](#) that, contra assertions in local media, the inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement signed in September 2018 does not bar or restrict joint US-ROK military exercises, including near the DMZ.

**Feb. 7, 2020:** MND [clarifies](#) that despite otherwise stalled relations, inter-Korean military hotlines are working normally. The two sides communicate twice daily, at 0900 and 1600, plus additionally as circumstances require. MND [reiterates](#) this message on April 27.

**Feb. 7, 2020:** MOU [says](#) that in weighing the possibility of individual tourism to North Korea, it is "taking the issue of the new coronavirus into consideration."

**Feb. 9, 2020:** At a forum in Pyeongchang, Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [reaffirms](#) the need to push for inter-Korean cooperation in railways, roads and tourism.

**Feb. 10, 2020:** MOU [insists](#) that individual tourism to North Korea by South Koreans is not a matter for consultation with Washington, as this is not banned under UN sanctions.

**Feb. 10, 2020:** Four years after South Korea's then President Park Geun-hye abruptly closed the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), the last inter-Korean joint venture, business persons with investments there hold a [rally](#) in Seoul. Urging that the zone be reopened, they ask the government to deliver a letter asking North Korea to let them visit and prepare for reopening. Separately, MOU [reiterates](#) its own (more abstract) view that the KIC should reopen when conditions are right.

**Feb. 13, 2020:** The DPRK website *Uriminzokkiri* [denounces](#) the Liberty Korea Party (LKP), the main ROK conservative opposition party, for recruiting two prominent defectors from North Korea to run as its candidates in forthcoming parliamentary elections in April.

**Feb. 16, 2020:** North Korea finally mentions South Korea's push for individual tourism to the North—but not favorably. *DPRK Today* [attacks](#) Seoul for seeking US approval for this plan.

**Feb. 17, 2020:** MOU [says](#) Pyongyang has made no response to calls for the KIC to reopen.

**Feb. 18, 2020:** Meeting in Seoul, some 200 North Korean defectors [launch](#) a preparatory committee to establish their first-ever political party. (See also March 6, below.)

**Feb. 19, 2020:** Seoul [says](#) the ROK will consider any requests from international agencies to help Pyongyang fight COVID-19, provided it is formally asked to assist.

**Feb. 21, 2020:** In a rare if backhanded compliment, *Choson Sinbo*, the newspaper of pro-DPRK ethnic North Koreans in Japan, [praises](#) the Oscar-winning ROK film *Parasite* as a “masterpiece” for laying bare the problem of class warfare, and “clearly revealing the reality in which a small number of the wealthy dominates the absolute majority.” This is the movie's first mention in any DPRK-related media.

**Feb. 24, 2020:** The magazine *DPRK Today* [attacks](#) ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha for what it calls the “spineless act” of discussing North Korean denuclearization with US and Japanese counterparts at the recent Munich Security Conference: “There are still fools asking for subservience and humiliation ... oblivious to the bitter lesson history has taught us.”

**Feb. 24, 2020:** With coronavirus cases spiking in South Korea, MOU [says](#) it will postpone the resumption of tourism to Panmunjom, scheduled to begin on February 26–28.

**Feb. 26, 2020:** Reacting to news that North Korea's former diplomat Thae Yong-ho will stand for the conservative United Future Party (UFP) in South Korea's parliamentary election on April 15, the DPRK website *Meari* [renews](#) allegations against Thae (first made in 2016) of embezzlement and rape. It adds: “Driving these scums (sic) to the forefront of confrontation between the two Koreas is an intolerable challenge to our nation's desire for unification.”

**Feb. 26, 2020:** A poll of 3,000 Northern defectors (almost 10% of the total, 33,523) by Hana, a state foundation which aids their resettlement, [finds](#) that 17.2% experienced discrimination last year: slightly less than the 2018 figure of 20.2%.

**Feb. 27, 2020:** DPRK website *Uriminzokkiri* [scorns](#) Moon's outreach to Japan, accusing him of “begging for more frequent meetings” with Prime Minister Abe Shinzo.

**March 1, 2020:** On the 101st anniversary of an historic uprising against Japanese occupation, and with coronavirus cases rising fast, Moon [calls](#) for international cooperation to fight the virus, including with North Korea and Japan: “The March 1 Independence Movement once again reminds us that we can prevail over anything as long as we stand together.”

**March 2, 2020:** MOU [says](#) South Korea will prepare to expand cooperation with the North in health and related fields. A day later the ministry [notes](#) that inter-Korean cooperation on healthcare is a key focus of its annual policy plan, recently delivered to the Blue House. Other goals—easier said than done—include a push for individual tourism to North Korea, and transform the DMZ into a peace zone.

**March 2, 2020:** North Korea [test-fires](#) two short-range projectiles, for the first time this year. After holding an emergency videoconference of security chiefs, the Blue House [expresses](#) “strong concern” and, in notably mild terms, urges the North to halt acts that are “not helpful to efforts to ease military tensions on the Korean peninsula.”

**March 3, 2020:** In her first ever statement published in her name, Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong [lambastes](#) Seoul's criticism of the North's strike drills as (among much else) shocking, senseless, imbecile, and like a frightened dog: "Such incoherent assertion and actions made by Chongwadae only magnify our distrust, hatred and scorn for the south side as a whole."

**March 4, 2020:** Spokesman [says](#) the Blue House is "prudently" analyzing Kim Yo Jong's diatribe, and does not plan to respond formally. MOU [calls](#) for "mutual respect" between the two Koreas.

**March 4, 2020:** DPRK website *Uriminzokkiri* [attacks](#) ROK movies and dramas for "anti-republic" fabrications. No names are mentioned. Ironically, the TV drama "Crash Landing on You," all the rage, is widely seen in the South as giving a favorable portrayal of the North—and [criticized](#) on that count by some conservatives.

**March 5, 2020:** After an ROK TV channel aired footage of a DPRK medical worker wearing a dental mask with the logo of a Southern brand, Seoul [denies](#) that South Korea has provided any facemasks to North Korea.

**March 5, 2020:** Blue House [says](#) Kim Jong Un has sent Moon a personal letter, delivered the previous day. Expressing "quiet support" for South Korea's fight against the coronavirus, and solicitude for Moon's health, Kim assures Moon of "his constant friendship and trust." Kim also gives his "frank" thoughts about the situation on the peninsula; these are not revealed.

**March 6, 2020:** Conservative daily *Chosun Ilbo* [claims](#) that Kim's letter to Moon asked for help fighting the coronavirus, and that Moon responded positively. MOU [denies](#) this, insisting that the North has not requested any such assistance.

**March 6, 2020:** The Inter-Korean Unification Party (IKUP), the first political party formed by North Korean defectors in the South, is officially [launched](#) in Seoul. Its program is to liberate the North from autocracy and promote defector rights in the South. It goes on to gain a paltry 10,833 votes in April 15's elections. (See also February 18 above.)

**March 8, 2020:** North Korea again [test-fires projectiles](#) (three, this time) into the East Sea. South Korea again remonstrates. Two further tests follow on March 20 and 28—making this the DPRK's [busiest ever](#) month for missile launches, with a total of nine projectiles fired.

**March 11-12, 2020:** In two statements on successive days, MOU [pours](#) cold water on [calls](#) for the KIC to be [reopened](#) to produce face masks, in short supply in the South. The ministry [notes](#) that, among other obstacles, North Korea has completely closed its borders as an anti-coronavirus measure.

**March 19, 2020:** MOU [licenses](#) two border cities, Paju and Goyang, to operate independent humanitarian aid projects in North Korea. Four other local governments—Seoul and Incheon cities, and South Chungcheong and Gyeonggi provinces (but see March 24 below)—already have such permission. This is all somewhat notional, given Pyongyang's non-cooperation.

**March 20, 2020:** Seoul renews its [call](#) for the two Koreas to cooperate in fighting COVID-19.

**March 20, 2020:** North Korea fires two projectiles presumed to be short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea.

**March 23, 2020:** A day after Kim Yo Jong [reveals](#) that Trump offered to assist Pyongyang in combating the coronavirus, Seoul [repeats](#) its call for the two Koreas to work together on this: "from the perspective of humanitarian and mutually beneficial cooperation ... closely related to the right to health and survival of the people of both countries."

**March 24, 2020:** Seoul [says](#) South Korean NGOs can get government financial support for coronavirus-related aid projects in North Korea if they have an agreement with Pyongyang. Two days later, though, MOU [nixes](#) a bid by the local administration in Gyeonggi province (which surrounds Seoul) to send masks and test kits worth 1.2 billion won (\$980,000), saying that this "failed to meet the requirements."



**March 26, 2020:** At a memorial [ceremony](#) at the ROK Navy's 2nd Fleet Command in Pyeongtaek on the 10th anniversary of the [sinking](#) of the frigate *Cheonan*, with 46 lives lost, Defense Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo says, "We should protect the Northern Limit Line (NLL, the de facto inter-Korean maritime border) all the more tightly to make sure past sorrows such as the Cheonan attack never are repeated, and establish North Korea's denuclearization and the Korean Peninsula's lasting peace." Pyongyang has always [denied](#) responsibility.

**March 28, 2020:** North Korea fires what appear to be two short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea.

**March 30, 2020:** ROK's Inter-Korean Exchange and Cooperation Promotion Council (IKECPC) [approves](#) spending 688 million won (\$565,000) to create a digital archive of relics unearthed when, for a decade starting in 2007, the two Koreas jointly excavated Manwoldae palace near Kaesong, which was Korea's capital during the Koryo dynasty (918-1392).

**March 31, 2020:** Despite Pyongyang's [threat](#) a day earlier to stop negotiating with the US, MOU [reiterates](#) Seoul's readiness to assist a resumption of long-stalled denuclearization talks.

**April 2, 2020:** MOU [says](#) it will give aid worth \$5.73 million to the DPRK via international agencies this year. This comprises \$4 million to the World Health Organization (WHO) for women and children, announced in December, and \$1.73 million through the Red Cross to help typhoon recovery efforts. Seoul's contribution is much the largest within the global total of \$9.43 million in aid to North Korea pledged this year. MOU also [okays](#) an unnamed NGO's plan to supply hand sanitizers worth \$81,000 to North Korea to help fend off COVID-19, the first such private aid this year.

**April 7, 2020:** MOU [predicts](#)—correctly, it turns out, suggesting good intelligence sources in Pyongyang—that coronavirus concerns may prompt North Korea to streamline its upcoming parliamentary meeting (see April 12) by having deputies register on the day—rather than the usual 1-2 days in advance, followed by paying homage at the Kims' mausoleum and the like.

**April 11, 2020:** Kim Jong Un chairs Politburo [meeting](#) of the Central Committee (CC) of the ruling Workers' Party (WP). Thereafter Kim is unseen until May 1, which sparks external speculation about his health and whereabouts.

**April 12, 2020:** DPRK Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), North Korea's rubber-stamp Parliament, [holds](#) its annual spring session—two days late, without explanation. The agenda includes the usual economic and budget [reports](#), as always with no hard numbers. Kim Jong Un, who is no longer an SPA deputy, does not attend this year.

**April 15, 2020:** Customary celebrations of "Sun's Day"—Kim Il Sung's birthday—in Pyongyang are scaled down, presumably due to COVID-19 concerns. Unprecedentedly, Kim Jong Un is [not present](#).

**April 15, 2020:** Four-yearly parliamentary [elections](#) in South Korea see a swing to Moon's ruling Democratic Party (DP), giving it an overall majority in the National Assembly for the first time. Two North Korean [defectors](#) win seats for the conservative opposition, including former diplomat Thae Yong-ho (now Tae Kumin), who is elected in Gangnam.

**April 17, 2020:** [Reiterating](#) its determination to facilitate individual tourism to North Korea, MOU adds that this is subject to progress in tackling the coronavirus.

**April 20, 2020:** MOU [reports](#) that the number of North Koreans visiting the South fell from 809 in 2018 to zero in 2019 as relations chilled. 9,835 South Koreans visited the North. If commuting by ROK staff at the joint liaison office in Kaesong is excluded, the figure drops to 576: sharply down from 4,612 in 2018.

**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 after heart surgery. It later modifies that to "a cardiovascular procedure." (Unlike other media, *Daily NK* does not claim that Kim is gravely ill, much less dead.) This report intensifies worldwide media speculation.

**April 21, 2020:** Various South Korean government sources [insist](#) that all is normal in the North. Seoul firmly maintains that line, damping down speculation about Kim's health.

**April 23, 2020:** South Korea [designates](#) a planned 111-km railway, running north from the east coast port city Gangneung to Jeju near the DMZ, as an inter-Korean project. This means reconstruction can proceed without the normal feasibility study.

**April 23, 2020:** MOU [approves](#) an unnamed NGO's plan to send 20,000 items of protective clothing worth \$162,000 to help North Korea combat COVID-19. No more details are given.

**April 24, 2020:** MOU releases mid-term plan for developing inter-Korean relations. [Ideas](#) include a joint event in June to mark the 20th anniversary of the first inter-Korean summit. There is no sign that Pyongyang is interested.

**April 28, 2020:** Reiterating the ROK's consistent stance, Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [denounces](#) reports that Kim Jong Un is gravely ill as "fake news," and deplores what he [calls](#) an "infodemic" of speculation on the subject.

**May 1, 2020:** Kim Jong Un [reappears](#). Flanked by most of the top DPRK leadership, he [cuts](#) a ribbon to open the Suncheon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factory, some 50 miles north of Pyongyang. *NKNews* [notes](#) a new mark on his wrist, which could indicate a minor cardiac procedure.

**May 3, 2020:** South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [report](#) that at about 0741 Northern gunfire struck a guardpost at Cheorwon in the central part of the peninsula, leaving four bullet holes. Following procedure, the ROKA reacted with broadcast warnings, followed by two bursts of return fire (10 rounds each). Though a clear breach of 2018's inter-Korean military agreement, Seoul reckons the North did not intend a provocation. The JCS noted that "it was quite foggy and the North Korean soldiers usually rotate shifts around that time,"

**May 3, 2020:** Yonhap cites an unnamed Blue House official as [denying](#) that Kim Jong Un has undergone any kind of medical procedure.

**May 4, 2020:** ROK MND [says](#) Pyongyang has not yet offered any explanation for yesterday's gunfire incident at the DMZ.

**May 4, 2020:** Yonhap [says](#) that the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP), an ROK state think-tank, is proposing that South Korea sign a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with North Korea, "to accelerate reform ... and to help it integrate into the international market." (KIEP's [homepage](#) lists a report with this date, but in [fact](#) published last December—so it is unclear what exactly is new here.)

**May 6, 2020:** US-led United Nations Command (UNC) [says](#) it is conducting "a full investigation" into May 3 border shooting incident. It was reportedly unable to enter the Northern side of the DMZ. Pyongyang has still offered no explanation, much less apology.

**May 6, 2020:** South Korea's Unification Minister [visits](#) the DMZ. Kim Yeon-chul's trip to Panmunjom (nowhere near Cheorwon) is to assess preparations for the planned resumption of tourism there, suspended since last year's outbreak of African swine fever.

**May 8, 2020:** Maj. Gen Kim Do-gyun, MND's point man on inter-Korean affairs, is promoted to three stars—but also taken off the case. From next week he becomes chief of the Capital Defense Command. Kim led the ROK side in 2018's inter-Korean military talks. The [report](#) does not state who will replace him on the North Korea beat at MND.



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## C O N N E C T I O N S

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

**CHINA- KOREA RELATIONS**

## CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS UNDER QUARANTINE

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SEE-WON BYUN, SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY

The outbreak of COVID-19, first in China and then in South Korea, placed plans for a highly anticipated summit between Xi Jinping and Moon Jae-in on hold. Beijing and Seoul's priorities focused on fighting the virus together through aid exchanges, a new inter-agency mechanism led by their foreign ministries, and multilateral cooperation with Japan and ASEAN. As cases spread across borders, political frictions emerged over entry bans and relief supplies. The public health crisis triggered efforts to mitigate its socioeconomic repercussions, raising questions over long-term US influence. The virus also dramatically interrupted the normal diplomatic and economic interactions between China and North Korea.

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The outbreak of the novel coronavirus COVID-19 virus, first in China and then in South Korea, placed plans for a highly anticipated Xi-Moon summit on hold. Beijing and Seoul's priorities focused on fighting the virus together through aid exchanges, a new inter-agency mechanism led by their foreign ministries, and multilateral cooperation with Japan and ASEAN partners. As cases spread across borders, political frictions emerged over entry bans and relief supplies. The public health crisis triggered regional efforts to mitigate its socioeconomic repercussions, raising questions over the United States' long-term influence. COVID-19 dramatically interrupted the normal flows of diplomatic and economic interaction between China and North Korea.

Containment of the virus quickly consumed the Chinese leadership's attention by mid-January and became a focal point in North Korean state media by the end of January. The virus was the pretext for an exchange of messages between Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping on February 2, but dramatically curtailed official diplomatic, tourist, and economic exchanges during the first part of 2020. It is not yet clear whether the virus also affected the growing volume in 2019 of ship-to-ship transfers of oil and coal between North Korea and China under the tacit protection of Chinese state authorities.

### Xi-Moon Summit Talks on Hold

South Korean President Moon Jae-in declared "war" on COVID-19 on March 3, six weeks after the country's first confirmed case on January 20, and two months after the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) began reporting suspected cases in China. South Korea recorded the highest number of confirmed cases outside China as infection peaked in late February. By the time the World Health Organization (WHO) called COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, it also identified China and South Korea as countries with "significantly declining" cases.

Foreign ministers Wang Yi and Kang Kyung-wha met on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference on February 15, where they continued to support Xi-Moon summit plans. After months of speculation, Kang finally indicated at an April 28 parliamentary meeting that Xi's visit to South Korea would indeed be unlikely due to the coronavirus pandemic. The visit was planned for the first half of 2020 after

the summit in Beijing last December. In his New Year [address](#) on January 7, Moon vowed to upgrade bilateral relations in anticipation of separate visits by Xi and Premier Li Keqiang, expressed hopes for advancing trilateral cooperation with Japan, and outlined plans for boosting South Korea's export competitiveness in light of US-China trade tensions. During his New Year press [conference](#) on January 14, he promised to coordinate his regional economic policies with China's Belt and Road Initiative, and emphasized Beijing's role in resolving the North Korea nuclear issue. China's foreign ministry in response [expressed](#) Beijing's readiness to advance regional dialogue and inter-Korean engagement.

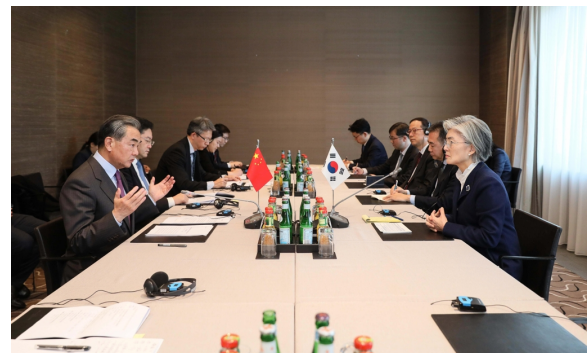


Figure 1 Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Kang Kyung-wha participate in bilateral talks in Munich. Photo: Yonhap

Those priorities quickly shifted by January 28, when Moon promised "support and cooperation" in China's fight against COVID-19 in a letter to Xi. In telephone talks with Wang the same day, Kang [indicated](#) South Korea's willingness to provide medical supplies, and coordinated plans for evacuating about 700 Koreans from Wuhan, Hubei province, where the virus originated. Evacuations were completed in three rounds on January 31, February 1, and February 12, combined with South Korea's deliveries of emergency supplies to China as part of a total \$5 million in aid [announced](#) on January 30.

### Effects of Quarantine on China-North Korea Diplomacy

Concerns about the spread of the virus quickly led North Korea to impose a comprehensive quarantine on air and ground transit routes between China and North Korea at the end of January. Travel companies were banned from bringing tourists to North Korea on January 22, a one-month quarantine on overseas arrivals



was announced the following week, and most air, port, and train routes were suspended during the last week of January. Foreign diplomats located in Pyongyang were restricted to their compounds throughout February. Many diplomatic representatives withdrew and closed their embassies once an evacuation flight to Vladivostok was arranged on March 9, though Chinese embassy personnel were reported to have remained in country during and following the quarantine period.

