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PACIFIC  FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

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CONNECTIONS

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

EDITED BY  
ROB YORK  
BRAD GLOSSERMAN

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2020  
VOL. 22, NO. 3  
JANUARY 2021



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# PACIFIC FORUM

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

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

A Board of Directors guides the Pacific Forum's work. The Forum is funded by grants from foundations, corporations, individuals, and governments. The Forum's studies are objective and nonpartisan and it does not engage in classified or proprietary work.

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C O N N E C T I O N S

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*EDITED BY*

**ROB YORK, PACIFIC FORUM**

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

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HONOLULU, HAWAII

# COMPARATIVE CONNECTIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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2020 brought a global pandemic, economic strain, and, in both the United States and Japan, leadership transitions. COVID-19 came in waves, smaller to be sure in Japan than in the United States, and each wave intensified public scrutiny of government. Neither Tokyo nor Washington held up well. Public opinion continued to swing against President Donald Trump, increasing his [disapproval rating](#) from 50% in January to 57% in December following the US presidential election. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo also suffered a loss of confidence. His [disapproval rating](#) grew from 40% in January to 50% in July, cementing his [decision to step down](#) on Aug. 28, ostensibly for health reasons.

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After a months-long wait to see who would lead the US from 2021, both South and North Korea got an answer in November: Joe Biden. South Korea moved to forge ties with the incoming US administration, relieved at the prospect of a more conventional White House, yet anxious for it to adopt an approach to North Korea congruent with that of the Blue House. North Korea has stayed mum on Biden's victory, reflecting its poor relations with the former vice president, a pause to recalibrate diplomatic expectations, and domestic issues that overshadow foreign policy in Pyongyang. The latter point is fitting, as it is also true of Washington. The early days of the Biden presidency will see domestic focus due to the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine rollout, economic recovery, and the need to try to heal political and cultural divisions in the United States. That said, neither Korea can be neglected for long.

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The resurgent COVID-19 pandemic and US elections constrained the conduct of US relations with Southeast Asia and of regional affairs more broadly in the final months of 2020. Major conclaves were again “virtual”, including the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and the APEC meeting. Over the year, ASEAN lost considerable momentum because of the pandemic, but managed to oversee completion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in November. Some modest gains in US-Southeast Asian relations were realized, most notably extension of the US-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) for another six months, an opportunity for Manila and the new administration in Washington to put the VFA—and the US-Philippines alliance more broadly—on firmer ground. Another significant step, albeit a more controversial one, was the under-the-radar visit to Washington of Indonesian Defense Minister, Prabowo Subianto, in October.

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China faced a less forceful US posture in the South China Sea in this reporting period compared with earlier in 2020. Beijing took advantage of President Trump's failure to participate in the East Asian Summit (EAS) and other ASEAN-led meetings in November. Chinese leaders depicted the United States as disruptive and out of step with what Beijing saw as an overriding trend toward regional economic integration and cooperation. They highlighted the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement and ASEAN's new prominence as China's top trading partner, forecasting stronger regional economic growth led by China's rapid rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic. Beijing remained on guard against US challenges, and it resorted to unprecedented trade retaliation and related diplomatic pressures to compel Canberra to change its recent moves to check Chinese interference in domestic Australian affairs, expansionism in the South China Sea, repression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, and malfeasance in the initial handling of the COVID-19 outbreak in China. Some experts were optimistic that the Philippines and China were on the verge of agreeing on joint exploitation of oil and gas in South China Sea areas claimed by both countries, but others remained skeptical.

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

Taiwan's successful management of COVID-19 infections and the pandemic's economic impact has elevated Taiwan's international profile and President Tsai Ing-wen's already high domestic approval ratings, but did little to ameliorate Taiwan's confrontation with mainland China. Growing US-China economic and security tensions have continued to swirl around the island. Chinese air and naval forces have increased intimidation operations around Taiwan, with the Chinese media threatening that People's Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft might even overfly the island. Taiwan has committed to increasing its defense budget and upgrading its reserve forces, and the US approved a series of military sales that are more closely aligned with Taipei's porcupine strategy than some earlier high-profile sales. Taiwan's IT companies have struggled to preserve their production base in China, while assuring the US that they would not contribute technology to US-sanctioned Chinese companies. They also opened facilities in third countries and the US in order to ensure US market access and political support.

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Inter-Korean relations, still formally in abeyance, were dominated in September and October by a mysterious and tragic incident in the West Sea. A Southern official went missing from a survey vessel and ended up in Northern waters—where he was shot and his body burnt. Kim Jong Un apologized, sort of, and Seoul revealed that he and Moon Jae-in had earlier privately exchanged pleasantries—but neither this, nor Unification Minister Lee In-young's ceaseless calls for aid and cooperation, cut any ice in Pyongyang. Meanwhile Kim launched a campaign to eradicate Southern slang among Northern youth. In December Moon's ruling party passed a law to ban propaganda balloon launches across the DMZ, prompting widespread criticism but earning no praise from the North. At a big Party Congress in January, Kim lambasted the South in shopworn terms, withdrew his "goodwill," and said the ball is in Seoul's court. For good measure, his sister Kim Yo Jong called South Korea "weird." Despite Moon's dreams, the 2018 peace process is over, with scant prospects of renewal.

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PRC State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi's November visit to Seoul produced limited substantive results while signaling Beijing's deeper strategic intentions toward the United States' Asian allies. China's commemorations of the Korean War's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary in October provided reassurances to North Korea while triggering a war of words with South Koreans, ranging from the foreign ministry to the K-pop group BTS. On social media, the history controversy was a prelude to wider cultural clashes on a host of issues. While the repercussions of COVID-19 and US-China trade tensions challenge China and South Korea's economic agenda, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership's signing in November raised prospects for regional multilateralism. Meanwhile, North Korea's self-imposed quarantine resulted in a precipitous drop in North Korean imports from China according to China's official trade statistics. UN Panel of Experts-led monitoring of North Korean off-the-books exports of coal and sand to China drew harsh US criticisms and catalyzed the announcement of a US Treasury-administered rewards program for reporting on primarily Chinese entities engaged in illicit trade with North Korea. Coupled with the incoming Biden administration's envisioned regional architecture and the campaign's declared reliance on multilateral approaches to North Korea, Asia's multilateral initiatives may heighten Seoul's US-China dilemma.

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Perhaps the biggest news of the last third of 2020 was that Xi Jinping's often-postponed state visit to Japan will not take place in spring 2021 and may be postponed to September 2022, in commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the normalization of China-Japan diplomatic relations. Both countries' economies recovered well from the pandemic, with robust trade between them even as they continued to snipe at each other politically and upgrade their military capabilities. China continued to expand its presence in waters of the East China Sea claimed by Japan.

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The inauguration of Suga Yoshihide as Japan's prime minister in September 2020 did not lead to a breakthrough in the stalled Japan-South Korea relationship. However, it provided an opportunity for South Korea to signal that President Moon Jae-in would be interested in a summit meeting with Suga. In the final months of 2020, it became apparent that both governments in Seoul and Tokyo felt the need to improve bilateral ties, but had not yet found a way to make that happen.

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The end of 2020 may well be an “[end-of-history](#)” moment for a world riddled with disease, death, despair, and de-linkage. Despite huge differences in how Russia and China coped with these challenges, bilateral cooperation in a variety of areas (SCO, COVID-19, response to the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, etc.) were sustained and even enhanced in the last months of 2020. A salient factor was Washington’s dual-adversary undertaking, which pushed Moscow and Beijing toward deeper and broader strategic coordination. The post-election instability also cast a long shadow over US domestic and foreign policies. As 2020 drew to a close, Beijing and Moscow stepped up their strategic coordination for a possible resetting of relations with the Biden administration, or perhaps even a Biden moment, thanks to Trump’s legacy.

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Despite the COVID-19 global pandemic, India’s engagement with East Asia during 2020 remained reasonably active, both actually and virtually. India’s external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, took several opportunities to emphasize that the Indo-Pacific concept (i.e., the inclusion of India and the Indian Ocean region) has gained wider acceptance. In his opening remarks at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Quad Ministerial Meeting, for example, he said “[i]t is a matter of satisfaction that the Indo-Pacific concept has gained increasingly wider acceptance.” And he also repeatedly highlighted India’s commitment to the concept, saying “The Indo-Pacific Ocean’s Initiative that [India] tabled at the East Asia Summit [in 2019] is a development with considerable promise in that context.” He pointedly highlighted India’s actions at the frontier of the western Pacific, telling an [Indonesia-Australia convened town hall](#) that “[i]t is revealing that in the midst of a global health crisis, Indian diplomacy has actually put its Indo-Pacific approach into practice. We provided assistance to Solomon Islands, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati, Tonga, Tuvalu and Palau for procurement of medical equipment and supplies to assist in their response to COVID-19.” However, on two major counts—the decision by most regional countries to sign the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement (RCEP) without India (which had dropped out of the negotiations last year) and the confrontation-filled Sino-India relationship—India’s East Asian relations were complicated rather than positive. Brighter spots included progress on the “Quad Consultations” (US, Japan, Australia, and India) and concomitant steady progress in bilateral security ties to Japan and Australia.

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

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**REGIONAL OVERVIEW**

## MULTILATERALISM (STILL) MATTERS IN/TO ASIA

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

The last trimester of the year saw its usual flurry of (albeit virtual) multilateral summitry, with most coming after the US election. While outgoing US President Donald Trump did “attend” the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting (for the first time since 2017), he was, as usual, a no-show at the ASEAN-chaired gatherings, with the US being represented at the US-ASEAN Summit and at the more important (at least to the other participants) East Asia Summit, for the second straight year, by National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo did attend, in person, the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Tokyo in October, with the four navies meeting later in the year for their first four-way exercise in India. Pompeo also attended (virtually) the US-ASEAN Ministerial but left the participation in the broader-based ASEAN Regional Forum to Deputy Secretary of State Steve Biegun.

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The most significant economic gathering revolved around the signing of the 15-nation (sans the US or India) Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in November, arguably the world's largest economy partnership agreement, and the first multilateral trade arrangement including China. Following President-elect Joe Biden's victory, speculation was rampant in the region regarding the US possibly rejoining the TPP. While Asian states viewed Biden's election as good news as far as US support to multilateralism and a more "traditional" approach to foreign policymaking are concerned, there remained different levels of relief and anticipation, as usual, over the implications of any US regime change. Sound familiar? The key descriptor four years ago was "anxiety."

### **Yeah, Yeah, Yeah, It's All About Showing Up**

Regular consumers of the regional overview can probably skip this section: the message is familiar and readers may have difficulty hearing as we continue to (loudly) beat our drum. In short, in Asia it's all about showing up.

The president's disdain for multilateralism has been a feature of his administration. Some have joked that the only thing worse than Trump not showing up is his potentially disruptive presence when he does; recall his [blasts](#) at Justin Trudeau after the Canadian prime minister hosted the 2018 G7 summit and Trump prevented the group from issuing a joint statement at meeting's end. But his seeming indifference undermined US efforts to show a commitment to a region that officials repeatedly call critical to US national interests. Worse, there is a long [list](#) of initiatives that the US should be trumpeting that were overshadowed by the president's neglect. As outlined below, it is presumed (or at least hoped) that President-elect Biden will be more attentive toward and appreciative of Asian multilateralism.

### **APEC Gets Down to Business with a Statement and a Vision**

Trump did join the APEC summit on Nov. 16, although a week before the meeting his attendance was [uncertain](#). He withdrew from speaking at the CEO summit that took place just before the leaders meeting. The Chinese tabloid *Global Times* [noted](#) that Trump was "the only one of the 21 APEC leaders to appear without a

backdrop logo wall bearing the APEC theme," and continued with the expected applause for Chinese President Xi Jinping's remarks in support of free and open trade and multilateralism. Inexplicably, the White House website only [provides](#) a summary of Trump's remarks and not the speech itself.

The foreign ministers' meeting that preceded the summit produced the first [statement](#) in three years (last year unrest forced Chile, the host, to cancel; the year before, US objections scuttled a declaration). It recognized "the importance of a free, open, fair, nondiscriminatory, transparent and predictable trade and investment environment to drive economic recover at such a challenging time," and promised quick action to bring about a recovery from the economic calamity created by the COVID-19 outbreak.

The leaders [statement](#) hit similar notes. Calling the pandemic "one of the most challenging health and economic crises of our times," the group promised "to work together to use all available policy tools to support an inclusive, effective and sustained response to COVID-19, minimizing its impact on people's livelihoods." Given the uneven national responses to the pandemic—and that includes countries that should be leading regional efforts—that pledge rings hollow. They also proclaimed that they would embrace "the [APEC Putrajaya Vision 2040](#) ... an open, dynamic, resilient and peaceful Asia-Pacific community by 2040, for the prosperity of all our people and future generations." The leaders tasked senior officials to develop a comprehensive implementation plan by the next meeting, one that rests on three pillars: trade and investment, innovation and digitalization, and strong, balanced, secure, sustainable, and inclusive growth.

### **ASEAN-led Summits Largely Overshadowed**

Usually the ASEAN-led fall summits, bilaterally with each of its dialogue partners, and multilaterally through the East Asia Summit (EAS), steal the headlines; this year, not so much ... other than the [headlines](#) calling attention once again to the absence of President Trump, his vice president, or any member of his Cabinet. After skipping out early from his first EAS meeting (in the Philippines in 2017), Trump sent Vice President Mike Pence to the Singapore Summit in 2018. Last year in Thailand and this

year, held virtually but hosted by Vietnam, the US was represented by National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien. The Nov. 14 meeting itself focused, not surprisingly, on combatting the coronavirus pandemic. More generally, the [Chairman's Statement](#) "reaffirmed that the East Asia Summit is an open, inclusive, transparent and outward-looking forum which strengthen global norms and universally [recognized] values with ASEAN as the driving force working in partnership with the other participating countries of the East Asia Summit."

During the separate ASEAN-US Summit earlier in the day, O'Brien stressed that "(A)t this time of global crisis, the US-ASEAN strategic partnership has become even more important as we work together to combat the coronavirus," further noting that the US "has your back and we know you have ours."

## RCEP Ho!



Figure 1 Leaders and trade ministers from the 15 Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership countries pose for a virtual group photo during the signing ceremony hosted by Vietnam on November 15, 2020. Photo: AP

The big headlines came the following day when the other members of the EAS, minus India, Russia, and the US, announced the signing of the RCEP, which offers proof that ambitious plans can produce results. RCEP is the product of eight years of negotiation, and while less than intended—more on that in a minute—it is still the largest trade deal in history: its members account for 2.2 billion people and about 30% of the global economy.

It is often said that China is behind the RCEP—that is wrong. Beijing supported the initiative, but its chief driver has been ASEAN, with help from Japan. Progress was spurred by completion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and its successor the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership

(CPTPP). RCEP was always viewed as a lower standard deal than CPTPP, although in some cases it might be a stepping stone to joining that agreement.

Don't dismiss RCEP. It will profoundly simplify trade within the region by establishing a single set of rules of origin, which will facilitate the movement of goods among members and reduce tariffs in a number of cases. It is the first multilateral trade deal to include China (we're not counting joining the World Trade Organization). It is the first deal that includes Japan, China, and South Korea. With 15 members—the 10 members of ASEAN (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) and Japan, China, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand—it is foundation for economic and political integration, a process that is set to proceed without the United States. The creation of a single Asian market has the potential—over time—to reshape global trade dynamics by promoting production and consumption within Asia as the region gets richer. That would be a big deal.

At the same time, however, RCEP is less than anticipated. India's withdrawal last year—Delhi feared a flood of Chinese imports—deprived RCEP of one-third of its potential population and a big political counterweight to Beijing. Moreover, actual economic benefits are limited. One [forecast](#) reckons RCEP will add \$186 billion to the world economy by 2030—not much compared to global GDP that exceeds \$80 trillion—and 0.2% to the GDP of its members.

## CPTPP Beckons

The relative value of those competing trade deals was made plain when some RCEP members began to make noise about joining the CPTPP as soon as the former deal was completed. China [announced](#) its interest, as has [Thailand](#), [South Korea](#), and [Taiwan](#). Members of the incoming Biden administration recognize the importance of joining the group on both the economic and strategic levels, but it is too much of the new government.

In 2018, the UK declared its interest in joining the CPTPP and in September 2020 its chief negotiator, International Trade Secretary Liz Truss, [met](#) for the first time with all her counterparts from the group's 11 member states.

Joining the group makes great sense for London as it struggles with the impact of Brexit and tries to make a diplomatic splash that is in keeping with Prime Minister Boris Johnson's swashbuckling image, evidences a bold new approach to diplomacy and heralds the birth of his Global Britain. Johnson will have the support of Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide who [told](#) APEC business leaders that he envisioned expansion of the trade agreements as steps toward an even more far-reaching deal. "Japan will aspire for the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific through the early conclusion of the RCEP agreement and the steady implementation and expansion of the CPTPP as next year's chair," Suga explained.

### Ministerial Meetings Focus on China

Secretary Pompeo was also involved (or not) in several ministerial multilateral security-oriented meetings during the trimester. Pride of place went to the second Quadrilateral Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Tokyo on Oct. 6, which Pompeo attended in person despite cancelling the rest of his Asia trip due to COVID-19 concerns after President Trump was infected with the virus. The growing importance of the Quad was highlighted in our September 2020 [chapter](#). While no joint statement was issued, an [analysis](#) of the individual ministers' statements not surprisingly revealed that China was very much on everyone's minds. While others were more indirect, focusing on key buzzwords like "free and open" and "the rule of law," Pompeo was more explicit, raising concerns (as he has at almost every given opportunity) about China in general and the Chinese Communist Party in particular. The ministerial was followed a month later by Australia's first participation in 13 years in the annual (since 1992) *Malabar* naval exercise off the coast of India along with its other three Quad partners sending [a message to China](#) of the Quad's growing multidimensional nature.

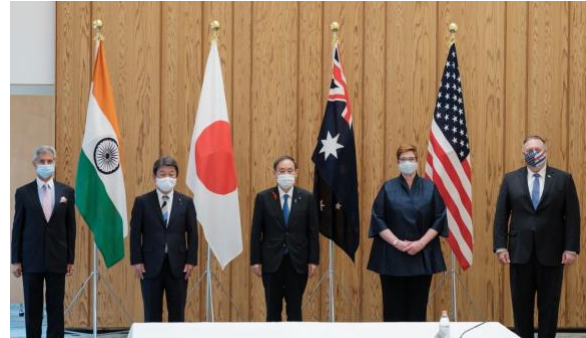


Figure 2 Foreign Ministers from the United States, Australia, Japan, and India meet at the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in Tokyo on October 10, 2020. Photo: AFP/Nicolas Datiche

Pompeo also "attended" the virtual US-ASEAN Ministerial on Sept. 11 hosted by Vietnam. In his prepared [remarks](#) on "The Enduring US Commitment to ASEAN," he "reaffirmed U.S. support for ASEAN's role at the heart of the Indo-Pacific," further noting that the ASEAN Outlook for the Indo-Pacific and the US Indo-Pacific Strategy "share a respect for sovereignty, the rule of law, transparency, openness, and inclusivity." In case this was too subtle, his statement also underscored "our commitment to speak out in the face of the Chinese Communist Party's escalating aggression and threats to sovereign nations' ability to make free choices."

Pompeo passed on the opportunity to attend the next day's broader multilateral ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) ministerial meeting. The US was represented instead by Deputy Secretary of State Steve Biegun, who [underscored](#) "the importance of the international rules-based order in addressing increasing tensions and militarization in the South China Sea, the need for unhindered humanitarian access and the cessation of violence in Rakhine State, concern over the erosion of autonomy and human rights in Hong Kong, and the US support for a path to lasting peace in the Korean Peninsula." He joined all the other ARF participants "in expressing concerns about the coronavirus pandemic's impact and the need for a well-coordinated regional response and an affordable vaccine." The [ARF Chairman's Statement](#) focused on fighting the pandemic, while soft-peddling on the other issues (i.e., expressing "their continued support for Myanmar's commitment to promote safety and security for all communities in Rakhine State as effectively as possible") while avoiding any reference at all to Hong Kong.

## Scrambling the COVID Competition

The response to COVID-19 by Indo-Asia-Pacific governments challenged years of theorizing about the merits of political systems in responding to crises. Democracies were supposed to best autocracies when confronting these problems—governments that felt popular pressure would be faster and more efficient in their response because they would be threatened with dismissal.

Reports that the Chinese government covered up the initial outbreak in Wuhan would seem to support the traditional argument. But Beijing recovered and has managed to control the outbreak. With rare exceptions, democracies have not performed as well. However, it looks like governments in this part of the world have done well, regardless of regime type. In the early stages of the outbreak, Hong Kong (a liberal, nondemocratic regime), Singapore (an illiberal dominant-party state), and Taiwan (a liberal democracy) were [assessed](#) as setting the gold standard for a response. Now, New Zealand, Taiwan, and Singapore get applause, as does China.

Three factors contributed to success: learning from the 2003 SARS outbreak; political legitimacy; and state capacity. Democracies were supposed to be especially good at the last two. Reality proved otherwise. Much depends on competence—again, supposedly a feature of democracies—and leadership. A leader's failure to take the virus seriously had to undermine any response. Also important is trust, which inspires a public to follow its government. These days, perhaps counter-intuitively, there is [more trust in China](#)—meaning among Chinese—than elsewhere in the world.

The implications of this are profound (and we aren't talking about the academic careers that might be upended by these developments): Beijing claims that the superiority of its response validates its political system and uses that success as a platform for assertive diplomacy. It argues that human rights can be sacrificed to beat COVID-19. That is wrong, as the record of some of the region's democracies makes plain. Still, former US Treasury Secretary Larry Summers has [warned](#) that divergent responses to the crisis—referring to the gross failures in the US and other advanced democracies—“may well be a hinge in history.”

## Biden Asia Policy: What to Expect?

Speculation regarding incoming US President Joe Biden's Asia/Indo-Pacific policy and team has already filled volumes. As this issue was going on line, *The Financial Times* [reported](#) that former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific Kurt Campbell would be named to a new position of Indo-Pacific coordinator overseeing the various Asia-oriented desks at the National Security Council and that Ely Ratner, a former deputy national security advisor to Biden, would be nominated to serve as assistant secretary of defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, the Pentagon's top Asia position.] Given that Biden in all probability will revert to a more traditional staff-supported approach to foreign policy (rather than policy by tweets), who he picks for the key Asia portfolios at State, Defense, and the NSC will help shed more light as the transition takes hold; the only quasi-Asia hand nominated thus far is Wendy Sherman for deputy secretary of state, whose prior diplomatic portfolio included negotiating with the DPRK (along with Iran and others).

The choices of Jake Sullivan (head of policy planning and deputy chief of staff to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and later national security adviser to Biden during Obama's second term), Antony Blinken (who served as both a deputy national security adviser and as deputy secretary of State with long and close personal ties to Biden), and retired Army Gen. Lloyd Austin (who last served as head of US Central Command in 2016) to fill the three top foreign policy positions (national security advisor, secretary of state, and secretary of defense, respectively) sends a clear signal of a renewed emphasis on multilateralism and alliance-based diplomacy as previously practiced by the Obama-Biden administration. This does not necessarily portend a less firm approach toward China, however, as many are speculating. As Sullivan has already clearly [signaled](#), we are dealing today with “a much more assertive China abroad and a much more repressive China [at home]” than the one Obama faced. As a result, “(W)e expect to be taking a stronger position on China than has been the case in past Democratic administrations.” The change in approach toward Asia policy in general and toward China in particular is more likely to be a change in style rather than in substance. Recall that *National Security Strategy* statements from both the Obama and Trump administrations

stressed the alliance-based nature of Asia security policy and the need to both cooperate with China when possible and confront/constrain (not contain) when necessary. What's changed over time has been the difference in emphasis between cooperation and confront/constrain, but this has been driven more by Chinese actions than US desires. Not surprisingly, Sullivan also signaled renewed emphasis on climate, global health, cyber, and human rights by the incoming administration.

Reaction to Biden's win in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region has largely been positive, but there has been some concern. There is no regret at the prospect of an end to Trump's seemingly unilateral, mercurial, ad hoc, and transactional approach to foreign policy. Allies, partners, and likely even adversaries are looking forward to a more predictable and process-driven foreign policy. One of the authors produced [six articles](#) outlining expectations of the new administration by US allies in the region. A constant theme was a desire for more consistency and consultation. Equally important, they all stressed continued vigilance toward China's revisionism and blocking Beijing's efforts to extend its influence in the region. Many in the region would welcome a US return to the TPP or even its joining RCEP but it's unlikely that Biden would expend the political capital required to make such a move at least in the near term given other priorities, such as fighting an out-of-control pandemic and rescuing a rapidly deteriorating economy.

At the same time, however, regional governments do not want Biden to force them to take sides in the competition between the two powers, nor to foreclose the economic opportunities that they enjoy from close relations with China. They are wary of a values-based foreign policy that could antagonize other governments in the region that are not as committed to human rights and democracy, and could undermine the broader alliance against a revisionist power. And of course each regional government has its particular concern. The South Korean government does not want the new US administration to adopt a hard line against Pyongyang that would imperil inter-Korean relations. The government in Tokyo continues to harbor instinctive concern about a Democratic administration in Washington, no matter how [unfounded](#) those beliefs are. Individual chapters in this issue of *Comparative Connections* offer more details and we're sure

that the issue will demand attention in issues to come.

# REGIONAL CHRONOLOGY

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2020

**Sept. 1, 2020:** US Department of Defense [releases](#) its annual report on China's military power, assessing that the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s military modernization has eroded Taiwan's potential advantages should a cross-Taiwan Strait conflict occur.

**Sept. 1, 2020:** Japan, Australia, and India [agree](#) to diversify supply chains away from China, a major trading partner for all three.

**Sept. 2, 2020:** Chinese and Lao firms [sign](#) a shareholders pact to establish the Electricite du Laos Transmission Company Limited in Vientiane.

**Sept. 2, 2020:** US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [announces](#) that the State Department will require senior PRC diplomats in the US to receive approval to visit university campuses and meet local government officials.

**Sept. 3, 2020:** Department of State [publishes](#) the website entitled "The Chinese Communist Party's Human Rights Abuses in Xinjiang," detailing aspects of alleged violations of human rights in Xinjiang.

**Sept. 6, 2020:** KMT national convention [reiterates](#) party's cross-Strait narrative: "1992 Consensus based on the ROC Constitution," and says it opposes Taiwan independence and China's "one country, two systems."

**Sept. 7, 2020:** Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe [meets](#) Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin in Kuala Lumpur and discuss bilateral cooperation.

**Sept. 8, 2020:** Philippine Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez [meets](#) Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines Huang Xilian via video conference to discuss cooperation between Manila and Beijing, including timely completion of projects under the "Build, Build, Build" program.

**Sept. 8, 2020:** Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi [cautions](#) the United States and China not to entangle Jakarta in their regional struggle for influence.

**Sept. 8, 2020:** Department of State [revokes](#) more than 1,000 visas of PRC nationals following a May 29 [proclamation](#) by President Trump in response to China's curbs on democracy in Hong Kong.

**Sept. 8, 2020:** Chinese Defense Minister Wei [meets](#) Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto in Jakarta and they agree to resolve South China Sea issues through dialogue.

**Sept. 9, 2020:** Brunei Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah [meets](#) Wei in Bandar Seri Begawan.

**Sept. 9-12, 2020:** Video meetings of foreign ministers on East Asia Cooperation [take place](#).

**Sept. 10, 2020:** Pompeo [attends](#) a virtual US-ASEAN ministerial meeting and urges counterparts to stand up to Chinese maritime bullying.

**Sept. 10, 2020:** Chinese Vice-Premier Liu He [participates](#) in the China-EU high-level dialogue in the digital area and stresses digital cooperation with the EU.

**Sept. 11, 2020:** Wei [meets](#) Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana and pledges to donate \$20 million in noncombat equipment to the Philippines.

**Sept. 11, 2020:** China's foreign ministry [accuses](#) Australian consular officials of "wanton obstruction" and disruption of law enforcement activities of Chinese authorities by sheltering journalists Bill Birthles and Mike Smith in the embassy in Beijing and in the Shanghai consulate.

**Sept. 11, 2020:** US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun [meets](#) foreign ministers from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam to discuss ways to deepen cooperation.

**Sept. 11, 2020:** China State Construction Engineering Company [publishes](#) its first sustainable development report for Sri Lanka.

**Sept. 11, 2020:** China [announces](#) new restrictions on US diplomats working in mainland China and Hong Kong in response to similar measures imposed on Chinese diplomats.

**Sept. 12, 2020:** US lawmakers [question](#) Disney CEO Bob Chapek on connections with security and propaganda authorities of China's Xinjiang region during production of the film *Mulan*.

**Sept. 12, 2020:** Online meeting of the 27<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum [takes place](#).

**Sept. 13, 2020:** China [bans](#) imports of horses and other equines from Malaysia following an outbreak of African Horse Sickness.

**Sept. 14, 2020:** International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi [tells](#) board members that North Korea appears to have continued operating nuclear facilities.

**Sept. 14, 2020:** Suga Yoshihide [wins](#) the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presidential election, effectively becoming prime minister of Japan.

**Sept. 15, 2020:** World Trade Organization (WTO) panel [says](#) the US broke global regulations in imposing tariffs on Chinese goods in 2018.

**Sept. 15, 2020:** Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [meets](#) Mongolian Foreign Minister Nyamtseren Enkhtaivan and pledges to advance cooperation.

**Sept. 15, 2020:** US [blacklists](#) Chinese real-estate development company Union Development Group over its Cambodia development project amid "credible reports" the project could be used to host Chinese military assets.

**Sept. 16, 2020:** Ma Xiaoguang, spokesperson for China's Taiwan Affairs Office, [calls](#) Chinese military drills of Taiwan's southwest coast a "necessary action" to protect Chinese sovereignty.

**Sept. 17, 2020:** US-based venture capital firm Lightspeed Venture Partners [announces](#) establishment of regional headquarters in Singapore, signifying expansion into Southeast Asia.

**Sept. 17, 2020:** Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh [briefs](#) Rajya Sabha regarding the standoff between the Indian Army and PLA at the Eastern Ladakh border.

**Sept. 17, 2020:** US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell [describes](#) China's recent actions as that of a "lawless bully" in prepared testimony for a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing.

**Sept. 19, 2020:** Japan's former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo [visits](#) Yasukuni Shrine a few days after his resignation.

**Sept. 19, 2020:** US Undersecretary for Economic Affairs Keith Krach [concludes](#) visit to Taiwan after attending a memorial service for late former President Lee Teng-hui.

**Sept. 19, 2020:** China's Commerce Ministry [announces](#) details about its "unreliable entities list" in response to US WeChat and TikTok bans.

**Sept. 20, 2020:** New Delhi police [arrest](#) veteran Indian journalist Rajeev Sharma on suspicion of spying for China.

**Sept. 21, 2020:** California Judge Laurel Beeler temporarily [blocks](#) the Department of Commerce ban of Chinese social media app WeChat.

**Sept. 21, 2020:** Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen [accuses](#) Beijing of inflaming tensions in East Asia following Chinese warplanes' crossing of the sensitive median line between the cross-strait rivals.

**Sept. 22, 2020:** South Korean President Moon Jae-In [calls](#) for declaring an end to the Korean War at 75<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly.

**Sept. 22, 2020:** Baimadajie Angwang, a New York City police officer, [is charged](#) as an intelligence asset for the Chinese government.

**Sept. 22, 2020:** Ren Zhiqiang, Chinese property tycoon and outspoken critic of Xi Jinping, [is sentenced](#) to 18 years for alleged corruption.

**Sept. 22, 2020:** President Trump [lashes](#) out at China for “unleashing” the COVID-19 pandemic in a pre-recorded address to the 75th session of the UN General Assembly. Chinese President Xi [responds](#) with calls for multilateralism and warnings against the “stigmatization” of states.

**Sept. 23, 2020:** Pompeo [warns](#) state and local US politicians of the dangers posed by Chinese diplomats seeking to manipulate them as part of Beijing’s propaganda and espionage campaign.

**Sept. 24, 2020:** South Korean officials [condemn](#) North Korea’s [killing](#) of a South Korean Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Ministry official who may have tried to defect to North Korea.

**Sept. 25, 2020:** Australian Strategic Policy Institute [releases](#) a research report documenting over 380 suspected detention facilities in Xinjiang, China.

**Sept. 25, 2020:** US State Department [publishes](#) a fact sheet on China’s environmental abuses.

**Sept. 25, 2020:** Suga has his first [call](#) with Chinese President Xi, agreeing to pursue high-level contacts in the pursuit of regional and international stability.

**Sept. 26, 2020:** Malaysian Ambassador to China Raja Nushirwan Zainal Abidin [says](#) that Malaysia will not follow the US in imposing sanctions on 24 Chinese companies that the US accuses of advancing Chinese militarization in the South China Sea.

**Sept. 27, 2020:** US government [imposes](#) sanctions on China’s largest chipmaker, Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation, dealing additional damage to the country’s semiconductor industry.

**Sept. 27, 2020:** US Federal Judge Carl Nichols [blocks](#) the Trump administration’s order to Apple and Google to remove TikTok from their US app stores.

**Sept. 28, 2020:** China [holds](#) five simultaneous military exercises on different parts of its coast for the second time in two months. Locations [include](#) the Bohai Sea, the East China Sea, the Yellow Sea, and the disputed South China Sea, close to the Paracel Islands.

**Sept. 29, 2020:** China [describes](#) India’s designation of the fast-militarizing Ladakh region as a union territory “illegal” and objects to Indian infrastructure construction in the area.

**Sept. 29, 2020:** Thailand’s new army chief Gen. Narongpan Jittkaewtae, [pledges](#) support to the Thai monarchy.

**Sept. 30, 2020:** H.R.6270 – Uyghur Forced Labor Disclosure Act of 2020 [passes](#) in the US House of Representatives.

**Sept. 30, 2020:** Bangladesh officials [accuse](#) the Myanmar government of conducting a “disinformation campaign” to hamper Rohingya repatriation in a speech before the UN General Assembly.

**Sept. 30, 2020:** Vietnamese President Nguyen Phu Trong [suggests](#) to his Chinese counterpart Xi that the two countries “work together” to address concerns, particularly maritime issues.

**Oct. 1, 2020:** Lawmakers in the US House of Representatives [approve](#) legislation requiring publicly listed companies in the US to disclose commercial links to China’s Xinjiang Autonomous Uygur Region.

**Oct. 2, 2020:** Trump [announces](#) that he and first lady Melania Trump have tested positive for COVID-19.

**Oct. 3, 2020:** Cambodia reportedly [destroys](#) a US-built facility at one of its largest naval facilities amid concerns of a secret Phnom Penh-Beijing deal to host PLA soldiers at Ream Naval Base.

**Oct. 4, 2020:** Interpol [issues](#) a “red notice” for Vorayuth Yoovidhya, Thai heir to Red Bull co-founder Chaleo Yoovidhya’s fortune estimated at \$20.2 billion, for his role in an alleged hit-and-run.

**Oct. 4, 2020:** President of Singapore Halimah Yacob and Xi [exchange](#) congratulatory messages to mark the 30th anniversary of bilateral relations.

**Oct. 5, 2020:** Chinese People’s Liberation Army propagandists [are ordered](#) to steer clear of US election coverage and avoid remarks that might cause more disturbance to US-China relations.

**Oct. 5, 2020:** Indonesia [passes](#) the so-called omnibus law, overhauling several dozen tax and labor market laws as Jakarta looks to boost foreign investment and mitigate the economic impact of COVID-19.

**Oct. 6, 2020:** Pew poll [shows](#) a rise in unfavorable views of China in 14 countries, including Australia, South Korea, and Japan.

**Oct. 6, 2020:** Taiwan's deputy defense minister, Chang Guan-chung, [appeals](#) to the United States to help boost the island's defenses at the annual US-Taiwan Defense Industry Conference.

**Oct. 6, 2020:** Foreign ministers from the Quad—the US, Japan, India, and Australia—[gather](#) in Tokyo to discuss the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” initiative. **Oct. 7, 2020:** Pompeo [criticizes](#) Chinese military maneuvers in the Pacific, reiterating US assurances to help Taiwan defend itself.

**Oct. 7, 2020:** US [lifts](#) the 20-year ban on Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, a move analysts claim is aimed at balancing China's power in Southeast Asia.

**Oct. 7, 2020:** Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu and his Australian counterpart Marise Payne [meet](#) to discuss the Australian-Japanese strategic partnership and cooperation.

**Oct. 8, 2020:** Police in Indonesia [arrest](#) hundreds of protesters across the country as thousands rally against the omnibus labor law.

**Oct. 8, 2020:** Japanese fishing industry representatives [urge](#) the government not to allow the release of tons of contaminated water from the Fukushima nuclear plant into the sea.

**Oct. 9, 2020:** China [joins](#) 156 countries in WHO-led Covax initiative for fair distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.

**Oct. 9, 2020:** US government [appeals](#) court ruling that suspended government ban of video-sharing app TikTok.

**Oct. 10, 2020:** India's Foreign Secretary Harsh V Shringla and the country's army chief [make](#) a joint visit to Naypyidaw, fueling talk that Myanmar is stepping up efforts to balance Chinese influence.

**Oct. 10, 2020:** Kim Jong Un [unveils](#) North Korea's largest ICBM at military parade. Kim [tears](#) up as he delivers an apology to North Korean citizens for his failure to raise living standards

**Oct. 11, 2020:** Japan's Coast Guard [claims](#) that two Chinese vessels entered what Japan considers its territorial waters near disputed islands in the East China Sea.

**Oct. 12, 2020:** China's PLA [holds](#) a large-scale island invasion drill during Taiwan's “Double Ten” holiday.

**Oct. 12, 2020:** China [signs](#) a free-trade deal with Cambodia and pledges \$140 million for national “top priority projects.”

**Oct. 13, 2020:** Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein [meets](#) with his Chinese counterpart Wang during the second leg of Wang's five-nation regional tour. During their meetings Wang [slams](#) the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.

**Oct. 14, 2020:** US State Department Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs [releases](#) its list of Hong Kong, Macau, and PRC officials it says have contributed to undermining of autonomy in Hong Kong.

**Oct. 14, 2020:** As part of China's regional charm offensive, Wang [visits](#) Thailand, casting Beijing as Bangkok's “big friend.”

**Oct. 15, 2020:** UN [condemns](#) North Korea's unlawful killing of ROK official in waters.

**Oct. 15, 2020:** Thailand's government [declares](#) a state of emergency in Bangkok following anti-government protests by around 10,00 people in Bangkok.

**Oct. 15, 2020:** China [calls](#) on Taiwanese spies to switch sides after claiming to have uncovered hundreds of cases of spying by Taipei on the Chinese mainland.

**Oct. 16, 2020:** Cotton Australia and the Australian Cotton Shippers Association [confirm](#) reports of a verbal directive for Chinese mills to stop using Australian cotton. This adds cotton to a growing list of targeted Australian exports, including coal, barley, wine, and beef.

**Oct. 16, 2020:** China's ambassador to Canada [blasts](#) Ottawa for granting refugee status to Hong Kong pro-democracy protesters, calling it "interference" encouraging "violent criminals."

**Oct. 17, 2020:** Wang [tells](#) ASEAN that the "Quad" aims to "stir up confrontation among different groups ... to maintain the dominance and hegemonic system of the US."

**Oct. 17, 2020:** Philippines [announces](#) that oil and gas exploration will resume in the South China Sea, signaling an end to a six-year moratorium on resource exploration in the disputed waters.

**Oct. 17, 2020:** Chinese government [warns](#) Washington that it may detain Americans in China in response to the prosecution of Chinese military-affiliated scholars.

**Oct. 19, 2020:** Chinese Ambassador to Japan Kong Xuanyou [urges](#) Tokyo to use its unique position as US ally and major Chinese neighbor to help stabilize Washington-Beijing relations.

**Oct. 19, 2020:** Suga and Vietnamese counterpart Nguyen Xuan Phuc [meet](#) in Hanoi and agree to cooperate on regional issues, including the disputed South China.

**Oct. 20, 2020:** Australia [agrees](#) to take part in large-scale *Malabar* naval exercise with other members of the Quad in the Bay of Bengal.

**Oct. 20, 2020:** Indonesian DM Prabowo and US Defense Secretary Mark Esper [agree](#) to boost defense and security cooperation.

**Oct. 21, 2020:** Thai royalists and anti-government protesters [confront](#) each other over demands for reform to the monarch and departure of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha.

**Oct. 21, 2020:** Indian authorities [hand back](#) a Chinese soldier who was apprehended in the Demchock area of Ladakh after crossing a contested border in the Himalayan region.

**Oct. 22, 2020:** Protesters in Bangkok [reject](#) PM Prayut Chan-o-cha's olive branch and submit a letter calling on him to resign within three days.

**Oct. 22, 2020:** China [issues](#) a draft version of its national defense law, detailing enhanced security in cyberspace and improved communication between the government and military.

**Oct. 22, 2020:** Beijing's [describes](#) US labelling of six Chinese media outlets as "substantially or effectively controlled" by Beijing as "political oppression" and threatened to retaliate.

**Oct 23, 2020:** Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden [says](#) he could meet Kim Jong Un if North Korea reduces the country's nuclear capabilities.

**Oct. 23, 2020:** Justice Department official John Demers [accuses](#) China of helping North Korea launder money from massive cyber thefts carried out to raise capital in the face of international sanctions.

**Oct. 23, 2020:** In a speech marking the anniversary of the Korean War, Xi [warns](#) that China is not afraid of war and will not allow its sovereignty, security, and development interests to be undermined.

**Oct. 25, 2020:** Beijing cautiously [welcomes](#) Vladimir Putin's suggestion that a military alliance between China and Russia is possible.

**Oct. 25, 2020:** Suga [pledges](#) Japan will become carbon neutral by 2050 in his first policy speech to a new session of the Diet.

**Oct. 26, 2020:** State Department [approves](#) sale of 100 Harpoon Coastal Defense Systems (HCDS) to Taiwan in a package worth \$2.37 billion.

**Oct. 26, 2020:** Media reports [claim](#) the United States and India are preparing to sign an agreement to share satellite intelligence, as the two sides seek to increase security cooperation.

**Oct. 26, 2020:** US lodges an [appeal](#) against the WTO ruling that some of its tariffs on China are unlawful.

**Oct. 27, 2020:** In a trip to New Delhi with Defense Secretary Mark Esper, Pompeo [vows](#) to work closely with India to counter an increasingly aggressive China.

**Oct. 27, 2020:** Spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry [announces](#) Beijing's intention to impose sanctions on US firms Boeing Defense, Lockheed Martin, and Raytheon Technologies, as well as "anyone who played a bad role" in Washington's \$1.8 billion Taiwan arms deal.

**Oct. 27, 2020:** Three prodemocracy activists [are arrested](#) by the Hong Kong Police Force after briefly entering the US consulate in the city in an apparent bid to seek asylum.

**Oct. 28, 2020:** Pompeo [calls](#) China's communist government a "predator" during a meeting with Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in Colombo.

**Oct. 28, 2020:** US Department of Defense [hosts](#) a crisis communications working group with the PLA to discuss concepts of crisis communications, crisis prevention, and crisis management.

**Oct. 28, 2020:** South Korean President Moon Jae-in [pledges](#) to make his country carbon-neutral by 2050 during a budget speech.

**Oct. 29, 2020:** US authorities [charge](#) eight people with conducting an illegal operation intended to target, intimidate, and kidnap individuals perceived by Beijing to be dissident threats.

**Oct. 29, 2020:** Pompeo [issues](#) a statement condemning the arrest and detention of three student activists in Hong Kong under the National Security Law.

**Oct. 29, 2020:** Pompeo [adds](#) a two-day visit to Hanoi to his Asian tour designed to promote US foreign policy. Earlier destinations included India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Indonesia.

**Oct. 30, 2020:** Australia [criticizes](#) China's anti-dumping duties on its barley exports in a statement at the WTO.

**Oct. 30, 2020:** Chinese and US defense officials [comprising](#) the Crisis Communications Working Group meet to discuss crisis prevention amid rumors that the Trump administration plans to attack Chinese-claimed islands in the South China Sea.

**Oct. 31, 2020:** Pompeo [concludes](#) a visit to Asia in Vietnam, a tour marked by repeated calls for assistance to the US in confronting security threats posed by China.

**Nov. 1, 2020:** Telecoms giant Huawei [works](#) on plans for a dedicated chip plant in Shanghai, which would enable it to secure essential supplies for its telecom infrastructure business despite US sanctions.

**Nov. 2, 2020:** Former Chinese Commerce Minister Chen Deming [says](#) China should "carefully consider" whether Beijing should join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

**Nov. 2, 2020:** Pompeo [condemns](#) Hong Kong authorities for "clear abuse of law enforcement" in arresting eight opposition ministers.

**Nov. 3, 2020:** State Department [approves](#) a \$600 million sale of four Weapons-Ready MQ-9B Remotely Piloted Aircraft to Taiwan.

**Nov. 3, 2020:** Indonesian President Joko Widodo [endorses](#) controversial omnibus law, which has sparked protests from those who say it erodes labor rights and weakens environmental protections.

**Nov. 3, 2020:** Indian, Japanese, Australia, and the US [begin](#) joint naval exercises in the Indian Ocean as part of the Malabar exercise.

**Nov. 3, 2020:** US [approves](#) sale of four sophisticated drones to Taiwan, in the final component of a weapons package to Taipei worth almost \$4.8 billion.

**Nov. 4, 2020:** China [suspends](#) the \$37 billion listing of Ant Group, which was set to become the world's largest IPO, two days before trading was due to start.

**Nov. 5, 2020:** Duong Di Sanh, deputy chairman of the Museum of Chinese Australian History, [becomes](#) the first person charged under a new foreign interference law by Australian Federal Police.

**Nov. 5, 2020:** US [removes](#) the designation of the Uyghur-founded group the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist organization.

**Nov. 6, 2020:** German defense chief Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer [labels](#) China a “systemic challenge” and calls for greater military cooperation with “like-minded” countries in the Indo-Pacific.

**Nov. 6, 2020:** China drafts a coast guard law [authorizing](#) maritime law enforcers to demolish foreign constructions on Chinese-claimed reefs and use weapons against foreign ships.

**Nov. 7, 2020:** BHP Group [signs](#) a memorandum of understanding focused on decarbonizing steelmaking with Baowu, China’s biggest steelmaker.

**Nov. 7, 2020:** Indian Chief of Defense Staff Bipin Rawat [warns](#) that tense border standoff with Chinese forces in the western Himalayas could spark a larger conflict.

**Nov. 8, 2020:** Moon [congratulates](#) Joe Biden on his election victory, as does [Suga](#).

**Nov. 8, 2020:** China’s PLA [releases](#) a video on Weibo showing armed personnel carriers driving through the streets of Hong Kong before conducting a live-fire exercise.

**Nov. 9, 2020:** US [imposes](#) sanctions on four additional PRC and Hong Kong officials over the Hong Kong national security law.

**Nov. 9, 2020:** Japan [welcomes](#) the visit of ROK intelligence chief Park Jie-won as an opportunity to thaw frosty relations between Tokyo and Seoul.

**Nov. 10, 2020:** Center for Strategic and International Studies [publishes](#) pictures allegedly showing the destruction of a US-built facility at Cambodia’s Ream Naval Base.

**Nov. 10, 2020:** Hong Kong pro-democracy legislators [resign](#) en masse amid reports of Beijing planning to disqualify four opposition lawmakers accused of potential unlawful filibustering in the legislature.

**Nov. 11, 2020:** Pompeo [announces](#) that Undersecretary of State Keith Krach will lead economic talks with Taiwan this month.

**Nov. 12, 2020:** Trump [signs](#) an executive order prohibiting Americans from investing in Chinese firms the administration says are owned or controlled by the Chinese military.

**Nov. 12, 2020:** Biden [declares](#) that Article 5 of US-Japan security treaty applies to Japan’s administration of the disputed Senkaku Islands.

**Nov. 12, 2020:** North Korea [labels](#) the IAEA a “marionette dancing to the tune of the tune of hostile forces.”

**Nov. 13, 2020:** Taiwan representative to the US Bi-Khim Hsiao [speaks](#) with Biden foreign policy advisor Tony Blinken by phone to congratulate Biden on his election victory.

**Nov. 13, 2020:** China’s MFA spokesman [congratulates](#) Biden on his election as president after staying silent for 10 days following the election on Nov. 3.

**Nov. 13, 2020:** Christopher Langman, Australian deputy foreign affairs and trade secretary, [expresses](#) confidence that “technical” issues disrupting trade between Beijing and Canberra will be resolved as soon as possible.

**Nov. 13, 2020:** China’s Foreign Ministry in Hong Kong [describes](#) the ousting of four pro-democracy lawmakers from Hong Kong’s legislature as the “right medicine” and tells foreign governments that the issue is none of their business.

**Nov. 13, 2020:** Trump administration [extends](#) deadline for ByteDance to restructure ownership of its video app TikTok in the US, giving the Chinese company time to resolve national security concerns raised by Washington.

**Nov. 14, 2020:** Defense chiefs of Japan and the US [confirm](#) that the Senkaku Islands fall under the scope of a security treaty between Tokyo and Washington.

**Nov. 15, 2020:** Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the [world’s](#) biggest free trade pact, is signed by 15 Asia-Pacific nations.

**Nov. 15, 2020:** Research paper in the *Chinese Journal of Aeronautics* [reveals](#) US software is being used in Chinese military research, despite US ban and efforts to restrict Beijing’s access to these tools.

**Nov. 16, 2020:** Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison [arrives](#) in Tokyo to meet counterpart Suga.

**Nov. 17, 2020:** China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian [states](#) that China bears "no responsibility" for the collapse of bilateral trade with Canberra as a result of a rising number of restrictions on Australian exports to China.

**Nov. 18, 2020:** US [sends](#) two long-range bombers into China's air defense identification zone.

**Nov. 18, 2020:** Governments of the US, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK [release](#) a joint statement expressing "serious concern regarding China's imposition of new rules to disqualify elected legislators in Hong Kong."

**Nov. 18, 2020:** At least 10,000 Thai democracy activists [surround](#) police headquarters in Bangkok during one of the largest demonstrations since protests began almost five months ago.

**Nov. 18, 2020:** Australia and Japan [agree](#) "in principle" to a Reciprocal Access Agreement, which provides the legal framework for Australian forces in Japan, and vice versa.

**Nov. 18, 2020:** China's foreign ministry [expresses](#) unease at the joint defense pact signed by Japan and Australia, noting that their military cooperation should not threaten third-party interests.

**Nov. 19, 2020:** China [criticizes](#) a statement by the "Five Eyes" intelligence alliance urging Beijing to reverse the disqualification of pro-democracy lawmakers from Hong Kong's Legislative Council.

**Nov. 19, 2020:** Morrison [responds](#) to Beijing's list of 14 grievances, accusing Canberra of "poisoning bilateral relations," by stating he would not compromise Australia's national security and sovereignty.

**Nov. 20, 2020:** Suga [states](#) Tokyo's intention to expand the CPTPP to include China and Britain.

**Nov. 21, 2020:** Xi [tells](#) an online APEC summit that China will consider joining the CPTPP.

**Nov. 21, 2020:** US and Taiwan [sign](#) a memorandum of understanding during inaugural US-Taiwan Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue, laying a foundation for stronger economic ties.

**Nov. 21, 2020:** USS Barry [transits](#) Taiwan Strait in a Freedom of Navigation Operation.

**Nov. 22, 2020:** Controversial 43 billion renminbi (about \$6.6 billion) port project to be built off the coast of Melaka, Malaysia, slated to be the largest in the region, [is scrapped](#) by the state government.

**Nov. 23, 2020:** In letter read at the opening ceremony of the 7th World Internet Conference in Wuzhen, Xi [says](#) China ready to work with other countries to build a shared cyberspace community and "create an even better future for mankind."

**Nov. 23, 2020:** Wang [tells](#) French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian that Beijing supports Europe's push for "strategic autonomy" amid calls for the EU to work with the new Biden administration to counter China.

**Nov. 24, 2020:** China [launches](#) Chang'e 5 space mission, an unmanned expedition aiming to probe, drill, and retrieve minerals from an unexplored volcanic mound on the moon.

**Nov. 24, 2020:** Taiwan [commences](#) construction of first domestically developed submarine, armed with a US combat system.

**Nov. 25, 2020:** Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam [vows](#) to deepen ties with Beijing at an annual policy address, pledging to rescue the city from "chaos."

**Nov. 25, 2020:** Xi [congratulates](#) Biden on his election as president of the United States 12 days after China's initial congratulations.

**Nov. 25, 2020:** India's Electronics and Information Technology ministry [announces](#) a ban on an additional 43 Chinese apps, including AliExpress, bringing the total of blacklisted apps to over 200.

**Nov. 26, 2020:** Wang [meets](#) senior government officials in South Korea, stressing the importance of bilateral relations amid growing concern that Seoul is being squeezed between China and the United States.

**Nov. 27, 2020:** Beijing [announces](#) anti-dumping duties on Australian wine imports in the latest wave of sanctions that have already targeted barley, beef, seafood, and coal.

**Nov. 27, 2020:** Taiwan Finance Minister Su Jain-rong [promotes](#) informal alliance with the US to finance infrastructure and energy projects in Asia and Latin America with capital from the private sector.

**Nov. 28, 2020:** In TV interview, Hong Kong's chief executive [says](#) she has no bank account after the US imposed sanctions on her, along with 14 other senior security officials, in response to Hong Kong's national security law.

**Nov. 29, 2020:** China [powers](#) up its first domestically developed nuclear reactor, the Hualong One, which is expected to go into commercial use by the end of the year.

**Nov. 29, 2020:** Taiwan [commences](#) construction of first indigenous submarine its fleet, when complete, will consist of eight vessels.

**Nov. 30, 2020:** Canberra [accuses](#) Beijing of sharing a "deeply offensive" fake image on Twitter of an Australian soldier murdering an Afghan child amid escalating diplomatic tensions.

**Nov. 30, 2020:** Chinese Defense Minister Wei [pledges](#) military support for Nepal during talks in Kathmandu amid Chinese defense disputes with India in the contested Himalayas region.

**Nov. 30, 2020:** China [announces](#) sanctions against National Democratic Institute (NDI) and National Endowment for Democracy (NED) personnel in a tit-for-tat measure against US sanctions on Chinese and Hong Kong officials.

**Dec. 1, 2020:** Australian Defense Minister Linda Reynolds [announces](#) that Australia will jointly develop hypersonic cruise missiles with the US to counter Chinese and Russian efforts to develop similar weapons.

**Dec. 2, 2020:** Department of Homeland Security [announces](#) a ban on cotton products made in whole or in part by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, alleging that its products are made using slave labor.

**Dec. 2, 2020:** China's Chang'e 5 spacecraft moon lander and ascender vehicle [land](#) on the moon to drill for lunar samples.

**Dec. 2, 2020:** Deputy Assistant Secretary for North Korea Alex Wong [accuses](#) China of a "flagrant violation" of its obligation to enforce international sanctions on North Korea, offering rewards of up to \$5 million for information regarding sanctions evasions.

**Dec. 3, 2020:** Chinese social media app WeChat [censors](#) a post by Morrison containing a conciliatory message to Australia's Chinese community.

**Dec. 4, 2020:** State Department [terminates](#) five cultural exchange programs with China after calling them "soft power propaganda tools."

**Dec. 4, 2020:** US customs authorities [begin](#) to detain shipments of products connected to Xinjiang Production & Construction Corps' cotton over their use of forced labor.

**Dec. 4, 2020:** State Department [announces](#) new visa restrictions on Chinese government officials belonging to, or affiliated with, the United Front Work Department, a CCP organ operating with a broad mandate to strengthen adherence to the party within and outside China.

**Dec. 5, 2020:** North Korea [announces](#) that its Supreme People's Assembly will hold its next session in January, after Biden takes office.

**Dec. 5, 2020:** State Department [scraps](#) five China-funded exchange programs, with Pompeo dismissing them as "propaganda tools" disguised as cultural exchanges.

**Dec. 6, 2020:** Beijing [reorganizes](#) ministerial and provincial rankings, promoting a new generation of Chinese officials from various backgrounds to fill an array of positions, including top roles at the commerce and agriculture ministries.

**Dec. 6, 2020:** Japan, France, and the United States [hold](#) joint military drills on one of Japan's uninhabited outlying islands in the East China Sea for the first time in May next year.

**Dec. 7, 2020:** Wang [calls](#) for Beijing and Washington to resume dialogue to reset ties after months of increasing hostility during an address to the board of the US-China Business Council (USCBC).

**Dec. 7, 2020:** Treasury Department [imposes](#) financial sanctions and a travel ban on 14 members of China's National People's Congress over their role in Beijing's disqualification of pro-democracy legislators in Hong Kong.

**Dec. 7, 2020:** Indian officials [accuse](#) China of assisting rebel groups in Myanmar that have stepped up their attacks on the India-Myanmar border.

**Dec. 8, 2020:** Suga [launches](#) Japan's third fiscal stimulus of the year, ¥30.6 trillion (\$294 billion) package, aimed to boost Japan's coronavirus recovery.

**Dec. 8, 2020:** Hua Chunying, spokesperson for the Chinese foreign ministry, [warns](#) the US that Beijing will retaliate with "the necessary countermeasures" if Washington imposes sanctions on Hong Kong officials responsible for the disqualification of opposition legislators.

**Dec. 9, 2020:** Indian FM S. Jaishankar [describes](#) China-India relationship as at its worst in decades, and says relations can't improve unless the ongoing border dispute is settled peacefully.

**Dec. 9, 2020:** Treasury Department [announces](#) new sanctions on six entities and four vessels related to North Korea.

**Dec. 10, 2020:** In telephone call, Xi [tells](#) French counterpart Emmanuel Macron that he hopes Europe approaches China with a positive attitude; they agree to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and pursue joint space exploration.

**Dec. 10, 2020:** Beijing [revokes](#) visa-free visits to Hong Kong and Macau for holders of US diplomatic passports in retaliation for US restrictions on the movement of 14 members of China's National People's Congress.

**Dec. 10, 2020:** Indian FM S. Jaishankar [announces](#) that Australia and India are in discussions for a bilateral free trade agreement.

**Dec. 11, 2020:** *Bloomberg News* employee Haze Fan is [detained](#) in Beijing on suspicion of "participating in activities endangering national security."

**Dec. 11, 2020:** Taiwan [commissions](#) first vessel in a new fleet of coast guard ships, an advanced catamaran armed with missile capacity, as the island faces a growing threat from Beijing.

**Dec. 12, 2020:** Xi [announces](#) that political security will be a top priority in the next five years, and the Communist Party must proactively maintain the safety of the Chinese political system.

**Dec. 12, 2020:** President-elect Biden [states](#) that his nominee for trade chief, Katherine Tai, will target abusive trade practices by China, a sign that the Trump administration's trade war with Beijing will continue.

**Dec. 14, 2020:** Wei and Japanese counterpart Kishi Nobuo [discuss](#) tensions in the disputed East China Sea over a phone call.

**Dec. 14, 2020:** South Korea's National Assembly [passes](#) a revision to the Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act to ban sending leaflets into North Korea.

**Dec. 15, 2020:** Canberra [reaches](#) out to Beijing to clarify whether it has formally banned Australian coal, warning that such an action would contravene WTO rules and be harmful to both countries.

**Dec. 16, 2020:** Canberra [refers](#) China to the WTO over Beijing's imposition of punitive tariffs on Australian barley imports, in the newest escalation in a bitter diplomatic and trade dispute.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** Document outlining objectives for the US Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard for 2021 [warns](#) the US will be "more assertive" against Beijing and US naval forces are expected to be more visible in the Pacific.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** *USS Mustin* [transits](#) Taiwan Strait, conducting Freedom-of-Navigation operation.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** China's Chang'e-5 lunar probe carrying rocks and soil from the moon [returns](#) safely to earth.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** Quad Senior Officials Consultations [take place](#) via video conference.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** US [imposes](#) sanctions on members of the Chinese Communist Party engaged in “malign activities,” including actions related to mass surveillance, military modernization, human rights abuses, and coercion in the South China Sea.

**Dec. 19, 2020:** Washington [adds](#) Chinese companies Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation and DJI, the drone maker, to the US export blacklist.

**Dec. 19, 2020:** Wang [urges](#) Biden to have the “right perception” of China and cooperate with Beijing to “restart dialogue, return bilateral relations to the right track, and rebuild mutual trust.”

**Dec. 20, 2020:** China’s People’s Liberation Army [accuses](#) Washington of “jeopardizing stability” in the region by sending the guided missile destroyer *USS Mustin* through Taiwan Strait.

**Dec. 21, 2020:** US Department of Commerce [publishes](#) list of Chinese and Russian firms with alleged military ties that restrict them from buying a wide range of US goods and technology. Elsewhere, Pompeo [announces](#) additional restrictions for issuing visas to Chinese officials believed to be complicit in human rights abuses.

**Dec. 22, 2020:** South Korea [scrambles](#) fighter jets in response to intrusion in its air defense zone by Russian and Chinese military aircraft.

**Dec. 22, 2020:** Tibet Policy and Support Act of 2020 [is passed](#) by Congress as an amendment to the \$1.4 trillion government spending bill.

**Dec. 22, 2020:** US guided-missile destroyer *USS John S. McCain* [conducts](#) a FONOP near the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Two days later, the vessel [asserts](#) navigational rights and freedoms near Vietnam in the vicinity of the Con Dao Islands in the South China Sea.

**Dec. 23, 2020:** Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi virtually [meets](#) with Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc. They call for a peaceful, “open and rules-based” Indo Pacific, agree to increase military-to-military exchanges, and to intensify defense industry collaboration.

**Dec. 27, 2020:** Trump [signs](#) into law a \$2.3 trillion government spending [package](#) that includes the Taiwan Assurance Act of 2020 and the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020.

**Dec. 27, 2020:** In response to signing of the Taiwan Assurance Act of 2020 and Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said China was “resolutely opposed” to both acts.

**Dec. 27, 2020:** Chinese delegation led by Vice Minister of the International Department of the CCP Guo Yezhou [meets](#) Nepali President Bidya Devi Bhandari, Prime Minister Kharga Prasad Oli, and other NCP leaders.

**Dec. 31, 2020:** Pompeo [denounces](#) Chinese court’s jailing of Hong Kong activists trying to flee to Taiwan. In a statement, Pompeo said, “A regime that prevents its own people from leaving can lay no claim to greatness or global leadership. It is simply a fragile dictatorship, afraid of its own people.”

*Regional chronology by Pacific Forum Research Intern Tom Connolly.*



PACIFIC FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

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## CONNECTIONS

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

US-JAPAN RELATIONS

## LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS IN TOKYO AND WASHINGTON

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2020 brought a global pandemic, economic strain, and, in both the United States and Japan, leadership transitions. COVID-19 came in waves, smaller to be sure in Japan than in the United States, and each wave intensified public scrutiny of government. Neither Tokyo nor Washington held up well. Public opinion continued to swing against President Donald Trump, increasing his [disapproval rating](#) from 50% in January to 57% in December following the US presidential election. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo also suffered a loss of confidence. His [disapproval rating](#) grew from 40% in January to 50% in July, cementing his [decision to step down](#) on Aug. 28, ostensibly for health reasons.

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Yet, the transition process could not have been more different. In Japan, the LDP organized an election for party leadership, one that limited participation among local members and focused attention on those in the national legislature. Factional leaders took an early role in building a consensus for a managed succession, and on Sept. 16, Abe's chief Cabinet secretary for almost eight years, Suga Yoshihide, [stepped in](#). A continuity Cabinet was formed.



Figure 1 Yoshihide Suga in the Parliament's lower house after being elected as Japanese Prime Minister. Photo: Koji Sasahara/AP

In the United States, however, a far more volatile and contentious campaign for the presidency led to an unprecedented transition process. The stakes were high. Two-thirds of eligible Americans voted in the 2020 election, the [highest since 1900](#). Democratic candidate Joe Biden and his running mate, Kamala Harris, garnered 306 of the 538 Electoral College votes, [winning the contest](#). But President Trump refused to concede, claiming his victory had been “stolen” and [launching repeated legal challenges](#) in many of the swing states. No evidence was brought to bear on the challenges, and on Dec. 14, the formal count of the Electoral College [confirmed](#) the Biden-Harris victory. Few, then, would have predicted the shocking events that followed on Jan. 6 when Congress was overtaken by a violent mob as it was certifying these results.

Bilaterally, while all eyes were on the leadership changes in Tokyo and Washington, allied military cooperation continued. The two governments continued their quiet discussion on Host Nation Support, Japanese government financial support for the deployment of US Forces in Japan. Chinese forces in the region reminded both militaries that the stakes in the Indo-Pacific remain high. A new commander

was nominated for the US Indo-Pacific command. And Japan's new defense minister, Kishi Nobuo, Abe's younger brother, signaled Japan's determination to strengthen its offshore capabilities as analysts waited to see how the Ministry of Defense would resolve its ballistic missile defense conundrum.

## Abe Resigns, Suga Steps Up

[By summer's end](#), the longest-serving prime minister of Japan, Abe, faced considerable headwinds. His approval rating had [dropped considerably](#), from 49% at the [beginning of 2020](#) to 36% by Aug. 23. COVID-19 had shaken public confidence in Abe's leadership, a fate that many leaders in democratic nations also shared. But Abe had additional [political scandals](#) to account for and once more his health seemed to be failing. Several visits to the hospital revealed the year's strain on Abe's physical strength, and on Aug. 28, he [announced his intention to step down](#) from leadership of his party and country.

On Sept. 1, the secretary-general of the Liberal Democratic Party, Nikai Toshihiro, announced the party's leadership election would be a [limited one](#) due to Abe's inability to fulfill his term. This limited the role of the more than 1 million grassroots party members to just 141 prefectural delegates, thereby giving the 394 lawmakers elected to the Diet the [predominant voice](#) in determining who would succeed Abe. Factional heads met in rounds of discussions over who to back, and in the end, three candidates stood for consideration: Kishida Fumio, Abe's former foreign minister; Suga, Abe's chief Cabinet secretary; and Ishiba Shigeru, a critic of Abe with strong backing among rank-and-file party members. None of the next-generation leaders in the party threw their hat in the ring, choosing instead to wait for the anticipated next round after the 2021 Lower House election. Suga was the clear [winner](#), with many seeing him as the logical caretaker to the Abe Cabinet's agenda. His role as the prime minister's right-hand man throughout Abe's long tenure in office meant that Suga had helped formulate that agenda, and as chief Cabinet secretary had an indispensable role in its implementation. Continuity in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic won the day.

Suga took over as prime minister on Sept. 16 with the [surprisingly high approval rating](#) of 74%, the third highest for any Cabinet after

those of former prime ministers Koizumi Junichiro and Hatoyama Yukio. Suga's [early speeches](#) highlighted his focus on better and more responsive governance, and he argued strongly for Japan to accelerate its transition to a digital economy. He announced plans to [create a new agency](#) directly responsible for this and appointed one of the leading future contenders for party leadership, Kono Taro, to head up his effort to eliminate the stovepipes and regulatory complications that hindered the government's responsiveness to the needs of Japanese citizens. COVID-19 has revealed the costs of Japan's slow adaptation to new platforms and communications technology.

But Suga's honeymoon with the public was short-lived. By October, his approval rating began to drop. An [early tussle with academic appointments](#) to the Science Council of Japan's General Assembly was widely perceived as a vendetta against those who had criticized the Abe Cabinet. The real challenge for the new Suga Cabinet, however, proved to be problems he inherited from the Abe era. Abe was [under investigation](#) by Japanese prosecutors for using political funds to pay for dinners at luxury hotels for supporters ahead of the annual cherry blossom viewing parties and for giving false testimony in the Diet about the spending. Furthermore, the Suga Cabinet also drew public criticism for its pandemic policies. The Go To Travel campaign designed to boost domestic tourism was [widely criticized](#), as was the government's [determination to move ahead](#) with the Tokyo Olympics as cases of COVID-19 infection began picking up again. In late December, Japan [crossed](#) the 200,000 mark in terms of total COVID-19 cases, as well as the 3,000 mark for coronavirus-related deaths. On Jan. 7, the Suga Cabinet [declared](#) a state of emergency in the Tokyo metropolitan area.

Suga seems to be on firmer ground diplomatically, however, leaving little room for doubt that Japan's strategic focus on the shifting balance of power in the region continues uninterrupted. As Japan waits for the new Biden administration to take office and its Asia policy to take shape, the Suga Cabinet has not stepped back from its regional activism. The Indo-Pacific vision that frames Japan's relations with others across the region remains paramount, and the new prime minister and his Cabinet wasted no time in demonstrating Japan's continued leadership in building Indo-Pacific cooperation. Within weeks of assuming

office, the prime minister [traveled](#) to Vietnam and Indonesia where he reiterated Japan's Indo-Pacific vision. Not long after, Suga gave a speech at the Japan-ASEAN Summit emphasizing the need for regional consensus to "cooperatively work towards the [further prosperity of a free and open Indo-Pacific](#)." Suga's new defense minister, Kishi Nobuo, also continued to move forward expeditiously with Japanese security cooperation with others around the region. On Sept. 9, Japan's ambassador to India signed a new defense agreement with India's minister of defense, establishing an Access and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), followed by a similar agreement on Nov. 17 between the defense ministers of Japan and Australia to [enable bilateral visits for training and operations](#) on Nov. 17.



Figure 2 Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc wave during a welcome ceremony at the Presidential Palace in Hanoi. Photo: AP Photo/Minh Hoang

Suga has also deftly handled the difficult politics of the US presidential transition. Despite Trump's challenge of the election outcome, [Suga spoke with Biden](#) over the phone about the alliance on Nov. 12, five days after Biden was declared president-elect. After the call, Suga noted how pleased he was about Biden's unprompted assurances that the United States would continue to offer Article 5 protections for the Senkaku Islands, islands claimed also by China. Even before that call there were signs that Tokyo and Washington would return to emphasizing their shared priority on addressing global challenges. Suga had announced on Oct. 26 that Japan intended to be [carbon neutral by 2050](#), undoubtedly welcome news for the Biden transition team, which emphasizes addressing the threat of climate change as a national security priority. And on Dec. 25, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that longtime Washington hand,

Tomita Koji, would be the [next Japanese ambassador to the United States](#).

### A Biden-Harris Win and a Rocky US Transition

On Nov. 3, the United States held general elections for the presidency, a third of the seats in the Senate, all seats in the House of Representatives, and a variety of state and local offices. While [many polls](#) in the leadup to the election projected that the Democrats would expand their majority in the House and recapture a majority in the Senate, the actual results were much closer than predicted, with Republican candidates exceeding expectations in many contests. In the House, the Democrats retained control, but their majority shrank from 232 to 222 of 435 seats, with two seats still contested as of this writing. In the Senate, the Democrats gained at least one seat but fell short of a majority with 48 of 100 seats. However, the two Senate races in Georgia were close enough to [trigger runoff elections](#) on Jan. 5. The runoff races were tightly contested, but in the end the Democrats captured both seats. The partisan balance of the new Senate will thus be tied at 50-50 when it convenes later in January, but Democrats will have effective control because it will be up to Vice President Kamala Harris to cast the deciding vote.



Figure 3 A digital screen in Tokyo depicts Republican candidate Donald Trump and Democratic candidate Joe Biden. Photo: AP

As close as elections were in the House and Senate, it was the presidential election that garnered the most attention. By the end of election night on Nov. 3, results seemed to favor the Democratic ticket of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris over Republican incumbents Donald Trump and Mike Pence, but the race was [too close to call](#) in several states such as Arizona,

Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. The COVID-19 pandemic played a large role in [delaying the official vote tally](#), both because of additional safety precautions at ballot counting centers and because a [historic number of citizens](#) cast their ballots via mail rather than in person. Many Americans and international observers watched closely as vote results trickled in over the next few days. Finally, on Nov. 7, the Associated Press and other major networks [called](#) Pennsylvania for Biden and Harris, putting them above the minimum 270 Electoral College votes needed to win the election.

As Suga and other [international leaders](#) moved to congratulate Biden and Harris on their victory, Trump refused to concede and spent the remainder of 2020 trying to overturn the results by spreading baseless claims of election fraud. The Trump campaign and their allies went to court in six states with allegations of fraud but lost more than 50 lawsuits as their efforts were struck down by judges from [across the political spectrum](#). Perhaps the most prominent case came when the state government of Texas [filed a lawsuit](#) directly in the Supreme Court challenging election procedures in Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. This unprecedented attempt by a state to overturn the election results in four other states [received significant support from Republicans](#), including Trump, attorneys general in 17 states, and nearly two-thirds of House Republicans. However, on Dec. 11, the Supreme Court rejected the lawsuit, saying that Texas [lacked standing](#) to bring the case before the court.

Three days later, the Electoral College convened on Dec. 14 and [officially confirmed](#) Biden's victory. In the end, Biden received 306 Electoral College votes compared to 232 for Trump, a margin that was nearly identical to Trump's victory over Hilary Clinton in 2016, when he won 304 Electoral College votes. Biden received more than 81 million votes, the most ever cast for a presidential candidate, with Trump receiving the second most at over 74 million votes. All told, the 2020 election saw the [highest voter turnout](#) (66.5%) in over a century.

Despite their many setbacks in court, state legislatures, and the Electoral College, President Trump and his team steadfastly refused to accept the results. Officials within the Trump administration who dared to openly contradict the president by saying that there was no

evidence of election fraud were [fired](#) or [resigned](#). By the end of 2020, there were even reports that Trump held discussions in the White House about [imposing martial law](#) and seizing voting machines to rerun the election. On Jan. 2, Trump followed this up by berating Georgia's secretary of state over the phone and urging him to "find votes" for him, a call whose [transcript](#) was published and shared widely by *The Washington Post*. Trump then turned his wrath on his own vice president, arguing that Pence should unilaterally overturn the election results when the Congress met to officially certify them on Jan. 6. When Pence rebuked the president's request, correctly stating that the US Constitution gave the vice president no ability to overturn the Electoral College results, Trump railed to his supporters at a rally the same day, saying "[we will never concede](#)."

Emboldened by the president's speech, angry Trump supporters [formed a mob that stormed the US Capitol](#), delaying the official certification process. As the mob clashed violently with Capitol police, Pence and lawmakers had to be evacuated and placed on lockdown. Subsequent videos revealed rioters searching for the vice president and the Speaker of the House while chanting [threats](#) to their lives. Five people died in the rioting at the Capitol, including one police officer who was bludgeoned to death. Several pipe bombs were discovered at the Republican and Democratic National Committee headquarters not far from the Capitol, suggesting the events of the day included plans for considerably more destruction. The FBI is investigating the mob violence and has [begun to make arrests](#), while public officials are [reviewing the failure of law enforcement](#) to protect Congress from attack. Similar [threats](#) of violence on inauguration day have been documented by federal and local law enforcement.