North Korea announced the appointment of former defense commander Ri Son Gwon as its new minister of foreign affairs, replacing veteran diplomat Ri Yong Ho, who had met with Xi Jinping on December 22 in Beijing as one of his last official international diplomatic engagements. But due to the coronavirus outbreak, Ri did not have any substantive external engagements through the end of April. Kim Jong Un's [letter to Xi Jinping](#) reported on February 2 offering his support to Xi's coronavirus response efforts was the single public leadership interaction between Pyongyang and Beijing during the first four months of 2020. China announced that it sent [COVID-19 test kits](#) to North Korea for future use on April 27, months following North Korea's quiet appeals to international aid organizations since early February for COVID-19 related supplies. China had previously exported over [\\$50 million](#) in medical supplies to North Korea in 2019.

In a Reuters [interview](#) ahead of the Munich Security Conference in February, Wang Yi reiterated China's position on Korean Peninsula peace and denuclearization, stating that the "dual-track approach" supported by Moscow and Seoul awaits "a real consensus within the US." Working-level defense talks between Beijing and Seoul on January 16 focused on advancing denuclearization and peace after the breakdown of US-DPRK talks after the February 2019 Trump-Kim summit.

### **Coronavirus Cooperation: Interagency Mechanisms and Aid Exchanges**

The public health crisis surrounding the coronavirus prompted close cooperation between China and South Korea from the onset, most notably in the form of interagency institutional mechanisms and bilateral aid exchanges. Xi and Moon discussed information-sharing and other ways to cooperate in

telephone [talks](#) on February 20, when South Korea reported its first coronavirus-related death. The foreign ministries [led](#) the first working-level video conference on joint contingency measures on March 13, launching a new cooperation mechanism on COVID-19 including health, education, customs, immigration, and civil aviation agencies.



*Figure 2 Chinese and ROK officials participate in a video conference as part of their established joint response. Photo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*

China's foreign ministry [called](#) it not just a step toward implementing Xi and Moon's "important consensus," but also a "reference for other countries to join hands to fight the epidemic." Moon's approach stood in contrast to the Trump administration's early ban on travel from China as well as recommendations to ban flights to China from the Korean Medical Association. In an extensive *China Daily* [report](#) in March on China-ROK cooperation, Wang Junsheng at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) agreed that "the two neighbors will serve as a model for other countries," many of which have "overreacted" to Chinese and South Korean cases. For Yu Wangying at Sungkyunkwan University, the "mutual assistance" from governments and society [demonstrated](#) "people-to-people connectivity" and "deepened mutual understanding."

A day before pledging \$5 million in government aid, South Korea's foreign ministry revealed on January 29 that two Korean civic groups would send medical supplies to China. Local governments, companies, and the private sector [contributed](#) relief aid to Wuhan and other regions from late January. New Consul General Kang Seung-seok arrived in Wuhan on February 20 with additional relief supplies from various sectors. As a *Global Times* [interview](#) with Kang indicated, his arrival "won praises" from China's foreign ministry and "touched the

hearts of many Chinese citizens.” In his *China Daily* [op-ed](#) on February 27, new PRC Ambassador to Seoul Xing Haiming reflected on local gestures of emotional support in South Korea, and shared experiences fighting outbreaks like SARS in 2002–2003 and MERS in 2015.

Among the first to donate supplies to China, South Korea soon became a recipient of China’s reciprocal global aid at intergovernmental, technical, and subnational levels. China’s foreign ministry on February 20 [identified](#) the South Korean case as a primary example of such aid exchange, praising the ROK Embassy slogan of Moon’s early words to Beijing, “China’s problems are our problems.” Shanghai was the first Chinese municipal government to [support](#) South Korea by providing masks to the hardest-hit regions of Daegu and North Gyeongsang province on February 27. Dismissing foreign media claims on China’s export restrictions on surgical masks, the foreign ministry on March 9 pointed to China’s 1.1 million mask donations to South Korea and additional donations from Chinese businesses and eight sister-city regions. As the Chinese state media later [declared](#), “made-in-China supplies reinforce world’s war on COVID-19.”

### **Coronavirus Conflict: Entry Bans and Domestic Backlash**

In South Korea, Seoul’s \$5 million aid plan to China still drew domestic backlash for threatening domestic supplies. When the plan was announced on January 30, South Korea also reported its first suspected human-to-human transmission. During a crackdown between February 6 and 12, the Korea Customs Service detected illegal shipments of 730,000 masks worth \$1.18 million, mostly by Chinese nationals. A foreign ministry official [told](#) the media on February 28 that South Korea would only provide half of its promised aid to China through international agencies.

Frictions in China and South Korea’s fight against the coronavirus emerged most importantly over entry restrictions. Pointing to Seoul’s concerns about the economic impact and Xi’s planned visit, a *Korea Herald* editorial on March 2 [argued](#) that Moon “should have been more active in banning entry from China without being bound by considerations other than public health.” Jeju residents voiced the earliest concerns in January by pressing their

regional government to ban Chinese travelers under its visa-free program. By the time Seoul announced a temporary entry ban from February 4 on foreigners who have been in Hubei, more than 650,000 citizens supported an online petition demanding a ban on travelers from China entirely. According to [one](#) survey in February, 64% of respondents supported a ban on visitors from China, while 33% found it unnecessary.

Xing Haiming’s first press [conference](#) remarks as PRC ambassador on February 4 raised controversy for suggesting Seoul’s failure to follow WHO recommendations against travel restrictions. Unannounced quarantine measures by Chinese provincial authorities from February 25 especially angered South Koreans, who [criticized](#) the Moon administration for not taking “reciprocal measures.” Kang [expressed](#) South Korea’s concerns to Wang during telephone talks on February 26, which Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Gunn also [voiced](#) to Xing in Seoul. As global attention on China’s entry restrictions heightened, the PRC foreign ministry on February 28 released a [statement](#) on health regulations indicating that Chinese and foreign nationals are “treated as equals.” But in nationalist media outlet *Global Times*, experts like Da Zhigang at the Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences [warned](#) against re-imported cases from South Korea, especially via missionary activities of religious groups like Shincheonji Church, linked to more than half of the country’s cases.

Seoul [filed](#) an official written complaint on March 16 protesting Beijing municipality’s decision to quarantine incoming travelers in designated facilities at their own expense. The complaint came just two days after Xi sent a message of sympathy to Moon [reciprocating](#) South Korea’s show of support. By mid-March, 22 Chinese regions were implementing tightened quarantine measures for travelers from South Korea. South Korea’s foreign ministry again [called](#) in Xing for a meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Gunn on March 27 after Beijing announced a temporary suspension of the entry of foreigners. The second meeting of the China-ROK mechanism on COVID-19 reached agreement on April 29 to initiate a fast-track system simplifying entry procedures for business travelers effective May 1. Although the system applied to all of South Korea, only half the 10 designated Chinese regions could bring it into force given the status of flight operations.

China's foreign ministry [called](#) it a "groundbreaking initiative" between the two neighbors and economic partners as "epidemic prevention and control becomes a new normal."

### **The Steep Downturn in China-North Korea Trade and Its Implications**

A major casualty of North Korea's self-imposed quarantine was China-North Korea official trade, which hit levels of exchange even lower than those recorded at the height of sanctions in early 2018. [Overall trade dropped by 24%](#) compared to the previous year according to Chinese customs data for January and February. China's exports fell to \$198 million for the first two months of the year, while imports from North Korea dropped 74% to only \$10 million, reflecting the severity of the impact of the quarantine.

North Korea has reportedly placed a ban on imports of consumer goods as part of the quarantine, but Seoul National University Professor [Kim Byeong-yeon speculates](#) that the real reason behind import restrictions is foreign currency shortages inside North Korea. He cites reports of "panic buying" and the resumption of public bond issuance for the first time in 17 years as evidence that supports this conclusion. If North Korea does face a domestic currency crunch, China would face even greater pressure to provide support to stave off a humanitarian and political crisis should economic conditions drastically worsen inside North Korea.

### **China Abets North Korean Sanctions Evasion**

The anticipated March 2020 release of the 2020 [UN Panel of Experts report on North Korea](#) was delayed to April due to objections from China. The report came against the backdrop of a draft UNSC resolution co-sponsored by China and Russia last December advocating the loosening of sanctions on North Korea. A draft of the Panel of Experts report, leaked to the [media](#) in February, drew attention to extensive ship-to-ship transfers of oil, coal, and sand that regularly occurred in Chinese territorial waters during 2019. North Korea is reported to have utilized foreign-flagged tankers to make 64 deliveries of refined petroleum products ranging between 560,000 and 1.531 million barrels, in excess of the 500,000 limit imposed by UNSC resolutions on North Korean petroleum imports. In addition, North Korea is suspected of having illicitly exported 2.8 million metric tons of coal

to China worth an estimated \$370 million via ship-to-ship transfers, and of having earned over \$120 million by selling fishing rights in North Korean waters to Chinese vessels.

The regularity and location of the suspected transfers near Zhoushan, home of the China's East Sea Fleet, suggest that Chinese state authorities have tacitly enabled North Korean ships and Chinese-controlled counterparts to evade UN sanctions on North Korea through nonenforcement of the resolutions. US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien [stated in response](#) that "The Chinese have to enforce the sanctions against North Korea. They've got to stop the ship-to-ship transfers. They have to send the labor—the folks who are engaged in labor in China, and then sending remittances back to North Korea to keep the economy going. We need the Chinese to assist us as we pressure the North Koreans to come to the table."

Constraints imposed by China on the content of the UN Panel of Experts reports have meant that specific information detailing Chinese nonenforcement of sanctions has come from independent research organizations such as the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and the Japanese foreign ministry. The RUSI report entitled "[The Phantom Fleet: North Korea's Smugglers in Chinese Waters](#)" provides extensive photographic and other evidence showing the routes, locations, and cargos of vessels involved in UN sanctions evasion through ship-to-ship transfers. China has routinely been identified as an overseas base for North Korean hacking and cybertheft operations, but the PRC embassy in Pyongyang has also been reported as the victim of North Korean hacking operations, according to a [Beijing-based security firm Qihoo 360](#).

### **COVID-19's Economic Impact on China and South Korea**

COVID-19's economic impact on China and South Korea heightened concerns over the global repercussions. During video talks on April 17, Commerce Minister Zhong Shan and Industry Minister Sung Yun-mo agreed to mitigate disruption to global supply chains, especially given South Korea's heavy dependence on China for labor-intensive products in sectors like automobiles. China's economy [declined](#) by 6.8% in January-March 2020 after the coronavirus shutdown, challenging Beijing's goal of doubling the



economy from 2010 levels by 2020. The IMF projected in April that China's economy is expected to grow by 1.2% in 2020, 4.9% lower than in 2019, while South Korea's economy will shrink by an estimated 1.2%. Asia-Pacific growth overall is projected to be worse than during the global or Asian financial crises, with the United States and EU, key trading partners, to be hit even harder. The Asian Development Bank estimated in March that South Korea's GDP could shrink by up to \$16.5 billion in 2020 in the worst-case scenario of prolonged outbreaks and declining Chinese consumption. According to South Korea's trade ministry, total exports declined by 24.3% in April on-year, the biggest decline since 2009. Exports to China declined by 6.2% in March on-year, but FDI pledged from China grew almost threefold in January–March 2020 to \$1.46 billion, driven by service-sector investment.

According to the China Institute for Reform and Development, trilateral economic cooperation with Japan is [critical](#) in light of newly-emerging trends of regionalization and localization. Director-General of the Ministry of Commerce's Department of Foreign Trade Li Xingqian [identifies](#) cooperation with South Korea and Japan among China's priorities for stabilizing foreign trade, through targeted support to enterprises and initiatives like the trilateral FTA and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Wang Jinbin at Renmin University similarly [calls](#) for signing the trilateral FTA and RCEP this year as part of a post-pandemic trade development strategy in Asia, citing the growing importance of regionalization, an ailing global industrial chain, and "reverse globalization." According to Wang Junsheng at CASS, the coronavirus outbreak combined with US protectionism "has given them a [push](#) to cooperate" despite tensions among the three countries last year. As Tian Yun at the Beijing Economic Operation Association argues, China's diversifying export market may [place](#) it in a better position to deal with the trade war with Washington. ASEAN emerged as China's biggest trade partner in the first quarter of 2020, surpassing the EU and the United States. A Boston Consulting Group report in March indicated that US–China trade frictions have especially damaged US leadership in the semiconductor industry, predicting that South Korea will take over in a few years and China will lead in the long term.

## Asian Models and Implications for the United States

The regional spread of the coronavirus reinforced Beijing and Seoul's cooperation with Japan and other partners since RCEP talks in Bali on February 3–4. Foreign Ministers Wang Yi, Kang Kyung-wha, and Toshimitsu Motegi [held](#) a trilateral video conference on coronavirus cooperation on March 20, three days after director-general level talks. According to CASS scholars, the meeting [highlighted](#) the need to maintain cross-border economic exchanges, high-level political consensus, favorable public opinion, and multilateral coordination. In an [interview](#) with *People's Daily* earlier that month, Deputy Secretary-General of the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat Cao Jing claimed that such efforts would "inject new impetus to deepening their cooperation," identifying public health, scientific innovation, and the trilateral FTA as priorities. Premier Li, President Moon, and Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo joined a special ASEAN+3 video summit on April 14 affirming their commitment to a collective regional response. The joint [statement](#) on COVID-19 identified various proposals including the creation of a regional reserve of medical supplies and an emergency response fund.



Figure 3 Premier Li speaks in Beijing with ASEAN Plus Three leaders via video conference in April. Photo: China Daily

Such initiatives inspired Chinese debate on Asian regional cooperation and lessons for the West. *China Daily* commentators [suggested](#) that East Asian countries are developing innovative models to "fill in the gaps" in the supply of global public goods from organizations like the WHO. The China–ROK mechanism and trilateral foreign ministers meeting on COVID-19 exemplified comprehensive approaches to mitigate the socioeconomic effects, showing that international public health governance goes beyond health sector cooperation. Wang Sheng

at Jilin University saw the public health crisis as an important driver of [trilateral](#) cooperation with Japan on non-traditional security, pointing to China and South Korea's similar responses at home. In a *Global Times* [op-ed](#), Wang Junsheng attributed their success compared to Western counterparts to their governments' early measures, advanced quality of health sectors, and their people's stronger willingness to "obey and follow" government recommendations. He further criticized the West's "hypocritical" tendency to reject China's model while seeking to learn from democratic South Korea, arguing that "the three countries are coordinating efforts to deal with discrimination against Asians." A CGTN opinion piece on April 15 [concluded](#) that "US influence in East Asia continues to wane" since COVID-19, highlighting tensions with South Korea over defense burden-sharing.

### **Conclusion: Post-Pandemic China-Korea Relations**

At the start of 2020, Moon called Xi's planned visit "an opportunity for South Korea-China relations to make an epoch-making leap." Despite the visit's delay, joint efforts to fight the coronavirus pandemic consolidated claims of deepened friendship. Briefing the Chinese media in April, South Korea's Consul General in Wuhan Kang Seung-seok [identified](#) intergovernmental information sharing, nongovernmental donations, and emotional support as the "biggest gain" for both countries, expressing hopes that such friendship will "serve as a basis for further bilateral exchanges in the future." After telephone talks with Moon in February, Xi [reassured](#) that "friendly feelings between the Chinese and South Korean people will grow even deeper." As China's foreign ministry spokesperson [echoed](#), "after being tested by this pandemic, the friendship and mutual trust between the two peoples in China and the ROK will be strengthened." As *China Daily* [summed](#) up, the China-South Korea case shows that "East Asia is enhancing its institutions, interagency coordination, people-to-people ties and information sharing."

Such favorable assessments lay aside looming domestic and global uncertainties surrounding post-pandemic relations. One poll conducted by a US marketing agency in March 30-April 3 [showed](#) that Chinese consumers had the most positive view of their government's response to the outbreak (79%), followed by Britain (50%),

South Korea (43%), and the United States (34%). Even as opposition voices on diplomacy with China and economic challenges grew louder, a Gallup Korea poll showed that Moon's approval rating increased from 44 to 57% in March-April, the highest since October 2018. The ruling Democratic Party's win in the parliamentary elections on April 15 was seen to boost his foreign policy agenda at a time of growing concern over North Korea's belligerence, tensions with Japan, and the future of the US-ROK alliance. According to Ma Weying's [assessment](#) of Moon's future diplomacy, although the US-ROK alliance will remain the "cornerstone," South Korea's military and political dependence on Washington is likely to be limited since "Moon values autonomy." Having recovered from the THAAD fallout, Seoul will continue to "seek a balance between China and the US." While Moon will seek friendly ties with China to meet economic goals, his China policy will also depend on US relations and Korean Peninsula conditions. Although Seoul relied heavily on Xi's planned visit this year to advance Moon's regional agenda, bilateral priorities remain on battling the virus and its economic repercussions.

*Research assistance and chronology compilation provided by Chenglong Lin, San Francisco State University.*



# CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

## JANUARY – MAY 2020

**Jan. 1, 2020:** Kim Jong Un receives a New Year's letter from the General Association of Koreans in China.

**Jan. 2, 2020:** After Kim declares plans to develop “new strategic weapons,” China [urges](#) the United States and North Korea to remain committed to peacefully resolving the nuclear issue.

**Jan. 3, 2020:** China's UN Ambassador Zhang Jun [expresses](#) support for a China-Russia resolution aimed at easing sanctions on North Korea.

**Jan. 4, 2020:** South Korea seizes Chinese fishing boats for illegally fishing in its waters in the Yellow Sea.

**Jan. 7, 2020:** South Korean President Moon Jae-in in his New Year's address [expresses](#) hopes for advancing China-ROK ties.

**Jan. 7, 2020:** South Korean activists protest Chinese actions against Hong Kong demonstrators.

**Jan. 8, 2020:** The Korean Centers for Disease Control begins [reporting](#) suspected cases of pneumonia-like illness spreading in China.

**Jan. 10, 2020:** South Korea asks China to provide information on a new type of coronavirus.

**Jan. 13, 2020:** The Korea Tourism Organization announces that about 3,500 Chinese students will travel to South Korea on winter field trips until early February.

**Jan. 14, 2020:** Moon [discusses](#) cooperation with China in his New Year's press conference.

**Jan. 14, 2020:** Pak Kyong Il, vice-chairman of the Korean Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and chairman of the DPRK-China Friendship Association, Chinese ambassador to the DPRK Li Jinjun, and other officials attend a friendship meeting in North Korea for Lunar New Year.

**Jan. 14, 2020:** The United States sanctions two DPRK entities including a China-based lodging facility for involvement in labor exports violating international sanctions.

**Jan. 15, 2020:** President Trump during a signing ceremony for a phase-one trade deal with China acknowledges China for “helping us with North Korea.”

**Jan. 15, 2020:** People's Republic of China foreign ministry [responds](#) to Moon's New Year press conference.

**Jan. 16, 2020:** PRC and ROK officials attend the 19<sup>th</sup> Meeting of ASEAN+3 Tourism Ministers in Brunei.

**Jan. 16, 2020:** China and South Korea hold working-level defense talks in Seoul.

**Jan. 16, 2020:** Pak Kyong Il, vice-chairman of the Korean Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and chairman of the DPRK-China Friendship Association, Chinese ambassador to the DPRK Li Jinjun, and other officials attend a friendship film show in North Korea.

**Jan. 18, 2020:** A DPRK delegation including North Korea's Ambassador to China Ji Jae-ryong and Ambassador to the UN Kim Song leave Beijing for Pyongyang.

**Jan. 20, 2020:** KCDC [reports](#) the first confirmed [coronavirus case](#) in South Korea. China's foreign ministry [indicates](#) that China has been working with South Korea, Japan, and Thailand to control the spread of the virus.

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

**Jan. 22, 2020:** DPRK Embassy in Beijing hosts a Lunar New Year reception, attended by PRC Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui and other officials.

**Jan. 22, 2020:** Korea-China Air Quality Joint Research Team releases research findings that show ultrafine dust in Beijing and Seoul contain similar elements.