Trump's refusal to acknowledge his loss is likely to have both short and long-term implications for US politics. In the short term, the most direct effect of his repeated denials has been to impede the transition process for the incoming Biden administration. The first example of this came when Emily Murphy, Trump's appointed administrator of the General Services Administration, [refused to certify](#) Biden's victory for 16 days after the press called the election. Murphy's refusal prevented the Biden campaign from receiving the necessary resources and security briefings to officially

begin the transition. In the longer term, even though most observers expect Biden's inauguration to proceed as planned, there is evidence that Trump's efforts have [caused serious harm](#) to the confidence of many of his supporters in the fairness of US elections. The violent storming of the US Capitol building by Trump's backers on Jan. 6 is likely to further hurt images of US democracy, both at home and abroad.

Biden largely ignored Trump's efforts at obstruction throughout November and December, and instead [pressed ahead](#) with selecting the members of his incoming administration. The announcements thus far suggest that Biden's Cabinet is set to [mark several historic firsts](#) in terms of diversity and representation. Kamala Harris will be the first female, Black, and Asian-American vice president. Elsewhere in the Cabinet, Lloyd Austin has been nominated to be the first Black Defense secretary, Janet Yellen the first female Treasury secretary, Xavier Becerra the first Latino Health and Human Services secretary, Alejandro Mayorkas the first Latino and immigrant Homeland Security secretary, Pete Buttigieg the first openly gay Cabinet member as Transportation secretary, and Deb Haaland the first Native-American Cabinet member as Interior secretary. Biden also elevated individuals with whom he has [close relationships](#) to key roles, such as by nominating Antony Blinken as secretary of state and Jake Sullivan as national security advisor.

Joe Biden's inauguration will take place Jan. 20.

### **Disconnects in US-Japan Alliance Cooperation?**

Presidential transitions in the United States often take time, and alliance management in the interim is largely a task for the bureaucrats and military leaders responsible for the day-to-day oversight of the US-Japan relationship. But the 2020 transition is like no other in recent memory. Moreover, a number of unresolved issues remain for the alliance, born of decisions made in 2020 that suggest a new effort at strategic coordination may be overdue.

First, Japan's defense thinking seems to be evolving into a more independent mode. The [decision to pull back](#) from the deployment of the land-based ballistic missile program AEGIS Ashore has left some in Washington unsure of Japan's defense plans. A new National Security

Strategy is being drafted and is expected in 2021. Also expected is a rewrite of the 10-year defense plan due to increasing pressures on the defense budget. Nonetheless, on Dec. 21, the Suga Cabinet approved a [record defense budget](#) of 5.34 trillion yen (\$51.7 billion) for fiscal 2021, a 0.5% increase from the year before. The policy discussion on conventional strike capability has been shelved, although many expect it will return after the Lower House election. Japan's new defense minister, Kishi, has not skipped a beat, however, in increasing investment in Japanese capabilities. On Dec. 18, he announced that Japan would [invest in an indigenous standoff missile](#). This followed on the heels of the announcement last year that Mitsubishi Heavy Industries would [take the lead in an international consortium](#) for replacing Japan's support fighters.

Second, this is a complicated moment for Japan's diplomacy with China. President Xi Jinping was due to visit Tokyo for a state visit in the spring of 2020, but the pandemic stalled that final step in improving China-Japan diplomacy. Other factors have since come into play. The rising antagonism between Washington and Beijing over the coronavirus, as well as over longstanding trade tensions, has meant little global problem-solving with China is taking place. To make matters worse, China's imposition last summer of a National Security Law on Hong Kong residents has soured international opinion on Beijing's ambitions. At the time, Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu issued a statement expressing Japan's opposition to the law, saying that Japan attaches "great importance to upholding a free and open system and the [democratic and stable development of Hong Kong](#) under the 'one country, two systems' framework." The [mass arrests](#) of prodemocracy activists and civil society actors in Hong Kong have only made it more likely that Japan's diplomacy with China will be derailed.

Events across the Taiwan Straits also raised the stakes for the United States and Japan as they seek to cope with China's challenge. As Taipei and Washington have increased official contacts, Beijing has made escalating demonstrations of military power. On Sept. 18, the National Ministry of Defense in Taipei reported that 18 aircraft, including two H-6 strategic bombers, had [intruded](#) into its Air Defense Identification Zone by crossing the median line between the mainland and Taiwan.

By year's end, *Reuters* reported [over 100 sorties](#) by the PLA Air Force across the Straits. Opinion in Tokyo is sensitive to how the new US administration will approach China, and on Dec. 25, the State Minister of Defense Nakayama Yasuhide stated in an interview that the Chinese aggression against Taiwan constituted a "[red line](#)" and urged the incoming Biden administration to "be strong" against Beijing. To date, the Japanese government has assiduously avoided any statement that would suggest alliance cooperation with the US in a Taiwan contingency. On Jan. 9, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the United States would [no longer restrict its diplomatic engagement](#) with Taiwan, creating a difficult dilemma for the incoming Biden administration as it seeks to reset US foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific. Escalating tensions between the United States and China on Taiwan will undoubtedly put Japan's Taiwan policy to the test.

Finally, domestic politics in both the United States and Japan remain unresolved, despite leadership transitions in Washington and Tokyo. For Japan, the prospect of a Lower House election hovers over the Suga Cabinet. Successfully navigating the pandemic and its economic fallout remains elusive for Suga, as it did for Abe. Moreover, the legacy of Abe's scandals has left Suga somewhat handicapped. Without demonstrable successes in governance, the LDP's prospects at the polls may be dimmer. Opposition parties, despite an important merger, are not poised to take power and yet they could offer greater challenge to LDP candidates in the upcoming election if frustrations continue to run high. In the United States, of course, much resets on the ability of the Biden administration to avoid a lengthy and contentious process of confirming nominees for the Cabinet and other senior positions. The victory by the two Democratic candidates in the Georgia Senate race is likely to ease this aspect of the transition. But the United States too is bogged down by the pandemic's toll, and the Biden administration will be focused like the Suga Cabinet on improving the health and welfare of its citizens. Continued partisan antagonism could also be a factor in Washington's ability to focus on its foreign policy agenda.

## **2020 Finally Ends but the Turmoil Does Not**

For many, 2020 was a horrific year. Japan and the United States continue to battle the COVID-

19 pandemic, and leadership transitions in both nations reveal the growing disgruntlement of the public in the government response. Japan's political transition from Abe to Suga was unexpected. Rising US domestic tensions over its leadership choice, however, were not. The US-Japan alliance benefitted during these unpredictable Trump years from a [highly personalized role](#) for the Japanese prime minister in the execution of alliance cooperation with the United States. Abe, far earlier than other US allied leaders, understood the political benefits to be had from establishing close ties with the mercurial US president. Yet it remains unclear how well he understood the populist impulses, and the dangerous ambition, of Trump.

Deep political divisions in the United States seem destined to continue even after Joe Biden and Kamala Harris are sworn into office on Jan. 20. Few expected Trump's persistent refusal to accept the election outcome and the continued disinformation about the voting process by elected members of the Congress. Yet, the shock of the mob violence that ensued on Jan. 6 signals a far deeper crisis for US democracy. While the impact on the US-Japan alliance may not be clear, the continued turmoil of US politics is likely to ensure a government in Washington that will find it difficult to focus on events abroad.

The COVID-19 pandemic, of course, continues to wreak havoc in the United States and Japan. Over 300,000 Americans and 3,000 Japanese died from COVID-19 in 2020. Travel between the two countries is restricted, and while the two governments continue to manage their day-to-day relations virtually, the priority for the Suga Cabinet and the incoming Biden administration will be taking care of their citizens at home. 2021 has begun with darker clouds than expected, and until the US transition to a new president has been safely accomplished, it is hard to imagine what might be ahead for the US-Japan partnership in the new year.

# CHRONOLOGY OF US-JAPAN RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2020

**Sept. 1, 2020:** Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) [announces](#) that it will not include votes from rank-and-file members in the party election to decide Abe's successor.

**Sept. 5, 2020:** Prime Minister Abe Shinzo [says](#) that he will publish a new statement on ballistic missile defense strategy before his planned resignation on Sept. 16.

**Sept. 8, 2020:** The US and Japan [release](#) a joint ministerial statement marking the one-year anniversary of the Japan-US-Mekong Power Partnership (JUMPP).

**Sept. 8, 2020:** G7 foreign ministers, including from the US and Japan, [release](#) a joint statement on the poisoning of Alexei Navalny.

**Sept. 14, 2020:** Suga Yoshihide is [elected](#) LDP president with 377 of 534 votes.

**Sept. 16, 2020:** Suga [takes office](#) as prime minister of Japan.

**Sept. 16-17, 2020:** Eleventh meeting of US-Japan Policy Cooperation Dialogue on the Internet Economy is [held](#) via videoconference.

**Sept. 20, 2020:** Suga and President Trump [speak](#) by telephone.

**Sept. 24, 2020:** Japan-US Strategic Energy Partnership (JUSEP) meeting is [held](#) via videoconference.

**Sept. 25, 2020:** Deputy Minister for Foreign Policy Yamada Shigeo, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Affairs Dean Thompson, Australian Deputy Secretary (Indo-Pacific Group) Justin Hayhurst, Indian Joint Secretary (Americas) Vani Rao, and Indian Joint Secretary (East Asia) Naveen Srivastava [hold](#) a quadrilateral Japan-US-Australia-India videoconference.

**Sept. 25, 2020:** Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [meets](#) National Security Secretariat Secretary General Shigeru Kitamura in Washington, DC.

**Sept. 28-30, 2020:** US Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control Ambassador Marshall Billingslea [visits](#) Japan to [meet](#) Senior Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Mori Takeo and other government officials to discuss arms control and disarmament.

**Oct. 1, 2020:** A list of the 210 members for Science Council of Japan's General Assembly [becomes](#) public, revealing that Suga refused to appoint six academics.

**Oct. 6, 2020:** Suga, Pompeo, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Marise Payne, and Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar [attend](#) the [second Japan-US-Australian-Indian Foreign Ministers' Meeting](#) in Tokyo.

**Oct. 6, 2020:** Motegi and Pompeo [hold](#) a Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Tokyo.

**Oct. 6, 2020:** Pompeo [meets](#) with Suga in Tokyo.

**Oct. 7, 2020:** Deputy Director General for North American Affairs Arima Yutaka, Deputy Director General for Defense Policy Taro Yamato, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Japan and Korea Marc Knapper, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asian Security Heino Klinck [hold](#) bilateral security discussions by videoconference.

**Oct. 13, 2020:** US, Japan, Australia, Canada, Italy, Luxembourg, United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom [sign](#) the Artemis Accords on space exploration and utilization.

**Oct. 15-16, 2020:** Deputy DG for North American Affairs Arima and Department of State Political-Military Bureau Senior Advisor Donna Welton [hold preparatory consultations](#) on Japan-US Host Nation Support.

**Oct. 18-21, 2020:** Prime Minister Suga [visits](#) Vietnam and Indonesia.

**Oct. 19-23, 2020:** Second Japan-Korea-US Women's Trilateral Conference is [held](#) via videoconference, releasing a [joint statement](#).

**Oct. 27–28, 2020:** The 57th Japan–US Business Conference is [held](#) via videoconference.

**Oct. 29, 2020:** The US, Japan, Australia, and Palau [announce](#) construction of an undersea fiber optic cable to Palau.

**Nov. 3, 2020:** The US [holds](#) presidential, legislative, and state and local elections.

**Nov. 3, 2020:** Indian, Japanese, Australia, and US [begin](#) joint naval exercises in the Indian Ocean as part of the Malabar exercise.

**Nov. 7, 2020:** Associated Press and other major networks [declare](#) Joe Biden the winner of the US presidential election.

**Nov. 10, 2020:** The US and Japan [begin](#) formal negotiations on Host Nation Support.

**Nov. 10, 2020:** Inaugural Japan–US–Brazil Exchange is [held](#) in Brasilia, releasing a [joint statement](#).

**Nov. 11, 2020:** Biden [announces](#) Ron Klain will be his chief of staff.

**Nov. 12, 2020:** Suga [speaks](#) by telephone with President-elect Biden.

**Nov. 12, 2020:** Suga [attends](#) the 23rd Japan–ASEAN Summit Meeting.

**Nov. 24, 2020:** Biden [announces](#) he will nominate Antony Blinken as secretary of state, Jake Sullivan as national security advisor, Alejandro Mayorkas as secretary of homeland security, Avril Haines as director of national intelligence, Linda Thomas–Greenfield as ambassador to the United Nations, and John Kerry as special presidential envoy for climate.

**Nov. 24–25, 2020:** China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi [visits](#) Tokyo to meet Suga and Foreign Minister Motegi.

**Dec. 1, 2020:** President-elect Biden [announces](#) he will nominate Janet Yellen as Treasury secretary.

**Dec. 1, 2020:** Newspaper reports [suggest](#) Biden is considering appointing a White House czar for Asia on the National Security Council.

**Dec. 2, 2020:** Trilateral Vietnam–US–Japan Commercial Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) Forum is [held](#) in Hanoi, releasing a [joint statement](#).

**Dec. 3, 2020:** Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun and Vice Foreign Minister Akiba Takeo [speak](#) by telephone.

**Dec. 3, 2020:** Commander of US Pacific Fleet Adm. John Aquilino is [nominated](#) to be the next commander of US Indo–Pacific Command.

**Dec. 7, 2020:** Newspapers reports [indicate](#) that the Japanese government plans to name Ambassador to South Korea Tomita Koji as the next ambassador to the US

**Dec. 8, 2020:** Biden [announces](#) he will nominate Lloyd Austin as secretary of Defense.

**Dec. 9, 2020:** Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo announces that Japan will [build two new Aegis ships](#) as an alternative to its cancelled land-based system.

**Dec. 10, 2020:** Biden [announces](#) he will nominate Katherine Tai as US trade representative.

**Dec. 11, 2020:** The FDA [authorizes](#) the Pfizer–BioNTech COVID–19 vaccine for emergency use.

**Dec. 11, 2020:** Supreme Court [dismisses](#) Texas lawsuit seeking to overturn the presidential election results in four other states.

**Dec. 14, 2020:** Electoral College [votes](#) to affirm Biden’s win by a margin of 306 votes to Trump’s 232 votes.

**Dec. 17, 2020:** Pompeo and Motegi [speak](#) by telephone.

**Dec. 17, 2020:** Suga Cabinet [announces](#) decision to develop a new long-range missile.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** Senior officials from the US, Japan, Australia, and India [meet](#) by videoconference to follow up on the Oct. 6 quadrilateral meeting.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** Suga Cabinet [approves](#) the building of two new Aegis ships.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** FDA [authorizes](#) Moderna’s COVID–19 vaccine for emergency use.

**Dec. 25, 2020:** Tomita Koji officially [named](#) as Japan's ambassador to the United States, effective the same day.

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

**Jan. 7, 2021:** Suga [declares](#) state of emergency due to COVID-19 in the Tokyo metropolitan area.

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-CHINA RELATIONS

## JOE BIDEN IS ELECTED PRESIDENT AMID A PLUMMETING US-CHINA RELATIONSHIP

BONNIE S. GLASER, CSIS  
HANNAH PRICE, CSIS

In the final months of 2020, the Trump administration took a dizzying number of measures aimed at accelerating economic decoupling, curtailing Chinese Communist Party influence activities in the US, punishing Beijing for undermining Hong Kong's autonomy and carrying out human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and strengthening ties with Taiwan. The US even attempted to ban TikTok and WeChat from the US market. China took its time, but finally congratulated Joe Biden and Kamala Harris on their victory in the US presidential election. Both the US and China launched their COVID-19 vaccination campaigns. A new dialogue was launched between US and Chinese militaries on crisis communications, but the PLA later refused to attend an annual meeting of a longstanding mechanism on operational maritime safety.

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## COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout

As countries raced to develop coronavirus vaccines, China [began](#) inoculating hundreds of thousands of its citizens over the summer. Early recipients were medical workers, border inspection officials, workers at state-owned companies, government officials, and vaccine company staff. The next group to get the vaccine included teachers, supermarket employees, and people traveling to countries with high infection rates. By mid-December, China [said](#) it had administered more than 1 million coronavirus vaccine doses to more than 650,000 people.

US vaccinations began on Dec. 14 after Pfizer received emergency authorization for a vaccine that the company said is 95% effective at preventing illness. A second COVID-19 vaccine with similar effectiveness, developed by Moderna, was authorized for emergency use several days later. On Dec. 27, the US Center for Disease Control [reported](#) that just under 2 million doses had been administered. On Dec. 30, Sinopharm, a state-run Chinese company, [said](#) that its vaccine had an efficacy rate of 79% in Phase 3 trials. Compared with vaccines developed by Western countries, however, Chinese companies made public less data on efficacy and safety from its late-stage human trials.

Chinese media depicted vaccine production as a race that China was determined to win. For example, an article published in the nationalist tabloid *Global Times* written by the paper's staff reporters [described](#) the contest as a "fierce competition...where the countries' supply chains and technological prowess will be on test." A *Global Times* editorial [maintained](#) "China has performed well on both the anti-epidemic and economic fronts and will maintain such positive momentum. The advantages of the Chinese system and the country's economic and technological strength have interacted with each other, unleashing tremendous power this year. The bigger the challenge, the stronger and calmer we become."

Meanwhile, President Trump relentlessly pinned blame on China for the pandemic. In his speech at the United Nations General Assembly in September he [called](#) for the international community to "hold China accountable" for "unleash(ing) this plague onto the world." Even in late December, as the administering of

vaccinations raised hope that the end of the pandemic was near, Trump reminded the world in a [tweet](#) that "it was China's fault." The US also accused China of attempting to hack into overseas vaccine research data. John Ratcliffe, director of national intelligence, [alleged](#) that China "has attempted to steal our research" on COVID-19 vaccines.

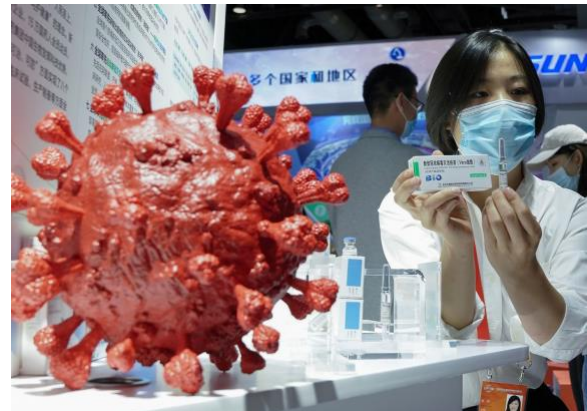


Figure 1 A coronavirus vaccine candidate is displayed at the 2020 China International Fair for Trade in Services in Beijing. Photo: Lintao Zhang/Getty Images AsiaPac

## China Reacts Slowly to Biden's Victory

As US election day came and went without the emergence of a clear winner, it was no surprise that Beijing kept mum about the outcome. By the weekend, however, after major US media outlets declared Joe Biden and Kamala Harris the victors, China's silence was noted as a stream of world leaders provided congratulations on social media and in formal statements. Asked about China's position at a press conference on Nov. 9, a foreign ministry spokesperson [said](#) that he "noticed that Mr. Biden has declared victory," adding that "We understand that the presidential election result will be determined following US laws and procedures." It wasn't until Nov. 13 that the foreign ministry spokesman congratulated President-elect Biden, [saying](#) that China "respect(s) the choice of the American people and extend(s) our congratulations to Mr. Biden and Ms. Harris."

Another 12 days passed before China's leader Xi Jinping offered his personal congratulations to President-elect Biden. *Xinhua* news agency reported that Xi [called](#) Biden on Nov. 25 to express his hope that China and the US will "uphold the spirit of non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect and win-win

cooperation.” Biden and his team undoubtedly recognized that Xi’s vision for the bilateral relationship comprises the Chinese leader’s concept of “[a new model of great power relations](#),” which was seriously considered but later rejected by President Barack Obama. On the same day, Chinese Vice President Wang Qishan also sent congratulations to US Sen. Kamala Harris on her election as US vice president. The only major world leader who held out longer than Xi was Russian President Vladimir Putin, who waited until Dec. 15, the day after the Electoral College confirmed Biden as the next president of the United States.

As China awaited the power transition in Washington, leading Chinese voices debated the likely future course of US-China relations. Writing in the pages of *The New York Times*, Fu Ying, a former ambassador and vice foreign minister, and now a vice chairwoman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National People’s Congress, [presented](#) her case for a US-China relationship of “coopetition” (cooperation and competition). Both countries should address each other’s concerns, Fu wrote, abide by rules and laws in the fields of economics and technology, shoulder responsibilities for ensuring regional peace, and convene talks between their militaries to avoid misunderstandings and establish mechanisms to effectively manage potential crises.

Adopting a realist position, Professor Yan Xuetong, dean of the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University, [argued](#) at the PLA’s Xiangshan Forum that fierce rivalry would persist between the US and China despite the departure of President Trump from office. He called for Beijing to stop its “wishful thinking” about the incoming Biden administration and accept that “unpredictability, uncertainty will still be the basic characteristic of the coming years. ... The world will definitely become more chaotic.”

### US Senior Officials Rant on China in Speeches

In a string of speeches during the fall, the Trump administration continued to warn Americans and the rest of the world about the dangers posed by China and its ruling Communist Party. Speaking virtually to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in mid-September, Trump [opened](#) by referring to global struggle against the “China virus.” In addition to blaming Beijing for spreading the

virus around the world, he condemned China’s environmental record and trade abuses. In his UNGA speech, Xi Jinping focused on COVID-19 and [urged](#) governments to embrace his vision of a “community with a shared future in which everyone is bound together.”

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered several speeches on China beginning with an address to the Wisconsin State Legislature in which he warned of PRC influence in US state and local governments. Xi knows that the US federal government is pushing back against the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) malign influence, Pompeo [claimed](#), and therefore is trying to “use subnational entities to circumvent America’s sovereignty.”

On Nov. 10, Pompeo gave a virtual [speech](#) entitled “The Promise of America” to the Ronald Reagan Institute marking the inauguration of its Center for Freedom and Democracy. He criticized China’s coercion and co-optation of US businesses, its use of consulates for spying, its stealing of intellectual property, its human rights violations in Xinjiang and Tibet, and its illegal claims in the South China Sea. Pompeo maintained that “the free world and sovereign nations are beginning to wake up” to the “CCP’s nature and its intentions.”

In his final [speech](#) on China in 2020 to the Georgia Institute of Technology on Dec. 9, Pompeo warned against the influence of the CCP in the US education system. He characterized the CCP as a “tyrannical regime” that seeks “to steal our stuff, to build their military might ... brainwash our peoples” and “buy off our institutions.” Pompeo called on universities to close Confucius institutes, investigate student groups backed by CCP money, and be vigilant against PRC-directed theft.

Deputy National Security Adviser Matt Pottinger delivered a [speech](#) on Oct. 23 to the London-based Policy Exchange entitled “The Importance of Beijing Candid.” It was the second address that Pottinger gave in perfect Mandarin Chinese, and he acknowledged that by doing so he hoped “friends in China” would join the conversation about China’s relationship with the rest of the world. He praised Chinese doctors who tried to warn of the risks of the virus when the outbreak began in Wuhan in late 2019 and later were reprimanded. Enumerating the CCP’s human rights abuses in Xinjiang and

its digital surveillance, Pottinger implored democratic nations to speak out with “reciprocity and candor.”

### Trump Seeks to Further Economic Decoupling

In the final months of 2020, the Trump administration took more steps aimed at “decoupling” the US and Chinese economies. Beijing continued to embrace economic integration and globalization, but also pushed for accelerating self-reliance.

[Speaking](#) at the 2020 China International Fair for Trade and Services on September 5, Xi stated that “human history shows that the world economy thrives in openness and withers in seclusion.” He pledged that China would “remain steadfast in opening up wider to the world.” But Trump remained keen to push the separation of the two countries’ economies. Just a few days after Xi’s remarks, Trump [told](#) reporters that the US was losing billions of dollars and would avoid those losses if it stopped doing business with China. He also promised to reward US companies that pull their operations out of China and to punish those who “desert America to create jobs in China and other countries.”

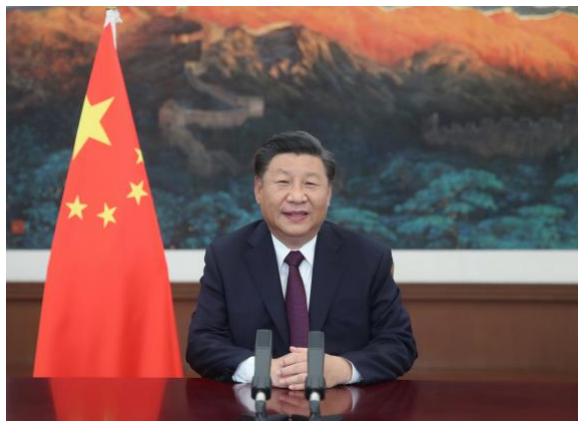


Figure 2 President Xi Jinping provides a virtual address to the Global Trade in Services Summit at the 2020 China International Fair for Trade in Services. Photo: Xinhua

The US president’s talk of economic decoupling and possible new tariffs caused jitters in many world capitals. Xi seized on the opportunity to present China as willing to work with other countries, including by signing more free trade agreements. In a mid-November address to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation CEO Dialogues via video, Xi explicitly [rejected](#) economic decoupling: “we will not seek to

‘decouple’ or create closed and exclusive ‘small circles,” Xi was quoted as saying.

China’s words were accompanied by deeds. Just a few days earlier, China joined the world’s [largest trade bloc](#) with 14 other Asia-Pacific countries through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP). The US Chamber of Commerce voiced concern that US absence from accelerating regional economic integration would be harmful to US exports, though it did not call for the US to join RCEP. The Chamber warned in a [statement](#) that the US was falling behind, while “China has become the most important trading partner for most of the Asia-Pacific, and its central role in the RCEP will only cement this position.”

In yet another action to advance economic decoupling, Trump [signed](#) into law “The Holding Foreign Companies Accountable Act,” which bars securities of foreign companies from being listed on any US exchange if they have failed to comply with the US Public Accounting Oversight Board’s audits for three years in a row. The legislation had been supported by a large majority in Congress.

China’s Communist Party Central Committee held its Fifth Plenum in late October and approved the 14<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan which covers 2021–25. The [communiqué](#) summarizing the plan’s objectives emphasized innovation as essential for China’s development and called for “making technological self-reliance a strategic support for national development.”

The US took a blow regarding trade in the international arena on Sept. 15 when a World Trade Organization (WTO) panel [ruled](#) that in 2018, the US broke global regulations in imposing tariffs on Chinese goods. In launching the case, Beijing argued that US tariffs violated the WTO’s most-favored nation treatment provision since the punitive measures were not applied equally to all WTO members. China also maintained that the US had gone against WTO rules by imposing the duties without first seeking consultations within the WTO. The Chinese called for the US side to fully respect the ruling. Trump later [appealed](#) on Oct. 26, which effectively prevents a final resolution due to the US refusal to allow the appointment of new judges to the WTO appellate body.

An additional move to loosen linkages between the US and Chinese economies was taken in mid-November when the Trump administration released an [Executive Order](#) banning US investments in companies with suspected ties to the PLA. A debate ensued within the executive branch over whether the rules were sufficiently strict, with the Pentagon and the State Department pressing for tighter regulations. At the end of December the hawks won the debate. The US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control [announced](#) on its website that the investment ban would apply not only to Chinese companies with connections to the Chinese military, but also to their subsidiaries.

As the end of the year approached, both the US and China reiterated their respective commitments to the Phase One trade deal that was signed in January 2020. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [told](#) the US-China Business Council in a video conference on Dec. 6 that China would meet its commitments under the deal. According to the Peterson Institute of International Economics, between January and November, China [purchased](#) \$82 billion of US goods, which is 58 % of the targeted \$159 billion for the year. Since the Phase One deal is a two-year agreement, Beijing has another year to increase its imports from the US. In an interview with CNBC in mid-December, US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer [urged](#) the incoming Biden administration to keep pressing China to deliver on its promises. "I would hold their feet to the fire on phase one," he stated.

President-elect Biden provided a few hints about his administration's plans for dealing with China on trade after he takes office on Jan. 21. In an [interview](#) with *The New York Times* in early December, Biden revealed that he would not immediately cancel the Phase One trade deal nor begin to remove tariffs on Chinese goods. "I'm not going to prejudice my options," Biden said, though he stressed that he would implement actions to stop China's stealing of intellectual property, providing illegal subsidies to state-run companies, forcing technology transfer from US companies to Chinese counterparts, and dumping products.

Some voices in China suggested that once Biden is inaugurated, Beijing will seek to renegotiate the Phase One deal. Shi Yinhong, an adviser to China's State Council, [told](#) *The South China Morning Post* on Nov. 9 that the agreement

signed with the US under the Trump administration would probably not survive. "Biden will sooner or later launch a renegotiation of the trade deal, as the current deal is unrealistic," Shi said, adding that "A renegotiation is also in line with China's wishes."

## US-China Defense Ties and FONOPs

On Sept. 1, the US Department of Defense issued its annual [report](#) on "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China." Covering developments through the end of 2019, this year's 170-page congressionally mandated report focused on China's national strategy, developments in the PLA's modernization and reform, the Chinese military's growing global presence, resources, and technology for force modernization, as well as defense contacts and exchanges between the US and Chinese militaries.

In a Pentagon press briefing, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Chad Sbragia [said](#) that although the Chinese Communist Party hasn't defined concretely what its 2049 goal of having a world-class military entails, "it is likely that China will aim to develop a military ... that is equal to, and in many cases superior to, the United States' military or that of any other great power that the Chinese view as a threat." China's Ministry of Defense spokesman Wu Qian [dismissed](#) the DoD report as a "pure act of hegemony" and typical of US promotion of the "China military threat theory." The report, he maintained, has "seriously damaged relations between the two countries and their militaries."

Nevertheless, exchanges between the US and Chinese defense establishments continued to be held. On Oct. 28-29, US and Chinese defense officials convened the first Crisis Communications Working Group. Due to COVID-19, the exchange took place by video teleconference. On the US side, participants included representatives from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, and the United States Indo-Pacific Command. The Chinese delegation included representatives of the Central Military Commission's (CMC) Office for International Military Cooperation, the CMC Joint Staff Department, and the PLA Southern Theater Command. According to the Pentagon's [readout](#) of the discussions, "The two sides agreed on the importance of establishing

mechanisms for timely communication during a crisis, as well as the need to maintain regular communication channels to prevent crisis and conduct post-crisis assessment.”

The exchange was indeed timely, as rumors [circulated](#) in China that the United States was planning to provoke a military conflict with China, possibly by launching an attack on one of the Chinese-occupied islands in the South China Sea. In addition debunking the rumors in the talks on crisis communications, US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper reportedly [informed](#) the PLA through the defense link that the US had no intention to incite a military confrontation.

In mid-November, the two militaries [conducted](#) the 16<sup>th</sup> seminar on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The seminar was held via video link between Nanjing and Hawaii. The three-day exchange focused on military participation in typhoon prevention, COVID-19 epidemic prevention and control, flood response, and civilian-military cooperation.

Despite efforts to tamp down tensions and sustain bilateral defense engagements, the year ended with a quarrel that resulted in the PLA's refusal to participate in a virtual meeting of the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) and a Flag Office Plenary session scheduled for Dec. 14-16. The MMCA dialogue has taken place regularly since 1998 to discuss unsafe military incidents that have occurred between US and PLA forces and enhance maritime and aviation safety. The tiff appeared to stem from the Chinese side's demand that the talks focus on principles and policy, while the US side held firm to adhering to the MMCA's charter and purpose as an operational safety mechanism.

The PLA Navy [maintained](#) that the US side tried to impose an agenda on the Chinese side and take other steps aimed at “changing the nature of the annual meeting,” which it deemed “unprofessional, unfriendly, and unconstructive.” Adm. Phil Davidson, commander of the Indo-Pacific Command, [described](#) the PLA's no-show as “another example that China does not honor its agreements.” Both the US and Chinese militaries held out the possibility that the MMCA dialogue would take place at a future date. “We remain committed to the MMCA,” Davidson said. A Chinese navy spokesman also

stated that China was willing to maintain communication with the US and discuss holding the meeting at a later date.

Between Sept. 1 and Dec. 31, the US Navy conducted three freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea. On Oct. 9, the guided-missile destroyer *USS John S. McCain* sailed in close proximity to the Paracel Islands, prompting [charges](#) of trespassing in China's territorial waters from the PLA's Southern Theater Command spokesman. The *USS John S. McCain* conducted two more FONOPs in December, sailing in the Spratly Islands on Dec. 22, and near the Con Dao Islands occupied by Vietnam on Dec. 24. The US operations challenged excessive maritime claims and, like all FONOPs, were aimed at preserving access and navigational freedoms consistent with international law. US Navy destroyers also conducted four Taiwan Strait transits on Oct. 14, Nov. 21, Dec. 18, and Dec. 31.

### **China Bristles as US Strengthens Ties with Taiwan**

China was still reeling from the August visit by US Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar to Taiwan when the Trump administration dispatched another senior official to Taipei. Keith Krach, Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment, traveled to Taiwan in mid-September to attend the memorial service for former Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui and to discuss coronavirus prevention measures. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Wang Wenbin insisted that the US and Taiwan “immediately stop” their official exchanges. An editorial in *Global Times* [displayed](#) a cartoon of Uncle Sam, wearing a blindfold, leading blindfolded President Tsai Ing-wen into a hole. The editorial said, “An increasing number of people are worried that the Taiwan Straits will be the most likely powder keg in the US-China competition.”

To demonstrate its indignation, China's Eastern Theater Command conducted naval and air exercises in the vicinity of Taiwan during which it flew 18 military aircraft over the Taiwan Strait. China's defense ministry spokesman [accused](#) Washington and Taipei of increasing their “collusion” and making trouble. He warned that the Trump administration's effort to use Taiwan to contain China “is destined to be a dead end.” China's military pressure on

Taiwan continued after Krach's departure. On Sept. 25, Taiwan's Ministry of Defense said that PRC planes had entered Taiwan's air defense identification zone 46 times in the prior nine days.

Pompeo went beyond longstanding US policy toward Taiwan in a radio interview on Nov. 12, saying "Taiwan has not been a part of China." He implied that the Reagan administration had reinterpreted the US policy of acknowledging but not accepting the Chinese position that Taiwan is part of China. Beijing's responded with a personal snipe at Pompeo. "We solemnly tell Pompeo and his ilk that any behavior that undermines China's core interests and interferes with China's domestic affairs will be met with a resolute counterattack by China," China's foreign ministry spokesman [said](#).

In late November, *Reuters* and local Taiwan media [reported](#) the visit to Taipei by Rear Adm. Michael Studeman, director of intelligence at United States Indo-Pacific Command. Taiwan's foreign ministry confirmed the arrival of a US official, but demurred from identifying the visitor. The US Defense Department also refused to confirm the reported trip. Under the Trump administration, visits to Taiwan by flag officers were taking place more frequently than in the past but were kept under wraps. China's foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian condemned the visit and [warned](#) that Beijing would make "a legitimate and necessary response" based on "how the situation develops."

In the last three months of the year, the US approved the sale of several weapons systems to Taiwan, including precision-guided cruise missiles, mobile light rocket launchers, Harpoon coastal defense systems, drones, and field information communications systems, totaling over \$5 billion.

### **Hong Kong's Autonomy Imperiled**

Following Beijing's passage of the Hong Kong National Security Law in late June, and the subsequent tit-for-tat sanctions implemented by the US and China, the world watched anxiously to see how the new law would be implemented. They didn't have to wait long.

On Oct. 1, China's National Day, Hong Kong police [arrested](#) at least 86 people on "suspicion of participating in an unauthorized assembly or committing other offences." One day later, the

Trump administration [announced](#) that it would expedite applications from Hong Kong citizens seeking asylum in the United States. Further action was taken in mid-October when the US Department of State submitted a [report](#) to Congress that identified 10 PRC and Hong Kong officials who the US deemed were complicit in undermining Hong Kong's autonomy.

Tensions spiked again on Oct. 27, when three pro-democracy activists who [attempted](#) to seek asylum at the US Consulate in Hong Kong were detained by Hong Kong police. They were accused of publishing content on a social media platform that "allegedly incited and abetted others to commit secession under the national security law." A Hong Kong government spokesman [opposed](#) the activists' actions, saying "[t]here is no justification for any so-called 'political asylum' for people in Hong Kong."

The US [imposed additional sanctions](#) on Nov. 9 on four PRC and Hong Kong officials believed to be instrumental in implementing the National Security Law. The State Department's press statement emphasized that the designations "underscore US resolve to hold accountable key figures that are actively eviscerating the freedoms of the people of Hong Kong and undermining Hong Kong's autonomy." At the end of the month, China retaliated by [imposing](#) sanctions on four Americans from National Democratic Institute (NDI) and National Endowment for Democracy (NED) who it claimed had "behaved badly on Hong Kong-related issues." In the first multilateral action, the US, joined Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK, in a joint [statement](#) on Nov. 18 expressing "serious concern regarding China's imposition of new rules to disqualify elected legislators in Hong Kong."

The situation in Hong Kong took a more negative turn in early December with the [sentencing](#) of three leading democracy activists—Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow, and Ivan Lam. The three received jail sentences for their involvement in mass protests in 2019. The same day, media tycoon Jimmy Lai was arrested. He was later charged with endangering national security by colluding with a foreign country. US Secretary of State Pompeo issued a [statement](#) against political persecution of democratic advocates in Hong Kong, pledging that "[t]he United States will continue ... to

champion the rights and freedoms of the people of Hong Kong.”

On Dec. 7, Washington announced [sanctions](#) against 14 vice chairpersons of the standing committee of the National People’s Congress due to their support for the Hong Kong National Security Law. China’s foreign ministry spokeswoman [expressed](#) the “strong indignation” of the Chinese government and people and “strongly condemn(ed) the outrageous, unscrupulous, crazy and vile act of the US side.” In a tit-for-tat, countermeasure China [imposed](#) travel restrictions on US officials traveling to Hong Kong, restricting visa-free visits to Macau and Hong Kong for holders of US diplomatic passports.

Harsh sentences were imposed on 10 Hong Kong prodemocracy activists by a court on the Chinese mainland at the end of December. The activists had been intercepted on Aug. 23 by Hong Kong’s coast guard. Two of the ringleaders were given the toughest punishment. Tang Kai-yin and Quinn Moon were given jail sentences of three and two years, respectively, along with a fine of up to \$3,000. Ahead of the trial, the US State Department called on Beijing [to release the 12 accused immediately](#) and allow them to leave the country. “Their so-called crime was to flee tyranny,” the State Department [said](#).

### **Actions Against Human Rights Abuses in Xinjiang**

China’s policies in Xinjiang remained a source of contention in the US-China relationship. The US argued relentlessly that human rights abuses were being carried out against China’s Uyghur minority in Xinjiang, while Beijing repeatedly denied the accusations and asserted China’s right to act freely within its own borders.

On Sept. 3, the Department of State published a [website](#) detailing Beijing’s human rights violations in Xinjiang. Then, in a move likely to affect US companies sourcing textiles that originate from Xinjiang, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) published five Withhold Release Orders on Sept. 14, prohibiting the import of certain products from Xinjiang. The House of Representatives weighed in on Sept. 22, [passing](#) H.R.6210, the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which banned specific imports from Xinjiang and sanctions

individuals contributing to human rights violations in Xinjiang.

The DHS Customs and Border Protection (CBP) took additional steps on Dec. 2 to prohibit the import of cotton and cotton products made by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps. DHS Acting Deputy Secretary Ken Cuccinelli cited “slave labor” as a cause of the ban. “‘Made in China’ is not just a country of origin it is a warning label,” he stated. The ban marked the [sixth enforcement action](#) that the CBP has taken against goods allegedly made by forced labor in Xinjiang in a three month period.

In a surprise move, the US [removed](#) the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) from its list of terrorist organizations on Nov. 5. Eighteen years earlier, the George W. Bush administration had designated ETIM as a foreign terrorist organization, but evidence of the group’s continued existence was scant. China’s Foreign Ministry Spokesman Wang Wenbin [charged](#) that the US was acting hypocritically, stating “[t]he US backtracking on its designation shows double standards—they are using the terrorist organization to promote their own interests and holding back international cooperation on counterterrorism.”

### **US Attempts to Ban TikTok and WeChat**

Technology tensions have featured prominently in US-China strategic competition, beginning with US actions against Chinese telecommunication companies Huawei and ZTE. In early August, President Trump opened a new front in the tech war by issuing executive orders aimed at banning two major Chinese apps—TikTok and WeChat—from the US market. The US argued that the apps threaten national security and could pass user data to China. The Chinese government and the apps’ parent companies Bytedance and Tencent denied the allegations.

On Sept. 18, the US Department of Commerce [announced](#) that it would prohibit people in the US from downloading the messaging and video-sharing apps, effective on Sept. 20 for WeChat and Nov. 12 for TikTok. The next day Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross [delayed](#) the prohibition of TikTok, but only for one week. Meanwhile, China’s Department of Commerce retaliated by issuing [rules](#) that would allow

China to blacklist companies it deemed a risk to Chinese national security.

China raised its objections to US actions against Chinese mobile apps at a closed-door meeting of the WTO on Oct. 5. A Chinese official reportedly [argued](#) that the US measures were “inconsistent with WTO rules, restrict cross-border trading services, and violate the basic principles and objectives of the multilateral trading system.”

In a victory for TikTok on Oct. 23, a US appeals court in San Francisco [rejected](#) a request from the US Justice Department to reverse a prior ruling that Apple and Google continue to allow users to download TikTok and WeChat. In addition, on Nov. 13, the Department of Commerce [announced](#) that it would not enact the ban on TikTok and WeChat and a federal appeals court would extend the deadline to submit documents against the ban until Dec. 14.

Although the Trump administration originally ordered TikTok to be sold by Nov. 12, on Nov. 13, the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) [extended](#) the deadline to Nov. 27. On Nov. 25, CFIUS [extended](#) the Nov. 27 deadline to Dec. 4. On Dec. 4 the US Treasury [told](#) Bytedance that it would receive no punishment for missing the Dec. 4 deadline for selling the application due to ongoing negotiations over the sale.

A US District Court in Washington [ruled](#) on Dec. 7 that the Department of Commerce could not ban US platforms from hosting TikTok. The Trump administration later [appealed](#) the ruling on Dec. 28. The dispute over the Chinese apps seemed unlikely to be resolved before Donald Trump leaves office on Jan. 20.

### Miscellaneous Trump Administration Actions Against China

The Trump administration imposed a slew of measures against China between Sept. 1 and Dec. 31. The actions below are in addition to those covered in the above analysis. These measures appeared intended to curtail Chinese influence in the United States and to punish CCP officials for various malign activities within China and abroad, while also tying the hands of the incoming Biden administration regarding China policy.

Objective	Date	Action
Chinese influence activities in the US	Sept. 2, 2020	US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo <a href="#">announced</a> that senior Chinese diplomats in the US would require the US Department of State's approval to visit US university campuses and to meet with local government officials.
	Oct. 2, 2020	US Citizen and Immigration Services issued <a href="#">new rules</a> to prevent members of the CCP from obtaining permanent residency or citizenship in the US.
	Oct. 9, 2020	Pompeo and US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos <a href="#">issued</a> a joint letter warning the American public against the Confucius Classrooms found in many US universities and colleges.
	Oct. 21, 2020	The US Department of State <a href="#">designated</a> US-based operations of six entities as foreign missions of China.
	Oct. 28, 2020	A federal court in Brooklyn, New York <a href="#">charged</a> eight individuals with conspiring to act as illegal agents of China.
	Dec. 2, 2020	The US <a href="#">announced</a> visa restrictions for members of the Chinese Communist Party and their families.
	Dec. 4, 2020	The US <a href="#">halted</a> five cultural exchange programs with China which have been ongoing since 1961.
	Dec. 4, 2020	The US imposed <a href="#">sanctions</a> on Chinese Communist Party officials who participated in coercive influence activities.
Iran and North Korea	Oct. 19, 2020	<a href="#">Sanctioned</a> Hong Kong and Chinese individuals and entities for actions supporting the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL).
	Nov. 25, 2020	The US <a href="#">imposed</a> sanctions on Chinese firms allegedly promoting Iran's missile program.
	Dec. 5, 2020	The US <a href="#">sanctioned</a> shipping companies (many of which operate in China) that export North Korean coal,

		citing violations of UN sanctions as the cause.
Human Rights	Oct. 1, 2020	President Trump <a href="#">determined</a> that China, in addition to other countries, would not receive nonhumanitarian and nontrade-related assistance until it met the minimum standards for human trafficking.
	Dec. 18, 2020	The US <a href="#">announced</a> sanctions on CCP members engaged in “malign activities,” including actions related to mass surveillance, military modernization, human rights abuses, and coercion in the South China Sea.
	Dec. 21, 2020	The US <a href="#">slapped</a> visa restrictions on PRC officials believed to be complicit in “repressing religious and spiritual practitioners, members of ethnic minority groups, dissidents, human rights defenders, journalists, labor organizers, civil society organizers, and peaceful protestors.”

### Recapping 2020 and Looking Forward to 2021

Recognizing that the spread of COVID-19 to the United States in early 2020 threatened his re-election, Trump quickly did his utmost to pin responsibility for the pandemic on China. Once the Phase One deal was signed, there was no longer any need to worry about undermining the trade negotiations. Trump gave up the pretense that Xi was his best friend. With no compelling reasons to refrain from taking actions against Chinese policies in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, Trump signed legislation and swiftly implemented sanctions. Steps were taken to further strengthen US ties with Taiwan. New limits were imposed on visas for Chinese journalists. Dozens of Chinese companies were added to the Department of Commerce’s Entity List. Scores of additional measures were taken to loosen the tightly intertwined ties between the United States and China. As it became clear that Trump would lose the election, administration China hawks sought to tie the hands of Joe Biden and his team.

Biden’s statements during the campaign suggest that he will place greater emphasis on alliances to pressure China to change its objectionable policies; attach more importance to human rights; and cooperate with China on climate change. It is unlikely that the Biden administration will pursue a strategy aimed at containing China’s rise. For at least his first year in office, Biden’s priorities will be fighting the pandemic and rejuvenating the US economy. In an interview with *60 Minutes* just over one week before the presidential election, Biden [said](#) that Russia poses the greatest threat to the United States. He notably eschewed calling China a threat or a rival, instead describing China as the US’ “biggest competitor.”

Beijing appears to have low expectations for a reset of US-China relations after the Trump presidency ends. Chinese experts say that their leaders understand that US views of the bilateral relationship have changed fundamentally. Nevertheless, China hopes to put a floor under the relationship, reduce tensions, and find areas of cooperation.

At the end of 2020, official PRC documents depict the world as entering a period of turbulent change and maintain that many challenges lie ahead, but nevertheless see the balance of power is trending in China’s favor. The Chinese economy is rebounding from the pandemic faster than any other major country. New research from the UK [estimates](#) that China will overtake the United States as the world’s largest economy by 2028, five years earlier than previously forecast. Chinese speeches and writings suggest that the CCP has concluded that the pandemic has presented Beijing with new opportunities and accelerated China’s emergence as a great power, while hastening US decline. One of the noteworthy assessments of the international situation and China’s future was published in the *People’s Daily* in early December. He Yiting, executive vice president of the Central Party School, [wrote](#), “The profound adjustment of the international balance of power, especially that ‘the East is rising, the West is declining’ is the main direction for the development of the major changes.”

# CHRONOLOGY OF US-CHINA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2020

**Sept. 1, 2020:** US Department of Defense [releases](#) annual report to Congress entitled “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020.”

**Sept. 2, 2020:** US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [announces](#) that the State Department will require senior PRC diplomats in the US to receive approval to visit US university campuses and to meet with local government officials.

**Sept. 3, 2020:** Department of State [publishes](#) website entitled “The Chinese Communist Party’s Human Rights Abuses in Xinjiang” detailing aspects of alleged violations of human rights in Xinjiang.

**Sept. 7, 2020:** In remarks at a press conference, President Trump [says](#) “there’s been no country anywhere, at any time, that’s ripped us off like China has” and “If Biden wins, China wins, because China will own this country.”

**Sept. 8, 2020:** Department of State [revokes](#) more than 1,000 visas of PRC nationals following a May 29 [proclamation](#) by Trump in response to China’s curbs on democracy in Hong Kong.

**Sept. 8, 2020:** Trump [tells reporters](#), “Whether it’s decoupling, or putting in massive tariffs like I’ve been doing already, we will end our reliance in China, because we can’t rely on China.”

**Sept. 8, 2020:** Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs [announces](#) their Global Initiative on Data Security, an eight-part framework to improve global standards around data security.

**Sept. 9, 2020:** US-China Security Commission [holds](#) a hearing on US-China relations in 2020.

**Sept. 11, 2020:** China [announces](#) new restrictions on the activities of US diplomats in Hong Kong and China in response to new US rules requiring Chinese diplomats receive approval when visiting US university campuses and meeting with local government officials.

**Sept. 14, 2020:** Department of Homeland Security [issues](#) five Withhold Release Orders (WRO) on goods produced by state-sponsored forced labor in Xinjiang.

**Sept. 15, 2020:** World Trade Organization (WTO) panel [says](#) that the US broke global regulations in imposing tariffs on Chinese goods in 2018.

**Sept. 15, 2020:** United States [imposes](#) sanctions on Chinese state-owned enterprise Union Development Group, Ltd., citing corrupt practices in Cambodia and alleging that a coastal development project at Dara Sakor may be used to host PRC military assets.

**Sept. 17, 2020:** Subcommittee of the Ways and Means Committee of the House of Representatives [conducts](#) a hearing entitled “Enforcing the Ban on Imports Produced by Forced Labor in Xinjiang.”

**Sept. 17, 2020:** Senate Foreign Relations Committee [holds](#) a hearing entitled “Advancing US Engagement and Countering China in the Indo-Pacific and Beyond” at which Assistant US Secretary of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell [testifies](#).

**Sept. 18, 2020:** Department of Commerce [announces](#) prohibitions on transactions relating to mobile apps WeChat and TikTok to take effect Sept. 20 and Nov. 12 for WeChat and TikTok respectively in response to President Trump’s Aug. 6 executive orders.

**Sept. 18, 2020:** US Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Keith Krach [arrives](#) in Taiwan for a visit.

**Sept. 19, 2020:** Department of Commerce [delays](#) TikTok-related prohibition in US app stores from Sept. 20 to Sept. 27.

**Sept. 19, 2020:** PRC Ministry of Commerce [issues](#) rules that could allow it to halt exports, imports and investments by businesses accused of endangering national security in response to the ban of TikTok and WeChat on US app stores.

**Sept. 22, 2020:** Trump [delivers](#) address at the UN General Assembly in which he says “We must hold accountable the nation which has unleashed this plague onto the world: China.”

**Sept. 22, 2020:** House of Representatives [passes](#) H.R.6210 – Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which bans certain imports from Xinjiang and sanctioned individuals contributing to the human rights violations in Xinjiang.

**Sept. 23, 2020:** Pompeo [delivers](#) a speech in Madison entitled “State Legislatures and the China Challenge” in which he warns of PRC influence in US state and local governments.

**Sept. 25, 2020:** US State Department [publishes](#) a fact sheet on China’s environmental abuses.

**Sept. 27, 2020:** District Court for District of Columbia [grants](#) nationwide preliminary injunction against the implementation of President Trump’s executive orders against TikTok/ByteDance.

**Sept. 30, 2020:** Trump [issues](#) an Executive Order requiring the Secretary of the Interior to identify critical minerals and reduce reliance on critical minerals from “foreign adversaries.”

**Sept. 30, 2020:** H.R.6270 – Uyghur Forced Labor Disclosure Act of 2020 [is passed](#) in the US House of Representatives.

**Oct. 1, 2020:** Trump [determines](#) that China will be among countries not to receive nonhumanitarian, nontrade-related assistance until the countries bring themselves into compliance with minimum standards regarding trafficking in persons.

**Oct. 2, 2020:** US Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS) [updates](#) rules to prevent members of “the Communist Party or any other totalitarian party” from being issued permanent residence or citizenship in the United States.

**Oct. 6, 2020:** A Pew Research survey [finds](#) that negative views of China have increased nearly 20 percentage points since Trump took office and 13 points since 2019.

**Oct. 9, 2020:** Pompeo and US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos [publish](#) a joint letter to state commissioners of education warning about the threat posed by Confucius Classrooms.

**Oct. 9, 2020:** USS John McCain [sails](#) close to Paracel Islands as part of a Freedom of Navigation Operation.

**Oct. 13, 2020:** Pompeo [requests](#) that think tanks and other foreign policy organizations publish foreign funding that they receive on their websites and says that disclosure will be considered in determining whether the State Department engages with those organizations.

**Oct. 14, 2020:** Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs in the State Department [releases](#) a list of Hong Kong, Macau, and PRC officials it says have contributed to undermining of autonomy in Hong Kong.

**Oct. 14, 2020:** Guided-missile destroyer USS Barry [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait, the first time for a US warship since Aug. 31.

**Oct. 17, 2020:** China [threatens](#) to detain US citizens if the Justice Department proceeds with prosecutions of arrested scholars who are members of Chinese military.

**Oct. 19, 2020:** US [imposes](#) sanctions on Chinese and Hong Kong persons for doing business with the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL), which the US alleges has transported proliferation-sensitive items intended for Iran’s ballistic missile and military programs.

**Oct. 21, 2020:** Department of State [designates](#) US operations of six entities as foreign missions of the PRC.

**Oct. 21, 2020:** State Department [approves](#) the sale of an arms package totaling \$1.8 billion to Taiwan, including 135 precision-guided cruise missiles and mobile light rocket launchers.

**Oct. 23, 2020:** Deputy National Security Advisory Matt Pottinger [gives remarks](#) on “The Importance of Being Candid” (贵在坦诚) in Mandarin.

**Oct. 23, 2020:** US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien [characterizes](#) the United States as a Pacific power and says that PRC fishing operations in the EEZ of other countries in the Indo-Pacific "threatens [US] sovereignty, the sovereignty of [the US's] Pacific neighbors and endangers regional stability."

**Oct. 23, 2020:** US appeals court in San Francisco, CA [rejects](#) a request from the Justice Department to reverse a prior ruling that Apple and Google continue to allow users to download TikTok and WeChat.

**Oct. 26, 2020:** State Department [approves](#) sale of 100 Harpoon Coastal Defense Systems (HCDS) to Taiwan in a package worth \$2.37 billion.

**Oct. 26, 2020:** United States [lodges](#) an appeal against a World Trade Organization ruling that some of Trump's trade war tariffs on China were unlawful.

**Oct. 27, 2020:** Three pro-democracy activists are arrested by Hong Kong police after briefly [entering](#) the US consulate in the city in an apparent bid to seek asylum.

**Oct. 28, 2020:** Eight individuals are [charged](#) with conspiring to act as illegal agents of the PRC in a federal court in Brooklyn.

**Oct. 28, 2020:** Department of State [designates](#) the National Association for China's Peaceful Unification (NACPU) as a foreign mission of the PRC.

**Oct. 28, 2020:** Department of Defense [hosts a crisis](#) communications working group with PLA to discuss concepts of crisis communications, crisis prevention, and crisis management.

**Oct. 29, 2020:** Pompeo [issues](#) a statement condemning the arrest and detention of three student activists in Hong Kong under the National Security Law.

**Oct. 30, 2020:** Stilwell [delivers](#) virtual remarks at Hoover Institution webinar on "Covert, Coercive, and Corrupting: Countering the Chinese Communist Party's Malign Influence in Free Societies."

**Nov. 2, 2020:** White House [publishes](#) compilation of Trump administration remarks into document entitled "Trump on China: Putting America First."

**Nov. 3, 2020:** State Department [approves](#) a \$600 million sale of four Weapons-Ready MQ-9B Remotely Piloted Aircraft to Taiwan.

**Nov. 5, 2020:** US [removes](#) the designation of the Uighur-founded group the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist organization.

**Nov. 9, 2020:** US [imposes](#) sanctions on 4 additional PRC and Hong Kong officials over the Hong Kong National Security Law.

**Nov. 10, 2020:** Pompeo [delivers](#) remarks at the Reagan Institute Center for Freedom and Democracy.

**Nov. 11, 2020:** US and Chinese militaries [begin](#) a three-day-long video seminar on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

**Nov. 12, 2020:** Trump [signs](#) an executive order prohibiting Americans from investing in Chinese firms the administration says are owned or controlled by the Chinese military.

**Nov. 12, 2020:** Secretary of State Pompeo [says](#) on a US radio interview that "Taiwan has not been a part of China."

**Nov. 13, 2020:** China's MFA spokesman [congratulates](#) Joe Biden on his election as president of the United States after staying silent for 10 days following the election on Nov. 3.

**Nov. 13, 2020:** Department of Commerce [announces](#) that it will not enact the ban of TikTok and WeChat, and a federal appeals court will extend the deadline to submit documents against the ban until Dec. 14.

**Nov. 13, 2020:** Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) [extends](#) the deadline for the sale of TikTok to November 27.

**Nov. 16, 2020:** Department of Justice [publishes](#) a review of its China Initiative to deter national security threats posed by the PRC, calling the initiative a "success."

**Nov. 18, 2020:** US military [sends](#) two long-range bombers into China's air defense identification zone.

**Nov. 18, 2020:** Governments of the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom [release](#) a joint statement expressing “serious concern regarding China’s imposition of new rules to disqualify elected legislators in Hong Kong.”

**Nov. 21, 2020:** USS Barry [transits](#) Taiwan Strait in a Freedom of Navigation Operation.

**Nov. 25, 2020:** US [imposes](#) sanctions against Chinese firms allegedly promoting Iran’s missile program.

**Nov. 25, 2020:** Chinese President Xi Jinping [congratulates](#) Biden on his election as president of the United States 12 days after China’s initial congratulations.

**Nov. 25, 2020:** Chinese Vice President Wang Qishan [sends](#) message to Kamala Harris to congratulate her on her election as vice president of the United States.

**Nov. 25, 2020:** CFIUS [extends](#) the deadline for the sale of TikTok to Dec. 4.

**Nov. 30, 2020:** China [announces](#) sanctions against National Democratic Institute (NDI) and National Endowment for Democracy (NED) personnel in a tit-for-tat measure against US sanctions on Chinese and Hong Kong officials.

**Dec. 2, 2020:** Department of Homeland Security [announces](#) a ban on cotton products made in whole or in part by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, alleging that its products are made using slave labor.

**Dec. 2, 2020:** Trump administration [issues](#) rules limiting the duration of travel visas to the US from a maximum of 10 years to a maximum of one month for members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and their families.

**Dec. 3, 2020:** Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe [publishes](#) op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* entitled, “China Is National Security Threat No. 1.”

**Dec. 3, 2020:** Department of Defense [adds](#) four Chinese companies, including SMIC and CNOOC, to its original blacklist published in June 2020.

**Dec. 3, 2020:** Pompeo [releases](#) statement condemning the Hong Kong government’s political persecution of the city’s courageous pro-democracy advocates.

**Dec. 4, 2020:** State Department [terminates](#) five cultural exchange programs with China after calling them “soft power propaganda tools.”

**Dec. 4, 2020:** State Department [announces](#) sanctions that would restrict visa access to PRC and CCP officials engaged in “coercive influence activities.”

**Dec. 7, 2020:** State Department [approves](#) sale of a Field Information Communications System (FICS) to Taiwan for an estimated US\$280 million.

**Dec. 7, 2020:** Treasury Department [imposes](#) financial sanctions and a travel ban on 14 members of China’s National People’s Congress over their role in Beijing’s disqualification of pro-democracy legislators in Hong Kong.

**Dec. 7, 2020:** District Court in Washington [rules](#) that the Department of Commerce cannot ban US platforms from hosting TikTok.

**Dec. 8, 2020:** Speaking to the US-China Business Council, Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, [pledges](#) to uphold the Phase 1 trade deal with the United States under the Biden administration.

**Dec. 9, 2020:** Pompeo [delivers](#) speech entitled “The Chinese Communist Party on the American Campus,” which warns against the influence of the CCP in the American education system.

**Dec. 10, 2020:** Beijing [revokes](#) visa-free visits to Hong Kong and Macau for holders of US diplomatic passports in retaliation for US restrictions on the movement of 14 members of China’s National People’s Congress.

**Dec. 14, 2020:** China’s navy fails to participate in a [planned](#) three-day annual high-level virtual meeting of the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement.

**Dec. 16, 2020:** Treasury Department [imposes](#) sanctions on two Chinese companies for their role in supporting the sale of Iranian petrochemicals.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** Chinese FM Wang Yi [gives](#) address to the Asia Society about US-China relations.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** Commerce Department [adds](#) China's Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation to the entity list restricting access to US technology.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** *USS Mustin* [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait, conducting a Freedom-of-Navigation operation.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** Trump [signs](#) into law "The Holding Foreign Companies Accountable Act," which bars securities of foreign companies from being listed on a US exchange if they have failed to comply with the US Public Accounting Oversight Board's audits for three consecutive years.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** US [imposes](#) sanctions on members of the Chinese Communist Party engaged in "malign activities," including actions related to mass surveillance, military modernization, human rights abuses, and coercion in the South China Sea.

**Dec. 21, 2020:** Pompeo [announces](#) additional restrictions for issuing visas to Chinese officials believed to be complicit in human rights abuses.

**Dec. 22, 2020:** Tibet Policy and Support Act of 2020 [is passed](#) by Congress as an amendment to the US\$1.4 trillion government spending bill.

**Dec. 22, 2020:** US guided-missile destroyer *USS John S. McCain* [conducts](#) a FONOP near the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

**Dec. 24, 2020:** *USS John S. McCain* (DDG 56) [asserts](#) navigational rights and freedoms near Vietnam in the vicinity of the Con Dao Islands in the South China Sea.

**Dec. 27, 2020:** Trump signs into law a \$2.3 trillion government spending [package](#) that includes the Taiwan Assurance Act of 2020 and the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020.

**Dec. 28, 2020:** Treasury [clarifies](#) on its website that the executive order signed by President Trump in November banning investments in Chinese companies with suspected ties to the PLA applies to subsidiaries.

**Dec. 31, 2020:** Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyers *USS John S. McCain* (DDG 56) and *USS Curtis Wilbur* (DDG 54) [conduct](#) a routine Taiwan Strait transit.

*Chronology by CSIS Research Intern Benjamin Parker*



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-KOREA RELATIONS

## RESETTING RELATIONS WILL REQUIRE TRUE GRIT

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

After a months-long wait to see who would lead the US from 2021, both South and North Korea got an answer in November: Joe Biden. South Korea moved to forge ties with the incoming US administration, relieved at the prospect of a more conventional White House, yet anxious for it to adopt an approach to North Korea congruent with that of the Blue House. North Korea has stayed mum on Biden's victory, reflecting its poor relations with the former vice president, a pause to recalibrate diplomatic expectations, and domestic issues that overshadow foreign policy in Pyongyang. The latter point is fitting, as it is also true of Washington. The early days of the Biden presidency will see domestic focus due to the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine rollout, economic recovery, and the need to try to heal political and cultural divisions in the United States. That said, neither Korea can be neglected for long.

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## Election Fallout: Return of a ‘Serious Man’

As throughout 2020, the lead-up to the November election saw little discussion between the US and North Korea, though figures in the Trump administration [promised](#) that Trump’s re-election would spark a breakthrough. Even interactions between the US and South Korea were limited and restrained [compared to earlier in 2020](#), when, for example, there were tough negotiations over troop burden-sharing under the Special Measures Agreement (SMA). Seoul and Pyongyang took a wait-and-see approach to US relations, knowing they could be dealing with a strikingly different interlocutor depending on the election results.

Early indications [suggest](#) South Koreans are [relieved](#) by Biden’s election, seeing him as one who takes traditional diplomacy seriously, but one who also recognizes changes that have taken place since the Obama administration. That said, the Biden White House is likely to have priorities toward Korea similar to those of previous US administrations, including Trump’s: maintaining high-quality economic ties and the military alliance with South Korea, while pressuring North Korea to cease and eventually roll back its nuclear weapons program. Additionally, the US relies on South Korea to improve inter-Korean relations, notably via Seoul’s proposals for joint economic projects and confidence-building measures, while Washington mixes sticks (sanctions, military deterrence) and carrots (potential sanctions relief) to try to advance denuclearization of North Korea. Over several decades this overall strategic approach to Korea has been successful in advancing the US–South Korea relationship; it has failed abysmally with respect to North Korea’s nuclear weapons development.

What has changed under the Trump administration is not the fact that North Korea has continued to build out and improve its nuclear weapons arsenal, which happened under every US president since the 1990s, but rather that the US–South Korea alliance frayed as well. This was due to multiple factors—including [missteps](#) by South Korean President Moon Jae-in and an increasingly complicated regional environment for alliance management—but the overarching reason was the US administration. US–South Korea alliance degradation was a consequence of choices and

priorities by [President Trump](#), as well as his [transactionalism](#) and [distaste for alliances](#) in general. Worse still, this occurred during a period of rising strategic competition with China, which should have made the importance of [US alliances](#), including with South Korea, even more marked.

Joe Biden, by contrast, is the walking definition of establishment centrism, and his administration’s foreign policy [outlook](#) prioritizes [re-building US alliances](#) to recover US international influence and compete more effectively with China both regionally and globally. The incoming White House also recognizes that improving US standing abroad requires addressing dramatic domestic challenges: COVID-19 mitigation and vaccination, economic recovery, and healing the political polarization and cultural division that have cleaved US society. This implies that the Korean Peninsula will not be an immediate focus for Biden.

When the time comes to turn to the Korean Peninsula, there will be a mix of familiar problems and new opportunities. The new administration inherits Trump’s refusal to give sanctions relief for the North ahead of serious concessions on its nuclear program. This is the orthodox US position. It is also one that has failed to prevent North Korean nuclear weapons proliferation and qualitative and quantitative improvement of its warheads and delivery systems. The establishment credentials of Biden and his foreign, security, and defense policy team indicate that his administration would tend to take a standard hardline approach to Pyongyang (more on this later). In late October he [opened the door](#) to meeting with Kim Jong Un, but only after drawdowns in nuclear capacity of the sort that North Korea has consistently rejected. Around the same time, he [blamed](#) Trump’s “friendship” with Kim Jong Un for blinding him to the growing threat of North Korea’s nuclear weapons and expanded missile arsenal. And while no one should expect a precise repeat of the Obama administration, it cannot be overlooked that Biden was its vice president, and that this administration tightened sanctions and disavowed proactive solutions to the North Korea conundrum after the Leap Day Deal debacle. That said, there is a [small but growing](#) community of North Korea experts in Washington arguing for shifting US nonproliferation policy toward North Korea to that of [arms control](#), which may find more

support in both Koreas. Even Biden's nominee for secretary of state, Antony Blinken, has hinted at this possibility, if one [reads between the lines](#).

During the September–December period South Korean officials were straightforward about the approach to the North they hoped from Washington, regardless of which presidential administration would begin Jan. 20. On Sept. 22, Moon made a [call](#) for a declaration of the end to the Korean War at the 75<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly. In November, Director of National Security Suh Hoon [urged](#) a return to talks with North Korea. Five days later Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa [reaffirmed](#) the Moon government's commitment to reaching a peace regime. The chairman of Moon's Democratic Party, Lee Nak-yeon, went so far as to [call on](#) Biden to keep the deal Trump signed with Kim in Singapore in 2018. That the South has continued to push the issue, not only with the US but with [China](#), suggests that Moon's September UN statement was part of an effort to build international consensus.



*Figure 1 President Moon Jae-in virtually delivers a speech to the United Nations General Assembly, urging the UN and the international community to formally end the 1950–1953 Korean War. Source: Blue House*

Biden and Moon have [reaffirmed](#) commitment to working together on the North Korean nuclear issue, but that is only one task for the alliance. Some outstanding issues are relatively easy (e.g., US troop burden-sharing), others are fraught (US–South Korea–Japan trilateral cooperation), and still others are new and promising (growing the US–South Korea military alliance on [space defense cooperation](#), or Seoul's participation in a [D-10 grouping](#) to be inaugurated at the upcoming expanded G7). One

of the key issues in the US–South Korea relationship will be [how Seoul aligns](#) its geostrategic/geo-economic/geopolitical approach to Southeast Asia, notably under the New Southern Policy, with Washington's more muscular approach to the Indo-Pacific, which Biden has indicated he will continue.

However, given the rise in strategic competition with China and resulting complications in the regional strategic environment, managing relations with the two Koreas will require more than merely being nicer to Seoul on burden-sharing and restoring a less mercurial policy approach toward Pyongyang. Moon has high hopes for inter-Korean cooperation that have thus far been blocked by US-led sanctions, and Moon's administration is hedging by [signaling warmer relations with Beijing](#). The North continues to defy the US pressure campaign designed to stop its nuclear weapons program, and China's [lax sanctions enforcement](#) renders this possible (despite the drop in North Korea–China trade [due to](#) COVID-19 border closures). It is a wicked problem to square the circle on US–South Korea relations, US–North Korea denuclearization efforts, and the US commitment to nonproliferation, all with a disruptive China in the background and a still-uncontained global pandemic.

### US–South Korea: O Brother, Where Art Thou?

During the final trimester of 2020 the US–South Korea relationship, long [predicated](#) on mutual security and [shared values](#), was in stasis. A lull is a normal, periodic consequence of the US presidential electoral cycle. The spectacle during this lull, however, was highly abnormal, as the Trump campaign and a significant part of the Republican party have engaged in an unprecedented attempt to [overturn the presidential election](#). Certainly Trump's refusal to concede to Biden put Moon—like most world leaders—in an uncomfortable protocol dilemma, as he was obliged to weigh how long to delay the traditional [congratulatory phone call](#) to the presumed president-elect. More substantively, US-led alliances, including with South Korea, have been girded by shared democratic values for decades, so a US political system with damaged rule-of-law would mean other countries would face a US partner of a different character.



Figure 2 News coverage of the US presidential election at a Seoul railway station. Photo: AFP

Now, with the election decided for Biden, the Moon administration [may be relieved](#), even if that [relief is tinged with regret](#) as Trump's departure means a likely reduction of transformative possibilities for the Korean Peninsula. Trump's unorthodox, personalized wheeling-and-dealing did conjure the occasional fleeting opportunity for a breakthrough in US-North Korea relations, with positive potential knock-on effects for inter-Korean relations. Moon seized those opportunities and tried to realize them, even if they ultimately stalled. This tantalizing set of opportunities, moreover, was accompanied by complications from the US side: [extortionate SMA demands](#), harassment about the US-South Korea [trade imbalance](#), subtextual threats of US [troop withdrawals](#) from the peninsula, and public and [private](#) denigration of the alliance in general.

Moon will not miss these headaches. Rather, at the leader and Cabinet secretary levels Moon and his senior officials will now have an experienced set of counterparts aiming to rebuild US alliance relations, even if South Korea as such will [not likely be an immediate priority](#) for the incoming White House. Thus the Moon administration will likely need to be patient in expectation that the Biden administration will turn to dealing with the Korean Peninsula.

Still, the Biden administration's foreign policy team will get its chance to deal with Korea issues soon enough. At the highest levels, some of that team is already known: Antony Blinken as secretary of state, Lloyd Austin as secretary of defense, Jake Sullivan as national security advisor, Avril Haines as director of national intelligence, Katherine Tai as US trade

representative, Linda Thomas-Greenfield as US ambassador to the United Nations. Personnel is policy, and these names (some of which require Senate confirmation) signal competence and centrist Democratic, establishment foreign policy and national security ideas.

It remains to be seen how that will translate into US policy on the alliance with South Korea, not only because events (especially unforeseen events) will drive policy, but also because most of the senior-level alliance managers responsible for or connected to the Korea portfolio are still unknown. As with every incoming presidential administration, there will be significant turnover, and staffing takes time. US Ambassador Harry Harris will vacate his post without a known successor, as will US North Korea envoy (and deputy secretary of state) Steve Biegun. One notes that South Korea also has a [new North Korea envoy](#), Noh Kyu-duk, who replaced Lee Do-hoon in December. The incoming White House's nominees for assistant secretary of state for Asia-Pacific Affairs and the assistant secretary of defense for Indo-Pacific security affairs are also unknown. The same is true for senior officials responsible for Asia and Korea at the National Security Council.

US-Korea stasis in the final trimester of 2020 meant pending issues saw little or no progress. In theory one of the easiest problems to solve is the impasse over the US-South Korea SMA, which became a problem largely due to [exorbitant demands by Trump](#) in late 2019 and throughout 2020. A stopgap burden-sharing arrangement was in force until Dec. 31, 2020. Given that negotiations throughout 2020 yielded no satisfactory compromise, in the middle of October [USFK advised](#) the South Korean government that current SMA funding will run out on March 31, 2021. This is not only a problem for alliance management reasons, but also has a political dimension, as SMA funding cut-off would furlough 9,000 South Korean contract workers for the USFK. However, signs indicate that the Biden administration [will set](#) the SMA contribution request at a manageable figure, which portends well for removing this thorn from the side of the alliance during the first half of 2021.

The military dimension of the US-South Korea alliance remains solid—with joint military cooperation, inter-operability, and trust at high levels—and little changed in that regard during the September-December period. Gen. Suh

Wook, who became South Korean defense minister in September 2020, [has met with his counterparts](#)—US defense secretary Christopher Miller, and his predecessor Mark Esper, as well USFK/CFC/UNC Commander Gen. Robert Abrams, US Army Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville, and Adm. Philip Davidson, chief of US Indo-Pacific Command—to continue strengthening alliance military cooperation and strategize on countering North Korea and its nuclear program. Suh will soon have a new USFK/CFC/UNC commander with which to interact, as Gen. Abrams will finish his posting and be [replaced by Gen. Paul LaCamera](#).

There are alliance sticking points, however. The combination of postponement and scaling-down of US-South Korea combined exercises—first due to Trump’s decision following the 2018 Singapore summit, and then due to precautions in light of COVID-19—have [begun to erode](#) joint military readiness. McConville has had regular contact with South Korean military leadership regarding strengthening alliance military cooperation, but [stated in September](#) that it is unlikely that full-scale exercises can resume before the end of the pandemic, which has led to [numerous outbreaks](#) among US and South Korean soldiers. The US [has begun vaccinating](#) USFK members in Korea, but South Korea has yet to do so. The Blue House has competing interests regarding a possible US request to resume full-scale combined exercises. On the one hand, a return to full-scale exercises is a sine qua non for the still-unresolved issue of [transferring wartime operational control](#) back to South Korea, a priority for Moon. On the other hand, Unification Minister Lee In-young hinted at reluctance to restart full-scale exercises if they were to impede inter-Korean relations, claiming in December that exercises “[must not provoke](#)” Pyongyang, a deferential attitude that likely rankles in both Washington and among the ranks of USFK.

In the September-December period, two nuclear-related issues continued to lurk in the background of the US-South Korea military alliance. First, Trump’s erratic commitment to the alliance and inability to halt North Korea’s nuclear program have [cast doubt on US extended nuclear deterrence](#) for South Korea. This has moved discussions of Seoul acquiring its own nuclear deterrent out of the political fringes and into the mainstream, as Kim Chong-in, leader of the main opposition party PPP (People Power Party), argued that South

Korea would have to [seriously consider](#) developing nuclear weapons if North Korea did not denuclearize.