**Jan. 23, 2020:** Korean Air Lines is South Korea's first airline to announce a planned suspension of flights to Wuhan.

**Jan. 25, 2020:** KCDC designates China entirely as a "coronavirus watch" zone. ROK foreign ministry raises its travel advisory level for Wuhan and surrounding areas in Hubei province.

**Jan. 28, 2020:** In his reply to President Xi Jinping's congratulatory birthday letter, Moon expresses support for Beijing's efforts to contain the spread of coronavirus.

**Jan. 28, 2020:** ROK foreign ministry issues a travel alert for all of China, Hong Kong, and Macau.

**Jan. 28, 2020:** Foreign ministers Wang Yi and Kang Kyung-wha hold telephone talks.

**Jan. 28, 2020:** North Korea's *Rodong Sinmun* reports strengthened measures against the coronavirus.

**Jan. 29, 2020:** Asan and Jincheon residents protest South Korea's decision to bring evacuees from Wuhan. Jeju residents urge the regional government to ban Chinese travelers under its visa-free program.

**Jan. 29-30, 2020:** ROK foreign ministry [announces](#) medical aid to China from two Korean civic groups and separate plans to send China \$5 million in aid to fight the coronavirus.

**Jan. 30, 2020:** South Korea reports its first suspected human-to-human transmission case of coronavirus.

**Jan. 30, 2020:** A South Korean plane arrives in Wuhan to evacuate South Korean nationals.

**Jan. 30, 2020:** South and North Korea temporarily close their Kaesong liaison office due to coronavirus concerns. North Korea plans to close all foreign transportation routes according to South Korean media.

**Jan. 30, 2020:** Jeju government and justice ministry discuss a temporary suspension of a visa-free program for Chinese visitors.

**Jan. 30, 2020:** New PRC Ambassador to South Korea Xing Haiming arrives in Seoul.

**Jan. 31, 2020:** ROK Vice Foreign Minister Cho Sei-young and PRC Ambassador Xing Haiming meet in Seoul.

**Jan. 31, 2020:** Korean evacuees from Wuhan arrive in Seoul. Asan and Jincheon residents remove protest signage. President Moon thanks them via Twitter.

**Jan. 31, 2020:** North Korea is reported to have closed all air and railway routes across borders with China, and suspended plans to remove South Korean-built facilities at the Mt. Kumgang resort.

**Feb. 1, 2020:** South Korea's second evacuation plane arrives in Seoul with nationals from Wuhan.

**Feb. 1, 2020:** Kim Song-nam, first vice director of the WPK, arrives at Beijing Capital International Airport.

**Feb. 1, 2020:** KCNA reports that Kim Jong Un has sent a letter of sympathy to Xi, and that North Korea has sent financial aid to the CCP.

**Feb. 2, 2020:** South Korea announces a temporary entry ban on foreigners who have recently been in Hubei, effective Feb. 4.

**Feb. 3, 2020:** An Asiana Airlines cargo flight leaves for Wuhan to deliver relief aid.

**Feb. 3-4, 2020:** ASEAN and dialogue partners hold a high-level meeting on RCEP in Bali.

**Feb. 4, 2020:** Ambassador Xing Haiming [holds](#) his first press conference at the PRC Embassy.

**Feb. 6, 2020:** ROK Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Kim Gunn and Chinese Ambassador to South Korea Xing Haiming meet in Seoul.

**Feb. 7, 2020:** Moon [receives](#) the credentials of PRC Ambassador to South Korea Xing Haiming.

**Feb. 10, 2020:** China's foreign ministry in an online daily briefing [expresses](#) appreciation for South Korean assistance to fight the coronavirus.

**Feb. 10, 2020:** North Korea's *Rodong Sinmun* reports the WHO's recommendation not to use "Wuhan" in naming the coronavirus.

**Feb. 10, 2020:** A draft UN report shows that North Korea exported about \$370 million worth of coal last year in violation of UN sanctions, largely via illicit ship-to-ship transfers with China.

**Feb. 11, 2020:** China's Permanent Mission to the UN [expresses](#) concern over leak of a UN draft report on DPRK sanctions.

**Feb. 11, 2020:** A Red Cross report shows that North Korea has dispatched about 500 workers to the border with China to prevent a coronavirus outbreak.

**Feb. 12, 2020:** *Rodong Sinmun* praises Xi's medical site visits in China's efforts to fight the coronavirus.

**Feb. 12, 2020:** South Korea's third evacuation plane arrives in Seoul from Wuhan carrying ROK citizens and Chinese relatives.

**Feb. 13, 2020:** Korea Customs Service announces it has detected illegal shipments of 730,000 masks worth \$1.18 million, mostly by Chinese nationals, in a crackdown since February 6.

**Feb. 13, 2020:** ROK Education Minister Yoo Eun-hae announces planned support measures for Chinese students returning to local universities.

**Feb. 14, 2020:** PRC State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in a Reuters interview during the Munich Security Conference [reiterates](#) China's position on the Korean Peninsula.

**Feb. 15, 2020:** Wang and Kang meet on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference.

**Feb. 16, 2020:** Kim Jong Un receives a congratulatory letter from the General Association of Koreans in China on the occasion of Kim Jong Il's birth anniversary.

**Feb. 19, 2020:** ROK foreign ministry sends a fourth round of relief supplies to Wuhan, and announces plans to send aid to other Chinese regions.

**Feb. 19, 2020:** Hubei Provincial Foreign Affairs Office Director Qin Yu welcomes new ROK Consul General in Wuhan Kang Seung-seok, who arrives with relief supplies.

**Feb. 20, 2020:** Xi and Moon hold telephone talks.

**Feb. 20, 2020:** PRC, ROK, and Japanese foreign ministers hold a trilateral videoconference on coronavirus cooperation.

**Feb. 21, 2020:** A UN Security Council report shows that China and Russia supplied 22,730 tons and 30,180 tons of refined oil respectively to North Korea in 2019.

**Feb. 21, 2020:** Hubei Party Secretary Ying Yong and ROK Consul General in Wuhan Kang Seung-seok [meet](#).

**Feb. 22, 2020:** WHO indicates that, besides the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Japan, South Korea has the highest number of confirmed coronavirus cases outside China.

**Feb. 25, 2020:** Chinese cities start tightening entry measures against South Korean and other foreign visitors.

**Feb. 25, 2020:** China's foreign ministry expresses support for cooperation with South Korea and Japan on fighting the coronavirus.

**Feb. 26, 2020:** ROK Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Gunn and PRC Ambassador to South Korea Xing Haiming [meet](#) in Seoul.

**Feb. 27, 2020:** Shanghai [provides](#) 500,000 masks to Daegu and surrounding North Gyeongsang province, becoming the first Chinese municipal government to provide support to South Korea. The PRC Embassy in South Korea [provides](#) an additional 25,000 masks to Daegu.

**Feb. 27, 2020:** Foreign ministers Wang and Kang [hold](#) telephone talks.

**Feb. 28, 2020:** ROK education ministry [announces](#) a cooperation agreement with China to advise students against returning to school in each other's countries.

**Feb. 28, 2020:** ROK foreign ministry [announces](#) that South Korea will provide about half its promised \$5 million worth of aid to China.

**Feb. 28, 2020:** China's foreign ministry [expresses](#) support for cooperation with South Korea and [indicates](#) that Beijing's disease control measures apply equally to Chinese and foreign nationals.

**Feb. 29, 2020:** ROK justice ministry [indicates](#) that 42 followers of the Daegu-based Christian sect Shincheonji are presumed to have entered the country from Wuhan over the last eight months.

**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 3, 2020:** Moon declares "war" against the coronavirus.

**March 3, 2020:** US Treasury Department sanctions two PRC nationals linked to a North Korean state-sponsored cyber group.

**March 8, 2020:** North Korea test-fires short-range projectiles into the East Sea.

**March 11, 2020:** WHO calls COVID-19 a pandemic, and [identifies](#) China and South Korea as countries with "significantly declining" cases.

**March 12, 2020:** China Cultural Center in Seoul organizes online educational and cultural activities.

**March 13, 2020:** China and South Korea [hold](#) their first working-level video conference under a new inter-agency mechanism led by the foreign ministries.

**March 14, 2020:** Xi [sends](#) a message of support to Moon.

**March 16, 2020:** Seoul protests Beijing municipality's March 15 decision to quarantine incoming travelers at designated facilities at their own expense.

**March 17, 2020:** Foreign ministries of China, ROK, and Japan hold conference call on coronavirus cooperation.

**March 18-19, 2020:** State media [reports](#) Chinese provincial donations for coronavirus relief.

**March 20, 2020:** PRC, ROK, and Japanese foreign ministers [hold](#) a videoconference.

**March 20, 2020:** North Korea fires two projectiles presumed to be short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea.

**March 25, 2020:** A Chinese military plane enters South Korea's air defense identification zone.

**March 27, 2020:** ROK foreign ministry [calls](#) in PRC Ambassador Xing Haiming for a meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Gunn after Beijing's March 26 announcement on temporarily suspending the entry of foreigners.

**March 28, 2020:** North Korea fires what appear to be two short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea.

**Apr. 14, 2020:** North Korea fires what appear to be cruise missiles and air-to-ground missiles into the East Sea on the eve of Kim Il Sung's birthday anniversary and South Korea's general elections.

**Apr. 14, 2020:** ASEAN+3 partners hold a Special Summit on COVID-19 Response via video.

**Apr. 15, 2020:** ASEAN+3 leaders adopt a joint statement on coronavirus cooperation.

**Apr. 15, 2020:** General Association of Koreans in China celebrate Kim Il Sung's 108th birth anniversary.

**Apr. 17, 2020:** ROK Vice Foreign Minister Cho Sei-young and PRC counterpart Le Yucheng hold videoconference. ROK Industry Minister Sung Yun-mo and PRC counterpart Zhong Shan hold a videoconference.

**Apr. 17, 2020:** The China Tourism Office in Seoul and Shandong Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism organize an online exhibition.

**Apr. 20, 2020:** The ROK Consulate General in Wuhan resumes full operations.

**Apr. 23, 2020:** A CCP International Liaison Department senior official [reportedly](#) leads a delegation to North Korea amid speculation over Kim Jong Un's health.

**Apr. 27, 2020:** ROK Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gunn and PRC Ambassador Xing Haiming meet in Seoul.

**Apr. 27, 2020:** The Palace Museum and China Tourism Office in Seoul jointly [launch](#) an Online Spring Forbidden City Photo Exhibition.

**Apr. 27, 2020:** China's foreign ministry [indicates](#) that China has sent coronavirus testing kits to North Korea.

**Apr. 29, 2020:** Director-general talks between PRC and ROK foreign ministries reach an agreement to implement fast-track entry for each other's business travelers from May 1.



PACIFIC  FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

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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

## SINO-JAPANESE RELATIONS: IN A HOLDING PATTERN

JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

Politically, the major news in Japan-China relations was that Xi Jinping's long-anticipated state visit was postponed. While the coronavirus was a factor, the two sides had also been unable to agree on the text of the Fourth Communiqué, and there was considerable opposition within Japan to the visit due to issues between them. Several major Japanese companies announced major investments in the People's Republic of China, even as the Japanese government agreed to subsidize companies to move their supply chains out of the country.

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Politically, the major news in Japan-China relations was that Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping's long-anticipated state visit was postponed. While the coronavirus outbreak was a factor, the two sides had been unable to agree on the text of a so-called Fourth Communiqué, and there was considerable opposition within Japan to the visit due to Beijing's intransigence on issues between them.

Economically, the news was grim: due in large part to the coronavirus pandemic, China's GDP shrank 6.8% in the first quarter of 2020—its worst performance since 1992—and Japan's by 7.1%, its worst showing since 2014. Several major Japanese companies announced major investments in the People's Republic of China even as the Japanese government agreed to subsidize companies to move their supply chains out of China.

The PRC continued patrols in areas under Japanese jurisdiction that are claimed by China, and Japan continued to complain. Both sides continued to enhance their military capabilities. A Chinese professor at a Japanese university was arrested by PRC authorities and charged with espionage, and a widely reported incident of anti-Japanese sentiment at a Shenyang restaurant resulted in the firing of the restaurant's manager.

## Politics

This reporting period was supposed to feature the first state visit by Xi Jinping to Japan, and at times it appeared that their mutual struggle with what was soon to be a global pandemic would bring Asia's two biggest economies together. Neither came to pass, and while the virus itself is officially blamed for Xi's missed state visit in April, undercurrents of tension were evident from early in the year at both the governmental and societal levels. Japanese media and politicians were especially vocal in their critiques of their neighbor, and at times the censure came from unexpected sources.

In January Japanese press agency *Jiji*, noting that the removal of an import ban has often been used as a political goal, hoped that the ban China has imposed on products from Tokyo and eight other prefectures plus a partial ban on a seventh, would be lifted prior to Xi's since-postponed visit in the spring. Neither it nor Xi's visit took place, however. That same month, China's official news agency *Xinhua* [reported](#) that the

University of Tokyo had fired a faculty member and owner of an artificial intelligence company after he said the company would not hire a Chinese and, separately, that the university favored those with leftwing political views.

Meanwhile, the controversy ahead of Xi's planned visit continued. In a taste of things to come, January saw the Japanese Communist Party (JCP)'s first platform revision since 2004, which [described](#) Beijing's quest for great-power chauvinism hegemonism as "problematic," and JCP head Shii Kazuo adding that its actions in the East and South China seas indicate that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does not deserve the name "communist party." A month later, a *Nikkei* columnist [termed](#) the rupture between the two parties the JCP's "long goodbye."

Tensions with China within Japanese politics only grew from there. On January 23, conservative Diet members expressed opposition to a state visit by Xi, saying that without improvement on such issues as intrusions of Chinese ships into Japan's territorial waters and human rights, the event would send the wrong message both at home and abroad. Diet member Kishi Nobuo, who is also Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's younger brother, flew to Beijing that month to point out the deleterious effect of the increasing number of Chinese ships in what Japan claims as its territorial waters.

Over the following month, as the anxiety surrounding the worsening COVID-19 outbreak expanded, Chinese officials began speaking more vociferously about the need for greater cooperation between the two Asian powers, and expressing gratitude for Japan's support. A Japanese government source in February [interpreted](#) China's relatively favorable statements about Japan as motivated by an effort to ease its international isolation, but added that Beijing had not compromised on security issues: a total of eight Chinese vessels entered the territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands on February 5 and 13, with sail-bys in the islands' contiguous zone for 15 days straight.

There were also clear limits to the generosity of at least some Japanese: Plans to deduct 5,000 yen (\$45) from the salary of each LDP Diet member for coronavirus relief in China were [modified](#) at the end of February into voluntary

contributions after complaints from conservatives. State Minister for Foreign Affairs Suzuki Keisuke, for one, announced that, due to repeated Chinese intrusions into Japanese waters, he would decline to contribute as an individual.

Then, in early March, the announcement finally came that Xi's visit had been postponed, presumably until fall, with Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide [explaining](#) that "it is necessary to make thorough preparations for [Xi's] state visit in order to achieve sufficient results." The center-right *Yomiuri Shimbun*, stating that the decision to postpone Xi's visit was partly due to domestic opposition, urged China to take steps to improve Japanese sentiment toward China in order to ensure the success of a visit.

But Chinese sources were not unaware of such sentiment. Well before the summit cancellation, a January editorial in the state-run *Global Times* said that narrow minds were hindering China-Japan cooperation, and urged Japan to treat China's rise rationally rather than regard its deepening ties with other Asian countries as a threat, because China does not intend to displace any other country. In February the same paper, thanking the Japanese government and civilians for aid in dealing with the coronavirus epidemic, [stated](#) that despite better government-to-government relations, "we cannot be overly optimistic about the prospect of bilateral relations." Signals were mixed, though; that same month, fellow Chinese Communist Party mouthpiece *The China Daily*, [declared](#) that the fight against the spread of the coronavirus had brought China and Japan closer together. Shortly thereafter, *Global Times* [accused](#) *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, Japan's largest circulation daily, of bias against China when its Beijing bureau chief said that the PRC should be held responsible for the outbreak.

And it was not just the media sending mixed messages. A Shenyang congee restaurant that hung a large banner over its door "welcoming" the coronavirus to the US and hoping it remained in Japan for a long, long time was sharply criticized on Japanese social media. The restaurant later apologized and took down the banner. The owner of the chain was later reported to have fired the local manager, saying that the manager posted the banner without permission.



Figure 1 The banner over a Shenyang restaurant "welcoming" the coronavirus to the US and hoping it remained in Japan. Photo: Daily Mail

In the run up to the original summit, Abe was criticized for delayed imposed containment measures, hoping that Xi's planned state visit could still take place; sure enough, entry restrictions on travelers from China were announced three hours after cancellation of the visit. In April, echoing distrust of China's handling of the outbreak also seen in the US and Europe, a member of Japan's National Security Secretariat, observing that just under 2% of returnees from China tested positive for coronavirus, opined that the China's official infection rate was too low to be believed.

Even before the cancellation, signs of growing distrust were brewing: in February, it was revealed that the number of Japanese visiting China was far below the number of Chinese visiting Japan; polls showed that 84.7% of Japanese [hold](#) an unfavorable view of China compared to 45.9% of Chinese vis-à-vis Japan. That same month a former head of Japan's National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies [credited](#) Abe's China policy of hedging the risk of China's unilateral attempt to change the regional order by force while engaging the PRC in multilateral norm- and rule-building and promoting cooperation in mutual and regional benefit projects such as infrastructure development. In March, the editor of conservative Japanese monthly *Seiron* urged the creation of a supra-partisan advisory body on the model of the United States Economic and Security Review Commission to consider the security threat from the PRC. Noting its tendency to use its influence for political ends and that Chinese nationals now led four of the United Nations' 15 specialized agencies and had almost secured a fifth, *Nikkei* [editorialized](#) in

April that countries should be wary of the CCP's strategic penetration of the leadership of international organizations.

Finally, in March, suspicions were confirmed when it was announced that Chinese citizen Yuan Keqing, a prominent scholar at Hokkaido University who disappeared while visiting his mother's funeral in China in mid-June 2019, has been [charged](#) with espionage. That September, another Hokkaido University scholar, Iwatani Nobu, had been arrested on similar charges; he was released in November. This is the result those who knew Yuan had feared; in January, his students and colleagues petitioned the Chinese consulate general in Sapporo asking for his return to Japan. Another academic in Japan noted that, since passing sweeping espionage legislation in 2014, China has arrested numerous Japanese nationals in China, along with Chinese nationals working in Japan on visits to the mainland. The details of accusations against Yuan have not been made public.

### Economics

In February, in an implicit acknowledgement of the importance of China to the Japanese economy, the Bank of Japan appointed its top China expert to head the BOJ's international department, a post previously dominated by officials with experience in Western financial centers. As the month ended, and confounding predictions that the trade war and Covid-19 epidemic would result in supply chains being transferred away from the PRC, Toyota announced it will build a new \$1.22 billion electric vehicle plant in Tianjin with local partner FAW as well as expand its EV manufacturing in Guangzhou with another partner, the GAC Group. Chinese automakers are [ramping](#) up production in Myanmar in a challenge to entrenched Japanese rivals in the fast-growing market there.

After clinical trials in Wuhan and Shenzhen China [approved](#) Fujifilm Holdings' Avigan (generic name Favipiravir) for treatment of Covid-19 even as doubts remained in Japan about its effectiveness.

Japan is seeking to [persuade](#) more Asian states to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership since Covid-19 exposed the risks of supply chains' dependence on China. A total of 37% of auto parts shipped to Japan in 2019 came from the PRC, up from 18% in 2005. Japan relies on China

for 21.1% of its imports of intermediate goods, much higher than other G7 nations, with the US at 16.3%, Germany 7%, and the UK at 5.9%. The Japanese government will [provide](#) an estimated ¥ 200 billion (about \$1.9 billion) in subsidies for companies that move their production bases from the PRC to Japan and Southeast Asian countries. These are expected to cover companies in such fields as rare earths and the manufacture of masks. According to *Nikkei*, Chinese economic sources have voiced [concerns](#) about the measure, and fear that other foreign companies may be incentivized to do the same.