Second, and more likely to cause consternation, South Korea [reiterated its plans](#) to develop a nuclear-powered attack submarine, [the fueling of which](#) would complicate US nuclear policy toward South Korea in particular. In September, South Korean Deputy National Security Advisor Kim Hyun-chong went to Washington to ask the US to provide the nuclear fuel for the submarine’s reactors. Doing so would require re-negotiation of the US-South Korea Agreement of Cooperation Concerning the Use of Atomic Energy for Peaceful Purposes, which the US has no interest in doing. Seoul could pursue its own uranium enrichment program to produce reactor fuel indigenously, but this would be provocative, put Seoul crossways with Washington, and damage denuclearization efforts vis-à-vis Pyongyang.

Beyond bilateral alliance management issues, there are several regional challenges for the US-South Korea partnership. One US desideratum is improved US-South Korea-Japan trilateral relations—Blinken, the secretary of state nominee, has stated that [mending South Korea-Japan](#) relations will be one of his priorities. This will require finesse, as domestically there is [little to be gained](#) politically in Seoul or Tokyo from repairing fractured relations. It makes sense from a US perspective, however, as solid Seoul-Tokyo ties make more efficacious US regional strategy in the Indo-Asia-Pacific, especially in terms of countering both China and North Korea.

Although manageable—whether via 2+2 ministerial meetings, the Security Consultative Mechanism, or the US-South Korea [working group established](#) in September by South Korean Vice-Foreign Minister Choi Jong-gun—friction on the above dossiers is pre-programmed, as in a few other areas. To wit: the US under Biden will likely continue to prioritize a competitive China strategy implicating regional partners such as South Korea in areas such as trade/economics, technology (notably 5G), maritime security, cybersecurity, and human rights. Seoul is [concerned about](#) drawing the wrath of Beijing, [particularly economically](#), and can be expected to continue to hedge where possible.

The North Korea dossier presents both peril and promise for Washington-Seoul relations. The

Moon administration is seeking to advance diplomacy with Pyongyang, but the incoming Biden White House foreign affairs and security policy team has [left North Korea off](#) its list of priorities. Improved inter-Korean relations—which require coordination with the US—is Moon’s signature issue, but he has little to show for it even as his term is entering its last full year. Whether via the 8th Workers’ Party Congress or otherwise, Pyongyang will have its say, of course. One should not expect it to remain sidelined by Washington for long. A restart of nuclear and/or missile testing would get the attention of the Biden team and move Pyongyang higher on the agenda. At the same time, a belligerent North Korea makes improved inter-Korean relations a more difficult sell for Moon.

### **US–North Korea: The Relationship That Wasn’t There**

Little has happened at the highest levels of US–North Korea relations since early 2019. There has been, however, a quid pro quo equilibrium: North Korea continued its moratorium on testing long-range missiles and nuclear weapons that the US considers especially provocative, while the Trump administration stopped pushing for major new UN sanctions and downplayed human rights. At lower, bureaucratic levels the US continued efforts to restrain North Korea’s proliferation activities, which continued apace, and North Korean officials did not hesitate to denounce the US, although not Trump himself. US officials occasionally spoke of [ongoing talks](#) and possible breakthroughs, and both leaders spoke fondly of one another, keeping alive hopes of a deal if Trump was re-elected. Indeed, Kim was one of the world leaders to [send](#) his regards following Trump’s October COVID-19 diagnosis.

Between September and the end of December this trend continued. The US:

- Successfully prosecuted a company based in the British Virgin Islands, which [pleaded](#) guilty to laundering money for North Korean clients.
- Placed [new sanctions](#) on Iranian entities and individuals, with the justifications for doing so including the resumption of cooperation between Tehran and Pyongyang over long-range missile development.

- [Called](#) Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programs a global threat after seeing North Korea’s new weapons—especially a new generation ICBM—at its October military parade.
- [Issued a warning](#) in late October over the North Korean hacking group Kimsuky, seemingly timed to deter interference in the upcoming election.
- [Sanctioned two](#) North Korea-linked enterprises operating in Russia, citing involvement in the exploitation of forced labor.
- [Offered](#) up to \$3 million in funding for organizations working for North Korean human rights, a 25% increase over the State Department’s previous offering.
- [Criticized China](#) for “flagrant violation” of obligations to enforce international sanctions on North Korea, adding that the US would offer rewards up to \$5 million for information about sanctions evasions.
- [Placed new sanctions](#) on six entities and four vessels related to North Korean sanctions evasion.

The Kim regime had little reaction to such measures, probably because its focus was on internal matters. North Korea is by all accounts in as [difficult a position](#) as it has been in 25 years. The only recent positive for North Korea was the October [stealth military parade](#), in which it celebrated the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its ruling party by displaying modern military equipment, including a new ICBM. The parade was a good show, but other than this international and domestic propaganda success, the situation in North Korea has become [dire](#).



Figure 3 Military vehicles are seen during a parade to mark the 75th anniversary of the founding of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea, October 10, 2020. Photo: KCNA via Reuters

Inclement weather, including severe flooding, left the North Korean leader concerned about [typhoon recovery outside](#) the country's capital and in its [mining areas](#). Worry over COVID-19 has loomed particularly large. Given the Kim regime's decision to close the border with China for nearly all of 2020, Pyongyang's licit trade with Beijing has shrunk to [practically zero](#). The economic consequences are [bordering on disastrous](#). North Korea has also [warned citizens](#) to stay inside to avoid so-called COVID-carrying "yellow dust," and the virus threat was implied even when not mentioned, as it [appears](#) to have led to suspension of the mass games expected in October. Earlier that month Kim took the unprecedented step of [weeping openly](#) and saying he had failed to provide the people of the country with a better economy. The regime ordered an [80 day](#) economic "speed battle"—much hated by North Koreans—to finish state development projects and boost economic productivity.

Under such conditions, it's safe to say Kim's priority is on avoiding domestic catastrophe and ensuring regime survival in the Hermit Kingdom. He even refrained from the usual New Year's address, [instead penning a solemn letter](#) thanking North Koreans for their support in difficult times. This makes the outcome of the just completed 8th Workers' Party Congress all the more critical, both as such and in terms of the signals it will send the Biden administration.

Kim's opening Congress [speech](#) apologized for failure of the 2016–2021 five-year economic plan, vaguely referred to better relations with South Korea, and did not mention nuclear weapons. A new [five-year economic plan](#) was

also announced at the Congress, although the details are still sketchy. Focus on prolonged autarky would suggest a continued shutdown of nuclear diplomacy with the US, as Kim would be betting that he can survive sanctions that might be lifted if an agreement were to be made. Beyond that signaling mechanism, the Biden administration's Korea policy team will want to study the mix of focus on domestic (economics, technology, pandemic) vs international (e.g., China relations, military deterrence) issues, and what that might reveal about Pyongyang's intentions toward Washington. Any openings toward improved inter-Korean relations will also be scrutinized for possibilities that they might allow Washington and Seoul to coordinate policies for renewed nuclear negotiations and steps toward a more peaceful and secure peninsula.

### Conclusion: No Country for Old Approaches

Perhaps the biggest question is whether the Kim regime will engage in an act of hostility—nuclear or missile test, inter alia—to welcome the Biden administration and move Pyongyang up the agenda in Washington. This is a standard move from Pyongyang's playbook, and one that has bedeviled the approach to Korea for most recent US presidents. North Korea had largely been silent about the US in the final six months of 2020, but at the 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress on Jan. 9 Kim [called](#) the US North Korea's "biggest enemy," then announced a series of goals for increased military power, including missiles with strike capabilities of 15,000 kilometers, tactical nuclear weapons, ground or submarine-launched solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), plus hypersonic aircraft and a military surveillance satellite.

Had the silence of the second half of 2020 been a precursor to a fixed strategic plan, or a sign of strategic flexibility, perhaps waiting to see what would be produced by a review of North Korea policy by the Biden administration? The prevailing sense is that Kim will miss comrade Trump, whose unorthodox approach to negotiations failed to deliver sanctions relief, but at least made that prospect thinkable, even in the absence of significant denuclearization. That said, the US and North Korea continue to have divergent national interests, and how Kim initially reacts to a new US administration will set a path that will likely persist throughout Biden's presidency.

Another important question is how much space Moon will have to facilitate dialogue along his preferred path. If North Korea chooses not to act provocatively early in Biden's term, and gives him a chance to settle into the role and address the wreckage left over from America's 2020 annus horribilis, it improves the chances of the US working with South Korea to find opportunities to reduce sanctions pressure. Yet Biden may not, as Trump did, disregard short-range missile tests of the sort North Korea carried out in 2019 and 2020, and may consider them provocations. With the US deeply divided, behavior that the US public considers threatening may not give Biden the political leeway necessary for a deal. In any event, by the time we revisit US-Korea relations in late spring, the pattern for US engagement with the Korean Peninsula may be set.

# CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2020

**Sept. 1, 2020:** A company based in the British Virgin Island [pleads](#) guilty to laundering money for North Korean clients.

**Sept. 2, 2020:** Documents [reveal](#) that North Korea is seeking millions of dollars in medical supplies for an upcoming Pyongyang general hospital project.

**Sept. 3, 2020:** Senior adviser Jared Kushner [says](#) President Trump will reach a breakthrough with North Korea if he is reelected.

**Sept. 4, 2020:** Satellite imagery [suggests](#) North Korea's preparation for a submarine-launched ballistic missile at the South Sinpo shipyard.

**Sept. 6, 2020:** North Korea [sends](#) only low or mid-level diplomats to UN General Assembly meetings this year.

**Sept. 7, 2020:** UN chief [urges](#) North Korea to resume denuclearization talks with the US and the South.

**Sept. 8, 2020:** North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [calls](#) for an urgent recovery from typhoon damage.

**Sept. 9, 2020:** US Army chief Gen. James McConville [says](#) he doesn't see full-scale ROK-US drills amid the coronavirus pandemic.

**Sept. 11, 2020:** US and South Korea [agrees](#) to launch a new working-level dialogue channel to discuss alliance matters.

**Sept. 12, 2020:** Kim [inspects](#) recovery work in a flood-hit area, according to North Korea state media.

**Sept. 13, 2020:** Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun [expresses](#) Washington's support for lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula at a regional security meeting.

**Sept. 15, 2020:** Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [tells](#) the Atlantic Council that US talks with North Korea remain ongoing.

**Sept. 16, 2020:** South Korean Minister of Unification Lee In-young visits Panmunjom, [urging](#) North Korea to implement agreements reached during the 2018 inter-Korea summit.

**Sept. 17, 2020:** Assistant Secretary of State for East Pacific and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell [says](#) that the US is not discussing the possibility of withdrawing troops from South Korea.

**Sept. 18, 2020:** *USS Pueblo* intelligence ship veterans [file](#) a lawsuit against North Korea, demanding compensation of up to \$6 billion.

**Sept. 19, 2020:** North Korean defector is arrested [trying](#) to cross back into the DPRK.

**Sept. 20, 2020:** US [announces](#) new sanctions on Iranian entities and individuals, saying Tehran and North Korea have resumed cooperation on long-range missile development.

**Sept. 21, 2020:** Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette [says](#) the US "remains committed to addressing the threats posed by the nuclear programs of both North Korea and Iran" at IAEA.

**Sept. 22, 2020:** South Korean President Moon Jae-In [calls](#) for declaring an end to the Korean War at 75<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly.

**Sept. 24, 2020:** South Korean officials [condemn](#) North Korea's [killing](#) of a South Korean Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Ministry official who may have tried to defect to North Korea.

**Sept. 25, 2020:** State Department [condemns](#) North Korea's killing of a South Korean official and demands an explanation.

**Sept. 26, 2020:** State Department [says](#) North Korea's apology over killing of a South Korean official is a "helpful step."

**Sept. 27, 2020:** North Korea [accuses](#) South Korea of sending ships into its territory to find the body of the dead South Korean official.

**Sept. 28, 2020:** ROK President Moon [apologizes](#) to the South Korean public and the family of the official killed by North Korean troops.

**Sept. 29, 2020:** South Korean Coast Guard [says](#) that the South Korean official killed by the North Korean Navy sought defection to the North.

**Sept. 29, 2020:** Biegun [says](#) the US and South Korea discussed how to move the stagnated dialogues with the North.

**Sept. 30, 2020:** North Korea's UN ambassador [says](#) North Korea has a "reliable and effective war deterrent for self-defense."

**Oct. 1, 2020:** Kim Jong Un [inspects](#) a flooded village damaged by recent typhoons.

**Oct. 2, 2020:** Kim Jong Un [sends](#) a letter to President Trump, expressing his hopes that he would recover from the coronavirus.

**Oct. 4, 2020:** South Korean and US intelligence [have](#) spotted North Korea moving an intercontinental ballistic missile.

**Oct. 4, 2020:** Pompeo [cancels](#) a planned visit to South Korea.

**Oct. 5, 2020:** South Korea's Unification Ministry [calls](#) on North Korea to respond to South Korea's request for a joint investigation over the killing of a South Korean official.

**Oct. 6, 2020:** North Korea's acting ambassador to Italy, who went missing in late 2018, reveals he [lives](#) in South Korea under government protection since last year.

**Oct. 8, 2020:** South Korea [grants](#) permission to private organizations to send \$1.24 million in private aid to North Korea.

**Oct. 10, 2020:** Evidence [suggests](#) North Korean appears to have held anniversary military parade. At the event North Korea [displays](#) a new ICBM, and Kim [tears](#) up, apologizing to North Korean citizens for failing to deliver higher living standards.

**Oct. 11, 2020:** South Korean government [holds](#) emergency National Security Council meeting after North Korea unveils a massive intercontinental ballistic missile.

**Oct. 13, 2020:** Kim Jong Un [inspects](#) a mining area in South Hamgyong province, which was recently hit by flooding and typhoons.

**Oct. 14, 2020:** Defense Secretary Mark Esper [says](#) North Korea's nuclear and missile programs pose a global threat, after seeing North Korea's new weapons at military parade.

**Oct. 15, 2020:** UN [condemns](#) North Korea's unlawful killing of a South Korean government official in waters.

**Oct. 16, 2020:** South Korean National Security Adviser Suh Hoon [says](#) Seoul and Washington are on the same page over the initiative to declare the end of the Korean War.

**Oct. 17, 2020:** U.S. National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien [sees](#) a chance to resume denuclearization talks with North Korea around next summer Olympic games.

**Oct. 19, 2020:** Civilian tours of Panmunjom [will](#) reopen early next month after a year of suspension caused by the African swine fever, the Unification Ministry says.

**Oct. 20, 2020:** South Korean Defense Minister Suh Wook and Adm. Phil Davidson, commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, [discuss](#) denuclearization of North Korea.

**Oct. 21, 2020:** South Korean Unification Minister Lee In-young [says](#) South Korea will keep seeking dialogue with North Korea for cooperation in railway linking.

**Oct. 22, 2020:** North Korea [appears](#) to have suspended gymnastic shows scheduled for this month.

**Oct. 23, 2020:** Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden [says](#) he could meet Kim Jong Un if North Korea reduces the country's nuclear capabilities.

**Oct. 24, 2020:** North Korea [warns](#) citizens to stay inside over fears that yellow dust from China could bring coronavirus.

**Oct. 26, 2020:** Biden [says](#) that North Korea possesses a great number of missiles because of Trump.

**Oct 27, 2020:** Moon's special security adviser, Moon Chung-in, [says](#) signing a declaration to end the Korean War is the first step toward the denuclearization.

**Oct. 28, 2020:** US government [issues](#) a warning on a North Korean hacking group before the US presidential election.

**Oct. 29, 2020:** North Korea [says](#) South Korea is responsible for the death of a fisheries official killed at sea last month, although they reiterate regret over the killing.

**Oct. 29, 2020:** US Ambassador Harry Harris [becomes](#) honorary citizen of Seoul in recognition of his efforts to expand exchanges between the city and the United States.

**Oct. 31, 2020:** A UN panel [says](#) the al-Shabab Islamic extremist group used a North Korean mortar in a terrorist attack in Somalia earlier this year.

**Nov. 1, 2020:** North Korea [imposes](#) requirements on foreigners to fight against coronavirus.

**Nov. 2, 2020:** North Korea [argues](#) that the South is plotting to bring in additional U.S. missile defense system in the country, saying that it would lead to "self-destruction."

**Nov. 3, 2020:** ROK troops [take](#) into custody a North Korean man who crossed the border.

**Nov. 4, 2020:** Unification Minister Lee In-young [urges](#) North Korea to restore cross-border communication lines between the two Koreas.

**Nov. 6, 2020:** South Korean national security chief Suh [urges](#) US government to resume talks with the North Korean regime.

**Nov. 8, 2020:** President Moon [congratulates](#) Joe Biden on his election victory.

**Nov. 9, 2020:** ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa [visits](#) Washington for talks with Pompeo.

**Nov. 11, 2020:** Foreign Minister Kang [reaffirms](#) efforts to continue ensuring peace on the Korean Peninsula after Biden's election.

**Nov. 12, 2020:** Moon and Biden [reaffirm](#) commitment to their alliance and to work together closely on the North Korean nuclear issues in a phone call.

**Nov. 13, 2020:** Chairman of the Democratic Party of South Korea Lee Nak-yon [calls on](#) Biden to keep the deal signed between North Korean leader Kim and President Trump in 2018.

**Nov. 15, 2020:** Three members of ruling Democratic Party of South Korea [leave](#) for Washington for meetings with US congressional leaders and experts on the Korean Peninsula issues.

**Nov. 16, 2020:** Ambassador Harris [congratulates](#) four Korean-Americans on their election to the House of Representatives.

**Nov. 17, 2020:** US Army Chief of Staff Gen. James C. McConville [meets](#) South Korean Defense Minister Suh Wook to discuss ways to strengthen and expand cooperation.

**Nov. 18, 2020:** Unification Minister Lee [says](#) South Korea will formally offer talks with North Korea when the coronavirus wanes.

**Nov. 19, 2020:** Department of Treasury [adds](#) two North Korean enterprises that operate in Russia to sanctions list on North Korea for alleged involvement in the exportation of "forced labor."

**Nov. 20, 2020:** North Korea [accuses](#) the UN Security Council for labeling the country's space program as threats, calling the agency an "undemocratic organ devoid of impartiality."

**Nov. 20, 2020:** International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) [suspects](#) North Korea of producing enriched uranium at the Kangson facility.

**Nov. 22, 2020:** South Korea [agrees](#) to boost cooperation with US Air Force to respond better to emerging space threats.

**Nov. 23, 2020:** Unification Minister Lee [stresses](#) that a breakthrough in South-North Korean ties could come "sooner than expected."

**Nov. 24, 2020:** Kim Chong-in, leader of South Korea's main opposition People Power Party (PPP), [says](#) South Korea may need to consider acquiring nuclear weapons if North Korea does not give up nuclear weapons.

**Nov. 24, 2020:** US State Department [offers](#) up to \$3 million in funding for organizations working for North Korean human rights.

**Nov. 26, 2020:** China's top diplomat Wang Yi and Kang [hold](#) talks in Seoul, discussing North Korea's nuclear program and preparing a visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping.

**Nov. 27, 2020:** North Korean hackers [are](#) suspected of trying to break into the systems of British drug company AstraZeneca in recent weeks.

**Nov. 27, 2020:** Former Commander of US Forces Korea (USFK) Burwell Bell [warns](#) South Korea may lose allies if the country arms itself with nuclear weapons.

**Nov. 29, 2020:** North Korea [reinforces](#) border lockdown to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic from spreading into its country.

**Nov. 30, 2020:** US expert [says](#) North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and his family have been vaccinated for the coronavirus with a vaccine provided by China.

**Dec. 1, 2020:** Department of State [accuses](#) China of "flagrant violation" of its obligation to enforce international sanctions on North Korea, saying the US would offer rewards up to \$5 million for information about sanctions evasions.

**Dec. 2, 2020:** North Korean hackers [have attempted](#) to hack at least six pharmaceutical companies developing COVID-19 vaccines in the US, the UK, and South Korea.

**Dec. 3, 2020:** Six US soldiers and two other civilians in South Korea [test](#) positive for coronavirus.

**Dec. 4, 2020:** ROK Minister of Unification Lee [promises](#) aid organization activists to send humanitarian assistance to North Korea.

**Dec. 4, 2020:** Head of US Army Pacific, Gen. Paul LaCamera, [is nominated](#) to be next commander of US Forces Korea (USFK).

**Dec. 8, 2020:** Biegun [arrives](#) in South Korea for talks with South Korean officials, including the foreign minister and the minister of unification, regarding bilateral alliance and stalled nuclear negotiations with North Korea.

**Dec. 9, 2020:** Treasury Department [announces](#) new sanctions on six entities and four vessels related to North Korea.

**Dec. 10, 2020:** Biegun [calls](#) on North Korea to return to dialogue for complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

**Dec. 11, 2020:** Kim Yo Jong, sister of the North Korean leader, [slams](#) the ROK foreign minister for "reckless remarks" on Pyongyang's coronavirus handling.

**Dec. 12, 2020:** Biegun [reaffirms](#) the US commitment to complete denuclearization of North Korea.

**Dec. 15, 2020:** North Korea [starts](#) regular winter-time drills, showing no signs of unusual movements.

**Dec. 16, 2020:** Trump [says](#) he will veto US defense bill, which includes limits on the president's ability to withdraw troops from countries including South Korea.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** USFK Commander Gen. Robert Abrams [calls](#) for "immediate and aggressive" antivirus measures.

**Dec. 19, 2020:** United Nations Command (UNC) [suspends](#) tours to truce village of Panmunjom due to the coronavirus pandemic.

**Dec. 20, 2020:** North Korea [says](#) it will expand its Mount Kumgang tourist complex in "our way," despite hopes of revived inter-Korean cooperation there.

**Dec. 21, 2020:** Presidential Secretary Noh Kyu-duk is [named](#) Seoul's new top nuclear envoy.

**Dec. 23, 2020:** USFK [will](#) be the first group in South Korea to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. It will start administering the Moderna vaccine against coronavirus to frontline health workers and first responders.

**Dec. 24, 2020:** US State Department [expresses](#) strong support for South Korea to defend its air space after Chinese and Russian military aircrafts entered the KADIZ.

**Dec. 25, 2020:** Moderna's COVID-19 vaccines for USFK [arrive](#) in South Korea.

**Dec. 26, 2020:** ROK Defense Ministry [discusses](#) with related authorities whether ROK Army troops assigned to USFK can get the COVID-19 vaccine shipped for US soldiers in South Korea.

**Dec. 27, 2020:** North Korea's trade with China [slumps](#) to just \$2,382 in November due to Pyongyang's measures to stop the entry of the coronavirus into the country.

**Dec. 29, 2020:** US Air Force reconnaissance plane [flies](#) over Korea as North Korea appears to prepare a military parade.

**Dec. 30, 2020:** Data [shows](#) six countries—Russia, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Canada, and Bulgaria—have provided nearly \$10 million in food aid this year to help North Korea respond to chronic food shortages.

**Dec. 31, 2020:** USFK-affiliated South Korean civilian workers and troops [begin](#) getting COVID-19 vaccinations. They are the country's first citizens getting vaccinated against the virus.

*Chronology compiled by Pacific Forum Research  
Intern Hanmin Kim.*



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

## WAITING ON WASHINGTON: SOUTHEAST ASIA HOPES FOR A POST-ELECTION BOOST IN US RELATIONS

CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

The resurgent COVID-19 pandemic and US elections constrained the conduct of US relations with Southeast Asia and of regional affairs more broadly in the final months of 2020. Major conclaves were again “virtual,” including the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and the APEC meeting. Over the year, ASEAN lost considerable momentum because of the pandemic, but managed to oversee completion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in November. Some modest gains in US-Southeast Asian relations were realized, most notably extension of the US-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) for another six months, an opportunity for Manila and the new administration in Washington to put the VFA—and the US-Philippines alliance more broadly—on firmer ground. Another significant step, albeit a more controversial one, was the under-the-radar visit to Washington of Indonesian Defense Minister, Prabowo Subianto, in October.

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As Southeast Asian economies struggled under the crush of COVID-19, they looked to Washington for opportunities to “decouple” from China through stronger trade and investment with the United States. The results thus far are mixed: the US trade representative dealt blows to Thailand and Vietnam, but a concerted campaign by Jakarta to expand economic relations appears to be more promising. Political turbulence in the United States left Southeast Asian leaders unsure of the way forward for relations with Washington in the immediate aftermath of the election, but some countries were themselves embroiled in complex political dynamics. Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha faced escalating protests against his administration and the monarchy, while Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin continued to have difficulty expanding his majority in Parliament. The headline political event in the region was general elections in Myanmar on Nov. 8. Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy won an absolute majority in Parliament; this achievement is no guarantee of constitutional change, however, and Suu Kyi will likely remain an informal head of state for the next five years.

### **The Cost of COVID**

Although Southeast Asia does not rank among the world’s worst “hotspots” for COVID-19, the region is suffering from a [second surge of the virus](#). Indonesia remains the most seriously afflicted; by year’s end, the country had [logged](#) 818,000 cases and nearly 24,000 deaths. Thailand, which was lauded internationally for its handling of the first surge in early 2020, is in the midst of a COVID rebound that doubled cases in December. The pandemic has intensified sentiments against migrant workers in several countries—Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia—and forced governments to continue travel restrictions, which cuts deeply into tourism and trade in goods. In the ASEAN region in 2020, the overall GDP shrunk 4.2%, with the services sector being harder hit than manufacturing, particularly in tourism. Among individual member states, only Vietnam was able to eke out positive growth in 2020, of 2.91%. The Philippines recorded the largest contraction, falling 8.2%, with Thailand at -7.15%.

In the midst of the new surge, Southeast Asian governments are competing with one another to preorder vaccines and consider the logistical challenges of distribution and vaccinating their

publics. The pace of vaccination across the region is likely to vary widely: Indonesian officials estimate that a nationwide vaccine program may not be possible until the third quarter of 2021.

In the meantime, China has promised early access to its vaccines for countries of strategic interest: the Philippines, Indonesia, and Myanmar have been given priority. Vietnam, being reluctant to rely upon Beijing, has entered a large order for vaccine being developed by Russia. Although the United States is a leader in developing vaccines against the coronavirus, the need to produce and distribute a vaccine for the US public is too grave for Washington to mount a serious campaign of “vaccine diplomacy” in Southeast Asia.

### **Anti-China Diplomacy**

The Trump administration, and the State Department in particular, continued its strong [diplomatic push](#) against Beijing in Southeast Asia with a series of speeches excoriating China for the coronavirus, breeches of cybersecurity, increased assertiveness in the South China Sea, environmental conditions in the Mekong region, and human rights abuses, particularly against Hong Kong protestors. Administration officials argue, not without justification, that each of these issues supports their anti-China advocacy. Southeast Asian leaders do not necessarily disagree on a case-by-case basis, but they object to Washington’s messaging, which they view as an attempt to force ASEAN to abandon its principle of balancing regional powers and to join in a bloc with the United States.

Brief visits to the region in late 2020 by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien were heavy on anti-Beijing rhetoric and light on deliverables. Official addresses at regional meetings adopted a similar tone. The exception to this may be the reshaping of the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) into the [US-Mekong Partnership](#) in September. Governments often pour old wine into new bottles, but the partnership signals renewed US interest in the Mekong region, a new tranche of funds, and a sharper rationale when compared to the LMI, with a focus on transparency, good governance, and connectivity. The receptivity of the Southeast Asian Mekong countries is likely due to growing concern regarding the connection between the upriver dams and chronic drought in the downriver countries.



Figure 1 US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Bing Minh bump elbows in greeting at a meeting in Hanoi on Oct. 30, 2020. Photo: Bui Lam Khahn/VNA via AP)

### Incremental—But Significant—Security Steps

As it has for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US Indo-Pacific Command continued to play a large role in US relations with Southeast Asia in the final months of 2020, through the continuation of some joint exercises and, wherever possible, “defense diplomacy.” The need for maintaining a high defense profile was obvious. Analysis from the [Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative](#) and other groups showed that the COVID-19 pandemic had little impact on Chinese Coast Guard forays in the South China Sea in 2020, with continued harassment of Philippine fishing activity and increased attempts to disrupt oil and gas activity in several Southeast Asian exclusive economic zones (EEZ’s).

The continued threat was underscored on Dec. 25, when [satellite images revealed](#) that China had flown its largest warplane, the Y-20 transporter, to Fiery Cross Reef, the first time that the plane had been deployed to the Spratlys. The deployment was followed by a set of military exercises in the waters surrounding Hainan. Although the Y-20 was not observed offloading or taking on cargo, its deployment was considered to be a sign of China’s intention to further militarize Fiery Cross, which could place major Philippine cities, ports, and military facilities within striking distance of Chinese air power.

This heightened threat environment likely persuaded Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte in November to extend the US–Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) a second time,

for another six months, presumably to place the alliance on firmer footing with the change of administrations in Washington. This likely tracks with the intentions of the Philippine defense community, but Duterte’s own views are more opaque, particularly since he was one of the few US allies who developed a positive personal relationship with Trump.

Some [Philippine analysts believe](#) that Duterte hopes to move the alliance from a singular focus on the South China Sea to place counterterrorism on an equal plane. This would not only address an issue of greater domestic importance to Duterte, but also relieve some pressure from him in his quest to court Chinese investment. Washington’s response was to dispatch a parade of high-ranking defense officials to Manila, including Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller, to reaffirm the value of the alliance in advance of negotiations on the continuation of the VFA.

A more low-key but still significant development in US security relations in Southeast Asia was the surprise visit of Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto to Washington in October to meet with then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper. Prabowo had been under a visa ban for two decades because of his association with Kopassus, the Indonesian military’s special forces, which was charged with a long list of human rights violations. The Pentagon’s invitation was intended to blunt the edge of Chinese overtures to Indonesia and deter Jakarta from purchasing Russian *Sukhoi* fighter jets. A [joint statement](#) from the visit mentioned increased cooperation on Indonesia’s military modernization and maritime security, but its only concrete commitment was to restart bilateral cooperation to recover the remains of US personnel lost in World War II. Accounting for US war dead is often used as an entry point for bilateral security cooperation, although, in this case, it was more a way of putting relations with a specific official on new footing.

### Tempering Expectations for Multilateral Trade

To the ASEAN states, the [finalization of RCEP](#) was a note of triumph for economic integration in the face of growing global protectionism. Although the agreement does little to advance trade liberalization, when it is ratified by its 15 member countries—the 10 ASEAN members, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand—it will encompass nearly 30% of

global GDP, making it the largest trade bloc in history. It is also the first free trade agreement to include China, Japan, and South Korea. India's withdrawal from the negotiations in 2019 was a clear disappointment to ASEAN, and further proof that New Delhi may not be ready to take significant steps towards regional integration.

China is likely to be greatest beneficiary of RCEP, in economic terms and its image in the region. Although RCEP is a status quo agreement, consolidating existing trade agreements among the members, its tighter organization of trade and standardization of rules of origin will enable members to rewire or strengthen supply chains among themselves more easily. This could impede US attempts to persuade Southeast Asian countries to “decouple” from China in favor of closer trade relations with Washington. Because RCEP was signed in November, Beijing has [expressed interest](#) in joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the successor to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which would increase its role in regional economic integration further.

As a result, many US companies and business groups have pressed Washington to seek entry into RCEP. They argue that China's role as the largest economy in RCEP (and potentially in the CPTPP) gives it greater leverage in defining the trade standards in the region. This will make it more difficult for Washington to negotiate trade agreements in the region with provisions that would help it win approval in Congress. For example, in negotiations for RCEP, China was successful in quashing Indian attempts to go beyond trade in goods to include a services agreement.

During the presidential campaign, Biden insisted that China could not be allowed to “write the rules of the road” for international trade, a view that the Trump administration clearly shared. However, Biden is unlikely to seek entry for the United States into either RCEP or the CPTPP, since both the US Trade Representative (USTR) and Congress would consider its standards to be too low. This leaves open the question of when and through what mechanism Washington might return to a multilateral framework in Asia.

In lieu of a quick return to the TPP or other broad trade agreement, Washington is more

likely to favor narrow agreements in areas that have not ordinarily been included in trade negotiations. At the [Indo-Pacific Business Forum](#) in Hanoi on Oct. 27, US business groups called for the United States to negotiate new sector-specific trade agreements in the region, pointing to the possibility of a digital trade agreement with Southeast Asia. As the world's fastest-growing internet market—with 360 million current internet users, 125,000 new users each day, and 914 million mobile connections—Southeast Asia is the [most digitally engaged](#) region in the world. In early 2020, the Trump administration informed Congress that it intended to open negotiations with Singapore on a digital agreement, as well as with Australia. If the Biden administration follows suit, it will likely employ an incremental, “plug and play” approach, with Southeast Asian countries entering into negotiations on a US digital trade agreement when their legal and regulatory structures can reach standards that are set out by Washington.

In the last quarter of 2020, the Trump administration endeavored to tie up some [loose ends](#) in bilateral trade in Southeast Asia in the final months of 2020. In October, the USTR suspended a portion of Thailand's benefits under the Generalized System of Preferences because of issues related to US pork products while allowing Indonesia and Laos to keep their benefits. As a result of a USTR investigation into currency manipulation in Vietnam, in November the Commerce Department announced preliminary countervailing duties (CVD) on Vietnam related to currency manipulation. In contrast, Indonesia hopes to expand and accelerate its economic relations with the United States: Jakarta is seeking US investment in Indonesia's new sovereign wealth fund and hopes to open negotiations with Washington on a trade agreement in 2021.

### Political Transitions and Political Turmoil

Despite Western criticism of the handling of the Rohingya crisis by the government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD)—and possibly because of it—the NLD turned in a stronger performance in the [Nov. 8 general elections](#) than it did in 2015. The party holds 82% of parliamentary seats and an overall 61% majority in the legislature, while taking reserved seats for the military into account. State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi is still banned from the presidency under the constitution, but

she is likely to emerge again at the top after negotiating the selection of a proxy president with her party and the military. This will be a slow and opaque process, and a new government may not be announced until February.

When that government is in place, its first priority will be to re-energize the peace process with armed ethnic groups. The NLD hopes to frontload this, with some government appointments for representatives of the ethnic political parties, which, as a group, drew the second-largest number of votes in the election after the NLD and ahead of the military-backed Union of Solidarity and Development. In the NLD government's first term, it made no real progress on the longstanding peace negotiations. Conflicts between the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military) and ethnic insurgents on the Myanmar-China border strained bilateral relations with Beijing; moreover, India's conflict with Naga insurgents on its border with Myanmar added to Naypyidaw's problems. However, there are also compelling domestic reasons to complete the peace process: the 2017 crackdown on the Rohingya and international condemnation of it has strengthened Buddhist nationalism. This likely contributed to the NLD victory at the polls, but it also raises the risk of greater internal conflict and violence.



Figure 2 A child wears an NLD paper crown at an October campaign rally in Kyankse for Myanmar's Nov. 8 general elections. Photo: Kaung Zaw Hein/SOPA Images

Although neither Thailand nor Malaysia underwent political transitions in 2020, Thai Prime Minister Prayuth and Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin have struggled to remain in power. For Prayuth, the struggle has intensified in the final months of the year as protests against his administration and, more dangerously, against the monarchy have expanded. The [annual military reshuffle](#) in

October placed King Vajiralongkorn's candidate for Army chief, Gen. Narongpan Jittkaewtae, into power above Prayuth's choice, signaling that Prayuth's leverage with the palace may be waning. In November, the government [restored the use of lèse majesté laws](#), which Vajiraongkorn had suspended, in order to expand arrests of protestors. In the last quarter of 2020, Muhyiddin struggled to keep his government coalition together so as to maintain his slim parliamentary majority in Malaysia. Although he is legally not required to hold general elections until September 2023, he is likely to do so earlier, at the first opportunity to solidify his power base and strengthen his legitimacy as an elected rather than appointed prime minister.

### Looking Ahead

In the immediate and tumultuous aftermath of the November presidential elections, only Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia [congratulated President-elect Joe Biden](#), but most other Southeast Asian leaders followed suit before the end of the year. Overall, the region expects the Biden administration to provide steadier and more consistent foreign policy, with continued attention to security, but, it is hoped, a trade policy that transcends Trump's "America First" approach. Southeast Asians generally applaud Biden's more multilateral orientation, but that is not likely to translate into US re-entry into the Trans-Pacific Partnership in the near-term; the region will benefit from Washington's return to the World Health Organization and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

Regional leaders will face the reality that US relations in the Indo-Pacific region will remain focused on the bilateral relationship with China, with Southeast Asia again in the position of a crossroads. However, they hope that a more conciliatory tone from Biden toward Beijing will lessen the "new Cold War" rhetoric of the Trump administration and remove them from the line of fire. When COVID restrictions ease, the Biden administration's diplomacy in Southeast Asia will be vigorous in comparison to the Trump administration, and the White House will move quickly to fill positions important to the region. One key slot will be the US ambassador to ASEAN, which the Trump administration never filled with a Senate-confirmed official.

A successful conclusion to negotiations between the Philippines and the United States on the Visiting Forces Agreement in the first half of 2021 would encourage hopes for a strong US security role in Southeast Asia, but that is not a given—President Duterte will remain a wild card, despite [continued support](#) from the Philippine defense sector and the public for the alliance. Bolstering US security partnerships in Southeast Asia would have an exponential benefit, since these partnerships encourage cooperation between Southeast Asia and other US allies, such as Japan and Australia. However, Biden could run aground if his proposal to convene a Summit of Democracies in his first year spurns allies, such as Bangkok and Manila.