### Defense

Aiming to counter China's rapidly increasing presence, Japan's Internal Affairs and Communications Industry is formulating an overseas expansion action plan covering areas such as the export of telecommunications infrastructure that includes specific policy to support submarine cables. As announced in January, private companies such as New, NTT, and KDDI will receive investment and financing from the public-private Fund Corporation for the Overseas Development of Japan's ICT and Postal Services (JICT). Chinese companies' successful 2018 completion of a 6,000 km submarine cable from South America to Africa is said to have shocked insiders.

According to the Japanese Coast Guard, Chinese government vessels sailed just outside Japan's territorial waters near the disputed Senkaku Islands and in the East China Sea on 282 days in 2019, the highest since record-keeping began in 2008, with 126 ships entering the territorial waters around the Senkakus—56 more than in 2018. The provocations continued in 2020, with reports in February indicating that at least one of the four Chinese Coast Guard vessels in Japanese territorial waters seemed to have a cannon. In the same time frame, four Chinese H-6 bombers armed with cruise missiles flew over the Miyako Strait, causing the ASDF to scramble fighters. The center-right *Sankei Shimbun* [editorialized](#) that such provocations, never acceptable, were particularly insensitive given the efforts that Japan, along with the rest of the international community, had made to help China contain the coronavirus pandemic.

Citing sources in the Japanese Ministry of Defense, *UPI* [reports](#) in February that the Japanese military [plans](#) to introduce a



hypervelocity gliding projectile that is specifically designed to penetrate the deck of an aircraft carrier. The HVGP, said to be useful when an island has been invaded by an unnamed enemy force, is due to be put into operational service by 2026. A second phase of HVGP deployment in 2028 is to feature claw-shaped payloads, plus enhanced speeds and ranges. However, the Japanese daily *Asahi* criticized the Ground Self-Defense Force's highly touted preparations for defending remote islands from Chinese encroachment, noting that the camp on Miyakojima still has no missiles or ammunition depots.

Mitsubishi Electric, a major supplier to the Japanese defense and SCADA sectors, revealed in January that its internal computer networks had been hit by a cyberattack believed to have been carried out by a Chinese-affiliated hacker group that targets defense-related classified information. Mitsubishi at first stated that no damage had been done by the attack, which was detected in June 2019, but later admitted that relevant data may have been leaked. Ten days later, NEC reported that it, too, had come under major cyberattacks over several years, including unauthorized access to files related to its business with the Defense Ministry, but that no damage had resulted.

Concerned about Chinese entities purchasing land near security-related facilities including military bases and nuclear plants, the Japanese government is [considering](#) a screening process for such sales. It will need approval from World Trade Organization member countries before imposing such restrictions. Japanese government sources [announced](#) that, due to security concerns about Chinese-made drones, it is expanding support for the domestic drone industry. Also, in the fiscal year beginning on April 1, the coast guard will replace its Chinese drones with versions produced either domestically or outside China.

In March, in a further move toward cooperation with the US military against China, the Japan Self-Defense Forces commissioned the *Maya*, their first ship equipped with the Cooperative Engagement Capability. CEC allows allies to instantly share the location of enemy missiles and aircraft, whereas conventional *Aegis*-equipped destroyers can respond only to missiles detected by their own radars. A second CEC-equipped destroyer, the *Haguro*, is to be commissioned in March 2021.

In January, warning Indonesia that China's forbearance of its ships' activities in Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone around the Natuna Islands should not be taken as weakness, Beijing described newly announced plans for Indonesian-Japanese coast guard cooperation and President Joko Widodo's plan to invite Japan to invest more in the Natunas and nearby areas as ill-fated efforts to pressure China into making concessions. A Chinese military website [opined](#) that Japan's motive in selling the J/FPS-3 air defense radar to the Philippines was, first, to fill the void created by US military withdrawal from Asia and, second, to expand its international diplomatic presence.

It predicted a "big challenge" for Japan to succeed in doing so. Little public attention was given by either side when at the end of March a Japanese destroyer and a Chinese fishing boat [collided](#) in the East China Sea about 400 miles west of Yakushima. Shortly thereafter, however, the Japanese Ministry of Defense [revealed](#) that a five-ship Chinese carrier defense force had transited the Miyako Strait toward the Philippine Sea. Responding to the PRC's establishment of new administrative districts to exercise jurisdiction over islands in the South China Sea, People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) naval exercises there, and the ramming of a Vietnamese fishing boat by a Chinese coast guard vessel, a *Yomiuri* [editorial](#) expressed concern that China was exploiting the pandemic to escalate tensions in the South China Sea.

## Taiwan

In January, Abe, in his capacity as LDP chair rather than as prime minister, [congratulated](#) Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen on her re-election. Tsai noted Japan's participation, with the US, in the Global Cooperation and Training Framework as an example of deepening bilateral relations. A few weeks later, and [speaking](#) as prime minister in a Diet meeting, Abe referenced Taiwan three times, the first time in 14 years that a sitting prime minister has mentioned the country's name in the Diet, with Diet members reportedly applauding after each mention.





Figure 2 Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe references Taiwan three times during a Diet meeting. Photo: Taiwan News

Also in January, immediately after visiting Beijing to point out the importance of “stability” in the East China Sea, Abe’s younger brother and Diet member Kishi Nobuo flew to Taipei where he presented Tsai with Japanese newspapers’ front-page stories on her re-election, saying “Even the [Japanese] prime minister does not always get front page coverage.” A few weeks later, the headline of a front-page article in *Yomiuri* described Taiwan as a “nation of immigrants” and “model for democracy in Asia.” Referring to Taiwan as a “nation” is anathema to Beijing, which considers the island part of China.

A Taiwanese [app](#) that tracks inventories of face masks received much praise in Japanese media which suggested that Japan should learn from Taiwan’s use of technology for crisis management. The Chinese government lodged a [protest](#) against an exchange of tweets between Abe and Tsai in which they pledged to join hands to overcome the coronavirus threat.

## Conclusion

Trends during the past four months portend a continuation of tensions in political, economic, and defense relations. Calls from Beijing on the need to work together to conquer the COVID-19 pandemic were undercut by its activities in disputed areas in the East China Sea and the consolidation of the PRC’s control over the South China Sea. Japan continued its modest military buildup and strengthened its defense ties to the United States. Possible successors to Abe are considered likely to continue these policies. Some Japanese corporations continued to seek business opportunities inside China, but supply chain disruptions resulting from the

pandemic cut into profits and gave weight to Abe’s admonitions that the Japanese economy had become too dependent on China as well as enhancing the attractiveness of a 200 billion yen subsidy for companies that move their production bases to Japan and elsewhere. By contrast, and to China’s chagrin, the pandemic drew Japan close to Taiwan, much praised by Japanese media for its efforts in curbing the spread of the disease and held up as a model for Japan to emulate.

# CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

## JANUARY – APRIL 2020

**Jan. 4, 2020:** Japanese press agency *Jiji*, noting that the removal of an import ban has often been used as a political goal, expresses hope that the ban China has imposed on products from Tokyo and other prefectures will be lifted prior to Xi Jinping's visit in the spring.

**Jan. 8, 2020:** Aiming to counter China's rapidly increasing presence, Japan's Internal Affairs and Communications Industry formulates an overseas expansion action plan covering areas such as the export of telecommunications infrastructure that includes specific policy to support submarine cables.

**Jan. 8, 2020:** Japanese Coast Guard announces that Chinese government vessels sailed just outside Japan's territorial waters near the disputed Senkaku Islands and in the East China Sea on 282 days in 2019, the highest since record-keeping began in 2008. 126 ships entered the territorial waters around the Senkakus, 56 more than in 2018.

**Jan. 16, 2020:** *Xinhua* [reports](#) that the University of Tokyo fired a faculty member and owner of an artificial intelligence company after he said the company would not hire a Chinese and, separately, that the university favored those with leftwing political views.

**Jan. 17, 2020:** Abe, in his capacity as Liberal Democratic Party chair, congratulates Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen on her re-election. Tsai notes Japan's participation, with the US, in the Global Cooperation and Training Framework as an example of deepening bilateral relations.

**Jan. 18, 2020:** Japanese Communist Party (JCP)'s first platform revision since 2004 [describes](#) Beijing's quest for great-power chauvinism and hegemonism "problematic," with JCP head Shii Kazuo adding that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does not deserve the name "communist party."

**Jan. 20, 2020:** Mitsubishi Electric, a major supplier to the Japanese defense and SCADA sectors, reveals that its internal computer networks were hit by a cyberattack, believed to be by a Chinese-affiliated hacker group.

**Jan. 20, 2020:** *Global Time* [states](#) that narrow minds are hindering China-Japan cooperation, and [urges](#) Japan to treat China's rise rationally rather than regard its deepening ties with other Asian countries as a threat.

**Jan. 21, 2020:** Concerned about Chinese entities purchasing land near security-related facilities including military bases and nuclear plants, the Japanese government considers a screening process for such sales.

**Jan. 21, 2020:** *Global Times* op-ed criticizes newly announced plans for Indonesian-Japanese coast guard cooperation and President Joko Widodo's plan to invite Japan to invest more in the Natunas.

**Jan. 21, 2020:** [Speaking](#) in his capacity as prime minister in a Diet meeting, Abe references Taiwan three times, the first time in 14 years that a sitting prime minister has mentioned the country's name in the Diet.

**Jan. 23, 2020:** *Yomiuri* reports that conservative Diet members applauded each mention of Taiwan, and that there was considerable opposition to a state visit by Xi Jinping without improvement on such issues as the intrusions of Chinese ships into Japan's territorial waters and human rights.

**Jan. 29, 2020:** The headline of a front-page article in *Yomiuri* describes Taiwan as a "nation of immigrants" and "model for democracy in Asia."

**Jan. 31, 2020:** NEC [reports](#) that it had come under major cyberattacks over several years, including unauthorized access to files related to its business with the Defense Ministry, but that no damage had resulted.

**Feb. 2, 2020:** Japanese government sources [announce](#) that expanding support for the domestic drone industry, and that in the fiscal year beginning April 1, the coast guard will replace its Chinese drones with versions produced domestically or outside China.

**Feb. 8, 2020:** Bank of Japan appoints its top China expert to head the BOJ's international department, a post previously dominated by officials with experience in Western financial centers.

**Feb. 9, 2020:** *Global Times*, while thanking the Japanese government and civilians for aid in dealing with the coronavirus epidemic, [states](#) that despite better government-to-government relations, "we cannot be overly optimistic about the prospect of bilateral relations."

**Feb. 12, 2020:** Reversing its Jan. 20 statement that no defense-related data had been affected by last year's cyberattacks, Mitsubishi Electric states that some sensitive information may have been compromised.

**Feb. 12, 2020:** A former head of Japan's National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies [credits](#) Abe's China policy with hedging the risk of China's unilateral attempt to change the regional order while engaging the PRC in multilateral norm- and rule-building, as well as promoting cooperation in beneficial projects.

**Feb. 13, 2020:** *China Daily* [declares](#) that the fight against the spread of the coronavirus has brought China and Japan closer together.

**Feb. 17, 2020:** A *Nikkei* columnist terms the rupture between the CCP and the Japan Communist Party the JCP's "long goodbye."

**Feb. 21, 2020:** A Japanese government source [opines](#) that China's relatively favorable statements about Japan are motivated by an effort to ease its international isolation, but that Beijing has not compromised on security issues.

**Feb. 22, 2020:** Center-right *Sankei Shimbun* [editorializes](#) against Chinese provocations against the Senkakus and Taiwan, terming them particularly insensitive at a time when the PRC should be cooperating with the international community to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

**Feb. 26, 2020:** Citing sources in the Japanese Ministry of Defense, *UPI* [reports](#) that the Japanese military [plans](#) to introduce a hypervelocity gliding projectile that is specifically designed to penetrate the deck of an aircraft carrier.

**Feb. 26, 2020:** Plans to deduct 5,000 yen (\$45) from the salary of each LDP Diet member for coronavirus relief in China are [modified](#) into voluntary contributions after complaints from conservatives.

**March 1, 2020:** Toyota announces it will build a new \$1.22 billion electric vehicle plant in Tianjin with local partner FAW as well as expand its EV manufacturing in Guangzhou with another partner, the GAC Group.

**March 5, 2020:** Xi Jinping's visit to Japan is postponed, presumably until fall, with Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide [explaining](#) that "it is necessary to make thorough preparations for [Xi's] state visit in order to achieve sufficient results."

March 6, 2020: *Yomiuri*, stating that the decision to postpone Xi's visit was partly due to domestic opposition, urges China to take steps to improve Japanese sentiment toward China in order to ensure the success of a visit.

**March 9, 2020:** Editor of conservative Japanese monthly *Seiron* [advocates](#) creation of a suprapartisan advisory body modeled on the United States Economic and Security Review Commission.

**March 18, 2020:** After clinical trials in Wuhan and Shenzhen, China [approves](#) Fujifilm Holdings' Avigan (Favipiravir) for treatment of COVID-19 even as doubts remain in Japan about its effectiveness.

**March 20, 2020:** In a further move toward cooperation with the US military against China, the MSDF commissions the *Maya*, its first ship equipped with the Cooperative Engagement Capability, allowing allies to instantly share the location of enemy missiles and aircraft.

**March 21, 2020:** Japan attempts to persuade more Asian states to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership since COVID-19 exposed the risks of supply chains that are overly dependent on China.

**March 25, 2020:** Chinese website *China Military Online* [opines](#) that Japan's motive in selling the J/FPS-3 air defense radar to the Philippines is to fill the void created by the US military's withdrawal from Asia and to expand its international diplomatic presence.

**March 25, 2020:** A *Shenyang congee restaurant* that hung a large banner over its door "welcoming" the coronavirus to the US and hoping it will remain in Japan for a long time is sharply criticized on Japanese social media. The restaurant later apologizes and takes down the banner. *Global Times* [reports](#) that the owner of the chain has fired the local manager.

**March 26, 2020:** *Kyodo* [reports](#) that Yuan Keping, a prominent Chinese scholar at Hokkaido University who disappeared while visiting his mother's funeral in China in mid-June, has been charged with espionage.

**March 28, 2020:** Japanese government will [provide](#) an estimated ¥ 200 billion in subsidies for companies that move their production bases from the PRC to Japan and Southeast Asian countries.

**March 29, 2020:** *Nikkei* reports that China is aggressively courting Japanese companies to gain access to their Internet of Things knowledge in manufacturing.

**March 30, 2020:** Japanese destroyer *Shimakaze* and a Chinese fishing boat collide in the East China Sea about 400 miles west of Yakushima, with one fisherman reportedly injured.

**March 31, 2020:** Taiwanese app that tracks inventories of face masks praise in the Japanese media, suggesting that Japan should learn from Taiwan's use of technology for crisis management.

**April 1, 2020:** *Nikkei* editorializes that countries should be wary of the CCP's strategic penetration of the leadership of international organizations.

**April 11, 2020:** Chinese government lodges a [protest](#) against an exchange of tweets between Abe and Tsai Ing-wen in which they pledged to join hands to overcome the coronavirus threat.

**April 11, 2020:** Japan's Ministry of Defense [reveals](#) that a five-ship Chinese carrier defense force transited the Miyako Strait toward the Philippine Sea.

**April 12, 2020:** Chinese automakers ramp up production in Myanmar in a challenge to dominant entrenched Japanese rivals in the fast-growing market there.

**April 12, 2020:** A *Global Times* editorial [accuses](#) Japan's *Yomiuri Shimbun* of bias against China after its Beijing bureau chief wrote that the PRC should be held responsible for the coronavirus outbreak.

**April 16, 2020:** *Nikkei* cites Chinese economic sources expressing [concerns](#) about the Japanese government's subsidies for relocating supply chains outside China, and worrying that other foreign companies may be incentivized to do the same.

**April 29, 2020:** *Asahi* [criticizes](#) the Ground Self-Defense Force's highly-touted preparations for defending remote islands from Chinese encroachment, noting that the camp on Miyakojima still has no missiles or ammunition depots.

**April 30, 2020:** *Yomiuri* [editorial](#) expresses concern that the PRC is exploiting the pandemic to escalate tensions in the South China Sea.





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# COMPARATIVE

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## C O N N E C T I O N S

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

**JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS**

## PRAGMATIC STABILITY, LATENT TENSIONS

MINTARO OBA, WEST WING WRITERS  
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In the first months of 2020, Japan and South Korea maintained pragmatic stability despite a brief flare-up over travel restrictions. The need to prioritize recovery from COVID-19 pushed both countries to focus on domestic issues. With the landslide victory of the ruling Democratic Party in April parliamentary elections in South Korea, it is not likely that Seoul's approach to bilateral disputes with Tokyo will undergo fundamental change anytime soon. With the US presidential election six months away, stalemate in US-South Korea military cost-sharing talks and volatility surrounding North Korea form an important backdrop to uncertainties in the South Korea-Japan bilateral relationship. By September, we may know whether it is pragmatic stability or latent tension that is the defining force in South Korea-Japan relations in 2020.

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## North Korea's Short-Range Projectiles and Kim Jong Un's Whereabouts

Even while the world was tackling COVID-19, two major developments concerning North Korea caught the attention of international media. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un began the year with a pledge to bolster the country's nuclear deterrent, claiming that the United States failed to meet a year-end deadline that Pyongyang had set for nuclear talks and US sanctions relief. At the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, Kim said that North Korea would unveil a "new strategic weapon," raising the question of whether Pyongyang was going to undo the suspension of nuclear and long-range missile tests that had been in place over the past two years.

While President Trump warned not to step up provocations with a long-range missile launch, North Korea went ahead with the firing of projectiles, which appeared to be short-range ballistic missiles, into the Sea of Japan/East Sea throughout March and April. Trump [remarked](#), "I see they're testing short-range missiles. And, you know, they've been doing it a long time." Furthermore, there has been no sign of any major change in Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's North Korea policy because of the recent launches. As North Korea is widely believed to be undergoing a health crisis with COVID-19, Japan's Defense Minister Kono Taro [commented](#) that North Korea's missile launches could be aimed at "bracing the regime together" in the face of the pandemic.

Another noteworthy development that focused Japanese minds on North Korea in the early months of 2020 was the disappearance from public view of Kim Jong Un, which raised speculation about the future of the country. Rumors about Kim's health highlighted the limits of intelligence on North Korea generally. They were also a reminder that in North Korea what happens to one leader could lead to a contingency affecting the entire state, with wider implications for regional and global security, including for Japan.

Consider three simple facts: 1) North Korea has weapons of mass destruction and delivery system capabilities, and in a contingency scenario it will be of critical importance and concern to safeguard these weapons; 2) the future of North Korea can shift the power balance in the entire region; 3) South Korea and

Japan are both treaty allies of the United States. All these considerations point to the importance of establishing effective channels of communication and coordination among all actors whose national interests will be affected by North Korea's future.

## Japan-South Korea: First Steps Toward De-escalation

At the end of 2019, South Korea-Japan relations had just begun to recover from an all-time low, caused by a steady onslaught of escalating disputes. South Korean court rulings on forced labor were followed by Japanese restrictions on certain Korean exports—cast by the Japanese government as a national security action but widely perceived in South Korea as retaliation for the forced labor rulings—which resulted in South Korea announcing it would withdraw from its bilateral General Sharing of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan. The GSOMIA withdrawal prompted a strongly negative US response and heightened efforts by Washington to resolve the dispute. Perhaps due to these efforts, as well as growing incentives for both Japan and South Korea to preserve stability as they faced growing regional and alliance challenges, the two sides ultimately came to an agreement that aimed to de-escalate tensions and bring these disputes into diplomatic channels.



Figure 1 Demonstration in South Korea calling for the extension of GSOMIA ahead of its November 2019 renewal. Photo: Kyodo

By the early months of 2020, this de-escalation had led to a new Japan-South Korea status quo of pragmatic stability; though bilateral tensions were evident, they remained at manageable levels, stayed mostly in diplomatic channels, and were overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although many of the incentives promoting stability in South Korea-Japan relations—such as the upcoming US election,

alliance cost-sharing discussions, and uncertainty about North Korea—will remain key factors in coming months, the substantive issues that brought South Korea and Japan to blows in 2019 remained far from resolution, making a return to tensions later in 2020 a possibility.

### A Pivot to Pragmatism

Starting in January, both Abe and South Korean President Moon Jae-in made rhetorical gestures signaling a continuing commitment to de-escalating South Korea-Japan tensions. In a January [interview](#) with *TV Asahi*, Abe called Moon “a gentleman with gentle manners” and expressed hope that Japan and South Korea could “resolve pending issues so that there could be a situation where the two countries’ leaders could meet more frequently and discuss various, more positive issues.” On the opening day of Japan’s National Diet, Abe [described](#) South Korea as Japan’s “most important neighbor, sharing the same basic values and strategic interests”—a formulation he had not included in the annual speech in six years. For his part, Moon, in a regular [speech](#) delivered by South Korean presidents on March 1—a national holiday celebrating Korea’s independence movement against Japan—said that Japan was “always our closest neighbor.”

If the tone at the leader level had improved, there were clear indications that neither country intended to budge on the substance of their disputes. Abe’s *TV Asahi* interview included a statement that “promises between countries have to be kept,” and his National Diet opening speech expressed that he “looks forward to keeping our promises from one country to another”—both references to Japan’s longstanding official position that forced labor compensation issues should be considered resolved by the provisions of a 1965 treaty normalizing relations between South Korea and Japan. In turn, Moon emphasized in his March 1 speech that “we will not forget the past, nor remain in it. I hope that Japan will also take the same attitude.”

The stability in the relationship was reflected in diplomatic interactions between Japan and South Korea at lower levels. On January 14, South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa and Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu met bilaterally, as well as trilaterally with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. The

day before, Japanese Foreign Ministry Director General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Takizaki Shigeki and South Korean Director General for Asian and Pacific Affairs Kim Jung-han met for the first in what would be a series of regular consultations at their level aimed at resolving issues between the two sides. Trade talks on Japan’s export restrictions were also held at the director general-level between the two countries’ trade ministries. Another bilateral and trilateral meeting between foreign ministers occurred February 15 on the margins of the Munich Security Conference. Each of these interactions was constructive in tone but produced no public change in either the Japanese or Korean positions on forced labor, export restrictions, or GSOMIA.

Other practical diplomatic interactions, both routine and related to the COVID-19 crisis, continued in the first months of 2020. Consultations on North Korea, cultural diplomacy, Middle East policy, and climate change all occurred. Both countries played an active role in US-led and regional mechanisms for cooperation on COVID-19, including in a weekly seven-country video conference organized by the United States at the vice ministerial level, an ASEAN+3 video summit, and a trilateral Japan-South Korea-China foreign ministers’ call, as well as consultations at lower levels. Historical and territorial issues were handled in a muted and routine manner, with South Korea issuing statements of protest against Japan’s annual Takeshima Day event (referring to the territorial dispute over small islets South Korea calls “Dokdo” and Japan calls “Takeshima”), references to Japan’s claim to the islets in middle school textbooks, and Abe’s ritual offering at the Yasukuni Shrine during its annual spring festival.



Figure 2 Police officers on duty near the venue of the annual Takeshima Day ceremony in Matsue, Shimane prefecture. Photo: Kyodo

## Tensions Over COVID Response

Despite the practical focus in the Japan-South Korea relationship in early 2020, the two sides faced a period of significant tension in March due to disagreements over Japanese travel restrictions on South Koreans due to the virus. On March 5, the Japanese government indicated it would suspend a visa-waiver program for South Koreans and announced new requirements for Korean visitors (along with Chinese visitors) to be quarantined for two weeks upon arrival in Japan and avoid public transportation. South Korea quickly suspended its own visa-waiver program for Japanese nationals. Vice Foreign Minister Cho Sei-young, [conveying](#) South Korea's "extreme regrets" over the measures, complained that the "unreasonable, unscientific, and unfriendly" restrictions were "unilaterally announced without prior consultations or notification." The next day, South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha officially summoned Japanese ambassador Tomita Koji to deliver the same message.

The reciprocal travel restrictions took effect March 9. When Japan decided to extend its restrictions for another month, Seoul expressed regret and maintained its own measures. South Korean diplomacy and public messaging shifted from protesting the restrictions to seeking exemptions for essential business travel. In an April 9 [interview](#) with South Korea's *Yonhap News Agency*, Tomita appeared to rebuff the notion of exemptions, at least for businessmen, warning that "an easing of entry restrictions in any form would lead to various confusions" while acknowledging that Moon's March 1 speech "called for the two countries to work together to overcome the crisis." "Sharing his thought, Japan will strive to promote cooperation," Tomita said.

## Dual Blows to the Economic Relationship

In the September 2019 issue of *Comparative Connections*, we [assessed](#) that the South Korea-Japan relationship had crossed an "unwritten red line" that largely kept political tensions between the two countries from hampering pragmatic cooperation at the economic level. 2020 saw a return to pragmatism. Signs of practical cooperation across critical industries in South Korea and Japan as well as the strength of cultural products like K-pop were bright spots in a relatively gloomy economic picture. But

although the de-escalation of Japan-South Korea tensions at the end of 2019 relieved much of the political pressure on the economic relationship, the dual blows of dispute aftereffects and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic still had a significant negative impact on the South Korea-Japan economic partnership.

The most visible sector affected by the dual blows of geopolitical tension and COVID-19 was tourism. Japanese tourism to South Korea, according to official Korea Tourism Organization statistics, had taken a hit from the events of the fall. September 2019 was the last month there was growth year on year in Japanese visitors to Korea; October, November, and December all saw significant decreases in Japanese tourism as bilateral tensions rose. January and February 2020 saw smaller declines of 1.2% and 0.9%, perhaps aided by the new year and the de-escalation of tensions. By March, though, the impact of COVID-19 and travel restrictions had become clear; South Korea recorded 8,347 Japanese visitors compared to 375,119 in the same period the previous year, a decline of 97.8%.

Visits from South Korea to Japan had been even more affected by tensions in the late summer and fall of 2019. Japan National Tourism Organization data shows that Korean tourism to Japan declined by a relatively small 7.6% in July 2019, but then saw a 48% decline in August, 58% in September, 65.5% in October, and 63.6% in November. COVID-19, though, drastically compounded the fall in visits as Korean tourism to Japan fell 79.9% year-on-year as of April.

The most direct casualty of the fall in travel, naturally, was the airline industry in both countries. In late February, six Korean budget carriers [issued](#) a joint statement asking for Korean government support in the face of "a desperately dangerous situation as the new coronavirus impact is dealing a further blow to their business already hit by local anti-Japan campaigns (following Japan's restrictions on exports to Korea)." By early March, the Korean budget carriers had curtailed most of their routes, Korean Air (South Korea's largest carrier) had suspended all but one route to Japan, and Asiana (the second largest) had suspended all flights to Korea's eastern neighbor. On the Japanese side, Japan Airlines had reduced flights to South Korea in February,



and in late March it announced it would further cut its international flights by 64%.

By the end of January, clear evidence had emerged that the Japanese export restrictions, as well as the resulting anti-Japanese sentiments they sparked in South Korea, had taken a toll. The combined operating income of major units of South Korea's top 10 business groups fell 60% in 2019 due to both Japanese export restrictions and US-China trade tensions, and Samsung Electronics—whose chip business was affected by the Japanese restrictions—in particular saw profits fall 68%. Japanese business also suffered; according to statistics from the Korea Automobile Importers and Distributors Association, sales of foreign cars in South Korea increased overall, but Japanese auto sales in South Korea fell by 64%.

In normal circumstances, these negative economic effects might have been ameliorated by time and the relief of political tensions, but the COVID-19 pandemic instead worsened the situation. The Korean chip industry, which had started in early 2020 to recover from the Japanese export restrictions due to increased demand and prices, faltered again as the pandemic hit and shut down China, a key export market. The postponement of the Tokyo Olympics was an economic and marketing loss for Japanese and Korean businesses alike; Samsung Electronics, for instance, had been the exclusive worldwide Olympics partner in wireless communications and computing equipment. South Korea's Minister of Culture [called](#) the postponement “very sad news,” noting in a *Yonhap News* interview that “the Tokyo Olympics’ economic influence on South Korea is not small.”

Still, while the situation was worse economically, a pragmatic mindset about Japan-South Korea economic cooperation remained evident. On March 27, South Korean Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun called for a new South Korea-Japan currency swap agreement; in 2015, amid tensions, South Korea had declined to continue a 14-year currency swap with Japan, and discussions over a new arrangement in the years since had faltered over political tensions. Strategic partnerships at a business-to-business level quietly continued or expanded. A multinational shipping alliance including Japan's Ocean Network Express and South Korea's Hyundai Merchant Marine began offering new Asia-to-Middle East routes in

February. The South Korean telecommunications company LG Uplus Corp signed a partnership in February with key companies in the augmented reality sector, including Japan's KDDI Corp. as a project partner. In March, nine telecommunications companies including KDDI Corp. and South Korea's SK Telecom formed a global alliance to develop 5G technologies.

Cultural ties between South Korea and Japan, which tend to be insulated from political tensions, remained a relative bright spot. The Korean film *Parasite* became the best-selling Korean film of all time in Japan, securing \$38.9 million in ticket sales by early March. On March 6, Shim Eun-kyung became the first Korean actor or actress to win best actress at the Japan Academy Film Prize awards. K-pop groups remained widely popular and continued to do well on Japanese charts. BTS, for instance, secured its fifth number 1 on Japan's Oricon album chart in March and announced that it would be recording an original soundtrack for a Japanese TV series (the second time it has done so). Still, the pandemic and the resulting restrictions on travel temporarily stymied K-pop bands in the Japanese market as they were forced to cancel appearances in Japan.



Figure 3 Officials from Japan's KDDI Corp. and South Korean LG Uplus Corp. test 5G roaming service in Japan. Photo: LG Uplus Corp. via Yonhap

### Storm Clouds on the Horizon?

As of early May, the Japanese government has extended its travel restrictions on South Korea again through the end of the month. The initial furor, however, had died down by April—and both countries have maintained a largely constructive tone and kept their focus on more pragmatic considerations. Asked in the National Diet about Japan-South Korea ties and COVID-



19, Abe [relayed](#) that “exchanging information and experience [with South Korea] would be of much help to Japan’s responses” and called South Korea an “important country” for Japan. The South Korean foreign ministry, in turn, expressed awareness of Abe’s remarks and indicated that “the government hopes to cooperate with Japan in necessary areas, including responses to COVID-19.” In a practical example of health-related cooperation, the Japanese and South Korean embassies in India worked to get a 5-year-old Korean girl suffering from acute leukemia home, with Japan flying the family from New Delhi to Tokyo on Japan Airlines before the family flew on to Seoul on Korean Air.

However, latent tensions in the relationship were also evident in early 2020—leaving diplomatic conflict and public escalation distinct possibilities in the future. Forced labor in particular remained the geopolitical Gordian knot at the center of the Japan-South Korea relationship, with both sides firmly wedded to their positions and domestic politics. So far, little prospect of resolving the linked issues of export restrictions and GSOMIA exists without progress on the forced labor issue.

Moreover, a renewed dispute over the forced labor issue may come sooner than expected due to circumstances outside the purview of the Korean and Japanese governments. The South Korean court decisions on forced labor resulted in the seizure of assets from Japanese companies, and a next likely step is for the court to sell off those assets. Liquidation could provoke a strong negative reaction from the Japanese government, escalating the forced labor dispute once again, inflaming public opinion, and limiting the options for resolution. In early January, groups representing Koreans affected by the forced labor rulings [proposed](#) that South Korea and Japan form a joint consultative body that would include “legal representatives of the victims and members of the supporting groups, as well as attorneys, scholars, businesspeople, and politicians from both countries,” according to South Korea’s left-leaning *Hankyoreh* newspaper. The urgency of getting ahead of potential liquidation of the assets was a key rationale behind the proposal. “Liquidating the assets would create a difficult situation for both the South Korean and Japanese governments and their respective publics,” one Korean lawyer indicated, “We can’t just sit back and let that happen.”

We expect that the direction of Japan-South Korea relations for the rest of the year will become clearer as countries start to emerge from the pandemic, governments are able to focus on other policy priorities, and multilateral opportunities for high-level engagement like the UN General Assembly and APEC—whether virtual or in-person—come closer.

# CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

## JANUARY – MAY 2020

**Jan. 7, 2020:** Groups representing forced labor victims propose that Seoul and Tokyo set up a joint consultative body to resolve the issue.

**Jan. 13, 2020:** South Korean Foreign Ministry Director-General for Asian and Pacific Affairs Kim Jung-han meets Japanese Foreign Ministry Director-General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Takizaki Shigeki to discuss forced labor and other bilateral issues in advance of a Japan-South Korea foreign ministers' meeting in San Francisco.

**Jan. 14, 2020:** Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu and South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha meet bilaterally as well as trilaterally with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. They reiterate existing positions and their desire to maintain momentum from the December summit between South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Japanese Prime Abe Shinzo.

**Jan. 20, 2020:** Abe's speech before National Diet calls South Korea Japan's "most important neighbor, sharing basic values and strategic interests," but he adds that he "looks forward to keeping our promises from one country to another."

**Feb. 2, 2020:** A second dialogue takes place between Japanese Foreign Ministry Director-General Takizaki and South Korean Foreign Ministry Director-General Kim. Discussion includes pending bilateral issues as well as COVID-19.

**Feb. 15, 2020:** Second bilateral meeting between Kang and Motegi, as well as a trilateral meeting with Pompeo, happen on the margins of the Munich Security Conference.

**March 1, 2020:** Moon, in annual address on Korean Independence Movement Day, says "Japan is always our closest neighbor" while emphasizing the need to "squarely face the past."

**March 2, 2020:** North Korea launches two projectiles that appear to be short-range ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan/East Sea. Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga says that the Japanese government has been coordinating with the United States and South Korea.

**March 5, 2020:** Japan announces it will tighten entry restrictions on arrivals from South Korea and China starting March 9 due to COVID-19 and suspend visa waiver programs for Koreans. South Korea responds by suspending its visa waiver program for Japan and the South Korean Foreign Ministry expresses "extreme regrets" over restrictions it described as "unreasonable, unscientific, and unfriendly."

**March 6, 2020:** Kang summons Ambassador Tomita Koji and expresses deep regret over the Japanese government's restrictions and calls for the prompt withdrawal of the measures.

**March 9, 2020:** Japan and South Korea begin enforcing their reciprocal travel restrictions.

**March 10, 2020:** South Korean and Japanese trade officials hold first meeting via videoconference regarding Japan's export restrictions on South Korea. No breakthroughs are announced.

**March 17, 2020:** Korean, Japanese, and Chinese foreign ministries hold a director-general-level phone consultation among ROK, Japanese, and Chinese foreign ministries on COVID-19.

**March 20, 2020:** Motegi, Kang, and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi hold a trilateral call on COVID-19. Simultaneously, Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Cho Sei-young and Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Akiba Takeo join weekly call regarding COVID-19 coordination with counterparts from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, India, and Vietnam.

**March 25, 2020:** South Korea protests Japan's authorization of middle school textbooks with claims to the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islets.

**March 27, 2020:** Japan decides to extend Korea entry restrictions another month. South Korea expresses regret and retains its measures as well.

**March 28, 2020:** North Korea launches two projectiles suspected to be short-range missiles into the East Sea/Sea of Japan.

**April 1, 2020:** Video consultation between Japanese and South Korean foreign ministry director-generals, focused on COVID-19 and forced labor.

**April 8, 2020:** Phone consultation takes place between Japanese Director-General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Takizaki and South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Lee Do-hoon on North Korea.

**April 15, 2020:** Moon and Abe join ASEAN+3 video summit on COVID-19.

**April 14, 2020:** North Korea launches several projectiles suspected to be cruise missiles.

**April 21, 2020:** Abe's ritual tree offering to Yasukuni Shrine draws South Korean government protest expressing "deep disappointment and regret."

**April 28, 2020:** Abe said in a session of Parliament that he was aware of the reports on North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's health conditions.



PACIFIC  FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

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## 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

# ENDING STRATEGIC DISTANCING IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL DISTANCING?

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In the first four months of 2020, as COVID-19 raged throughout the world, Russia and China increased, and even intensified, their diplomatic interactions, mutual support, and strategic coordination. Patience for maintaining an informal entente, rather than an alliance, seemed to be running thin. This happened even as the city of Moscow's own brief "Chinese exclusion" policy evoked sharp dissonance in China's public space. These developments occurred against the backdrop of a Middle East crisis and political shakeup in Russia. As the rest of the world sank into a state of despair, disconnect, and devastation, the two large powers moved visibly toward each other amid an increasing backlash from the US, particularly regarding China's early actions in the pandemic.

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## Before COVID

The first signs of the disastrous pandemic in late 2019 got little attention outside China. At the beginning of the year, even Moscow and Beijing were more shocked by the US drone [killing](#) of Iranian Gen. Qasem Soleimani, commander of Iran's Quds Force, on January 3.

Russia and China reacted quickly and strongly to the incident. In their telephone [conversation](#) the day after Soleimani's assassination, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called the killing "unacceptable," "unlawful," and "in violation of the UN Charter." Despite the strong rhetoric, the two top diplomats called for de-escalating the crisis and taking joint steps to create conditions for the peaceful resolution of conflict. To achieve this, they talked about how to coordinate policies in the UN Security Council. On January 7, China and Russia [blocked a UNSC statement](#) on the December 31 attack on the US embassy in Iraq, insisting that any such statement by the UN Security Council should also include the [latest developments](#) (such as Soleimani's [killing](#), among other things).

China-Russia diplomatic moves reflected a deep concern over the escalation of the conflict between Iran and other regional players (Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the US), which seemed well-founded, considering Iran's retaliatory missile [attacks](#) on two US military bases in Iraq on January 8, along with the accidental downing of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 flying out of Tehran to Kiev.

In the longer run, neither China and Russia would want to see the crisis escalate and further damage the already crippled [Iran nuclear deal](#). The killing of all 176 passengers and crew of the Ukraine International Airlines flight, ironically, seemed to function as a calming factor, as the parties involved stepped back from the edge of war.

## Viral Diplomacy: The China Phase

As Russia and China moved quickly to [coordinate policies](#) on the Middle East, Beijing watched from the sidelines, anxiously, as Putin reshuffled the government and revised the constitution to preserve the legacy of his first 20 years in power. At the end of April, however, the Kremlin politicking was suddenly disrupted when Russia's new Prime Minister

Mikhail Mishustin was infected by coronavirus. "Prime ministers in and out, but iron man Putin stays on," commented Wu Yan (铁打的普京, 流水的总理), a young Chinese scholar in fluent in both Russian and English.

But the most important factor for the China-Russia strategic partnership was probably the rapid unfolding of the coronavirus pandemic. From late December the Chinese government was in overdrive in dealing with the rapid spread of the deadly virus. This included China's first [report](#) to the World Health Organization (WHO), neighboring countries, and the US on January 3, the [first publication](#) of the genetic sequence of the coronavirus at Virological.org on January 11, and the lockdown of Wuhan on January 23.

On January 31, Putin sent [a message](#) to Chinese President Xi Jinping to express his deep sympathy and support for those affected by the virus. He also confirmed Russia's readiness to provide the necessary assistance to China "as soon as possible." The next day, [Lavrov](#) talked to his Chinese counterpart Wang by phone, and spoke highly of measures taken by China in fighting the coronavirus. This was followed by the announcement on February 4 that Russia would provide humanitarian [aid to China](#) for combating the COVID-19 outbreak. On February 5, the [first shipment](#) of Russian medical equipment arrived in Wuhan. On the same day, five Russian pandemic experts arrived in Beijing and were received by Deputy Foreign Minister Le Yucheng. They were "the first, and so far [only](#)," group of foreign experts coming to China during the pandemic, according to the Chinese foreign ministry. On the same day, while receiving letters of credence from 23 newly-appointed foreign ambassadors, Putin told China's new ambassador [Zhang Hanhui](#) that relations with China were "at an unprecedentedly high level," "ties in the field of defense and military-technical cooperation are developing successfully," and Russia was "ready to render help and every kind of assistance to the friendly Chinese people." On February 9, the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations delivered [23 tons](#) of medical supplies to Wuhan, including [2 million masks](#).