Although the mid-term horizon is encouraging, Washington will struggle to keep pace with China, much less to surpass it, in Southeast Asia in the early months of 2021. Lingering disruption in regional transportation lines because of COVID-19 and the finalization of RCEP will enable Beijing to retain and even strengthen supply chains in the region. As much as Southeast Asian governments may wish to rebalance and diversify their economic relations, the pandemic will keep them close to China in the near-term. Moreover, Beijing will likely win the “vaccine war” in Southeast Asia, by [giving priority to many countries](#) for the sales of Chinese-produced vaccine and facilitating local vaccine production.

At the end of 2020, Vietnam passed the ASEAN chair to Brunei. Hanoi had hoped that another strong performance as regional chair would be a strong lead-in for the 13th National Party Congress in late January 2021, when President and Party Secretary-General Nguyen Phu Trong is expected to hand power over to a handpicked successor. Hanoi sent up a trial balloon in the fall, hoping to retain the chair for another year because of the pandemic, without success. Brunei is expected to provide balanced leadership of ASEAN, but it has neither the administrative capacity nor the political heft of larger states, and some leaders in the region fear that, with ASEAN led by two of its smallest states (Cambodia will take the chair in 2022), China will be able to strengthen its strategic presence in the South China Sea and the Mekong region with greater ease.

# CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2020

**Sept. 11, 2020:** Foreign ministers of Southeast Asian Mekong countries and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [launch](#) the Mekong-US Partnership, successor to the Lower Mekong Initiative.

**Sept. 12, 2020:** ASEAN [holds](#) 27th ASEAN Regional Forum meeting virtually, attended by 26 ARF participating countries and entities, including North Korea and the European Union.

**Sept. 15, 2020:** The United States [imposes](#) sanctions on Chinese state-owned Union Development Group for its role in corrupt activities in Cambodia. Beyond corruption, the US is concerned that the UDG project at Dara Sakor could be used to host Chinese military assets.

**Sept. 16, 2020:** 11th US-Singapore Strategic Security Policy Dialogue [convenes](#) in Singapore, co-chaired by Acting Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy James Anderson and Singapore Permanent Secretary of Defense Chan Heng Kee. They discuss the COVID-19 response across the region, developments in the South China Sea, and counterterrorism.

**Sept. 22, 2020:** US [announces](#) an additional \$200 million in humanitarian assistance to benefit Muslim Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and those in Rakhine State in Myanmar, for a total of \$437 million in Fiscal Year 2020.

**Sept. 23, 2020:** The United States and Vietnam [conduct](#) the 11th US-Vietnam Political, Security and Defense Dialogue, discussing defense cooperation, maritime security, and war legacy issue.

**Oct. 6, 2020:** The annual US-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue [is held](#) virtually. Convened after normalization of relations, the Dialogue has continued without disruption for 24 years.

**Oct. 16, 2020:** Secretary of Defense Mark Esper [meets](#) Indonesian Minister of Defense Prabowo Subianto at the Pentagon to discuss regional security, bilateral defense, and defense acquisitions. They sign a Memorandum of Intent to restart work in Indonesia to recover the remains of US personnel lost in World War II. Prabowo, a former commander of Indonesia's special forces that had been under US sanctions for human rights abuses, had not visited the US in over 20 years.

**Oct. 25, 2020:** Indonesian Parliament passes a controversial omnibus bill that [covers](#) investment, taxation, labor, the environment, and other areas related to the country's economic development.

**Oct. 25-29, 2020:** Secretary of State Pompeo [visits](#) Indonesia and meets President Joko Widodo, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, and other officials.

**Oct. 28-29, 2020:** The Indo-Pacific Business Forum, co-hosted by Vietnam and the United States, is [convened](#) online in Hanoi.

**Oct. 30, 2020:** Pompeo [meets](#) Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc in Hanoi and announces a \$2 million assistance package to strengthen response to Tropical Storm Linfa and Typhoon Molave.

**Oct. 30, 2020:** United States Trade Representative (USTR) [announces](#) that the Trump administration will suspend \$817 million in trade preferences for Thailand under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) because of continued restrictions on US pork products. USTR also announces that, following eligibility reviews of Indonesia and Laos, both countries will retain their GSP benefits.

**Nov. 8, 2020:** General elections [conducted](#) in Myanmar in most of the country, although some polls are cancelled in conflict zones. Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy wins an absolute majority in Parliament, although the constitution still gives the military a quarter of seats in the legislature and other forms of political leverage.

**Nov. 10, 2020:** Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin [announces](#) that President Rodrigo Duterte will extend the US-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) another six months to give the two countries time to negotiate a more permanent continuation of the agreement amid growing tensions with China in the South China Sea.

**Nov. 14, 2020:** 15th East Asia Summit (EAS) is [held](#) via video conference, hosted by Vietnam as the ASEAN chair. Washington is represented by National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, who also participated with Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross in the 2019 EAS.

**Nov. 15, 2020:** The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is [signed](#) in Hanoi, creating the world's largest trade bloc.

**Nov. 16-Dec. 11, 2020:** US Coast Guard instructors [conduct](#) a Small Boat Operations course in Manila for Philippine Coast Guard participants, to enhance maritime law enforcement capability. It marks the first training event conducted by the USCG in the Philippines since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Nov. 17, 2020:** Bipartisan group of eight Senate and House members [call](#) on the State Department to levy stronger sanctions on Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen for a wave of new arrests of opposition figures, journalists and activists.

**Nov. 17-18, 2020:** Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan [visits](#) Washington to discuss expansion of Indonesian-US trade and investment relations. He signs a \$750 million memorandum of understanding with the US Export-Import Bank for infrastructure financing and pitched the new Indonesian sovereign wealth fund to the Development Finance Corporation. Luhut met Vice President Mike Pence and had an unscheduled meeting in the Oval Office with President Trump and White House Advisors Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner.

**Nov. 23, 2020:** US National Security Advisor O'Brien [visits](#) the Philippines and meets with his counterpart, Philippine National Security Advisor Hermogenes Espero and other top officials. O'Brien announces the delivery of new US military assistance in support of emergency counterterrorism needs and disaster relief for recent typhoon victims.

**Nov. 25, 2020:** US Secretary of the Air Force Barbara Barrett [visits](#) the Philippines to meet with a broad spectrum of Philippine defense and security officials, including Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Gilbert Gapay and Air Force Commander Lt. General Allen Paredes. Her visit coincides with the handoff to the Philippine Navy of a *ScanEagle* Unmanned Aerial System drone to strengthen Philippine maritime domain awareness.

**Dec. 8-9, 2020:** ASEAN [holds](#) 7th ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) online, discussing maritime security, stability in the Mekong region, terrorism and North Korea. Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller participates. Miller, however, is in the region and visits the Philippines and Indonesia.

**Dec. 9-14, 2020:** US Navy, US Marine Corps, and the Republic of Singapore Navy [conduct](#) 26th annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) maritime exercises, in international waters in the South China Sea and on Changi Naval Base in Singapore.

**Dec. 11, 2020:** Malaysia [hosts](#) virtual APEC meeting, the culmination of a year of APEC events held completely online. The 21 members discuss reorienting the APEC agenda toward post-COVID economic recovery, as well as continuing work on the digital economy and efforts to improve the investment climate. The 2021 APEC meeting will be hosted by New Zealand in February, also online.

**Dec. 22, 2020:** Indonesian President Joko Widodo [reshuffles](#) his Cabinet, replacing six ministers, in part to strengthen the government's response to COVID-19.

**Dec. 25, 2020:** A Chinese air transporter is detected arriving on Firey Cross Reef in the West Philippine Sea, raising alarm that any plans for Beijing to build a military base on the feature could place the entirety of the Philippines within striking distance of Chinese air power.



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

## BEIJING HAILS REGIONAL INTEGRATION, US SEEN SIDELINED

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

China faced a less forceful US posture in the South China Sea in this reporting period compared with earlier in 2020. Beijing took advantage of President Trump's failure to participate in the East Asian Summit (EAS) and other ASEAN-led meetings in November. Chinese leaders depicted the United States as disruptive and out of step with what Beijing saw as an overriding trend toward regional economic integration and cooperation. They highlighted the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement and ASEAN's new prominence as China's top trading partner, forecasting stronger regional economic growth led by China's rapid rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic. Beijing remained on guard against US challenges, and it resorted to unprecedented trade retaliation and related diplomatic pressures to compel Canberra to change its recent moves to check Chinese interference in domestic Australian affairs, expansionism in the South China Sea, repression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, and malfeasance in the initial handling of the COVID-19 outbreak in China. Some experts were optimistic that the Philippines and China were on the verge of agreeing on joint exploitation of oil and gas in South China Sea areas claimed by both countries, but others remained skeptical.

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Dueling US-Chinese military exercises in the South China Sea and related Chinese warnings of military conflict featured earlier in 2020 declined in this reporting period. Nevertheless, the extraordinary US naval exercises in the South China Sea in July were followed in September by large military excises by China in the South China Sea and three other locations along the China coast to show resolve against the United States and its allies and partners. China's Ministry of National Defense spokesman criticized Japan for carrying out anti-submarine drill with Vietnam in the South China Sea in October.

Chinese media were critical of the related annual *Malabar* military exercise in November, carried out near the western entry of the Malacca Strait and involving the United States, India, Japan and, for the first time, Australia. There also were routine Chinese reactions to US Freedom of Navigation Operations. On Dec. 23, *China Daily* reported the US destroyer *USS John S. McCain* was "expelled" while it "trespassed" in waters claimed by China in the Spratly Islands, noting that the same warship had been similarly countered when conducting operations in Chinese-claimed waters in the Paracel Islands in October. The report added that prior to its operations in the Spratly Islands, the US warship had been conducting operations in the Philippines Sea with a French submarine and a Japanese helicopter carrier.

*Reuters* and Japanese media reported there would be further exercises among the three militaries in May, with the chief of staff of the French Navy saying that "This is a message aimed at China...This is a message about multilateral partnerships and the freedom of passage." Coinciding with the US warship operation in the Spratly Islands, China sent the aircraft carrier *Shandong* and support warships through the Taiwan Strait and into the South China Sea for "long-distant training operations."

Meanwhile, sharp Chinese criticisms targeted Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien visiting the region. Chinese officials had little to say about O'Brien at the East Asian Summit (EAS) or President Trump at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit.

Depicting the United States as ineffective and out of step with regional priorities, Chinese

leaders doubled down on China's closer economic integration with Southeast Asian countries, notably through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement reached in conjunction with the East Asia Summit in November. They reassured regional states of Chinese intentions, highlighting growing China-ASEAN trade and investment, financing with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Chinese support for regional countries in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. They forecast a future of ever-closer regional ties in opposition to perceived disruptive practices by the US. The main exception was Australia, whose strong alignment with the United States and criticisms of Chinese government practices in Australia and the region prompted unprecedented restrictions on Chinese trade, student, and tourist exchanges, along with strong diplomatic and media pressure.

#### Chinese leadership at annual Asian regional meetings

As in the past, Premier Li Keqiang represented China at the East Asian Summit and other related head of government annual meetings, including the ASEAN Plus 3 and the China-ASEAN summit, hosted virtually this year by Vietnam as ASEAN chair. His comments set the tone and major themes of what would turn out to be a substantial Chinese publicity effort highlighting China as regional leader with the United States marginalized as a disruptive outsider.

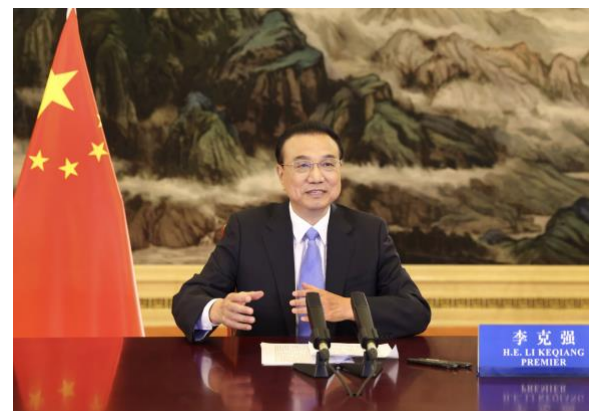


Figure 1 Chinese Premier Li Keqiang speaks via video at the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit. Photo: Xinhua

Speaking at the ASEAN Business and Investment summit on Nov. 13, Li [stressed](#) China's exceptional recovery from the COVID pandemic. He said this allowed for positive

economic growth and “taking the lead” in providing opportunities for regional economies seeking to rebound from recession. The RCEP trade agreement reached on Nov. 15 by Li and the 14 other government leaders, represented all ASEAN members, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. Li said RCEP was a “victory of multilateralism and free trade.” He acknowledged ASEAN countries played an “important leading role” in the eight years of negotiations leading up to the agreement, but he and related Chinese commentary also stressed China’s overall importance in this pact, including nations with about 30% of the world’s population and 30% of the world’s GDP. Alluding to the United States in referring repeatedly to the negative consequence of “unilateralism and protectionism,” Chinese officials [stressed](#) the importance of Chinese trade with RCEP countries, which amounted to \$1.06 trillion in the first three quarters of 2020, representing one-third of Chinese foreign trade. Chinese officials also used the momentum from the RCEP deal to encourage forward movement in Chinese efforts to improve trade relations with the other “Plus 3” countries, Japan and South Korea.

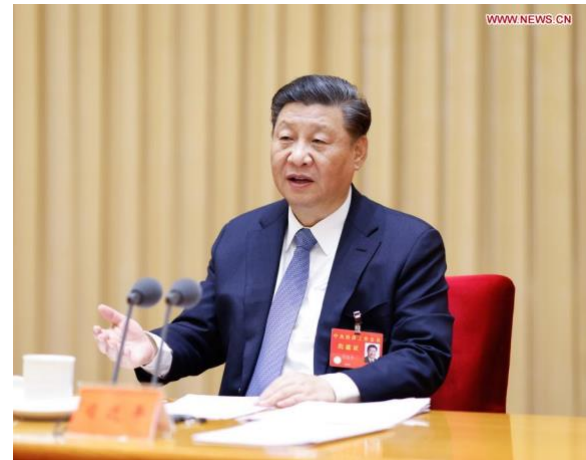
Chinese commentators at this time also [emphasized](#) the importance of stabilizing and reviving regional “supply chains” among China and its regional and global trading partners. The two main sources of disruption were the COVID 19 pandemic and what were seen as “coercive efforts” and “bribing” by the United States to remove China from global supply chains.

Other themes included Li’s emphasis on China’s role in regional efforts to counter the COVID-19 pandemic. He told the annual meeting of the ASEAN Plus 3 countries that China stands ready to engage in international cooperation on vaccines “with all parties” and promote the construction of an ASEAN Plus 3 emergency reserve center for medical materials. Supporting Chinese commentary highlighted China’s continued provision of protective equipment, medical devices, and vaccines to ASEAN and other countries. Li was optimistic that success in pandemic recovery would prompt advances in Chinese and regional economic growth, making East Asia the only region of the world to achieve economic growth in 2020.

Chinese interaction with the South China Sea during the regional meetings included Li’s presentation at the EAS which repeated Chinese

pledges to “uphold” the rule of law and work with ASEAN countries to achieve a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea “at an early date.” At the ASEAN-China leaders meeting Li added that the situation in the South China Sea “is stable in general.”

#### Xi Jinping at APEC, China-ASEAN Expo



*Figure 2 Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping speaks during the Central Economic Work Conference. Photo: Xinhua*

Building on the momentum of the RCEP agreement reached on Nov. 15, Chinese President Xi Jinping at the APEC leaders meeting on Nov. 20 capped his emphasis on multilateralism, an open world economy, and the leading role of the World Trade Organization with the [announcement](#) that China “will give favorable consideration to joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTTP).” That accord is a Japan-led effort to move forward with the high-standard Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) after US withdrawal from the TPP. During the Obama administration, the United States, Japan, and other TPP partners viewed the TPP as a means to get China to curb its widespread economic practices undermining free trade so it could join the TPP. Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide’s presentation at APEC on Nov. 20 said Japan was open to expanding CPTPP membership, leading ultimately to a much broader “Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific,” long endorsed by APEC. Initial reaction to Xi’s interest in joining the CPTPP was mixed, with some prominent Japanese commentators warning of suspected Chinese efforts to use CPTPP membership to undermine its high standards and reinforce Beijing’s economic practices adverse to Japan and other CPTTP members.

A week later, Xi broke with past practice of lower-level Chinese officials' [addressing](#) the annual China-ASEAN Expo and China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit. His speech to the participants advanced China's newly prominent view of the China-ASEAN relationship as "the most successful and vibrant model of cooperation in the Asia-Pacific" in accord with Beijing's platitudinous "community with a shared future for mankind." Xi highlighted Chinese support for supplying high-technology goods involved with smart city, 5G, artificial intelligence, e-commerce, big data, blockchain, and telemedicine. He said China would meet ASEAN needs for COVID-19 vaccines and offer financial support for the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund. He pledged to train 1,000 health personnel from ASEAN countries and to assist ASEAN in developing a regional reserve of medical supplies for public health. Xi advised that China's rapid economic rebound from the pandemic will fuel the worldwide recovery and ASEAN countries and others around the world will benefit.

As usual, Chinese publicity outlets followed the leader's pronouncements with glowing supporting accounts, in this instance focused on advances in China-ASEAN relations from the "golden era" of the current decade to the coming "diamond decade" of positive relations. They averred that the improvement has been based on three key elements: public health cooperation, economic development, and building mutual trust. Notably, ASEAN in 2020 overtook the European Union as China's largest trading partner, with a value of \$575.76 billion in the first 10 months of 2020, up 7% from the previous year. China's direct investment in ASEAN markets grew by 75% over the past year to \$10.72 billion. Big ticket infrastructure projects going forward include the China-Laos railway and Indonesia's Jakarta-Bandung high speed railway. Mutual trust was said to be built on China-ASEAN intergovernmental mechanisms to manage South China Sea disputes, including the efforts to develop a Code of Conduct. Also, Southeast Asian countries were seen as refusing to join US efforts to counter Chinese ambitions in the South China Sea and elsewhere in the region.

### **Dealing with the US and Related Challenges**

While praising progress in China's growing role in regional integration, Beijing remained on guard against US challenges, as well as those by

allies and partners supported by the United States. Foreign Minister Wang Yi speaking at the East Asia Summit foreign ministers' meeting on Sept. 9 cited recent US military exercises in the South China Sea to argue that the United States is the main driver of militarization and the most dangerous threat to peace in the region. Continuing to challenge Chinese behavior in the South China Sea, US Secretary of State Pompeo attacked Chinese "bullying" and pledged US support for regional disputants against China while speaking to an ASEAN-US ministerial meeting the next day.

To shore up Chinese relations with Southeast Asian countries in the face of US charges, in September China's most senior foreign policy official, Politburo Member Yang Jiechi, visited Myanmar to solidify close relations. China's Defense Minister Wei Fenghe also visited Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines. In October, Wang Yi traveled to Cambodia, Malaysia, Laos, Thailand, and Singapore, while also having talks with a senior Indonesia envoy in China and with the Philippines foreign minister visiting China, the latter of which official Chinese media [said](#) were efforts to counter US attempts to "drive a wedge" between China and ASEAN states over the South China Sea and other issues. Chinese media criticized Pompeo's visits to Indonesia and Vietnam in October, and National Security Adviser O'Brien's visits to Vietnam and the Philippines in November.

Meanwhile, Indonesia in September issued a foreign ministry protest and sent a patrol ship to confront a Chinese Coast Guard ship in Indonesian-claimed waters. In November, the CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) [showed](#) a Chinese Coast Guard ship engaged in another episode of intimidating Malaysia from engaging in drilling in waters coming within China's broad South China Sea claim. AMTI also provided a yearend review showing that aggressive patrolling and harassment by Chinese Coast Guard ships in the South China Sea was at the same level in 2020 as in 2019. The list of countries submitting diplomatic notes to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf challenging China's South China Sea claim grew when France, Germany, and the United Kingdom submitted a joint note in September challenging China's claims and endorsing the findings of the UNCLOS Arbitral Tribunal of July 2016.

Chinese sensitivity to US regional challenges grew with the upgrade of the US-backed Lower Mekong Initiative to the Mekong-US Partnership in September. The partnership provides funded support for Mekong countries that compete with Chinese advances, including under the Belt and Road Initiative. Adding to the challenge is US criticism of China for blocking the flow of the river and causing widespread drought among Mekong countries. While sharply criticizing US intervention, Beijing has recently shown more openness in sharing water information with downstream countries.

### Australian-China Acrimony Amid Punitive Trade Restrictions

Unprecedented decline in Australian-Chinese relations on account of acute differences over Chinese manipulation of Australian domestic affairs, expansionism in the South China Sea, malfeasance in China's initial handling of the coronavirus, and repression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang (as explained in the [previous edition](#) of *Comparative Connections*) continued in this reporting period. Chinese behavior graphically demonstrated to Australia, its ally in Washington, and its partners throughout Southeast Asia and the wider region the uniquely strong capacity of the Chinese Communist Party/State to counter opponents by exploiting their economic and other dependence. Notably, Beijing mobilized government and party mechanisms to carry out a wide-ranging series of abrupt trade restrictions along with cutbacks in investment, tourism, and student exchange to apply pressure to the Australian government and constituencies which rely heavily on economic and other exchanges with China. The show of force added to the growing record of heightened determination by strongman Xi and the Chinese party/state, more than any other major power in living memory, to develop the economic and related dependence of others on it to use as leverage, assuring deference to Chinese demands. Beijing's mobilization of government and party channels resulted in trade and other restrictions that were often nontransparent and difficult to counter using existing international mechanisms. And Chinese rhetoric all the while sought to shore up Beijing's avowed commitment to free trade and noninterference in other countries' internal affairs, now viewed with increasing cynicism in Australia and elsewhere.

Despite some seemingly moderate Chinese rhetoric in October urging Australia to change course in its criticism of Chinese actions in Australia and abroad, Chinese restrictions on trade involving purchases of Australian wine, lobsters, copper, sugar, cotton, timber, and coal took effect in early November. What China was demanding to restore normal trade became clear in mid-November when Chinese officials met with Australian media and provided a list of [14 grievances](#) that Australia needed to remedy. Widespread public outrage in Australia followed the Twitter post of a controversial Chinese foreign ministry spokesman, known for his aggressive, so-called "[wolf-warrior](#)" manner, showing the [fabricated image](#) of an Australian soldier with a knife to the throat of an Afghan child. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison denounced the "disgusting slur" and his government demanded an apology. Beijing was unapologetic, with official commentary in December advising that, from a Chinese perspective, the current Australian government is no longer trustworthy and Chinese people no longer see Australia as a friendly country, an attractive tourist destination, or a reliable destination for overseas studies. It forecast continued tensions.



Figure 3 Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Photo: Sky News

With domestic business and other constituencies feeling the impact of Chinese punitive restrictions, Morrison at times seemed to soften his tone toward China, seeking dialogue. Nonetheless, Australia followed through with moves viewed negatively in China. As noted, it participated for the first time in the US-India-Japan Malabar naval exercises in November. That month it also established a far-reaching defense cooperation pact with Japan, a strategic partnership action plan with Vietnam, and a strategic partnership with Thailand.



Figure 4 The Malabar naval exercises in November 2020.  
Photo: Twitter @indiannavy

### Philippines' Mixed Signals about China

The ambivalence in the Philippines government's approach to China over the South China Sea disputes amid an acute US-China rivalry in the region, seen earlier this year, continued in the current reporting period. On the one hand President Rodrigo Duterte, in a message to the UN General Assembly in September, gave his strongest defense yet of the 2016 UNCLOS arbitration tribunal ruling in favor of the Philippines and against China's expansive South China Sea claims. And despite his anti-US leanings, Duterte had earlier suspended a decision to abrogate the Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States. That suspension was [continued](#) in November, winning praise from visiting National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien. O'Brien came to the Philippines for a ceremony marking the transfer of \$18 million of precision-guided missiles and bombs and other advanced weapons that President Trump had promised in a phone call to Duterte in March. Duterte reportedly advised Philippine-Americans to vote for Trump in the 2020 US election. O'Brien strongly affirmed the recent US commitment to support Philippine forces and interests against Chinese attack in the South China Sea, stating "any armed attack on the Philippines forces aircraft or public vessels in the South China Sea will trigger our mutual defense obligations." Against the background of such stepped-up US support, Foreign Minister Teodoro Locsin [said](#) in September that the Philippines won't follow China's policy of keeping the US out of the South China Sea.

On the other hand, visiting Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe was [welcomed](#) in Manila in September, bringing a \$19 million grant of equipment for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Both sides agreed to seek ways to

sustain stability in the disputed South China Sea. The Chinese foreign minister met with Locsin in China as part of his interchange with several Southeast Asian counterparts in October. They muted public differences, while engaging in what were called "candid and in-depth exchanges."

Chinese media welcomed Duterte's decision not to follow US sanctions imposed on China Communications Construction Company because of its involvement in construction of artificial islands in the disputed South China Sea. The firm is currently involved in major Philippines infrastructure projects.

Duterte's decision announced on Oct. 15 to lift a six-year ban and allow oil exploration to resume in Philippines-claimed areas in the South China Sea also claimed by China was subject to different interpretations. Attention focused on a Philippines-China memorandum on joint development signed in 2018 but not yet enacted involving a Philippine oil company and a Chinese oil company. Two days after the announced lifting of the ban, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said, "China hoped it could work together with the Philippines in jointly developing energy projects in the South China Sea." He revealed that "China and the Philippines have reached consensus on the joint development of oil and gas resources in the disputed waters and have established a cooperation mechanism or relevant consultation."

Experts disagreed on the significance of these developments. [Some](#) were optimistic that arrangements could lead to survey and drilling with both companies sharing production. One interpretation was that the Chinese company could become involved in oil exploration under a service contract with the Philippines company licensed by the Philippine government. The arrangement was not seen to undermine Philippines' jurisdiction over resources in its Exclusive Economic Zone nor did it involve China conceding its sovereignty claims. But [others](#) judged that China's agreeing to such terms in contested waters would represent an unlikely reversal of Chinese practice.

### Indonesia Cautions China and the United States

Indonesia's Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi [cautioned](#) the United States and China in early September not to entangle Jakarta in their

regional struggle for influence. In an interview with *Reuters*, she emphasized that “ASEAN, Indonesia, wants to show to all that we are ready to be a partner. We don’t want to get trapped by this rivalry.” The message was a shot across the bow to both Washington and Beijing following increasing levels of hostile rhetoric, diplomatic, and military maneuvers in the South China Sea.

In October, Indonesia reinforced its message of neutrality when President Joko Widodo publicly rejected a proposal earlier in 2020 by Washington to allow US *P-8 Poseidon* maritime surveillance planes to land and refuel in Indonesia. The *P-8* plays a role in monitoring China’s military activities in the South China Sea. The US proposition surprised Indonesian officials given Jakarta’s longstanding policy of never allowing foreign militaries to operate there. Observers [noted](#) that the US request was seen as “out of place” and “an example of clumsy over-reach.”

## Outlook

Probably the most important change impacting China-Southeast Asia relations in 2021 will be the inauguration of Joseph Biden as the 46<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. Few observers on either side of the Pacific are optimistic about a major breakthrough in the strong China-US rivalry in Southeast Asia or elsewhere in the world. The new US president is likely to remain preoccupied with domestic priorities for many months. He is widely viewed as a much more predictable leader who places a much higher value on allies and partners than President Trump. China has been publicly cautious in dealing with the incoming leader, willing to engage in dialogue but offering no changes or concessions in the face of widespread US complaints.

# CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2020

**Sept. 1, 2020:** Thailand [announces](#) delay of a \$724 million submarine deal with China after public outrage over the deal amid the backdrop of a flagging Thai economy due to the global pandemic.

**Sept. 8, 2020:** Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi [cautions](#) the United States and China not to entangle Jakarta in their regional struggle for influence.

**Sept. 9, 2020:** Foreign Minister Wang Yi [criticizes](#) the United States when speaking at an East Asia Summit foreign ministers' meeting.

**Sept. 10, 2020:** Secretary of State Pompeo, [speaking](#) to an ASEAN-US Ministerial meeting, attacks Chinese “bullying” and pledges US support for regional disputants against China.

**Sept. 24–29, 2020:** Chinese military forces [carry out](#) exercises simultaneously in the South China Sea and three other locations along the Chinese coast.

**Oct. 15, 2020:** Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte [lifts](#) a moratorium on oil and gas exploration in waters claimed by China and the Philippines. The step is viewed by some experts as opening the way to joint survey and drilling by a Chinese company working with a Philippines company with both companies sharing the production. Other experts are skeptical.

**Nov. 3–6, 17–20, 2020:** Annual *Malabar* naval exercises [take place](#) in two stages in different parts of the Indian Ocean. They involve forces from India, the United States, Japan, and for the first time Australia.

**Nov. 13, 2020:** Prime Minister Li Keqiang [speaks](#) at annual ASEAN Business and Investment Summit.

**Nov. 15, 2020:** Li and government leaders from 14 other Asian-Pacific states [sign](#) the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP).

**Nov. 20, 2020:** Chinese President Xi Jinping [addresses](#) the 27<sup>th</sup> Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders Meeting.

**Nov. 27, 2020:** Xi [addresses](#) 17<sup>th</sup> China-ASEAN Expo and China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit.

**Nov. 30, 2020:** Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison [denounces](#) a Twitter post by a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman showing the fabricated image of an Australian soldier with a knife to the throat of an Afghan child.

**Dec. 21, 2020:** China's navy [announces](#) that the carrier *Shandong* and supporting warships passed through the Taiwan Strait to participate in “normal” exercises in the South China Sea.

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

## OVERCOMING COVID-19, NAVIGATING US-CHINA TENSIONS, AND ANXIOUSLY AWAITING A NEW US ADMINISTRATION

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STUDIES

Taiwan's successful management of COVID-19 infections and the pandemic's economic impact has elevated Taiwan's international profile and President Tsai Ing-wen's already high domestic approval ratings, but did little to ameliorate Taiwan's confrontation with mainland China. Growing US-China economic and security tensions have continued to swirl around the island. Chinese air and naval forces have increased intimidation operations around Taiwan, with the Chinese media threatening that People's Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft might even overfly the island. Taiwan has committed to increasing its defense budget and upgrading its reserve forces, and the US approved a series of military sales that are more closely aligned with Taipei's porcupine strategy than some earlier high-profile sales. Taiwan's IT companies have struggled to preserve their production base in China, while assuring the US that they would not contribute technology to US-sanctioned Chinese companies. They also opened facilities in third countries and the US in order to ensure US market access and political support.

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Tsai's decision in late August to allow imports of US pork treated with ractopamine was intended to reopen negotiations with the US on a bilateral trade agreement and it was driven by a strategic calculation that closer economic ties with the US would advance the island's economy and security. That move caused a storm of domestic opposition, led by the Kuomintang (KMT) but with no response from the US Trade Representative, a combination that risks undermining the initial successes of her second term in office. The election of Joe Biden caused anxiety in Taiwan that the new Democratic administration, in an effort to reduce tensions with China, might be less supportive of Taiwan than President Trump has been.

### President Tsai's National Day Summation

In her annual speech on Oct. 10, the Republic of China National Day, President Tsai [attributed Taiwan's success](#) in managing COVID-19 to "the unity and cooperation the people of Taiwan have shown." She promised that Taiwan would strengthen its economy and take advantage of global supply chain reorganization to attract international investment. She stressed her commitment to strengthen Taiwan's military, while promising to expand Taiwan's contribution to regional democracy and prosperity. She promised that Taiwan would "not act rashly and [would] uphold our principles" in cross-strait relations, calling for dialogue based on "mutual respect, goodwill and understanding ... parity and dignity." However, she added, "this is not something Taiwan can shoulder alone; it is the joint responsibility of both sides."

### COVID-19 Key to Taiwan's 2020 Record

Taiwan's successful management of COVID-19 was perhaps the single most important step that it took to strengthen its international image as a successful democracy facing unfair attacks from China. A [Brookings study](#) identified Taiwan as the only economy to record positive economic growth and low COVID-19 deaths through August, and that economic growth strengthened further through the end of the year as unemployment continued to decline. By late November, Taiwan economic agencies were predicting that 2020 GDP growth would exceed 1.8% and industrial production would increase 7.06%. *The New York Times* [called Taiwan](#) the "Switzerland of chips" and "pound

for pound ... the most important place in the world." [Freedom House](#) cited Taiwan as one of four countries proving "You don't need dictatorships to fight COVID-19." Tsai's job approval ratings continued to remain high.

### Economy Still Tied to China

Although Taiwan's economy remained buffeted by economic tensions between the US and China and by US sanctions against Chinese high-technology companies, Taiwan's economic ties to China remained strong. In September, Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council [confirmed](#) that Beijing had not abrogated the Cross-Straits Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) negotiated by the Ma Ying-jeou administration, which had reached the end of its 10-year term, and Taiwan would not suspend it either. The Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) explained its decision by noting that Taiwanese businesses and scholars had urged it be retained.

In October, the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation (TSMC) announced that its 2020 revenue [would increase 30%](#) despite its decision, under pressure from the US, to discontinue supplying Huawei. A month later, it was reported that TSMC was [expanding production](#) of lower end chips (28 nanometer) in China. Yet, there were also clear signals that Taiwanese businesses were seeking to reduce their reliance on China. Foxconn, among other Apple suppliers, said that it would relocate production facilities to South and Southeast Asia. Taiwan's Economic Affairs Minister, Wang Mei-hua, [told](#) the Taipei American Chamber of Commerce that US\$64 billion in investment and 90,000 jobs had returned to Taiwan from China. Taiwan Central Bank data indicated that Taiwanese individuals were also repatriating significant funds from Hong Kong. Chinese investments in Taiwan also came under scrutiny. Taiwan Taobao, the e-commerce company that is affiliated with Alibaba, [announced](#) that it would withdraw from the Taiwan market after being ordered to re-register as a Chinese company.

### Chinese Intimidation & Taiwan's Renewed Focus on Defense

Throughout this period, Chinese military operations continued near Taiwan. More than 1,700 PLA aircraft flew near the island this year through early October, according to Taiwan

Defense Minister Yen De-fa, increasing in pace over the last four months. As these PLA intrusions repeatedly entered Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), they caused Taiwan to scramble aircraft in response, leading to a 20% increase in Taiwan sortie rates over 2019 through September and to concerns that Taiwan's Air Force operations tempo was unsustainable and exceeding budget allocations.

In response to the September visit of US State Department Under Secretary Keith Krach to Taiwan, China announced that it would conduct naval drills in the East China Sea, its seventh drill in the region within the month, which China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) labeled as "necessary actions taken to safeguard national sovereignty." A month later, in response to a rumored US military flight over Taiwan, China's [Global Times](#) warned that PLA aircraft might fly over Taiwan if such a US flight happened, and there would be dire consequences if a Taiwanese jet fired on them. This remarkable and troubling hyperbole underscored how PLA operations were intended to intimidate.



Figure 1 US Undersecretary for Economic Affairs Keith Krach meets Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen in Taipei. Photo: AFP Photo

On Sept. 22, after several PLA aircraft crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman [Wang Wenbin](#) stated at a regularly scheduled press briefing that China did not consider that there was any median line down the center of the Taiwan Strait that the PLA Air Force needed to respect. Some commentators considered this to be a nonevent, noting that China had never acknowledged the median line; others, including former President Taiwan Ma Ying-jeou, countered that the PLA had traditionally respected the line and urged Beijing to continue to do so.

On Oct. 15, a routine Taiwan resupply flight to its base on Pratas Island at the northern edge of the South China Sea was ordered not to approach the island by Hong Kong air traffic controllers, who warned there were "dangerous activities" in the area, although the "notice to airmen," which is standard in such situations, had not been issued. No explanation of the dangerous activities was offered, and the flight returned to Kaohsiung amidst accusations that Beijing was seeking to block Taiwan's access to the island. Eleven days later, still without any clarification of the earlier incident, a second resupply flight proceeded normally.

The 2020 edition of the US Defense Department report, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, [confirmed](#) the continuing broad increases in the PLA's coercive capabilities against Taiwan, but also concluded that the PLA is not building up its large-scale amphibious capability or training for such an assault, leading *The Economist's* defense editor to [conclude](#) that "It's relatively unlikely that we're going to see an invasion anytime soon," although the dangers of conflict [are growing](#).

David Helvey, acting US Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia, told the annual US-TW defense industry conference that the 10% increase in Taiwan's 2021 military budget announced in August was a ["step in the right direction"](#), but more was required. Taiwan, he said, needs "large numbers of small capabilities" and must strengthen its reserve forces. Taiwan also needs to upgrade the capabilities of its reserve forces, which Minister of Defense Yen told Taiwan's legislature it has begun to do, although some doubt as to whether the upgrade will actually strengthen their combat capabilities. On Nov. 24, Tsai [inaugurated](#) the construction of Taiwan's indigenous submarine, the first of eight projected to cost \$16 billion in total. Whether the defensive capability of those submarines will justify the cost continues to be the subject of heated debate. In December, Taiwan launched the first of its indigenous *Tuo Chiang* corvettes equipped with anti-ship missiles, calling it an "aircraft carrier killer."