Russia's support came at a time when both the infection and death rates in China were climbing at an alarming rate. It was also a time when China was struggling with the West/US in the public space. US Commerce Secretary Wilbur

Ross' [statement](#) on January 30 that the pandemic would "help to accelerate" the return of jobs to the US and *The Wall Street Journal's* provocative [headline](#) on February 3, declaring China the "sick man of Asia," were shocking to Beijing.

In contrast, messages from Russia to China were largely sympathetic, positive, and supportive. In addition to Putin's swift and strong support to China, the official [Russian Newspaper](#) ran an editorial on February 10 titled "Friend In Need" and an entire page with huge Chinese characters spelling out "Wuhan, China, hold on! We are together!"



Figure 1 Russian Newspaper ran an entire page in support of Wuhan, China. Photo: Huanqiu

Russia impressed the Chinese with its foreign ministry spokesperson [Maria Zakharova](#), who has an extensive background in China and who used the Chinese language in her daily press briefing on February 10 to convey Russia's support:

We really want China and the Chinese people to act as one and unite in countering the epidemic to protect China as the ancient towers of the Great Wall do. Russia feels for the people of China during these difficult times. We are fully behind them and we would like to sincerely wish them every success in overcoming this epidemic.

In addition to using her Chinese fluency, which is unique in Russia's and other foreign ministries around the world, Zakharova produced perhaps the strongest words against

what she saw as the unwarranted criticism of China in the Western media:

... reading the foreign press, monitoring reports from Western news agencies and watching television, I am shocked that all this appears in states that not only consider themselves civilized but who also preach the lofty ideals of democracy and upholding human rights at international venues. ... They are using disinformation and fraudulent facts, and are showing a lack of respect and sympathy which is so badly needed by the country and people that have been hit with the unprecedented spread of a new virus. At the end of the day, they should come to their senses, gather their wits and recall or probably read again everything that was signed and everything that was declared by the UN and its agencies. ... If a country and its people are fighting such a dangerous and challenging epidemic, it is possible and necessary to display sympathy.

Russia also used its dual chairmanship of both BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for 2020 to galvanize multilateral support for China. On February 11, Russia issued a BRICS chairman's [statement](#) on behalf of other members of the group supporting China's effort against coronavirus pandemic. "The BRICS countries commit to work together in a spirit of responsibility, solidarity and cooperation to bring this outbreak under control as fast as possible. They underline the importance of avoiding discrimination, stigma and overreaction while responding to the outbreak," said the statement. Three days later, the SCO issued a [statement](#) on the coronavirus epidemic, reaffirming its "readiness to render China the necessary assistance and to closely cooperate in the spirit of the 10 June 2018 Declaration on Joint Countering of the Threats of Epidemics in the SCO Space."

### Moscow's "Hunt" for Chinese

The coronavirus outbreak in China in early 2020 led to frequent high-level contacts between top Russian and Chinese officials and diplomats. The Russian government also took early and swift actions to prevent and contain the spread of virus from China. However, their handling of potential outbreaks, and of Chinese people suspected of spreading the virus, led to tensions

very much at odds with the two nations' cooperation in international diplomacy.

On January 31, Russia's Prime Minister [Mikhail Mishustin](#), appointed to the position just two weeks earlier, took several decisive actions, including extending the temporary closure of five port entrances in Russia's Far Eastern regions bordering China, which had been closed on January 24 for the Chinese New Year. He also decided to radically reduce air travel to and from China, evacuate Russian citizens, and prepare to provide medical and humanitarian aids to China. The Mishustin government was also drafting a temporary ban on working visas for Chinese citizens.

On February 1, [Putin](#) authorized Russian Aerospace Forces to evacuate Russian citizens from "areas of the People's Republic of China most affected by the coronavirus." Four days later, Russian planes [evacuated](#) several hundreds of Russian and CIS country citizens from Wuhan. More than 10,000 Russians, including 6,000 students, chose to stay in China through the pandemic because they believed that China would be able to beat back the virus, according to [Chinese](#) and [Russian](#) sources.

Russia's actions came in the wake of US evacuation of US citizens and diplomats from Wuhan on [January 25](#) and travel restrictions to and from China on [January 31](#).

These early actions by the Russian government, though necessary and understandable given the quick spread of the virus and the lack of any effective treatment, were disruptive for many on both sides. For example, price for fresh produce in Russian Far Eastern regions shot up 40-50% as a result of the extended border closing. Russian local governments would have to [ease](#) the ban in early February.

China's vibrant social media, too, was [saturated](#) with complaints and even anger at Russia's actions, particularly the perceived harsh measures taken by the new prime minister. A triggering event was the press briefing by Mishustin on February 3 when he used the word "repatriation" in response to a question about possible government actions for coronavirus. His response was that the coronavirus was defined as a "first-level danger," meaning the government could expel, monitor, and detain infected foreigners.

Mishustin's response was said to be a [standard operational procedure](#) for the Russian government to any "first-level danger" based on previous governmental directives. The Russian Ministry of Health and [Chinese embassy](#) in Russia clarified the "misinterpretation" of the policy in early February that the infected people would be treated first in Russia. In late February, however, China's social media exploded after Moscow municipal authorities took sweeping and discriminative actions to detain, prosecute, and possibly repatriate 80 Chinese citizens for allegedly violating Russia's 14-day self-isolation rule. Many of them were said to be [handled roughly](#) by [local authorities](#) with little prior information and proper procedures. This happened in the wake of the alleged actions in Moscow, starting from February 19, to identify, question, and register only Chinese people in public transit systems and by taxi drivers.

The hunt for Chinese in Moscow was so disturbing that the Chinese [embassy](#) in Moscow reportedly issued an inquiry on February 24 with the Moscow municipal authority asking for "appropriate, non-discriminatory, and non-excessive policies" toward Chinese citizens in Moscow, according to liberal Russian media. They went as far as to produce an original copy of the Chinese embassy statement to the Moscow municipal government on February 24 with a quite unusual statement that "Chinese citizens are not specially monitored in such a way by any government in the world, including those of the US and other Western nations." Such strong, and certainly undiplomatic, wording is rare in the Chinese Foreign Service, let alone to a strategic partner such as Russia.



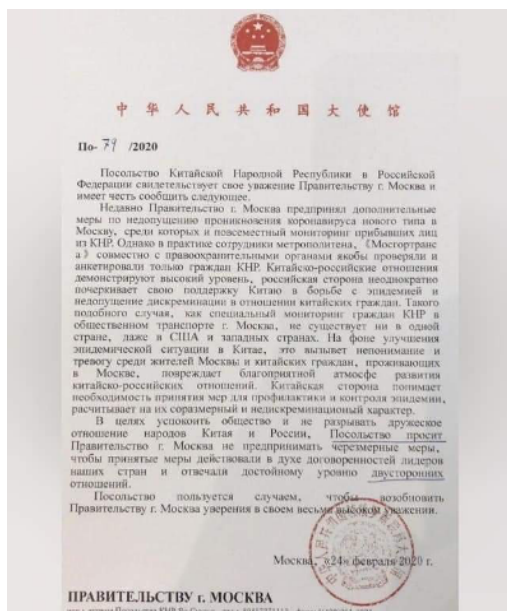


Figure 2 The Chinese embassy in Moscow reportedly requested non-discriminatory policies toward Chinese citizens in Moscow. Source: Toutiao

Press Secretary of the Russian President Dmitry [Peskov](#) denied on February 26 that Chinese citizens were targeted and discriminated in Moscow. Moscow Mayor [Sergey Sobyenin](#) also denied the allegation the following day. Russian media, however, showed that the Moscow transit authorities apparently informed its employees previously via [internal](#) email that bus and train conductors would inform police if Chinese were on board. This email instruction was said to be based on the Russian government's decision to ban Chinese citizens from entering Russia starting from February 20.

Chinese [diplomats](#) worked with the Moscow government to offer clarity while reaching out to the detainees with food, psychological assistance, and legal advice. On March 1, the embassy dismissed alleged violent enforcement of the law by Russian police and that only Chinese citizens were detained. China's [mainstream media](#) also warned about fake news and rumors at work to weaken China-Russia strategic partnership. It happened that [liberal, or pro-West, media](#) in Russia were most active in reporting the event.

The legal procedure to repatriate Chinese detainees continued in early March, including a statement by Deputy Mayor of Moscow [Anastasia Rakova](#) that Chinese detainees would be deported. After the [first round of legal procedures](#), Chinese detainees were informed

that they would be fined 5,000-10,000 rubles and then expelled with a five-year ban for traveling to Russia. In contrast, Russian detainees were fined only 1,000 rubles and a 14-day quarantine. On March 7, the first repatriations of four Chinese citizens were implemented.

Russia's legal practices shocked Chinese, including some opinion leaders and academia. [Hu Xijin](#), editor of *Global Times* in Beijing, explained on March 2 the impasse with a multi-dimension interpretation of Russian perceptions of China. First, there is no question that the Russian government considers relations with China highly imperative and Russian society also supports such a policy. Societal relations, however, were not as positive as those at the official level. Second, the steady rise of China had led to a complex mentality of admiration, disbelief, envy, and even enmity. Increased interactions between Russians and Chinese, too, create friction as a result of the dishonest behavior of some Chinese vendors in Russia, which provides corrupt police with an excuse to manipulate cases involving Chinese. Finally, both sides have those who do not want to see high level bilateral ties presumably at the expense of respective relations with the West/US.

On March 9, Prof. [Wu Dahui](#), a leading Russologist in Beijing's Qinghua University, pointed out serious flaws in Russia's handling of the case, and hoped that Russia would be gentler and more professional in how it treated detainees. Wu reminded readers not to forget the selfless help the Russians provided to China at the onset of the pandemic. As a true friend of Russia, however, China should also point out problems and disharmonies from both sides for long-term stability and development of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership.

On March 23, a Russian appeals court [dismissed](#) the first court ruling to repatriate a senior student in Moscow State University, leading to dismissing deportation verdicts for most of the cases, according to Chinese sources.

Moscow's obsession with Eastern sources of the virus was understandable, given the still high infection rate in China in [February](#). This, however, was apparently driven, and reinforced, by the widely spread [misconception](#) in Russia that coronavirus only infects Asians, particularly the Chinese. In a January 31 press

briefing, Russian Deputy Prime Minister [Tatyana Golikova](#) was asked if the virus spread only among Chinese. She dismissed the claim.

For almost a month after Russia imposed travel bans to China, there was, at best, inadequate attention to Europe. Russia imposed “[severe travel restrictions](#)” on air travel with Europe only on March 13, one day before the [US bans](#), when Italy had [a total of 17,660 cases](#). In retrospect, most of Russian’s cases of infection originated from Europe from late March. On the same day, China’s daily infection cases were down to just [13](#).

### **Viral Diplomacy: Russia’s Turn**

At the peak of China’s pandemic in early February, both Russia and China tried to make sure that high-level exchanges would continue despite the distortion of normal activities on the Chinese side. On February 10, Beijing confirmed Xi’s plan to attend the early May celebration of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany. China’s decision was not easy given the daily infection rate of over 3,000 for February 9 and its peak three days later of 15,152. Preserving and promoting strong ties with Moscow, however, was paramount for Beijing.

For Russia, business-as-usual seemed assured in early February as its daily infection number was still in single digits. Russian Ambassador [Andrey Denisov](#) indicated that the pandemic would not affect relations with China. Denisov’s confidence was based on the normal pace of bilateral exchanges, which usually picks up from late March. Xi’s Moscow trip for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of World War II was part of five summits planned for 2020. Additionally, the Russian prime minister would visit China in the second half of the year. “2020 will continue the frequency of senior meetings at and above deputy ministerial level, of which there are almost 200,” said Denisov, “and they include meetings of foreign and defense ministers.”

For much of February and early March, Putin was preoccupied by constitutional revision, which would prolong [Putin’s presidency beyond 2024](#), as well as imposing [term limits](#) for future Russian presidents. Putin’s seemingly contradictory efforts reflected both the potential and limits of his [authority](#) over a large number of liberal, or pro-West, Russian political elites. It also reflects a creeping anxiety about uncertainty in the post-Putin era. The Duma’s

passing of the constitutional revision on March 10 resolved the dilemma, at least for the time being. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman [Geng Shuang](#) said that China hoped and believed that Russia would be able to maintain social stability and economic development. And China respected and supported, as it always did, Russia’s choice in selecting its own governance model.

On March 17, when there were only 21 cases, Putin confidently declared that Russia had [managed to contain](#) the “massive penetration and spread of the infection in Russia.” The confidence on both sides (China’s new infections had fallen considerably by mid-March) led to a surge of joint diplomatic activities. The next day, Lavrov and his Chinese counterpart Wang held a telephone [conversation](#), focusing on the pandemic and the possible activities of the UN Security Council—now chaired by the PRC—and preparations for the summit of permanent members of the Security Council, a vision of Putin’s since January for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of WWII ending. On March 25, Russia and China were part of the [joint address](#) (with Venezuela, Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Syria) to the UN secretary general, urging the withdrawal of unilateral sanctions during the spread of the coronavirus. At the G20 emergency summit on March 26, Putin also initiated the “green corridors” idea that would be free of trade wars and sanctions for the mutual supply of medicines, food, equipment, and technology. He suggested a collective moratorium on restrictions affecting basic necessities and financial transactions for purchasing them.

From late March, Russia’s infection rate started its steady [climb](#) (500 for March 31) and accelerated through April (with 7,099 cases on April 30 alone). The scope and speed of Russia’s increase of infection were alarming for both sides. This led to increased communication at the top level. Putin and Xi had “an [in-depth discussion](#)” over the phone on [April 16](#). They discussed exchange of experts and medical equipment, medicines, and protective gear. Xi promised China’s strong support to Russia and hoped Russia would help Chinese citizens living in Russia. Putin said it was unacceptable to blame China as the source of the virus. Top diplomats also communicated frequently (Lavrov-Wang on March 27 and April 14, and their deputies on April 10, 22, and 24).



Part of their exchange was about land and air travel [restrictions](#) on Russia imposed by China starting from April 7 and then tightened on April 14. Meanwhile, there was a steady flow of Chinese PPE to Russia. The [first](#) plane load (26 tons) was delivered to Russia on April 2. On April 11, a group of Chinese medical experts arrived in Moscow, at which Chinese ambassador to Moscow Zhang Haihui declared that “today [we are all Muscovites](#).” More Chinese aid was soon to follow, according to Chinese Ambassador to Russia Zhang Hanhui. Russian procurement of PPE from China was also accelerating. On April 20, “when our Chinese friends encountered difficulties in February, we sent 2 million masks to them,” [remarked Putin](#), “We have now received 150 million masks from China,” he added. From April 6–28, 54 Aeroflot cargo planes brought back 205 million masks from China and many tons of other PPE, according to Aeroflot spokesperson [Yulia Spivakova](#).

### From Alignment to Alliance?

The reversal of fortunes for China and Russia in their dealings with the pandemic in the first months of 2020 led to more cooperation and coordination between the two Eurasian giants. It was the US factor, however, that gave extra impetus for Moscow and Beijing to coordinate policies more closely in the month of April.

The blame game between Washington and Beijing was already in full speed in March. April, however, witnessed heightened mutual accusations. On April 8, [ABC](#) reported that US military intelligence had warned the Trump administration about the pandemic as early as November 2019. Despite a quick dismissal by the [US Defense Department](#), the ABC report shocked many in China because of the US ability to monitor, and even predict, a pandemic even a month before China confirmed its first few cases on December 27. Six days later, a *Washington Post* [story](#) again pointed the finger at China’s possible culpability for leaking the virus.

On April 14, Lavrov had a [phone call](#) with Wang. Lavrov thanked China for medical assistance and said that close cooperation in the pandemic indicated special and strategic significance of the bilateral ties. Russia also opposed politicizing the pandemic and criticized how “a few nations” tried to cast the blame on others. While defending the WHO, Lavrov also disputed the argument that China “will have to pay everyone for spreading this infection.” It was

“beyond the pale,” said Lavrov, “to hear someone in London throw some numbers in the air and came up with 3.7 trillion dollars or euros that China allegedly owes to the EU for damages caused by the pandemic.”

The Trump administration launched on April 15 a coordinated effort accusing China of covering up its Wuhan lab leaks, a lack of transparency for six weeks, and a deliberate delay in reporting the pandemic. This was done with the [Defense Department](#), [Congress](#), and conservative [media](#). Accusations that China had spread the virus around the world were much stronger than in mid-March, when Trump mostly performed a solo play by using phrases such as “Wuhan virus” or “Chinese virus” in his daily tweets and press briefings.

China and Russia reacted swiftly to the new US accusations. Xi and Putin spoke on the phone on April 16. In addition to praising China’s consistent and effective actions to stabilize the situation in China, [Putin](#) stressed that it was “counterproductive to accuse China of releasing information to the global community on this dangerous infection in an untimely manner.”

While fending off US accusations, Russia and China also went on the offensive by accusing the US of responsibility for the pandemic. On April 17, Chinese Ambassador to Russia [Zhang Hanhui](#) presented to the Russian media TASS findings that gene sequencing of the coronavirus indicated that the virus was imported to Wuhan, instead of emerging there.

On the same day [Zakharova](#), the Russian foreign ministry spokesperson, questioned the purpose of US biochemical labs outside the US. “We cannot rule out that the Americans use such reference laboratories in third countries to develop and modify various pathogenic agents, including in military purposes,” she commented, with a special reference to a Georgia-based US biological laboratory. This was the second time that Zakharova made reference to the US labs in foreign lands in 2020. Her [February 12 briefing](#) provided more details.

For several years, the issue of US bio labs abroad was raised by Russian foreign and [defense](#) officials. [Putin](#) questioned it back to October 2017. Although Russian stories of US labs were discussed in Chinese social media and public space, China never officially endorsed the claim until April 29 when Chinese foreign ministry

spokesman [Geng Shuang](#) backed the Russian position. "We took note of the statement made by the Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman [Zakharova]. The United States has created many laboratories in the territory of the former Soviet Union, which evokes serious public worries in the neighboring countries concerned," Geng told a briefing. "The local public has been insistently demanding these facilities should be closed down. We do hope that the American side will display a responsible attitude, take into account the official concern of the world community and make real steps to eliminate such fears." Geng's phrase was quite reserved. The substance of his statement, however, indicated much closer coordination with the Russian position with reference to both the pandemic and US biological research activities abroad in the previous decades.

Such a move toward the Russians, however, was quite significant, if not shocking, even compared with early January when Prof. [Feng Shaolei](#), perhaps the most prominent Russologist in China, still described the US-China-Russian dynamics as "fluid, flexible, and complex." By the end of April, however, the triangle seemed more asymmetrical and less flexible as Moscow and Beijing were visibly moving toward each other vis-à-vis Washington.

For Hu Xijin, the *Global Times* editor, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership would have never matured as rapidly had the US and the West intended to form genuine friendship with China and Russia. In this sense, Moscow-Beijing ties are shaped by the "[storms of our era](#)," said Hu.

For this author, who had until the end of last year [depicted](#) the Beijing-Moscow strategic partnership as one of deliberately avoiding an alliance, the era of cautious strategic distancing appeared over. The next few months could be more interesting, and precarious, as the US presidential election unfolds in conjunction with a high infection and death rate. Blaming China for the dire consequences of the pandemic will only intensify.

The emerging US-China confrontation may provide Russia with strategic space, observed [Feng Yujun](#), a senior Russia specialist in Fudan University in Shanghai. Some in Russia have been longing for a posture of greater [equilibrium](#) in the post-pandemic world.

For Russians, who seem inherently pessimistic, the world is "heading into a storm as dangerous as that of the first half of the 20th century and maybe even more so," said Alexander [Solovyov](#), a historian and orientalist in Moscow. [Solovyov](#) dismissed the view that history was an adequate guide for future challenges for Russia. He was nonetheless worried that "[I]f the Anglophone-dominated world failed to manage peacefully the rise of semi-liberal, entirely capitalist and European Germany before 1914, then one would expect the problem of finding a worthy place for China in today's global order to be much harder ... Survival seems likely to be the key issue."

# CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

## JANUARY – APRIL 2020

**Jan. 4, 2020:** Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov [conduct](#) phone conversation focusing on the Persian Gulf crisis a day after the killing of Iranian Gen. Qassem [Soleimani](#) by US drone strike on January 3.

**Jan. 7, 2020:** Russia and China [block](#) UN Security Council statement on the US embassy bombing in Iraq, insisting that any statement by the UNSC on the attack on the embassy in Baghdad should also include the latest developments (including Soleimani's killing).

**Jan. 16, 2020:** Mikhail Mishustin is named Russia's new prime minister.

**Jan. 16, 2020:** Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang [says](#) that the resignation of Medvedev's Cabinet was "Russia's internal affair," and China completely respects the Russian decision.

**Jan. 23, 2020:** Russian President Vladimir Putin [proposes](#) a summit between leaders of the permanent members of the UNSC (Russia, China, the United States, France, and Britain) in 2020 to discuss global problems.

**Jan. 24, 2020:** Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying [expresses](#) support for Putin's proposal of holding a summit of the UNSC permanent members.

**Jan. 31, 2020:** Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin issues an order to extend the closing of five port entrances in Russia's Far East bordering China to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

**Jan. 31, 2020:** Putin [sends](#) a message to Chinese President Xi Jinping expressing sympathy and support for coronavirus victims.

**Feb. 1, 2020:** Russian Aerospace Forces [are authorized](#) to evacuate Russian citizens from the "most affected" areas of China by the coronavirus.

**Feb. 1, 2020:** Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov [speaks](#) by phone with Chinese counterpart Wang, saluting the measures China has taken in fighting the coronavirus.

**Feb. 3, 2020:** Mishustin [announces](#) that Russia would provide humanitarian [aid to China](#) for combating the COVID-19 outbreak.

**Feb. 5, 2020:** Russia [sends](#) its first shipment of medical supplies to Wuhan to assist China's anti-virus effort there.

**Feb. 5, 2020:** Putin [receives](#) letters of credence from 23 newly appointed foreign ambassadors in the Kremlin, including Chinese Ambassador to Moscow Zhang Hanhui, and says that Russian relations with China are "at an unprecedentedly high level."

**Feb. 9, 2020:** Russia's Ministry of Emergency Situations [sends](#) 23 tons of medical supplies to Wuhan.

**Feb. 11, 2020:** Russian BRICS Chairmanship [issues](#) a statement on behalf of other members of the group for supporting China's effort against the coronavirus pandemic.

**Feb. 15, 2020:** Lavrov and Wang [meet](#) on the sidelines of the 56<sup>th</sup> Munich Security Conference in Germany, where Lavrov promises that Russia would continue to provide humanitarian assistance to China.

**Feb. 18, 2020:** Russia [declares](#) that from February 20 it would "temporarily prohibit" the entrance of Chinese citizens from entering Russia with permits for work, private visit, study, and tourism, and also close its port entrances with China.

**March 10, 2020:** Foreign ministers of China, France, Russia, UK, and the US [issue](#) a joint statement on the 50th anniversary of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons reaffirming their commitment to the NPT “in all its aspects.”

**March 17, 2020:** Putin [tells](#) Russian officials in the Kremlin that Russia has managed to contain the “massive penetration and spread of the infection in Russia,” and that “the situation is generally under control.”

**March 25, 2020:** Russia and China [take part](#) in a joint address (with Venezuela, Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Syria) to the UN secretary general urging withdrawal of unilateral sanctions during the spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

**April 2, 2020:** China [sends](#) 26 tons of medical equipment to Russia.

**April 6, 2020:** Chinese embassy in Moscow [informs](#) Russian foreign ministry that to prevent the cross-border spread of COVID-19, China is temporarily closing the passenger corridor at the Suifenhe checkpoint effective April 7.

**April 11, 2020:** China [sends](#) a group of medical exports Russia.

**April 14, 2020:** Lavrov [holds](#) a phone call with Wang, discussing the pandemic and other issues. In his [press briefing](#) following the call, Lavrov warns against politicizing the coronavirus issue and says it is “beyond the pale” for the West to demand payment for China “spreading the virus.”

**April 16, 2020:** Xi and Putin [conduct](#) a telephone conversation focusing on the coronavirus, with Xi promising China’s strong support to Russia and hoping Russia would help Chinese citizens living in Russia.

**April 17, 2020:** China’s ambassador to Russia Zhang [tells](#) TASS that a gene sequence in the coronavirus indicated that the virus was imported to China’s Wuhan, instead of emerging there.

**April 23, 2020:** Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Maryana Zakharova [calls](#) Western accusation that China is the source of the coronavirus pandemic “absolutely inappropriate.”

**April 28, 2020:** BRICS foreign ministers [take part](#) in a video conference chaired by Lavrov. They agree to enhance collaboration to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, and to create a special credit mechanism with a total of [\\$15 billion](#) allocated to finance economic recovery projects.

**April 28, 2020:** Lavrov [dismisses](#) EU criticism of Russia and China over disinformation, and speaks highly of China’s efforts to contain the virus inside China, as well as its support for Russia and other countries.

**April 29, 2020:** Mishustin [is diagnosed](#) with COVID-19 and First Deputy Prime Minister Andrey Belousov is appointed interim head of government.

**April 29, 2020:** Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang [says](#) Washington must pay special attention to issues that have a direct bearing on the health and well-being of the people in countries where US laboratories are located, referring to a statement by Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman [Maria Zakharova](#) on April 17.

PACIFIC  FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

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## C O N N E C T I O N S

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

JAPAN-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

## GREAT DISRUPTION: UNCERTAINTY OVER THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Japan and Southeast Asia faced completely different situations in 2019 and 2020 because of the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, Japan-Southeast Asia relations were continuously positive. One of the major developments among Southeast Asian states was the creation of the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” (AOIP) which resonated with the principles in Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) concept. As a result, Japan expressed explicit support for AOIP. Functionally, they made progress, particularly in the fields of defense, infrastructure development, and digital, as illustrated by various Japanese initiatives—“Vientiane Vision2.0,” “Initiative on Overseas Loan and Investment for ASEAN,” and “Data Free Flow with Trust.” As such, both Japan and Southeast Asian states began to synthesize their respective visions of the Indo-Pacific and to establish concrete cooperative mechanisms. Diplomatic momentum was put on halt in 2020 as COVID-19 spread. While Japan, Southeast Asian states, and ASEAN made efforts to coordinate counter-measures, share information and best practices, and provide mutual assistance through teleconferences such as the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 in April 2020, each state faces different social and political situations, making it difficult to cooperate. As such, great uncertainty looms over Japan-Southeast Asia cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

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Japan and Southeast Asia faced completely different situations in 2019 and 2020 because of the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, Japan-Southeast Asia relations were positive. One of the major developments among Southeast Asian states was the creation of the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” (AOIP), which resonated with the principles in Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) concept; as a result, Japan expressed explicit support for AOIP. Functionally, they made progress, particularly in defense, infrastructure development, and digital fields, as illustrated by various Japanese initiatives—“Vientiane Vision 2.0,” “Initiative on Overseas Loan and Investment for ASEAN,” and “Data Free Flow with Trust.” As such, Japan and Southeast Asian states began to synthesize their respective visions toward the Indo-Pacific and to establish concrete cooperative mechanisms. However, diplomatic momentum was put on halt in 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic occurred. While Japan, Southeast Asian states, and ASEAN made efforts to coordinate counter-measures, share information and best practices, and provide mutual assistance through teleconferences such as the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 in April 2020, each state faces different social and political situations, making it difficult to cooperate. As such, great uncertainty looms over Japan-Southeast Asia cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Furthering the Japan-Southeast Asia Relationship in 2019**

Japan-Southeast Asia relations in 2019 were stable, and steadily strengthened their political, economic, military, and socio-cultural ties, which contributed to the creation of strategic options for Southeast Asia, while providing diplomatic leverage over Southeast Asia. In 2019, Japan constantly enhanced its [cooperation with ASEAN](#), particularly with Vietnam, which became the 2020 ASEAN Chair and the 2018-21 ASEAN Country Coordinator for Japan, so that Japan-ASEAN policy coordination in 2020 could move smoothly. Japan gradually reoriented its [“Free and Open Indo-Pacific” \(FOIP\) concept](#) to lay the groundwork for the Indo-Pacific regional order with [ASEAN’s support](#).

Because of these efforts, Japan’s image in Southeast Asia has been consistently positive. According to [ISEAS’s 2020 Survey Report](#), Japan is the most trustworthy state among major powers, including the United States and China,

which can provide global public goods. In addition, Japan is the most favorable “third choice” state for ASEAN in the context of US-China rivalry, although Japan’s political, strategic, and economic influence in Southeast Asia is considered to be much lower than that of China. This survey result is consistent with [another survey conducted in 2019](#) by Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It shows that 93% of respondents considered Japan to be a “reliable friend” and would contribute to “the peace and stability” of Southeast Asia.

### **Strategic Concept: Synergy between FOIP and AOIP**

The most significant development for Japan and Southeast Asia in 2019 was the creation of the [“ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”](#) (AOIP). The document was adopted at [the 34<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit](#) in June 2019, emphasizing “ASEAN centrality, inclusiveness, complementarities, a rules-based order anchored upon international law, and commitment to advancing economic engagement in the region.” The outlook essentially provides *guidelines* for ASEAN and its member states to engage the Indo-Pacific region, while asking for external partners to support ASEAN’s initiatives and cooperate in the areas that ASEAN indicates.

Indonesia has long taken the initiative to push a concept of the Indo-Pacific in ASEAN, while others displayed a somewhat lukewarm attitude toward such an initiative and were contentious in deciding what type of institutional documents and contents should be included. The outcome was a political compromise—the title of the document was [changed](#) from “ASEAN’s Indo-Pacific Outlook” to AOIP and ended up containing 14 principles, including ASEAN centrality, transparency, inclusivity, and a rules-based framework. In this sense, the document is similar to [the 1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality \(ZOPFAN\)](#), which aspired to [regional neutrality in Southeast Asia](#) amid power shifts in East Asia caused by the retrenchment of the United States and the United Kingdom, while seeking a way to secure regional powers’ recognition of Southeast Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). As ASEAN sought regional autonomy in the 1970s, the AOIP also attempts to secure ASEAN’s independent political stance in the context of the Indo-Pacific strategic competition between China and the United States.

However, unlike ZOPFAN, the AOIP gained strong political support from major powers that advocated for the Indo-Pacific concept, namely [Australia](#), [India](#), [Japan](#), and [the United States](#). For those powers, including Japan, it was a political achievement because AOIP indicates that ASEAN has incorporated the “Indo-Pacific” concept into its own strategic calculations, by which they could discuss and work together to shape a regional vision and cooperative frameworks. Furthermore, some of the principles, particularly a rules-based framework and respect for international law, resonated with those major powers’ Indo-Pacific concepts and visions. Thus, AOIP was a favorable development for Japan.

ASEAN’s major strategic objective for AOIP is to neutralize great powers’ dominance in creating the Indo-Pacific concept, which could marginalize the association’s institutional role in the region. While a balanced great power competition would give ASEAN strategic leeway to locate itself in the middle, facilitating friendly relations with both sides, the intensification of rivalry would force ASEAN member states to choose sides. Given the increasingly firm US stance against China and the potential institutionalization of the Quad—an anti-China coalition—ASEAN emphasized [the importance of inclusivity](#) to mitigate China’s concern, although China [avoided explicit support for AOIP](#).

Among the various FOIP concepts, Japan’s FOIP vision was largely compatible with AOIP. Admittedly, when Japan launched the FOIP strategy in [2016](#), it implicitly featured Japan’s competitive strategy against China in broader Asia. Also, its principle—to maintain and enhance the existing international order in the Indo-Pacific, which was generally led by the United States—remains intact. However, given the vagueness of the strategy, its approach and tactics have [evolved](#), emphasizing economic connectivity and respect for principles such as non-exclusivity and ASEAN centrality. From 2017, Japan also improved its relations with China, expressing a possibility of [cooperating with China](#) in terms of infrastructure development in a third country under the condition that China comply with international standards, resulting in [52 memorandums of cooperation](#) at the 2018 Japan-China Summit. Such policy flexibility enabled Japan to strike a balance between cooperation with China and the United States and avoiding the creation of

strategic division, a welcome development for ASEAN as well.

Japan’s constant modification of the FOIP concept thus provides strategic choices for ASEAN member states and becomes highly compatible with AOIP. This created a greater possibility for Japan and ASEAN to further cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

### **Functional Cooperation: Defense, Infrastructure, and Digital Infrastructure**

Concrete cooperative actions between FOIP and AOIP are still underway, but Japan and Southeast Asian states made progress in three areas: defense diplomacy, infrastructure development, and digital infrastructure.

#### *Defense Cooperation: Vientiane Vision 2.0*

First, Japan has adapted “[Vientiane Vision 2.0](#)” at the [5<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-Japan Defense Ministers’ Meeting](#) on November 18, 2019. This is the updated version of the “[Vientiane Vision](#)” in 2016, which is “a guiding principle” for Japan’s bilateral and multilateral defense cooperation with ASEAN and has three objectives: to consolidate a rules-based international order; to ensure maritime security; and to facilitate capacity-building programs for ASEAN member states. Although the 2016 version was highly compatible with Japan’s FOIP concept, Vientiane Vision 2.0 incorporates “the concept of the ‘Indo-Pacific’” and defines ASEAN as a pivotal player in the region.

More specifically, Vientiane Vision 2.0 emphasizes the importance of ASEAN’s location, connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as well as the compatibility of Japan’s FOIP and ASEAN’s AOIP, citing openness, inclusivity, and a rules-based framework. Japan added three new principles of defense cooperation, namely “Heart-to-heart Cooperation” (e.g. respect for ASEAN’s principles); “Tailored and Lasting Cooperation” (e.g. pursuing sustainable and transparent engagement with ASEAN and member states); and “equal and open cooperation” (e.g. pursuing wider international collaboration on the basis of ASEAN centrality, unity, and resilience). By ensuring these principles and its FOIP vision, Japan recognizes ASEAN-led institutions as a center of multilateral cooperation in an important strategic location of the Indo-Pacific and expresses its intent to increase interoperability

among ASEAN member states through norm and practice-sharing.

ASEAN member states [welcomed](#) this initiative. Such a vision focuses mainly on non-controversial areas of defense cooperation and does not engage strategic competition to force ASEAN member states to choose sides between Japan and China. Indeed, most of the agendas that the vision raises, such as capacity-building, have long been discussed and implemented as part of Japan-ASEAN defense cooperation, such as defense dialogues, capacity building programs, maritime security, and humanitarian assistance /natural disaster (HA/DR).

Nevertheless, this initiative has a strategic implication. For instance, capacity-building programs such as cyber security and ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) capabilities in the maritime and air domains strengthen ASEAN and member states resilience to politically and militarily respond to threats coming from China, particularly over the South China Sea. Such cooperative initiatives can provide ASEAN and ASEAN member states more options to not only engage in the Indo-Pacific region, but also manage flashpoints in Southeast Asia.

#### *Infrastructure Development Initiatives: Initiative on Overseas Loans and Investment for ASEAN*

Second, Japan launched the “[Initiative on Overseas Loan and Investment for ASEAN](#)” in November 2019. The initiative is [Japan’s efforts](#) to synthesize FOIP and AOIP, emphasizing the improvement of “connectivity” between Japan and Southeast Asia as well as among Southeast Asian states. [The initiative](#) aims to mobilize \$3 billion in public and private funds from 2020 to 2022 and consists of three principles—facilitating “Quality Infrastructure” projects; empowering “women, low-income people, medium and small-size businesses”; and promoting green investment. To be sure, this effort is not new. Japan has facilitated its “[Partnership for Quality Infrastructure](#) (PQI)” since 2015, by which Japan would mobilize financial assets for Asia’s infrastructure development, approximately \$110 billion from 2015 to 2020 using the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), and through collaboration with the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

However, the initiative subsequently expanded from Asia to the world. In 2016, the PQI was upgraded to the “[Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure](#),” increasing its financing to \$200 billion from 2016 to 2021, shifting its geographical scope from Asia to the world, widening the scope of infrastructure, including natural resources, and facilitating inter-agency collaboration with other domestic institutions, namely Japan’s Export and Investment Insurance (NEXI), Japan Overseas Infrastructure Investment Corporation for Transport & Urban Development (JOIN), Japan’s ICT and Postal Services (JICT), and Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corporation (JOGMEC). In June 2019, Japan proposed at the G20 summit the idea of quality infrastructure as a guiding principle for infrastructure development, resulting in the “[G20 Principles For Quality Infrastructure Investment](#).” These initiatives aim to consolidate and upgrade international standards for infrastructure development because China’s BRI has the potential to set alternatives to existing standards. Now that the G20 has set the principles and Japan’s original PQI ends in 2020, Japan’s new initiative will sustain diplomatic momentum for infrastructure development in Southeast Asia.

Japan’s development initiatives have become more visible in in Southeast Asia subregions, particularly the Mekong region. On the basis of Japan’s “[Tokyo Strategy 2018 for Mekong-Japan Cooperation](#)” which deemed the region geographically significant to implement the FOIP vision, Japan and Mekong regional states—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam—promoted the importance of quality infrastructure in enhancing connectivity in the region, particularly the East-West Economic Corridor. In this connection, Japan also decided to become an [ACMECS \(Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy\) development partner](#) in August 2019 to collaborate with ACMECS member states for infrastructure development and provide financial assistance. Japan also collaborated with external actors, including the US, to support development through new initiatives such as [Japan-United States Mekong Power Partnership](#) (JUMPP) from 2019. As such, Japan’s engagement in Southeast Asia for fostering PQI intensified.

### *Digital Connectivity: “Data Free Flow with Trust”*

Digital connectivity was repeatedly emphasized in Japan and the ASEAN member states in 2019. While hard infrastructure for the digital economy, such as 5G, is imperative to operationalize Industry 4.0, soft infrastructure to set rules and principles for digital governance is also needed. In this connection, Japan launched the initiative, the “[Data Free Flow with Trust \(DFFT\)](#)” for digital economy, at the Osaka G20 meeting. Given that data is the imperative resource for Industry 4.0, there are economic and security issues by which states would pursue protectionist measures and refuse to share data. DFFT aims to facilitate the synthesizing of domestic and international legal frameworks through the use and reform of the World Trade Organization (WTO). In so doing, Japan aims to ensure open data in the world, although some states, including China, insist that the state has “[cyber sovereignty](#)”—a right to protect its data, usually through data localization.

ASEAN has been well aware of the social and economic impacts that digital connectivity would bring, and in principle its policy direction is compatible with Japan’s DFFT. In 2016, ASEAN issued the [Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity \(MPAC\) 2025](#), which put priority in the creation of both hard and soft digital infrastructure and the promotion of institutional arrangements for an ASEAN digital data governance framework and an ASEAN open data network. In November 2019, ASEAN issued the [ASEAN Declaration on Industrial Transformation to Industry 4.0](#), by which ASEAN envisions the enhancement of intra-ASEAN collaboration, such as policy coordination, human resource development, and joint research and innovations.

Still, challenges exist. Because of the large digital divides within each ASEAN member state, as well as among member states, it is difficult to coordinate soft infrastructure among them. External frameworks such as the “[Japan-US Strategic Digital Economy Partnership \(JUSDEP\)](#)” that aim to facilitate digital connectivity and economy in third countries through high-standard investment could help build ASEAN member states’ digital capacity. However, each member state’s perception differs, and some remain hesitant to cooperate. For example, when Japan issued [the Osaka Declaration on Digital Economy](#), the so-called

“Osaka Track,” to create a coalition for rule-making in digital economy outside the WTO, which included some Southeast Asian states, namely Thailand, Singapore, Laos, Malaysia, and Myanmar, other states, including Indonesia, [refused to sign](#) the declaration because the Osaka Track might undermine the WTO process and cyber sovereignty. Further coordination and consultation will be required to advance multilateral collaboration between Japan and Southeast Asian states for digital connectivity rule making.

In sum, Japan’s 2019 initiatives on defense, infrastructure development, and digital connectivity are generally positive for Southeast Asian states as they generate strategic options in the context of intensifying great power rivalry between the United States and China. This trend has characterized Japan–Southeast Asia relations and nurtured a constructive relationship between them.