#### **KMT Insists on 1992 Consensus while Cross-Strait Frictions Flare**

In June, the new chairman of the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang/KMT), Johnny Chiang Chien-chen, sought to deemphasize the party's support for the "1992 Consensus," seeking to bring the party closer to Taiwan's mainstream opinion. The KMT has long claimed that the "1992 Consensus" reflects its "different interpretation" of "one China," but Beijing has insisted that it reflects the unitary sovereignty of the PRC over mainland China and Taiwan under "one country, two systems." At its annual party conference on Sept. 6, under pressure from older party leaders, the KMT nonetheless [insisted](#) that a re-defined "1992 Consensus" remained essential to cross-Straits dialogue. Plans for the former KMT speaker of the Legislative Yuan, Wang Jin-pyng, to lead a party delegation to the annual cross-Straits forum sponsored by China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) in Xiamen were upended after China's Central TV (CCTV) [headlined](#) that Wang was "coming to the Mainland to sue for peace." KMT Chairman Chiang, in explaining the withdrawal, insisted that cross-Straits exchanges must be based on mutual respect and be held on an equal footing, perhaps inadvertently echoing Tsai's inaugural address.

On the same day Taiwan's resupply flight to Pratas Island was turned away, Beijing CCTV aired a series of confessions by four alleged Taiwanese spies, at least two of whom had been held by Chinese authorities since 2018. Taiwan Premier Su Tseng-chang called the allegations groundless and "unbecoming of a world power." Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) called them "malignant political manipulation" and warned Taiwanese of the risks of traveling to the mainland, pointing out that two of the four alleged spies had been arrested during a cross-Straits academic exchange. The MAC [added](#) that 48 Taiwan nationals have disappeared in China since 2016, clearly suggesting that they had fallen victim to detention by the Chinese government. China's *People's Daily*, in turn, [published](#) a commentary, thought to be from the Ministry of State Security, warning Taiwanese spies and independence supporters to be "on the right side of history" and adding "don't say I didn't warn you," a phrase [previously used](#) on the eve of Chinese military action against India and Vietnam. Reports that Beijing had begun compiling a list of Taiwan independence supporters that are guilty of violating national security and subject to arrest, including Premier

Su Tseng-chang, only deepened cross-Straits suspicions.

Attempting to counter what Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) supporters said was biased reporting during the 2019-20 election campaign and commentary that provided a mouthpiece for Beijing's cross-Straits propaganda, Taiwan's National Communications Commission (NCC) decided on Nov. 18 not to renew the broadcast license for Chung T'ien TV (CTiTV), owned by the Want Want Group, which also owns *The China Times* newspaper. The NCC [found](#) that CTiTV was guilty of "repeated violations of regulations and a failure of its internal discipline and control mechanisms." The KMT and Taiwan People's Party (TPP) objected that the NCC itself was biased, because five of its seven members were confirmed by the DPP-controlled Legislative Yuan over their objections.

Chinese actions against Hong Kong, particularly under the Hong Kong National Security Law, continued to fuel Taiwanese suspicions of Beijing, with the detention of Jimmy Lai, owner of Hong Kong's *Apple Daily* newspaper, attracting particular attention. Bringing the confrontation closer to home, on Oct. 16 a man entered Taipei's Aegis restaurant, which offered employment to dissidents who fled Hong Kong, and [splattered chicken feces](#) in the kitchen and on an employee, forcing the restaurant to close. Four men were arrested for the act, who were supposedly paid for by a Chinese national. At the same time, Taiwan universities were reporting that applications by Hong Kong students were up 44% over the previous year, and the number of Hong Kong residents applying for residency in Taiwan rose 71.7%.

## US-Taiwan Relations Advance as US-China Relations Deteriorate

US-Taiwan relations continued to strengthen with the establishment of an annual bilateral economic dialogue and Washington's approval of several arms sales totaling \$5 billion. Trade talks—that had stalled since late 2016—did not take place, underscoring a gap in the Trump administration's otherwise strong track record on Taiwan. US Trade Representative (USTR) Robert Lighthizer disregarded growing calls for a bilateral trade agreement (BTA), even refusing to hold more modest talks on the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA).

Tsai's announcement in late August that Taiwan would remove a number of restrictions on US beef and pork imports effective Jan. 1, 2021 brought increased attention to the US-Taiwan economic relationship in the final months of 2020. Although the US secretary of state and National Security Council both publicly welcomed Tsai's dramatic step, the USTR remained silent. The USTR during the Trump administration has demanded the full removal of trade barriers on beef and pork as a condition for resuming trade negotiations, either within the already established TIFA or toward a bilateral trade agreement (BTA). In support of Tsai's initiative, the US-Taiwan Business Council formed a coalition to lobby for a BTA. A bipartisan group of 50 US senators also sent a letter to USTR Lighthizer in early October, urging him to open BTA negotiations. Nonetheless, Lighthizer has remained silent, and Trump's election defeat means that the transition process to a new administration will stall any negotiations well into 2021 or beyond.

In Taiwan, thousands marched to protest Tsai's opening the Taiwan market to US pork. The KMT said that Tsai's decision risked the health of Taiwanese consumers and the survival of Taiwan's pork producers, and introduced a petition for a referendum to overturn the move. Local KMT officials across the island sought to pass local laws forbidding pork sales, while central government ministries sought to assure citizens that their decision was in line with scientific health assessments. Despite these opposition-orchestrated pressures, the DPP-controlled Legislative Yuan in late December approved measures to lift the restrictions on pork and beef ahead of the Jan. 1 market opening. Because only the USTR could open BTA negotiations, Tsai's pork gamble appeared to have failed, at least for the moment. As a result of the USTR's inaction and local protests, Tsai's months-long high popular approval rating is faltering.



Figure 2 Taiwan legislators protest government approval of importing US pork. Photo: Annabelle Chih/Nur Photo via Getty Images

In the United States, other factors added to momentum for a US-Taiwan trade deal. COVID-19 has accelerated calls to shift US supply chains of sensitive technologies away from China toward trusted trading partners, like Taiwan. US-Taiwan trade has also grown steadily since 2018, with Taiwan having moved up two rankings to become the US's ninth largest goods trading partner as of October 2020. While the USTR has either negotiated or re-negotiated trade agreements with more than half of the US's top 10 trading partners since 2017, the USTR has resisted calls to open even routine TIFA trade discussions with Taiwan.

Aided by Tsai's market-opening gesture, interagency discussions regarding how to upgrade economic ties with Taiwan took place within the Trump administration, with Washington and Taipei announcing the creation of a [US-Taiwan Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue \(EPPD\)](#) in November. The forum, which is spearheaded by the US State Department and with the backing of the NSC, is intended to discuss areas of high-level economic and industrial cooperation, such as telecommunications security, supply chains, investment screening, and global health. The first meeting of the EPPD took place in Washington on Nov. 19-20, with the two sides agreeing to hold the dialogue annually for five years as part of a signed MoU. While a welcome development in US-Taiwan economic relations, and perhaps intended to lessen the sting to Tsai because of Lighthizer's silence, an annual meeting of the EPPD led by the State Department is still no substitute for regular trade talks culminating in a BTA. Only the USTR has the statutory remit and resources to open such trade talks.

A variety of reasons have been put forward for Lighthizer's intransigency on BTA talks, despite pressure from Congress and other Trump administration officials. The technical explanations include the USTR's limited bandwidth, the non-ideal timing of opening trade talks in the Trump administration's final stretch, and the parochial argument that Tsai's announcement does not address all the barriers on beef and pork. Several analysts have suggested that Lighthizer is most concerned that a trade overture with Taiwan could jeopardize China's implementation of the phase one trade agreement that he painstakingly negotiated and his agency's excellent line of communication with the PRC government. The Trump administration approved six major arms sales to Taiwan totaling \$5 billion during a seven-week period. On Oct. 21, the administration notified Congress of three separate sales covering sensors, missiles, and artillery worth an estimated \$1.8 billion. The following week, the State Department approved 100 *Harpoon* coastal missile defense systems and related equipment that was valued at \$2.37 billion. On Nov. 3, the administration announced the sale of four weapons-capable unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) worth \$600 million. Finally, in December, the administration authorized a \$280 million battlefield communication system. Altogether, arms sales notifications in 2020 totaled \$5.8 billion and they were the second largest in value since 2012, exceeded only by 2019 sales notifications that included 66 *F-16* Block 70 fighters. All of these decisions, coming in tandem with the administration's confrontational steps toward China, left many seeing these sales as more closely tied to Trump's frustration with China than support for Taiwan. This rapid succession of arms approvals around the US election may also have been an 11th-hour effort by the Trump administration's China hawks to lock in high-end systems for Taiwan, no matter the election's outcome.

On the diplomatic front, a series of high-level interactions between US and Taiwan officials also took place in autumn. Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment, Keith Krach, visited Taiwan in September to attend Lee Teng-hui's memorial service. Krach, the most senior State Department official to visit the island in decades, also met with Tsai and Taiwan economic officials. In New York, US ambassador

to the UN Kelly Craft had lunch with James Lee, director of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in New York, where the pair discussed how to include Taiwan in UN-affiliated agencies. Craft called the meeting "historic," as it was the first interaction between the US UN ambassador and a senior Taiwan official. EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler was due to visit Taipei in December, but controversy regarding the expense of his chartered flight in the waning days of the Trump administration led to the trip's cancellation by Washington. Wheeler and Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu instead spoke by phone on Dec. 22, where the two discussed ways to enhance cooperation on environmental protection.

### International Reminders of Cross-Strait Squabbles

In the first week of September, an 89-member delegation from the Czech Republic that was headed by Czech Senate President Milos Vystrcil paid a six-day visit to Taiwan. In an address to Taiwan's Legislative Yuan, Vystrcil said "I am a Taiwanese." The delegation's visit, although not sanctioned by the Czech government, drew Beijing's ire. While on a visit to Germany, PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi called the trip a "provocation" and said Vystrcil will "pay a heavy price." Wang's strong comments drew a rebuke from German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, who said "threats don't fit in here."



Figure 3 Czech Senate President Milos Vystrcil meets Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen during a visit to Taiwan. Photo: AFP

A physical altercation between Chinese and Taiwan diplomats occurred in Fiji on Oct. 8, as Taiwan hosted a celebration of its Double Ten national day at a hotel in capital city Suva. Chinese diplomats reportedly arrived at the venue to scope out the invited guests and take

pictures. After Taiwan diplomats demanded they leave, a fistfight ensued, resulting in one Taiwan diplomat being admitted to a local hospital. Although Fiji has recognized Beijing since 1975, Taiwan has retained an unofficial representative office in this Pacific hub. China–Taiwan competition for diplomatic recognition in the South Pacific has intensified since 2016, with Beijing keen to win over Taipei’s remaining four diplomatic allies in the region.

### Looking Ahead

The transition from the Trump to the Biden administration has generated apprehension within some quarters in Taiwan, fearing that the latter might adopt a much less friendly approach to Taipei. This anxiety may be the result of tying the marked expansion and deepening of US–Taiwan diplomatic and security ties since 2017 exclusively to Trump policies and officials, but other important factors arguably contributed to the flourishing of bilateral relations: heightened US–China competition, the active engagement of Congress in Taiwan policy, and Tsai’s prudent and non-provocative cross–Strait policies. This apprehension may also be fueled by memories of the Obama–Biden era policy of more quiet and cautious support for Taipei to avoid offending Beijing and to preserve US–China cooperation. However, there appears to have been a fundamental re–think on the threat that is posed by China and the importance of supporting a democratic Taiwan among former Obama–era foreign policy officials who have been tapped for senior posts in the Biden administration.

Will the Biden administration manage to strike the balance of a tough principled approach to China while avoiding unnecessary vitriol? Will it combine the strong defense support Taiwan enjoyed from the Trump administration with measured symbolic support? Will it find a way to reciprocate the Tsai administration’s opening of the Taiwan pork and beef markets, even if it delays international trade commitments? Almost all analysts anticipate that the Biden administration is more likely to maintain several areas of continuity with the Trump administration, such as expanded trade and investment, high–level political visits, enhanced US military activity in and around the Taiwan Strait, and continued “normalized” arms sales to Taipei.

With the Chinese Communist Party celebrating the 100th anniversary of its founding on July 1, 2021, one continuity seems inescapable: Beijing will continue to increase pressure on Taipei by conducting military operations around the island, blocking access to multilateral and bilateral international recognition, and threatening sanctions against any Taiwanese who does not endorse its preferred formula of “one country, two systems.” The annual plenums of the PRC National People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Consultative Congress will offer occasions for any further tightening, or, far less likely, loosening, of Beijing’s cross–Strait policy.

# CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2020

**Sept. 1, 2020:** Visiting Czech Senate President Miloš Vystrčil praises Taiwan's democracy and freedom in a speech at the Legislative Yuan, ending his remarks with "I am a Taiwanese" in Mandarin.

**Sept. 1, 2020:** US Department of Defense releases [its annual report](#) on China's military power, assessing that Beijing's military modernization has eroded Taiwan's potential advantages should a cross-Taiwan Strait conflict occur, even though Taiwan is taking steps to compensate for the growing disparities

**Sept. 2, 2020:** Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs introduces a new design for Republic of China passports, making the word "Taiwan" more prominent.

**Sept. 2, 2020:** Nationalist Party (Kuomintang/KMT) Chairman Johnny Chiang Chi-chen announces that the KMT will start a signature campaign seeking a referendum on the government's decision to allow the import of US pork containing ractopamine.

**Sept. 3, 2020:** An amendment to Taiwan's Audio-Visual Management Act banned PRC companies providing "Over the Top (OTT)" services in Taiwan (OTT services provide cable TV access over the internet).

**Sept. 6, 2020:** KMT national convention [reiterates](#) the party's cross-Strait narrative, which is "1992 Consensus based on the ROC Constitution." The KMT said it opposes Taiwan independence and China's "one country, two systems."

**Sept. 6, 2020:** The Dalai Lama expresses hope to visit Taiwan in 2021 "if Beijing allows."

**Sept. 7, 2020:** Taipei-based Chinese Wild Bird Federation (CWBF) says that it has been removed from its partnership with BirdLife International after the British-based conservation group insisted the CWBF commit to not promoting the legitimacy of the Republic of China or the independence of Taiwan from China.

**Sept. 9, 2020:** KMT caucus whip in Taiwan's Legislative Yuan, Lin Yi-hua, announces the party would introduce amendments to Article 15 of the Act Governing Food Safety and Sanitation to ban ractopamine and other beta agonists in domestic and imported pork.

**Sept. 9, 2020:** Somaliland opens a representative office in Taiwan.

**Sept. 14, 2020:** KMT [announces](#) that it would not send a delegation headed by former speaker of the Legislative Yuan Wang Jin-pyng to the annual Cross-Strait Forum sponsored by China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) after China Television said Wang would be coming "to sue for peace."

**Sept. 16, 2020:** US Ambassador to the UN Kelly Craft, meets James K.J. Lee, director of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in New York, the first time such a public meeting occurred.

**Sept. 18, 2020:** US Under Secretary of State Keith Krach begins three-day visit Taiwan to attend memorial services for former Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui. No economic dialogue talks were held, but Krach met with Hong Kong and China democracy activists.

**Sept. 22, 2020:** Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu [criticizes](#) Beijing for breaking the status after it claimed that the median line of the Taiwan Strait did not exist.

**Sept. 22, 2020:** The European Union hosts its first-ever investment forum in Taiwan.

**Sept. 30, 2020:** Taiwan and the US hold a virtual Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) webinar on using public-private partnerships to improve infrastructure. They announce the signing of “The Framework to Strengthen Infrastructure Finance and Market Building Cooperation” to support such projects in the Indo-Pacific region.

**Sept. 30, 2020:** China [blocks](#) observer status for the San Francisco-based Wikimedia Foundation, Wikipedia’s parent, at the Geneva-based World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) on the grounds that it had a Taiwan subsidiary.

**Oct. 3, 2020:** The US [classifies](#) fish caught by Taiwan boats as products of forced labor, based on conditions under which the crews worked, according to the US Department of Labor’s annual List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor report.

**Oct. 6, 2020:** Legislative Yuan [passes](#) KMT motion calling for formal diplomatic relations with the US. Taiwan Foreign Minister Wu had earlier insisted that Taiwan was not pursuing formal diplomatic relations with the US.

**Oct. 7, 2020:** US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticizes Chinese military maneuvers in the Pacific and reiterated US assurances to help Taiwan defend itself at a meeting of the quadrilateral security dialogue meeting of the US, Australia, Japan, and India. Separately, US National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien [warned](#) China against any attempt to retake Taiwan by force, reiterating that the US stood by its posture of “strategic ambiguity.”

**Oct. 8, 2020:** Chinese diplomats interrupt Republic of China National Day reception hosted by the Taiwan office in Suva, Fiji. The clash injured Taiwan diplomats, but Taiwan chose not to acknowledge the incident until it had made the news in Fiji. China claims that its diplomats were provoked.

**Oct. 10, 2020:** President Tsai Ing-wen’s [National Day address](#) focuses on plans to support Taiwan’s economic development. She also urged China to move on cross-Strait dialogue.

**Oct. 13, 2020:** Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) warns Taiwan of the risks of traveling to China after CCTV broadcasts supposed confessions of four accused of spying for Taiwan.

**Oct. 14, 2020:** Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington publishes a [survey](#) reporting that US “thought leaders” expressed strong support for defending Taiwan.

**Oct. 15, 2020:** Taobao Taiwan [decides](#) to shut down after it was ordered to register as a mainland-based company.

**Oct. 15, 2020:** A Taiwan civilian air aircraft carrying supplies to Taiwanese coast guard officers stationed on the disputed Dongsha Islands is advised by Hong Kong air traffic controllers not to enter the airspace over the islands because “dangerous activities” were in progress in the area. A second flight completed the resupply on Oct. 26.

**Oct. 21, 2020:** US approves arms sales to Taiwan worth a total of \$1.81 billion including: standoff land attack missiles, HIMARS rocket launchers, MS-110 Recce Pods, various vehicles, light arms, and communication equipment. China’s Foreign Ministry [announces](#) sanctions on Lockheed Martin, Boeing Defense, and Raytheon over the companies’ involvement in arms sales to Taiwan.

**Oct. 26, 2020:** Taiwan’s Department of Cyber Security reports that Taiwan’s central and local governments had been hacked 1,709 times since 2018, attributing the hacks to China.

**Oct. 26, 2020:** US [announces](#) a possible sale to Taiwan of up to 100 Harpoon Coastal Defense Systems (HCDS) and related equipment for approximately \$2.37 billion.

**Nov. 3, 2020:** US [announces](#) a possible sale to Taiwan of four Weapons-Ready MQ-9B Remotely Piloted Aircraft and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$600 million.

**Nov. 7, 2020:** US Mission to the UN in Geneva urges WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus to invite Taiwan to its upcoming meeting on COVID-19.

**Nov. 9, 2020:** Taiwan Navy [confirms](#) that US Marine Corps personnel had arrived in Taiwan to provide training on assault boats and infiltration operations. The US Defense Department and Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense subsequently denied the report.

**Nov. 12, 2020:** Secretary of State Pompeo tells a syndicated radio show that "Taiwan has not been a part of China." On Nov. 14, the State Department clarified that the US takes no position on Taiwan sovereignty.

**Nov. 13, 2020:** Taiwan representative to the US Bi-Khim Hsiao speaks with Biden foreign policy advisor Tony Blinken by phone to congratulate Biden on his election victory.

**Nov. 15, 2020:** China and 14 other Asia-Pacific nations sign the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Taiwan immediately announces it would seek to join the trade bloc.

**Nov. 15, 2020:** Pro-Beijing Dagongbao newspaper [reports](#) that Beijing plans to punish Taiwan "separatists" and their foreign backers with measures, including "severe sanctions" and giving them up to life sentences in their absence. *Global Times* suggested that Taiwan Premier Su Tseng-chang would be among the first targeted by the measure.

**Nov. 18, 2020:** Taiwan's National Communications Commission [announces](#) it would not renew the license of CTiTV, which had been accused of being a mouthpiece for Chinese propaganda.

**Nov. 20, 2020:** For the fourth time, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) founder Morris Chang represents Taiwan's president at the annual leaders meeting of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC).

**Nov. 20, 2020:** Inaugural meeting of US-Taiwan Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue is held in Washington.

**Nov. 22, 2020:** Several Taiwanese media report that Rear Adm. Michael Studeman, director of intelligence of US Indo-Pacific Command, arrived in Taiwan for a visit. Both AIT and Taiwan's Foreign Ministry refused comment.

**Nov. 27, 2020:** KMT legislators throw pig skin and entrails at Premier Su Tseng-chang when he tries to address the Legislative Yuan on the issue of US pork imports.

**Nov. 30, 2020:** Yuan T. Lee, Taiwan's only Nobel laureate, [endorses](#) plan to open Taiwan to US pork. He said that it was safe to consume pork with ractopamine so long as the drug was within the safety limit.

**Dec. 1, 2020:** Japan's representative in Taiwan, Izumi Hiroyasu, says that his main task is to assist the island in joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

**Dec. 1, 2020:** In its annual report, the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission [recommends](#) that the position of director of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) Taipei be made a presidential nomination comparable to ambassador and subject to Senate confirmation.

**Dec. 2, 2020:** Taiwan and Saudi Arabia sign an agreement on avoiding double taxation.

**Dec. 7, 2020:** Taiwan military announces that 18 F-16A/Bs originally sold to Taiwan in 1994 had completed scheduled upgrades to F-16Vs.

**Dec. 7, 2020:** US [approves](#) the possible sale to Taiwan of a Field Information Communications System (FICS) and related equipment to Taiwan at an estimated cost of \$280 million.

**Dec. 7, 2020:** Taipei District Prosecutors' Office indicts Ho Jianghua, head of the China Unification Promotion Party's (CUPP) women's department, and aide Pao Ke-ming over alleged involvement in setting up a spy network for Beijing.

**Dec. 9, 2020:** New Taipei Mayor Hou You-yi [announces](#) regulations in the city that stipulate that pork importers in the city must disclose ractopamine inspection results.

**Dec. 14, 2020:** John Deng, Taiwan's de-facto chief trade negotiator, [says](#) that a requirement to label US pork containing ractopamine could be challenged as a nontariff trade barrier unless Taiwan could provide scientific evidence to support it.

**Dec. 15, 2020:** Taiwan's first *Tuo-Chiang* guided missile corvette is launched. The Coast Guard's variant of the corvette was launched on Dec. 11.

**Dec. 16, 2020:** US includes Taiwan on the [watchlist](#) for currency manipulation for the first time since 2017.

**Dec. 19, 2020:** Taiwan's Central Election Commission approves two referendum proposals aimed at banning the import of US pork with ractopamine and requiring a binding referendum with island-wide election. Organizers must collect 289,667 valid signatures on petitions. If they do, the referendum banning US pork imports would take place on Aug. 24, 2021.

**Dec. 22, 2020:** Taiwan reports first community spread of COVID-19 after 253 days without infections.

**Dec. 24, 2020:** Taiwan's Legislative Yuan [approves](#) a series of government measures implementing the government's decision to lift restrictions on imports of pork containing the controversial feed additive ractopamine and US beef from cattle aged over 30 months.

**Dec. 27, 2020:** President Trump signs COVID-19 relief and government funding bill into law, which [included](#) the Taiwan Assurance Act.

**Dec. 31, 2020:** Two US destroyers sail through the Taiwan Strait, bringing the number of such transits in 2020 to 13.



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**

# FIRE ON THE SEA, NO BALLOONS IN THE SKY

AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

Inter-Korean relations, still formally in abeyance, were dominated in September and October by a mysterious and tragic incident in the West Sea. A Southern official went missing from a survey vessel and ended up in Northern waters—where he was shot and his body burnt. Kim Jong Un apologized, sort of, and Seoul revealed that he and Moon Jae-in had earlier privately exchanged pleasantries—but neither this, nor Unification Minister Lee In-young's ceaseless calls for aid and cooperation, cut any ice in Pyongyang. Meanwhile Kim launched a campaign to eradicate Southern slang among Northern youth. In December Moon's ruling party passed a law to ban propaganda balloon launches across the DMZ, prompting widespread criticism but earning no praise from the North. At a big Party Congress in January, Kim lambasted the South in shopworn terms, withdrew his "goodwill," and said the ball is in Seoul's court. For good measure, his sister Kim Yo Jong called South Korea "weird." Despite Moon's dreams, the 2018 peace process is over, with scant prospects of renewal.

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## Introduction

Following a [tempestuous summer](#), literally and metaphorically, for the two Koreas and between them, the last four months of 2020 were mercifully calmer. North Korea continued to cold-shoulder the South, as it has done for two years. The glory days of 2018, with its two substantial inter-Korean accords and three North-South summits—more in six months than in the entire previous 70 years of the peninsula's division—are beginning to fade into history. Rather than a lasting breakthrough, this has turned out to be just one more false dawn, the latest, and briefest, of several that have come and gone on the peninsula. There was 1972-73, 1984-85, 1990-92, 1998-2007—and, we must now add, 2018. Was, not is.

That is not how South Korea's current government sees it. President Moon Jae-in remains determinedly upbeat, and newish Unification Minister Lee In-young even more so. Yet the basis for their optimism is hard to fathom. Granted, in recent months Pyongyang has been less rude to Seoul than in June and July, but this merely means being ignored rather than insulted. There is no peace process. Nothing of substance is happening. South Korea keeps trying, making suggestions and offering help—but the North is not interested.

Those clutching at straws may wave one or two. In September, Moon and Kim Jong Un exchanged polite [letters](#)—privately. Seoul only revealed this after the North bizarrely and brutally shot and burnt a South Korean apparently trying to defect; this sad, strange episode is discussed below. Kim apologized for that, which is something. Normally, being North Korea means never having to say you're sorry, to paraphrase *Love Story* (only their movie is called *Hate Story*).

Yet Kim has done quite a bit of apologizing recently. While he arguably has much to apologize for, the tone of his [speech](#) at 2020's big event—a military parade marking the 75th anniversary of the ruling Workers' Party (WPK) on Oct. 10—was remarkable, albeit no doubt calculated, for its [tearful](#) moments. Sticking to our inter-Korean remit, this oration included a warm if brief (a single sentence) shout-out to the folks down south:

I also send this warm wish of mine to our dear fellow countrymen in the south, and hope that this health crisis

would come to an end as early as possible and the day would come when the north and south take each other's hand again.

Good to hear, but talk is cheap. Hold hands again? As this journal has chronicled, it was the North which wrested its mitt away two years ago, long before the coronavirus, which Kim falsely implies is the reason why inter-Korean cooperation halted. And as he knows full well, far from attacking him for this rude U-turn, and despite Pyongyang's confected tantrum in June when it threatened to attack and took the extreme step of blowing up the North-South liaison office, Moon and his ministers have never stopped extending their hands in friendship: urging the North to come back to the table, and constantly offering assistance—including with COVID-19, which the DPRK still claims to be free of. In December, when ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha dared to query that unconvincing claim, Kim's sister Kim Yo Jong broke a six-month [silence](#) and [snarled](#) at her to shut up. Thankfully briefer than her anti-Moon diatribes in June, this is Pyongyang's authentic voice. For at the very time in September when Kim was exchanging pleasantries with Moon, on the home front he appears to have launched a fierce propaganda [campaign](#) to incite anti-ROK sentiment and stamp out South Korean linguistic and cultural usages—which have evidently taken root in the North.

All of the above was written before Kim Jong Un's major speech at 2021's big event: the Eighth Congress of the North's ruling Workers' Party in early January. Strictly speaking, this falls outside the past trimester, yet it would be poor service to readers to make you wait till May for details of this key meeting. As discussed below, Kim's uncompromising stance toward South Korea, as indeed on all other fronts, must surely dispel any shadow of doubt as to Pyongyang's true attitude.

## Smoke on the Water

September began quietly. As noted in our last issue, after June's frenzy, Northern media fell silent regarding South Korea (see Appendix 2 [here](#)): one comment on July 7, then nothing. Seoul, by contrast, was a hive of unreciprocated energy. New MOU Lee was ubiquitous: urging Japan, Russia, and everyone to support inter-Korean relations; hoping (on no visible basis) for family reunions via videolink during

Chuseok, Korea's harvest festival, in autumn; and visiting Panmunjom, where against protocol in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) he waved toward the KPA soldiers on the Northern side. They were not reported as waving back. More usefully, Lee urged North Korea to implement 2018's accords, reopen communication lines and resume "open-minded" dialogue; suggesting public health and joint disaster control as promising areas for cooperation. But here again the North did not wave back.



Figure 1 Unification Minister Lee waves to DPRK soldiers at Panmunjom. Photo: Yonhap

All this was swept aside later in the month by a weird and tragic incident. Three months on, facts remain unclear or disputed, and probably always will be. On Sept. 23, South Korea's Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries (MOF) [revealed](#) that two days earlier one of its officials had gone missing from an inspection boat patrolling in waters off Yeonpyeong island, just south of the Northern Limit Line (NLL, the de facto inter-Korean border in the West/Yellow Sea). An intensive search failed to find the man. Intriguingly, MOF added that "according to our military intelligence, he was found in North Korean waters late Tuesday [Sept. 22]." *Yonhap*, the South's quasi-official news agency, cited "sources" in the National Intelligence Service (NIS, the ROK spy agency) as adding more and startling detail, [saying](#) the as-yet unnamed 47-year old was shot and "cremated" by KPA soldiers, while trying to defect.

The next day, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) weighed in, guns blazing. Citing "our military's thorough analysis of diverse intelligence," they claimed that KPA troops found the missing man in DPRK waters—whereupon they shot him, and burnt his body. Condemning this "act of brutality," MND urged

Pyongyang to explain and to punish those responsible. It added that the victim had financial and marital problems, and was probably seeking to defect.

This unusually robust line for Seoul was echoed by the Blue House, which condemned the "inhumane" shooting of a South Korean "who had no weapon and no intention to resist" as an "act against international norms and humanitarianism." President Moon [called](#) the incident "shocking" and intolerable, and ordered the military to further strengthen its security posture. MOU added its own condemnation; [noting](#) that it has no means to communicate these sentiments to the North, which cut all inter-Korean communication lines in June. No need to worry, in truth, as for once Pyongyang was most certainly listening.

Further facts and allegations emerged. The official ROK story was that the man took his shoes off (those were found aboard) and left the ship under cover of night, with a flotation device as well as a life jacket. He knew the local currents, which by 3:30 pm on Sept. 22 had carried him some 38 km (a little less than 24 miles) north to Cape Deungsan (Deungsangot) in Northern waters. A DPRK vessel found him there; its crew questioned him—still in the water—from a distance, after first putting on gas masks. He expressed a wish to defect, but they left him in the sea for a further six hours, while seeking instructions. Then, according to the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), "at around 9:40 p.m., the North Korean soldiers aboard their vessel shot him before pouring oil over his body and setting it aflame at around 10 p.m."

How could Seoul possibly know all this? MND cited "our military's thorough analysis of diverse intelligence." With so much circumstantial detail, South Korea seemed well able to monitor most of what the North was doing and saying. Torn between not wanting to reveal tricks of the trade, yet keen to cite evidence for their judgments, "sources" revealed much. The KPA's communications appeared to be thoroughly tapped, with claims that the word "defection" was heard—and that local units had queried (or at least requested reconfirmation of) the order to shoot, when it finally came after a six-hour delay.

One can imagine the flurry in the Blue House as the intelligence came in. First, to determine what exactly happened, and then, how to spin

it. The hard line which they settled on reflected Moon's reported comment, when first apprised of the news, that this is "an issue by which the public would be infuriated." Dead right. The story was huge, and the universal reaction was shock and anger. Ordinarily, most South Koreans pay little heed to the North, but hopes had been raised in 2018, only to ebb as dialogue stalled. Any lingering faith that Kim Jong Un might still be a trustworthy partner now went up in a literal puff of smoke. Conservatives had long condemned North Korea as barbarous and unpredictable. With this act, the Kim regime as good as (or as bad as) confirmed that judgement. MOU Lee In-young's preaching for peace, and indeed Moon's whole *Nordpolitik* was left looking distinctly naïve.

Kim Jong Un may have had the same thought, and for once sought to save Moon's bacon. On Sept. 25 the Blue House published a [letter](#) from the WPK's United Front Department (UFD), apologizing for this "unsavory" incident. Yet it is moot how much this helped overall, since the North's version of events, though detailed, stretched credulity on several points. Claiming that the man gave no clear answers and tried to flee (as well he might, after blanks had been fired at him), the UFD admitted he was then shot, from a 40-50 meter distance—but claimed that when the soldiers came closer no body could be found, only "a large amount of blood." So it was not his body but "the floating material" [which] "was burned in the water, following the national emergency quarantine regulation." Few in Seoul were buying that. Pyongyang said it would search for the body, but unsurprisingly nothing was found.

The two governments did not long monopolize the narrative, nor should they. The deceased's family weighed in. In a Sept. 29 press conference, his elder brother Lee Rae-jin [expressed](#) the family's grief and anger—not only at Pyongyang's brutality, but also at Seoul on two counts: for publicizing the awful death so graphically, and impugning a devoted public servant by claiming he was trying to defect. True, the deceased had debts—but don't we all? "Even ... Samsung has debts." Lee Rae-jin also rejected another hypothesis, that this was a suicide.

On Oct. 6 the dead man was finally named. Lee Dae-jun's teenage son [wrote](#) an open letter to Moon, accusing the government of failing to save his father. He disputed the official version:

"It doesn't make sense that my father—a skinny man with a height of 180 cm [5 feet 8 inches] and weighing only 68 kilograms [150 pounds], who had never learned how to swim professionally—rode the tide for 38 kilometers [23.6 miles] ... I desperately ask you, Mr President, to please restore my father's honor."

Moon Jae-in [replied](#) two days later. Offering condolences "with an aching heart," he promised a fully transparent investigation and urged the family to "please wait for the search result by the coast guard." Thereafter the story gradually fell off the front pages. The family will be glad to be out of the glare of publicity, but closure must be hard. With North Korea refusing a joint investigation, much about Lee Dae-jun's tragic end is likely to remain uncertain.

Two assessments may be ventured, regarding his reasons and Pyongyang's. With all respect to the family, defection does seem the likeliest motive. If he meant suicide, why the flotation device? And leaving his shoes behind hardly suggests an accident. Second, his murderous reception reflects not just North Korean brutality in general, but its paranoia about COVID-19 in particular. As with Kim Jong Un's over the top reaction to a returning redeffector, discussed in our last issue, the DPRK currently takes the medical defense of its borders to extremes. In other fields, this shows up in consumer goods [shortages](#) because imports are cancelled or held up at the border, now largely closed even with China. Anyone and anything from outside is seen as a potential coronavirus threat.

### Leaders Exchange Pleasantries

Meanwhile the Blue House just seemed relieved that the North had apologized. In a further attempt to calm passions, it revealed that earlier in September Moon and Kim had exchanged [letters](#), whose texts were now published. Moon wrote first, on Sept. 8, offering sympathy as North Korea was hit by successive typhoons and flooding, and praising Kim for his visits "on the frontlines of damage relief." With the gentlest of hints, he added: "It is regrettable that reality makes us unable to help each other at a time like this, when every day is a crisis." Still, "We will cheer each other up together as compatriots and overcome it."

Sept. 12, Kim replied in similar vein, avowing concern at Moon's "heavy responsibilities,"

praising his “uncommon sincerity,” telling him to take “special care” of his health, expressing faith that Moon will “overcome this crisis,” and wishing good health to all South Koreans. All fine and dandy—yet hard to square with North Korea’s bellicose actions in June. He added: “I feel like I can know better than anyone else how arduous it must be for you, Mr. President—how much heavy pressure must be upon you and how much you must be struggling.” Well he knows indeed, for the “pressure” includes not only COVID-19, which Kim stressed, but also two-faced people who insult him, threaten an attack, and then blow up a joint liaison office. But Kim made no reference to this, much less an apology, nor did Moon speak of it.

Given that—let alone what was to follow in January—this exchange of pleasantries, though interesting, seems irrelevant to the real state of inter-Korean relations. Equally meaningless was Kim’s brief apology to Seoul on Oct. 10, cited above. Kim did a lot of apologizing in that speech, as well he might. By August it had evidently dawned on the DPRK leadership that a big 75th anniversary Party party in October, as planned, might seem out of kilter when North Koreans had little to celebrate; with the triple-whammy of sanctions, typhoons, and flooding, along with the coronavirus (or, rather, border closures to keep it out, which have hit imports and consumer goods). Oct. 10 could hardly be forgotten, but it was repurposed with a midnight military parade—including North Korea’s largest ICBMs yet, previously unknown—and an unusual tone in Kim’s speech, full of regret that things were not better. Meanwhile attention shifted to January’s upcoming Party Congress—a fresh start, rather than looking at past glories—with an 80-day speed battle to fill the rest of 2020 and keep the masses busy.

### Don’t Say Oppa! Kim Fights the Hallyu Tide

Kim Jong Un’s two-facedness became clear as the year ended. The Osaka-based Asiapress, which has a knack for acquiring DPRK documents, published a top secret instruction by Kim to the WPK Central Committee. Its gist, as per Asiapress’s [headline](#) at *Rimjingang*, its English-language website, was “*Oppa* is Outlawed: Top-Secret Documents Detail Kim Jong-un’s Direct Orders to Eliminate S. Korean Cultural Influence.” Mightily vexed by the spread of Southern slang among Northern youth—like calling a friend *oppa*, which strictly means “older brother”—Kim railed against

such “perverted puppet language” and ordered its eradication. This document is dated Sept. 10: two days after Kim received Moon Jae-in’s friendly letter, and two days before his own flowery reply. Asiapress says it has more documents “which outline Kim Jong-un’s policy for inciting hatred among the domestic population towards South Korea.” That is the North’s real attitude. One can only hope his staff and the National Intelligence Service (NIS) are communicating this to Moon.