### **Great Disruption: Rising Uncertainty in 2020**

Despite these positive trends, the COVID-19 pandemic has created great disruption in Japan–Southeast Asia relations. Emerging from Wuhan in Hubei province, China, in December 2019, the virus spread to countries which have intensive interaction with China, including Japan and Southeast Asian states. Its impacts were not immediately evident, partly because of lack of information about the virus. The World Health Organization (WHO) was also uncertain about the situation given the lack of data, and after publishing its first [disease outbreak news](#) on January 5, it took 29 days to issue a “[Public Health Emergency of International Concern \(PHEIC\)](#)” on January 30. In Southeast Asia and Japan, the number of confirmed cases in each country was less than 100 until the mid-February (figure 1), and Japan [offered protective equipment](#) stockpiled in the Asia-Europe Foundation (AEF), which it financed, to Southeast Asian states, namely Cambodia, the Philippines, and Laos, as well as Mongolia.

Given the initial optimistic assessments of COVID-19 and its lower fatality rate than other deadly viruses (such as Ebola) a mixture of positive and negative responses ensued. For instance, while cautious approaches were recommended, Malaysia allowed a large [religious meeting](#) to be held at the Sri Petaling mosque near Kuala Lumpur from February 27 to March 1, attracting more than 16,000 people,



and Thailand let a [Muay Thai match](#) take place at the Lumpinee Boxing Stadium on March 6, where around 10,000 attended. These events created large clusters, and more pessimistic views began to prevail in March, when the surge of confirmed cases rose and WHO declared COVID-19 a [pandemic](#). From mid-March, almost all Southeast Asian states, namely Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam faced a rapid rise in confirmed cases, and so did Japan.

At the early stage, many states conducted travel bans and closed borders, but from mid to late March, Southeast Asian states and Japan began to take partial and full “lockdown” measures to contain the spread of COVID-19—Brunei’s border closed from March 24; Cambodia’s lockdown began April 10 and a “state of emergency” commenced April 29; Indonesia’s partial lockdown started April 10; Laos’s lockdown was from March 30; Malaysia’s “movement control order” started March 18; Myanmar’s partial lockdown began April 10 to 21; Singapore’s “circuit breaker” initiated April 7; Thailand’s “state of emergency” was from March 26; the Philippines’s “national emergency” began March 24; and Vietnam’s lockdown started April 1–22 (with measures easing thereafter). Japan declared a long-awaited state of emergency on April 7. As all Southeast Asian states and Japan took counter-COVID-19 measures restricting the movement of people, social, economic, and diplomatic exchanges have been significantly reduced between Japan and ASEAN member states since April.

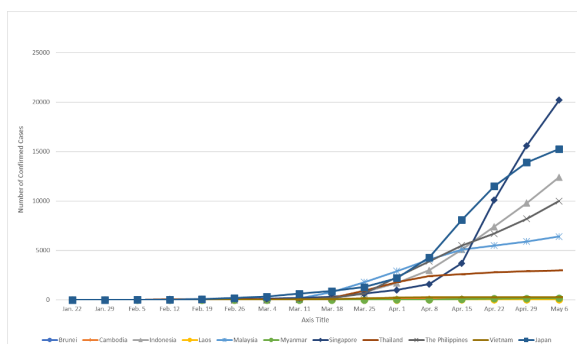


Figure 1 COVID-19 Confirmed Cases in Southeast Asia and Japan (As of April 28, 2020). Source: Johns Hopkins University

This does not mean that diplomatic relations between Japan and Southeast Asian states were put on hold. Japan and ASEAN, along with China and South Korea proactively organized ASEAN+3

(APT) meetings to coordinate policies among them. On February 3, the APT Senior Official Meeting on Health Development and the APT Health Ministers’ meeting were held on February 3 and April 7, respectively, through teleconferencing. Consequently, on April 14, Japan and ASEAN, together with China and South Korea, organized the Special APT Summit on COVID-19 and issued a [joint statement](#) which aimed to strengthen counter-COVID-19 cooperation on (1) an early warning system; (2) national and regional capacity building; (3) the APT reserve of essential medical supplies; (4) scientific cooperation; (5) mutual assistance between ASEAN, Japan, China, and South Korea; (6) funding; (7) public communication; (8) open economy; and (9) financial stability.

The APT decided to establish the “COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund for public health emergencies” to ensure medical equipment and supplies. Financial resources for this fund are supposed to come from the ASEAN Development Fund and the [APT Cooperation Fund](#), by which Japan contributed under the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF).

The COVID-19 death toll in Southeast Asia and Japan remains relatively low despite the rapidly increasing number of confirmed cases (Figure 2). This might derive from a lack of testing capacity and cluster tracking capability. Trends in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Japan are alarming because they indicate the possibility of overwhelming hospitals which requires immediate measures, such as ensuring a sufficient number of hospital beds. However, the COVID-19 overshoot—exponential growth of confirmed cases—which is similar to Europe and the United States, has yet to occur and can still be prevented by taking proactive policies.



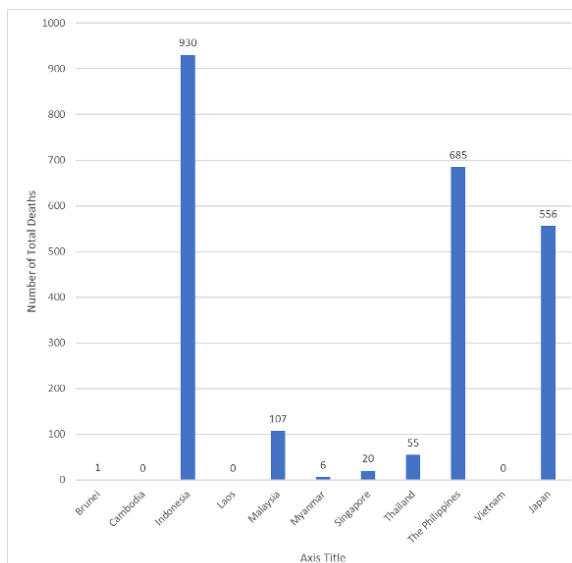


Figure 2 The Number of Total Deaths by COVID-19 in Southeast Asia and Japan (As of May 6, 2020). Source: Johns Hopkins University

Still, challenges and uncertainty remain. First, there are gaps in perceptions regarding COVID-19 among Japan and each Southeast Asian state. On the one hand, and although much depends on the number of available tests that each country can conduct, Brunei, Laos, and Myanmar have relatively small numbers of cases, and other states, such as Cambodia and Vietnam, have stabilized them. On the other hand, Japan and others, such as Singapore and Indonesia, are not in a position to ease their measures. Unless well-coordinated, the gap caused by different national circumstances could create policy divergences. Second, the current trend does not mean that there will be no second or third waves of COVID-19 in East Asia and Southeast Asia. As [past pandemic trends](#) show, it is quite possible for new waves to emerge. Third, it is unclear how long quarantines or lockdowns will continue. The impact of such measures, while necessary, is significant, as they make Japan-ASEAN cooperation difficult to organize: an example is the Maritime Self-Defense Force's [naval visit to Southeast Asia](#) that has been an important element of Japan's FOIP vision. Policymakers face policy dilemmas between ensuring security and economy. While lifting the quarantine can reactivate the economy, there is a risk of resurgence. While maintaining a quarantine can ensure health security, it would impact state economy. These choices are hard because both have security implications.

Another important factor in Japan-Southeast Asia relations is COVID-19's impact on geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific. While China has stabilized its situation, the United States faces a COVID-19 crisis, given the rapid increase in the number of confirmed cases and deaths, and it must concentrate on domestic stability. Economically, every state has been affected, but the impact differs. If the United States delays its economic recovery, and if China recovers quickly, their commitments to the region will be significantly affected, and China would gain the upper-hand in regional politics. Since President Trump's [no-show](#) at the 2019 East Asia Summit and the [postponement](#) of Trump's 2020 invitation of ASEAN leaders to the United States, Southeast Asian perceptions of US commitment have become more pessimistic. These great power dynamics matter in Japan-ASEAN relations because Japan can make the most of its strategic position under US-China competition by giving ASEAN an alternative political and economic choice. As such, COVID-19 makes the regional power shift in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific increasingly uncertain.

It is also true that even if the US maintains its retains its power advantages, the temporary disruption caused by COVID-19 would create an opportunity for political and diplomatic realignment among regional states, which also has long-term strategic implications for the regional balance of power. In this sense, the speed of social and economic recovery will be a critical factor in shaping the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific.

Given the increased numbers of variables shaping the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific, it is too early to tell how that regional strategic environment will look in the post-COVID-19 world. However, the relationship between Japan and Southeast Asian states is mutually beneficial not only economically but also strategically. To prevent Japan-Southeast Asia relations from being marginalized, it is necessary to follow through on existing Japan-Southeast Asia/ASEAN cooperative initiatives and enhance policy coordination mechanisms for COVID-19.

# CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

## MAY 2019 – APRIL 2020

**April 30–July 10, 2019:** Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) holds Indo-Pacific Deployment 2019 (IPD19), conducting joint exercises in the Indo-Pacific region.

**May 2, 2019:** Japan-Vietnam Defense Ministerial Meeting is held in Vietnam between Japanese Defense Minister Iwaya Takeshi and Vietnam's Defense Minister Ngo Xuan Lich.

**May 13, 2019:** Japan-Thailand Foreign Ministers' Meeting is held in Japan between Japanese Foreign Minister Kono Taro and Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai on the occasion of the 20th Thai Festival Tokyo 2019.

**May 22, 2019:** Japan-Indonesia Summit Telephone Talk between Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and Indonesian President Joko Widodo.

Japan-Singapore Defense Ministerial Meeting is held between Japanese DM Iwaya and Singapore's Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen.

**May 28, 2019:** Japan Ministry of Defense (JMOD) provides humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) capacity-building program for the Malaysian Armed Forces.

**May 29, 2019:** Japan-Philippines Foreign Ministers' Meeting is held in Japan between Kono and Philippines Foreign Secretary Teodoro Lopez Locsin Jr.

**May 30, 2019:** Abe meets Singaporean Deputy Prime Minister/Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat in Japan.

Japan-Laos Leaders' Working Lunch held in Japan between Abe and Laos' prime minister, attending signing of the "Project for Human Resource Development Scholarship."

Japan-Vietnam Foreign Ministers' Working Lunch is held in Japan between Kono and Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh.

Eleventh Meeting of the Japan-Vietnam Cooperation Committee is held in Japan.

**May 31, 2019:** Japan-Philippines Summit Meeting is held in Japan between Abe and Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte.

Japan-Cambodia Leaders' Working Lunch is held in Japan between PM Abe and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, attending the signing of the Exchange of Notes on grant aid projects, "The Project for Human Resource Development Scholarship" and "The Construction Support of Container Freight Station in Sihanoukville Autonomous Port Special Economic Zone (The Economic and Social Development Programme).

Japan-Malaysia Summit Meeting is held in Japan between PM Abe and Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and issues "Japan-Malaysian Cooperation—Look East Policy Revisited in the New Era."

Japan-Laos Foreign Ministers' Meeting is held between Kono and Laotian Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommaith.

Kono meets Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister/Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat in Japan.

Kono meets Myanmar's Union Minister for the Office of the State Counsellor Kyaw Tint Swe.

**June 18, 2019:** Eighth Meeting of Japan-Philippines Joint Committee on Infrastructure Development and Economic Cooperation is held.

**June 23–July 24, 2019:** JMOD and Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) provide capacity building assistance (engineering training) to the Cambodian Military.

**June 27, 2019:** Japan-Indonesia Foreign Ministers' Meeting is held in Japan between FM Kono and Indonesian counterpart Retno Marsudi on the occasion of G20 Osaka Summit.

**June 28-29, 2019:** Japan holds 2019 G20 Osaka summit.

**June 28, 2019:** Japan-Thailand Summit Meeting is held between Abe and Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha at the G20 Osaka Summit.

Japan-Singapore Foreign Ministers' Meeting is held in Japan between FM Kono and Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan at the G20 Osaka Summit.

**July 1, 2019:** Japan-Viet Nam Leaders' Working Lunch held in Japan between PM Abe and Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc.

Japan and Vietnam (1) exchange Memorandum of Cooperation on a Basic Framework for Proper Operation of the System pertaining to Foreign Human Resources with the Status of Residence of "Specified Skilled Worker" and (2) sign "the Treaty between Japan and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons."

**July 2, 2019:** JMOD and GSDF provide HA/DR capacity-building program for Philippines defense officers.

**July 8-11, 2020:** JMOD holds first Professional Airmanship Program with military officers from ASEAN member states.

**July 9, 2019:** Kono meets Myanmar's Union Minister for the Office of the Union Government Min Thu.

**July 31, 2019:** Kono meets Myanmar's State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi.

Japan-Viet Nam Foreign Ministers' Working Dinner held in Thailand between Kono and Vietnam's DPM/FM Pham Binh Minh at the ASEAN-related Foreign Ministers' Meetings.

**Aug. 1, 2019:** Japan-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting held in Thailand.

Japan-Cambodia Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in Thailand between Kono and Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn.

Kono meets Thai Foreign Minister Pramudwinai at the ASEAN-related Foreign Ministers Meetings.

Japan-Malaysia Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in Thailand between Kono and Malaysia's Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abudullah at the ASEAN-related Foreign Ministers Meetings.

JMOD holds cyber security seminar as part of capacity building program for Vietnam People's Armed Forces.

**Aug. 2, 2019:** Japan-Philippines Foreign Ministers' Meeting held between Kono and Philippine Foreign Minister Teodoro Lopez Locsin Jr.

Japan-Brunei Foreign Ministers' Meeting held between Kono and Brunei Foreign Minister II Dato Erywan.

**Aug. 6, 2019:** Tenth Japan-Cambodia Human Rights Dialogue is held.

**Sept. 24-27, 2019:** JMOD holds Aviation Meteorology Seminar as its capacity building program for the Myanmar Air Force (MAF).

**Oct. 9, 2019:** Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu meets Myanmar's Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

**Oct. 20-24, 2019:** JMOD provides HA/DR capacity-building program to the Lao People's Army.

**Oct. 21, 2019:** Japan-Brunei Foreign Ministers Meeting held between Motegi and Foreign Minister Dato Erywan.

Abe meets Aung San Suu Kyi.

**Oct. 22, 2019:** Japan holds Ceremonies of the Accession to the Throne of His Majesty the Emperor, while PM Abe meets HM Preah Bat Samdech Preah Boromneath NORODOM Sihamoni, King of Cambodia; and His Majesty Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin Al-Mustafa Billah Shah Ibni Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah Al-Musta'in Billah, The Yang di-Pertuan Agong of Malaysia XVI.

**Oct. 23, 2019:** Abe meets H.E. Halimah Yacob, president of the Republic of Singapore; and His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanali Bolkiah of Brunei Darussalam.

Japan–Thailand Summit Meeting held in Japan between Abe and Prayut Chan-o-cha.

**Nov 4, 2019:** Eleventh Mekong–Japan Summit Meeting held in Thailand.

ASEAN Plus Three held in Thailand and issues Leaders’ Statement on Connecting the Connectivities Initiative. Bilateral summits between Japan and Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines, and Vietnam are also held.

**Nov. 7–15, 2019:** JMOD provides a HA/DR training program to the Lao People’s Army.

**Nov. 14, 2019:** The 22nd Japan–ASEAN Summit Meeting is held in Thailand.

Abe meets Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte.

**Nov. 17, 2019:** Bilateral Defense Ministerial Meeting is held in Thailand between Japan and Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.

**Nov. 18, 2019:** Japan–Indonesia Defense Ministerial Meeting is held in Thailand between DM Taro Kono and Indonesia’s Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto.

**Nov. 20, 2019:** JMOD provides HA/DR capacity-building program for Indonesian defense officers.

**Nov. 22, 2019:** Japan–Indonesia Foreign Ministers’ Meeting is held in Japan between FM Motegi and Indonesian Foreign Minister Marsudi at the G20 Foreign Ministers Meeting.

Japan–Singapore Foreign Ministers’ Meeting is held between FM Motegi and FM Balakrishnan at the G20 Foreign Ministers Meeting.

**Dec. 13, 2019:** JMOD/JMSDF hold a workshop on Undersea Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) Clearance to Vietnam People Navy officers.

**Dec. 14, 2019:** Japan–Malaysia Defense Ministerial Meeting is held in Qatar between DM Kono and Malaysia Defense Minister Mohamad bin Sabu.

**Dec. 15, 2019:** Japan–Cambodia Foreign Ministers’ Meeting is held at the ASEM Foreign

Ministers’ Meeting in Spain between FM Motegi and DPM/FM Sokhonn.

**Dec. 20, 2019:** Japan–Indonesia Defense Ministerial Meeting is held in Japan between DM Kono and DM Prabowo Subianto.

**Jan. 6, 2020:** Japan–Vietnam Foreign Ministers’ Meeting and Working Lunch is held in Vietnam between Motegi and Vietnam’s DPM/FM Pham Binh Minh.

**Jan. 7, 2020:** Japan–Thailand Foreign Ministers’ Meeting is held in Thailand between Motegi and FM Pramudwinai.

**Jan. 9, 2020:** Motegi meets Philippines FM Teodoro Lopez Locsin, Jr. Both sign and exchange notes on a yen loan for “Metro Manila Priority Bridges Seismic Improvement Project (Second Term).”

Japan and Vietnam exchange notes concerning provision of Japan’s grant to Vietnam on “the Economic and Social Development Programme.”

**Jan. 9–17, 2020:** JMOD holds a Cyber Security Seminar as part of capacity building program to the Vietnam People’s Armed Forces.

**Jan. 10, 2020:** Japan–Indonesia Foreign Ministers’ Meeting (Japan–Indonesia Ministerial–Level Strategic Dialogue) held in Indonesia between FM Motegi and FM Marusdi.

The third Japan–Indonesia Maritime Forum is held in Indonesia.

**Jan. 14–17, 2020:** JMOD/JMSDF hold a capacity building program on Underwater Medicine to the Armed Force of Myanmar.

**Jan. 20, 2020:** Motegi meets with Thai FM Paramudwinai in Thailand.

**Jan. 22, 2020:** Japan appreciates submission of the Final Report by the Independent Commission of Enquiry about human rights violations in the northern part of Rakhine State.

**Jan. 28, 2020:** JMOD/JSDF holds Underwater Medicine Seminar in Myanmar for doctors and divers from Myanmar military.

**Jan. 28–30, 2020:** JMOD holds Aviation Meteorology Seminar as part of capacity building for the Myanmar Air Force (MAF).

**Jan. 30, 2020:** World Health Organization declares COVID-19 a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern.”

**Feb. 14, 2020:** Japan decides to provide Cambodia, Laos, and the Philippines approximately 220,000 counter-COVID-19 items, such as isolation gowns through the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) via financial contributions.

**Feb. 17-26, 2020:** JMOD holds HA/DR Engineering Equipment program for the Lao People’s Army.

**Feb. 18-23, 2020:** JMOD/JSDF conducts 3rd Japan-ASEAN Invitation Program on HA/DR with ASEAN member states militaries.

**Feb. 19-22, 2020:** JMOD and JSDF provide HA/DR capacity-building program for Indonesian defense officers.

**March 10, 2020:** JMOD holds 4th Seminar for Air Rescue to the Vietnam Air Defense and Air Force officers.

**March 11, 2020:** World Health Organization declares COVID-19 a “pandemic.”

**March 13, 2020:** Japan and Laos sign and exchange notes concerning “The Project for Flood and Drought Management in the Mekong River Basin (2020-2023)” in Laos.

**March 23, 2020:** Japan-Indonesia Foreign Ministers’ Telephone Talk held between Motegi and Marsudi.

**March 31, 2020:** Motegi and Vietnam’s Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh hold a telephone talk.

**April 2, 2020:** Japan-Singapore Foreign Ministers’ Telephone Talk held between FM Motegi and FM Balakrishnan.

**April 14, 2020:** Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is held as a teleconference.

**April 23, 2020:** Japan-Indonesia Leaders Telephone Talk is held between Abe and President Joko Widodo.





# ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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