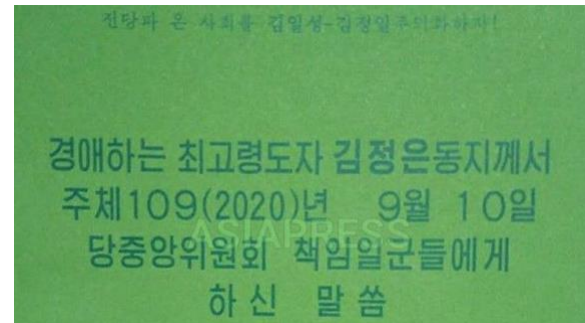


Figure 2 The cover image of the top-secret document with instructions by Kim to the WPK Central Committee. Photo: Asiapress

### The Balloon Goes Up—No More

Back in June, North Korea’s pretext for its outrageous behavior was anger at activists who launch balloons carrying anti-regime materials into North Korea at the DMZ. Arguably this anger was confected and calculated, but some in Seoul took it seriously. Moon’s government started [harassing](#) NGOs involved with North Korea, while pledging (not for the first time) to ban balloon launches. In December it did just that, using the ruling Democratic Party (DP)’s super-majority in the National Assembly to drive through this and a raft of other legislation. The conservative opposition—the latest of whose many names is People Power Party (PPP)—resorted to a filibuster but were unable to stop it becoming law.

The balloon issue provokes strong passions. For many in South Korea and beyond, mainly but not solely on the political Right, it is a simple [free speech](#) issue—in both Koreas.irate critics accused Moon of abetting the Kim regime in censoring independent information and keeping North Koreans captive. But there is another side, which adduces five arguments. First, South Koreans living near the DMZ [dislike](#) these activities, which create litter (many balloons fall short), discourage tourists and potentially endanger them; the North often

threatens to fire at balloons, and occasionally does. Second, not all activists support the balloon launches. A few groups that do this face various [accusations](#), ranging from the quality of their propaganda—some is obscene—to allegations of fraud. Third, there is scant evidence that anyone in North Korea has actually been moved to protest or defect by balloon-sent materials. Fourth, given the above, not only liberal but also past conservative ROK leaders, notably Park Geun-hye (2013–17), have sought to curb these activities. And fifth, as psychological warfare, sending leaflets is [arguably](#) in breach of 2018’s inter-Korean military agreement.

With activists vowing to continue balloon launches, and the border area being hard to police, it remains to be seen how the ban will fare. Meanwhile, did North Korea thank the South for making good on its promise and (some would say) doing its dirty work? Read on ....



Figure 3 Defectors launch anti-North Korea balloons carrying leaflets near the DMZ in South Korea. Photo: AFP

### Kim Jong Uncompromising: The Eighth WPK Congress

Though strictly speaking outside the trimester under review, the Eighth Congress of North Korea’s ruling Workers’ Party was a key event which it would be perverse not to cover. As usual the DPRK played its cards close to its chest regarding timing. This meeting was first announced in August as slated for January 2021. As noted in our last issue, that was puzzling: the next Congress was not due till May, and the harsh Northern winter was bound to be burdensome in terms of travel and logistics—not to mention the coronavirus. (North Korea still claims to be free of COVID-19, but this strains credulity.) On Dec. 30, the time narrowed to “early in January.” Delegates’

arrival in Pyongyang was reported Dec. 30; they received certificates of attendance, as did those hosted by Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. But the actual opening of the Congress went unannounced until the first day’s session had taken place, on Jan. 5. There were some 7,000 attendees, with no social distancing and not a mask in sight.

At this writing (Jan. 12) the Congress is still in session. The main event was a marathon report by Kim Jong Un, which took nine hours to deliver spread over three days (Jan. 5–7). No full text is yet available, but *KCNA* has issued a summary which runs to 13,500 words in English. General comment is beyond our remit, but a two-word mini-summary might be “doubling down.” Kim’s tone was uncompromisingly hardline on all fronts. The “state-first principle” will guide domestic policy, while enemies (the US, above all) will be checked by developing a range of new WMD, including hypersonic missiles and much more. Testing times ahead.

South Korea got 700 words, reproduced as Appendix 1 below; you may care to read that first. Saying that inter-Korean relations have reverted to their pre-2018 state, Kim blamed the South, where “hostile military acts and anti-DPRK smear campaign are still going on.” The hostility alleged is twofold: new military hardware and joint exercises with the US. Both are specious. Since 2018, US-ROK maneuvers have been cut back as never before. To unilaterally demand their abolition, with no quid pro quo from Pyongyang, fails the John McEnroe test for policy: You cannot be serious.

The hardware issue is more complex. Moon’s talk and walk are not identical. If some of his words suggest an uncritical desire to embrace the North, his deeds tell a different story. While preaching peace, Moon is also quietly modernizing the ROK’s arsenal. That is only wise, since even while the DPRK paused its long-range missile launches, it stepped up testing an array of new short-range conventional weapons systems targeting South Korea. Yet Kim defended his own arms development as a matter of sovereign right; for Seoul to call this a provocation indicates “a double-dealing and biased mindset.” It is the South which “should ... provide a convincing explanation for the purpose and motive in their continued introduction of cutting-edge

offensive equipment.” The motive seems rather obvious. This too fails the McEnroe test.

Kim also accused the South of raising “inessential” rather than fundamental issues, citing two examples. One is individual tourism, a ludicrous idea indeed, as we argued here before. But the other is “cooperation in epidemic prevention and humanitarian field” (sic). It is revealing that even in the era of COVID-19, buffeted by typhoons and needy on many fronts, Kim spurns humanitarian cooperation as inessential. To be sure, it has long been Pyongyang’s stance that North-South relations must set an overall framework before getting down to details, whereas Seoul believes starting small is the best basis for working up to bigger things. Yet despite this, in 2018 Kim was prepared to sign two wide-ranging accords presaging cooperation on many fronts. What exactly has changed? It is hard to believe now that he was sincere then.

There is more. Wagging his finger, Kim insists that a “new road ... can be paved only when the south Korean authorities strictly control and root out any abnormal and anti-reunification conducts.” Not a word of acknowledgment, much less thanks, that Seoul has just taken a big step in that direction by banning balloon launches, as demanded by Pyongyang. The naïve belief in Moon’s camp that this would impress or placate the North was wishful thinking.

So it is all down to the South. Kim adds that “we do not need to show goodwill to the south Korean authorities unilaterally as we did in the past.” LOL, as they say. What goodwill? For the last two years the one-way goodwill has all come from Seoul, not Pyongyang.

Another likely reason for Kim Jong Un’s hard line is that he views Moon Jae-in as a busted flush. With just 16 months left to serve, Moon’s popularity is [falling](#); like his predecessors, he risks becoming a lame duck as his presidency winds down so this is hardly a time for more concessions to Pyongyang. From May 2022 Kim will face a new ROK president, who might not honor his predecessors’ pledges—as in 2008, when the incoming conservative Lee Myung-bak reneged on the economic cooperation agreed by his liberal predecessor Roh Moo-hyun. This time Moon’s Democratic Party (DP) has a good chance of retaining the Blue House, so Kim’s rude rebuff may not be smart: Moon’s

successor, whoever it is, is bound to be much more cautious about engaging Pyongyang. (Moon himself nobly turned the other cheek in his own New Year address; the relevant portion is reproduced as Appendix 2 below.)

Kim seems not to care. Not for the first time, his disdain is plain. One wonders if dreamers like Unification Minister Lee In-young, who on Jan. 4 confidently predicted a “positive message of dialogue and cooperation” from Pyongyang in the near future, will finally admit that North Korea is playing a different game and one-sided engagement is not working. They may not; for many middle-aged ROK leftists, “unification” is an article of faith rather than a thought-through strategy. Few younger South Koreans share such sentimentality. All told, it is hard to hold out much hope for inter-Korean relations in 2021.

### Epilogue

Just as this issue of *Comparative Connections* went to press, Kim Yo Jong weighed in. Other than snapping at South Korea’s foreign minister in December, Kim Jong Un’s sister had been quiet lately. At the Party Congress she apparently lost her alternate Politburo membership—prompting frenzied [speculation](#) among Pyongyang-watchers. But whatever her formal rank, the First Sister is evidently still a power in the land, On Jan. 12—the same day the Congress finally closed—she issued a [statement](#) attacking South Korea for speculating whether or when Pyongyang might see a military parade: a matter still unclear at this writing. She concluded: “The southerners are a truly weird group hard to understand. They are the idiot and top the world’s list in misbehavior as they are only keen on things provoking world laughter.” Even Unification Minister Lee In-young will surely be hard put to find a silver lining there.

## **Appendix 1: Section of Kim Jong Un's Report to the Eighth WPK Congress**

### **3. For Independent Reunification of the Country and Development of External Relations**

In the third part of his report, the Supreme Leader mentioned the important issues for the independent reunification of the country and development of external relations.

The report studied the issues concerning south Korea in view of the prevailing situation and the changing times and clarified our Party's principled stand on the north-south relations.

As specified in the report, our nation is now standing on the crucial crossroads of whether to advance along the road of peace and reunification after breaking the serious deadlock in the north-south relations or to continue to suffer the pain resulting from division in the vicious cycle of confrontation and danger of war.

It is no exaggeration to say that the current inter-Korean relations have been brought back to the time before the publication of the Panmunjom Declaration and the hope for national reunification has become more distant.

Hostile military acts and anti-DPRK smear campaign are still going on in south Korea, aggravating the situation of the Korean peninsula and dimming the future of the inter-Korean relations.

Judging that the prevailing frozen north-south relations cannot thaw by the efforts of one side alone nor improve by themselves with the passage of time, the report stressed that if one sincerely aspires after the country's peace and reunification and cares about the destiny of the nation and the future of posterity, one should not look on this grave situation with folded arms, but take proactive measures to redress and improve the present north-south relations facing a catastrophe.

The report clarified the principled stand on the inter-Korean relations as follows:

It is necessary to take stand and stance to resolve the basic problems first in the north-south relations, halt all acts hostile toward the other side and seriously approach and faithfully implement the north-south declarations.

The report pointed out the main reason why the north-south relations which had favorably developed in the past were frozen abruptly and brought back to those of confrontation.

The south Korean authorities are now giving an impression that they are concerned about the improvement of north-south relations by raising such inessential issues as cooperation in epidemic prevention and humanitarian field and individual tourism.

They are going against the implementation of the north-south agreement on guaranteeing peace and military stability on the Korean peninsula in disregard of our repeated warnings that they should stop introducing latest military hardware and joint military exercises with the US.

Worse still, they are getting more frantic about modernizing their armed forces, labelling our development of various conventional weapons, which pertains entirely to our independent rights, a "provocation."

If they want to find fault with it, they should first give an explanation for the chief executive's personal remarks that south Korea should accelerate its efforts for securing and developing latest military assets, that it would develop ballistic and cruise missiles with more precision and power and longer range than the existing ones, and that it had already developed ballistic missiles with the world's heaviest warhead. They should also provide a convincing explanation for the purpose and motive in their continued introduction of cutting-edge offensive equipment.

The report seriously warned that if the south Korean authorities continue to label our action "provocation" with a double-dealing and biased mindset, we have no other option but to deal with them in a different way.

A new road toward improved north-south relations based on firm trust and reconciliation can be paved only when the south Korean authorities strictly control and root out any abnormal and anti-reunification conducts.

Whether the north-south relations can be restored and invigorated or not entirely depends on the attitude of the south Korean authorities,

and they will receive as much as they have paid and tried.

The report stressed that at the present moment we do not need to show goodwill to the south Korean authorities unilaterally as we did in the past, and that we should treat them according to how they respond to our just demands and how much effort they make to fulfill the north-south agreements.

It analyzed that the north-south relations may return to a new starting point of peace and prosperity in the near future, as desired by all compatriots, as they did in the spring three years ago, depending on the south Korean authorities' attitude.

## **Appendix 2: Section of President Moon Jae-in's New Year address**

Fellow Koreans,

This year marks the 30th anniversary of South and North Korea simultaneously joining the United Nations. The two Koreas should join hands and together prove that a peaceful and prosperous Korean Peninsula can also contribute to the international community. A peaceful Peninsula free of war and nuclear weapons is what we are obliged to pass down to the Korean people and posterity. The Government will strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance in step with the launch of the Biden Administration. At the same time, we will make our final effort to achieve a major breakthrough in the stalled North Korea-U.S. talks and inter-Korean dialogue.

Inter-Korean cooperation on its own can achieve many things. Peace equals mutual benefit. We have awakened to the fact that we are closely connected with each other after suffering from infectious livestock diseases, emerging infectious diseases and natural disasters. We are in the same boat in regard to many issues. For the survival and safety of both South and North Koreans, we have to find ways to cooperate.

I hope that the process of dealing with COVID-19 will initiate mutual benefit and peace. I would like the two Koreas to participate in regional dialogues about the Northeast Asia Cooperation Initiative for Infectious Disease Control and Public Health as well as the initiative for Korea-ASEAN comprehensive

healthcare cooperation. Collaboration in response to COVID-19 can expand to cooperation on issues directly connected to the safety and survival of South and North Koreans such as infectious livestock diseases and natural disasters. The broader cooperation expands, the further we can move along the path toward unification.

The key driving force of the Korean Peninsula peace process is dialogue and mutually beneficial cooperation. Our determination to meet at any time and any place and talk even in a contact-free manner remains unchanged. The two Koreas should jointly fulfill all the agreements made together to date—especially the three principles of mutual security guarantees, common prosperity and zero tolerance for war. If we can draw support from the international community in the process, the door to a community of peace, security and life will open wide, not just on the Peninsula but also in East Asia.

# CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA–SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2020

**Sept. 1, 2020:** Meeting Japan’s ambassador in Seoul, Koji Tomita, South Korea’s Unification Minister (MOU) Lee In-young [asks](#) Tokyo to support efforts to improve inter-Korean ties, claiming that this will be “very beneficial for Japan as well.”

**Sept. 1, 2020:** ROK Unification Ministry (MOU) [says](#) it has requested a greater than 3% increase in its budget for inter-Korean cooperation next year, to 1.24 trillion won (\$1.05 billion). Even though relations are stalled, the plan is to earmark more for hypothetical joint action against disease and natural disasters.

**Sept. 2, 2020:** ROK National Security Adviser Suh Hoon “[clarifies](#)” that the ROK-US working group forum on North Korea is “basically ... useful,” and its critics are misinformed. Seoul and Washington are consulting on how to improve it, by “adjusting the aspects of it being misunderstood and excessively functioning” (sic). (See Aug. 21 in the [previous issue](#).)

**Sept. 3, 2020:** Meeting Shin Hee-yong, new head of the ROK Red Cross, MOU Lee [says](#) he hopes the two Koreas “can kick off video reunions over the Chuseok holiday” (the Korean harvest festival, this year falling on Oct. 1). This seems optimistic, as North Korea has never even accepted the video equipment which Seoul paid for—obtaining a UN sanctions [waiver](#) as long ago as March 2019. In the event, no reunions are held.

**Sept. 3, 2020:** A propos another stalled project, MOU [says](#) it may redeem funds from the UN World Food Programme (WFP) if there is no progress by end-2020. In June 2019 Seoul had announced plans to send 50,000 tons of rice aid, and gave WFP \$11.6 million to cover costs—but Pyongyang rejected the offer. (See also Nov. 30.)

**Sept. 3, 2020:** At the annual Seoul Defense Dialogue (SDD), ex-USFK commander Gen. Vincent Brooks [predicts](#) that North Korea will hold off re-engaging with the South until 2021, when the election campaign for Moon Jae-in’s successor may give it more leverage.

**Sept. 4, 2020:** *NK News* [reports](#) that in late August a court in Incheon acquitted a lawyer who had brought back North Korean books and newspapers after attending a business forum held in Pyongyang in November 2018. The judge ruled that since MOU had approved his trip, the defendant could legally possess such items—otherwise banned under the National Security Law (NSL) —for personal research use.

**Sept. 5, 2020:** Pyongyang [vows](#) “severe punishment” for officials in Wonsan, accusing them of failing to prepare for Typhoon Maysak which struck the east coast of both Koreas on Sept. 2. An unspecified incident in the port city caused dozens of casualties.

**Sept. 6, 2020:** ROK Red Cross [says](#) MOU has commissioned it to create virtual reality (VR) content featuring the Northern hometowns of divided families: “As the separated families are aging rapidly and there are not enough opportunities for reunions, we decided to push ahead with this project using cutting-edge technology to offer them consolation.”

**Sept. 7, 2020:** Typhoon Haishen, the 10th this season, batters the eastern ROK and Japan’s Kyushu region. Landing at Ulsan, it temporarily knocks out power to [Hyundai’s](#) main auto plant. It then passes along the [DPRK’s](#) east coast, already hard-hit by Typhoon Maysak.

**Sept. 7, 2020:** MOU Lee [tells](#) a forum in Seoul that better inter-Korean ties—for instance, cooperation in public health—can move denuclearization forward and “open the era of complete, verifiable and irreversible peace, with the two Koreas taking the lead in cooperation with the international community ... We hope that the North will respond to this new start.”

**Sept. 14, 2020:** Responding to lawmakers' questions ahead of his confirmation hearing, Gen. Suh Wook—nominated by President Moon as Minister of National Defense (MND); hitherto he was chairman of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS)—[says](#) that “no signs indicating imminent firings of an SLBM [submarine-launched ballistic missile] have been detected.” There is speculation that the DPRK might mark the 75th founding anniversary of its ruling Workers' Party (WPK) on Oct. 10 with a launch of a new missile.

**Sept. 16, 2020:** JCS nominee Won In-choul (currently Air Force chief of staff), also replying to questions from lawmakers, [opines](#) that the North “could launch an SLBM by using catapulting devices.” It is unclear if this difference denotes a changed military assessment, or confusion. No launch occurs.

**Sept. 16, 2020:** On his first visit to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) as Unification minister, Lee [calls](#) on North Korea to implement 2018's inter-Korean accords, reopen cut communication lines, and resume “open-minded” dialogue. At Panmunjom Lee [waves](#) to DPRK soldiers. It is not shown, or stated, whether the Korean People's Army (KPA) waved back.

**Sept. 17, 2020:** MOU Lee [tells](#) DMZ Forum 2020 that the two Koreas should “set up a joint disaster control system in the DMZ” to tackle inter alia “flooding, damage from blight and harmful insects [and] forest fires.” This could “also bring in people to slow-developing border regions and get the peace engine up and running if roads and railways are connected.”

**Sept. 18, 2020:** The day before the second anniversary of his third summit with Kim Jong Un, Moon [tells](#) Buddhist leaders: “If (we) don't give up hope for meetings and dialogue, we will surely move on to the path of peace and unification.”

**Sept. 19, 2020:** Moon marks summit anniversary with a Facebook [post](#): “Together with Chairman Kim Jong-un, I declared denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula.” Since then “internal and external restraints” have stopped the peace clock, but a “seed sown in history” is sure to bear fruit. The ROK holds no official commemoration of the anniversary, which passes wholly unmentioned in DPRK media.

**Sept. 20, 2020:** South Korean police [reveal](#) that on Sept. 17 they caught a defector trying to go back to North Korea across the DMZ. Arrested in a military area in Chorwon in central Korea, the unnamed man in his 30s, who had come South in 2018, was found with cutters and four mobile phones.

**Sept. 23, 2020:** ROK Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries (MOF) [says](#) that on Sept. 21 one of its officials went missing—leaving only his shoes—from an inspection boat patrolling waters off Yeonpyeong island, near the Northern Limit Line (NLL, the de facto inter-Korean maritime border). An intensive search fails to find him. MOF adds that “according to our military intelligence, he was found in North Korean waters late Tuesday [Sept. 22]).

**Sept. 23, 2020:** “Sources” in the National Intelligence Service (NIS), the ROK spy agency, [say](#) the as-yet unnamed 47-year old was shot and “cremated” by KPA soldiers while trying to defect. They are probing his motives, and say there is “no evidence that any senior official is involved in this case.”

**Sept. 24, 2020:** ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) “strongly condemns” what it [calls](#) “an act of brutality ... According to our military's thorough analysis of diverse intelligence,” North Korean troops found the missing official in its waters, shot him, and burnt his body. In sharp tones, MND urges Pyongyang to explain and punish those responsible. It adds that the man had financial and other problems, and was probably seeking to defect.

**Sept. 24, 2020:** The Blue House (Cheongwadae, the ROK presidential office and residence) [condemns](#) this “inhumane” shooting of a South Korean “who had no weapon and no intention to resist,” as an “act against international norms and humanitarianism.” President Moon, [calling](#) the incident “shocking” and intolerable, orders South Korea's military to further strengthen its security posture. MOU [weighs in](#) similarly, [adding](#) that it has no way to communicate with the North since the latter cut all inter-Korean communication lines in June.

**Sept. 25, 2020:** In a most unusual message from the WPK's United Front Department (UFD), Kim Jong Un [apologizes](#) for this "unsavory" case. The North's explanation of why it shot the man strains credulity. Blue House also [reveals](#) that Moon and Kim exchanged fulsome [letters](#) early in May, and publishes their texts (unofficial translation [here](#)).

**Sept. 27, 2020:** Blue House [calls](#) for a joint probe with North Korea, and for the inter-Korean military hotline to be reopened to discuss this. Pyongyang makes no response, but its official *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA)—rather than the navy or government—[warns](#) Seoul against intruding into Northern waters. KCNA adds that the North is "about" to organize its own search, and will "even consider ... ways of handing over any tide-brought corpse to the south side conventionally in case we find it."

**Sept. 27, 2020:** Mobilizing 39 vessels and six aircraft, ROK Navy and Coast Guard [continue](#) their search for the official's body, despite the DPRK's warning against intrusion. They clarify that they are staying strictly south of the NLL.

**Sept. 28, 2020:** MND [says](#) North Korea has not responded to the South's call to restore the inter-Korean military hotline and discuss Seoul's proposal for a joint investigation. ROK Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun [urges](#) Pyongyang to do this.

**Sept. 29, 2020:** "Parliamentary sources" in Seoul, evidently after intelligence briefings, [say](#) the ROK military wiretapped KPA internal communications with and about the MOF official in real time throughout his ordeal. The captain on the spot talked of rescuing him, but was overruled from above. The intel confirms that he was trying to defect.

**Sept. 29, 2020:** After its own investigation, ROK Coast Guard [concludes](#) that the man was seeking to defect.

**Sept. 29, 2020:** MOU [admits](#) it okayed an NGO plan to send medical aid to North Korea just after news of the fatal shooting. It has told all six aid organizations granted such approval in September to suspend deliveries for now.

**Oct. 8, 2020:** In a video address to the Korea Society in New York, President Moon [suggests](#) that the US and ROK work jointly toward a declaration formally ending the Korean War. He says trust will be built by "keeping our ears, mind and heart open toward" North Korea. Although "talks have now stalled, and we are catching our breath ... we can neither allow any backtracking on hard-earned progress nor change our destination."

**Oct. 8, 2020:** MOU data, requested by an opposition lawmaker, [show](#) that in quantitative terms North Korean media criticism of South Korea soared six-fold in 2019 (981 stories) compared to 2018 (152). Three outlets were surveyed: the party daily *Rodong Sinmun*, the official *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA), and *Uriminzokkiri*, a propaganda website for external consumption. The 2020 total exceeds 600 items so far, with 239 in June alone but fewer than 10 per month subsequently (see Appendix 2 in our [last issue](#)).

**Oct. 10, 2020:** North Korea marks 75th anniversary of the founding of ruling Workers' Party (WPK) with a big military [parade](#): its first in two years, held unusually at midnight. Hardware rolled out includes a huge new [ICBM](#), the world's [largest](#) of its kind, on an 11-axle transporter erector launcher (TEL). Kim Jong Un's emotional [speech](#) includes a "warm wish ...to our dear fellow countrymen in the south, and hope ... the day would come when the north and south take each other's hand again."

**Oct. 11, 2020:** Saying it is reviewing Kim's speech, the Blue House [reaffirms](#) that inter-Korean accords should be honored "and war should be kept at any cost" (sic).

**Oct. 12, 2020:** After Kim's "warm wish," MOU [voices](#) hope for improved inter-Korean ties, but says conditions are not yet right to make specific proposals.

**Oct. 13, 2020:** MND [assures](#) South Koreans that the ROK can "immediately respond to and incapacitate" DPRK short-range missiles and multiple rocket launchers (MLRs) displayed at the North's Oct. 10 parade.

**Oct. 15, 2020:** In his latest report on DPRK human rights, UN special rapporteur Tomas Ojea Quintana [denounces](#) Lee Dae-jun's killing as a "violation of international human rights law" and demands that Pyongyang punish those responsible.

**Oct. 16, 2020:** ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [say](#) that Hoguk, an interservice defensive drill held annually since 1996, will kick off next week. It [begins](#) Oct. 19 and ends Oct. 30. North Korea usually criticizes these maneuvers, but is [silent](#) this year.

**Oct. 19, 2020:** ROK opposition lawmaker [says](#) MOU slashed its 2021 budget for the now demolished North-South liaison office to 310 million won (\$270,000), from 6.41 billion won in 2020.

**Oct. 21, 2020:** MOU [reports](#) that just 48 North Korean defectors—23 men and 25 women—reached South Korea in the third quarter: well down from the 226 who arrived in Q3 of 2019. Travel restrictions due to COVID-19 are driving a sharp fall: there were 135 in Q1 and a mere 12 in Q2.

**Oct. 21, 2020:** Restating familiar themes, MOU Lee In-young [tells](#) a forum in Seoul: "We are faced with the task of moving the US-North Korea nuclear talks forward through inter-Korean trust, allowing individuals to travel to North Korea and reconnecting and modernizing railways and roads as agreed upon by the leaders of the two Koreas ... That is the way to go no matter what and the responsibility that cannot be neglected."

**Oct. 23, 2020:** Shin Hee-young, newish head of the ROK Red Cross, [suggests](#) that instead of one-sided aid which hurts the DPRK's pride, the two Koreas conduct joint medical research.

**Oct. 27, 2020:** MOU [says](#) it will conduct an ecological survey of the Han River estuary next month. In 2018 the two Koreas carried out a joint survey, but this time the ROK will stick to the South side of the river only.

**Oct. 29, 2020:** Without naming him, *KCNA* [attacks](#) ROK national security adviser Suh Hoon for acting "so sordidly" on "his recent secret junket" to Washington. Suh's saying that inter-Korean ties also require consultation with other countries, such as the US, shows "the south Korean authorities' wanton denial, perfidy to and an open mockery of" all past North-South agreements, which put national independence above all. Calling Suh "an American poodle," *KCNA* adds: "We can not but doubt his sanity."

**Oct. 30, 2020:** In a 1,000 word *KCNA* [commentary](#) clearly meant to draw a line, Pyongyang again expresses "regret" at "the inglorious incident"—but blames Seoul for not controlling its citizen, and slams Southern conservatives for "working with bloodshot eyes to slander their fellow countrymen in the north." The piece is headlined: "Sustained Confrontational Frenzy of S. Korean Conservative Forces May Invite Greater Misfortune."

**Oct. 30, 2020:** At a forum in Cheorwon near the DMZ, MOU Lee [calls](#) the two Koreas "a single community of life and security." He avers: "Once the South and the North join hands, the DMZ could be turned into [an] experimental space of coexistence where the possibility of peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula can be tested in advance."

**Nov. 9, 2020:** Following the US presidential election, MOU Lee [urges](#) North Korea to "take a discreet, wise, and flexible approach" during the transition and refrain from provocations.

**Nov. 10, 2020:** ROK provincial authorities in Gangwon—the only Korean province bisected by the DMZ—[reveal](#) that in August they sent a letter inviting DPRK counterparts to co-host the 2024 Winter Youth Olympics. They live in hope, though no reply has been received.

**Nov. 18, 2020:** MOU Lee [says](#) South Korea should share coronavirus vaccines with the North. This prompts domestic criticism, since the ROK has yet to secure its own vaccine supplies—a fact which in December will become a major public [issue](#).

**Nov. 19, 2020:** With winter coming, MND [says](#) it will wrap up this year's work excavating remains at Arrowhead Ridge, a Korean War battlefield. This was meant to be a joint effort, but North Korea remains unresponsive. The South will resume work in the spring.

**Nov. 20, 2020:** MOU Lee [reiterates](#) call for the two Koreas to cooperate on COVID-19: "When vaccines and treatment ... are developed ... in the near future, a new environment will be created in the Korean Peninsula in which people and goods can come and go."

**Nov. 23, 2020:** On the 10th anniversary of North Korea's shelling of Yeonpyeong island, which killed four, South Korean Defense Minister Suh Wook pays tribute to the fallen and [vows](#) a strong defense posture: "True peace needs to be supported by strong power." The same day, MOU Lee [tells](#) officials of major *chaebol* (conglomerates) including Samsung, Hyundai Motor, SK and LG, whose heads accompanied President Moon to Pyongyang in 2018, to be prepared: an inter-Korean breakthrough "may come sooner than expected."

**Nov. 24, 2020:** *Korea Herald* [reports](#) that on Nov. 4, a DPRK defector in his 20s arrived undetected across the DMZ near the east coast. A former gymnast, the man said he vaulted over fences 3 meters (10 feet) high. ROK authorities make him jump twice to prove it.

**Nov. 25, 2020:** Park Sang-hak, leader of Fighters for a Free North Korea, is [charged](#) with assaulting a broadcasting team who visited his home (uninvited) to interview him about his leafleting campaign. He allegedly beat and threw bricks at the journalists, and fired a tear gas gun at police. Park counter-claimed that the journalists were housebreaking.

**Nov. 26, 2020:** MOU Lee [says](#) South Korea should send the North food and fertilizer next spring, when it faces a risk of "extreme famine." *And yet ...*

**Nov. 30, 2020:** In a saga going back to June 2019, MOU [says](#) it is in talks with the UN World Food Programme (WFP) to get back \$11.6 million it had sent to supply 50,000 tons of rice to North Korea. Pyongyang rejected Seoul's offer. (See also Sept. 3.)

**Dec. 5, 2020:** At the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) Manama Dialogue in Bahrain, ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa [says](#) it is hard to believe the DPRK's claim to be free of COVID-19: "All signs are that [they are] very intensely focused on controlling the disease that they say they don't have." This is not part of her prepared [remarks](#).

**Dec. 8, 2020:** Ever optimistic, Unification Minister Lee [detects](#) a "U-turn" toward a thaw since June's tensions. He says North Korea may respond to the South's offers of cooperation on COVID-29 after its upcoming Party Congress.

**Dec. 9, 2020:** In her first reported statement since June, Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong [calls](#) ROK foreign minister "impudent" and "reckless" for her comments: "We will never forget her words and she might have to pay dearly for it." FM Kang [repeats](#) her skepticism on Dec. 17.

**Dec. 9, 2020:** Ji Seong-ho, one of two DPRK defectors elected in April as a lawmaker for the ROK conservative opposition (named the People Power Party, or PPP), [says](#) that seeking nuclear talks with North Korea without addressing its human rights issue is "quite a hollow thing, such as a sand castle."

**Dec. 14, 2020:** By 187 votes to 0, ROK National Assembly [approves](#) a revision to the National Intelligence Service Korea Act. The spy agency can no longer investigate alleged pro-North activities by South Koreans: this power, abused in the past, now passes to the police. The conservative opposition PPP boycotts the vote after its filibuster the day before is overruled—as the ruling Democratic Party (DP) can do after 24 hours, having over 180 seats.

**Dec. 14, 2020:** By the same 187-0 margin, the National Assembly [passes](#) a revision to the Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act, to ban sending leaflets into North Korea. Maximum penalties are three years jail or a fine of 30 million won (\$27,000). Again the PPP boycotts the vote after its filibuster is overruled.

**Dec. 15, 2020:** One of the most high-profile (and [controversial](#)) balloon-launching activists, Park San-hang of Fighters for a Free North Korea, [says](#) he is contemplating a constitutional challenge to the ban on sending leaflets.

**Dec. 17, 2020:** MOU expresses [regret](#) that Tomas Ojea Quintana, UN special rapporteur on human rights in the DPRK, has called on Seoul to reconsider the leaflet ban.

**Dec. 17, 2020:** South Korea [says](#) it is developing ground vibration sensors to better detect movement near the DMZ, after a defector jumped over fences without raising alarms.

**Dec. 24, 2020:** MOU [says](#) it is drafting guidelines on the new ban on sending leaflets into North Korea, to clarify its scope of application.

**Dec. 25, 2020:** The Sejong Institute, a private think-tank in Seoul, [reports](#) that Kim Jong Un made 51 public appearances this year: the fewest ever in his nine-year reign, down from 85 in 2019 and 212 in 2013. Fourteen were economy-related, 12 military, and 25 political. Eight were on-site inspections, mostly related to natural disasters or health issues. The Institute speculates that COVID-19 is the main reason for Kim's relative invisibility of late.

**Dec. 28, 2020:** Statistics Korea, South Korea's official statistical agency, publishes a raft of economic [data](#) and estimates on the North Korean economy in 2019. This includes a number of inter-Korean comparisons.

**Dec. 29, 2020:** The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, a private think-tank in Seoul, [predicts](#) that North Korea may greet President Biden with a missile test: "the North will consider playing the card of an ICBM launch in a desperate measure to break the deadlock."

**Dec. 29, 2020:** Almost 30 South Korean human-rights organizations [file](#) a constitutional challenge to the new anti-leafleting law.

**Dec. 29, 2020:** Launching the Northeast Asia Conference on Health Security, an initiative of Moon's, FM Kang [expresses](#) hope that North Korea might join. The inaugural virtual meeting comprises South Korea, the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and Mongolia.

**Dec. 30, 2020:** A Politburo meeting—the 22nd session of the Political Bureau of the Seventh Central Committee of the WPK—[reviews](#) preparations for the upcoming Eighth Congress, set for "early in January" (still no exact date). Interestingly, this is chaired not by Kim Jong Un (though he attends) but former Premier Kim Jae Ryong, under KJU's "guidance."

**Dec. 30, 2020:** DPRK's *Voice of Korea* [reports](#): "Delegates to the Eighth Party Congress arrived in Pyongyang in late December."

**Dec. 31, 2020:** A joint survey of 414 defectors by two organizations, the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB) and NK Social Research (NKSR), [finds](#) that 26.6% of them sent money to North Korea this year. Remittances averaged 1.51 million won (\$1,390), with on average 1.8 transactions in 2020. A larger number, 38.6%, said they maintained contact with family in the North, nearly all (91.6%) by phone. Over one in seven (14.8%) said they had considered returning to North Korea.

**Dec. 31, 2020:** MOU [says](#) that from Jan. 4 it will increase support for NGOs aiding North Korea. Henceforth they can apply three times a year, rather than once, and need cover only 30% of financing themselves, down from 50%. Whether Pyongyang will accept such assistance is another matter.

**Dec. 31, 2020:** Former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon [calls](#) on South Korea to "rectify" its ban on sending leaflets into North Korea: "I cannot help but feel miserable that our country is facing criticism from home and abroad due to the human rights issue."

**Jan. 1, 2021:** Instead of Kim Jong Un's customary substantial New Year address, DPRK media carry a very short handwritten [letter](#). Kim offers greetings, thanks people for their trust in "difficult times," and promises to "work hard to bring earlier the new era in which the ideals and desires of our people will come true."

**Jan. 1, 2021:** Although North Korea cut all inter-Korean communication links in June, the United Nations Command (UNC) [confirms](#) that its direct telephone line at Panmunjom to the KPA remains operational. It delivered 86 messages in 2020, plus line checks twice daily.

**Jan. 4, 2021:** In his New Year address, MOU Lee [says](#) Seoul is expecting a "positive message of dialogue and cooperation" from Pyongyang in the near future.

**Jan. 4, 2021:** Osaka-based media NGO Asiapress [publishes](#) what it claims is a secret document from September in which Kim Jong Un launches a campaign to extirpate ROK linguistic usages as part of a “policy for inciting hatred among the domestic population towards South Korea.” Asiapress says it has more DPRK documents in this vein.

**Jan. 5, 2021:** Eighth WPK Congress opens in Pyongyang, unannounced; this is not reported till Jan. 6. Kim makes an opening [speech](#). He also [commences](#) a marathon report, which will last nine hours and take two days. Few details are initially provided.

**Jan. 6, 2021:** Congress continues, and so does Kim Jong Un’s [report](#).

**Jan. 7, 2021:** Congress continues. Kim Jong Un concludes his [report](#).

**Jan. 8, 2021:** *Reuters* [reports](#) that ROK prosecutors have indicted Kim Ryen Hi for violating the National Security Law (NSL). Kim, a North Korean woman aged 51 who claims she was tricked into defecting, has kept trying to be sent back to the DPRK, including turning herself in as a spy. Her lawyer comments: “It would invite international ridicule if you charge someone who is only fighting to go back home with threatening national security for sharing her daughter’s letters on Facebook.”

**Jan. 9, 2021:** *Rodong Sinmun*, the WPK daily, publishes a 13,500 word [summary](#) (not the full text) of Kim’s nine-hour speech to the Eighth Congress. This is hardline on all fronts, including toward South Korea.

**Jan. 9, 2021:** Reacting (if hardly responding) to Kim Jong Un’s diatribe, MOU [reiterates](#) South Korea’s commitment to implementing inter-Korean agreements.

**Jan. 11, 2021:** In his New Year [address](#), Moon repeats call for the two Koreas to work together: “Our determination to meet at any time and any place and talk even in a contact-free manner remains unchanged. The two Koreas should jointly fulfill all the agreements made together to date.”

**Jan. 13, 2021:** DPRK media publish a [statement](#) by Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong, attacking speculation in Seoul about the North holding a military parade. She concludes: “The southerners are a truly weird group hard to understand. They are the idiot and top the world’s list in misbehavior as they are only keen on things provoking world laughter.”

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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

CHINA- KOREA RELATIONS

## STRATEGIC DILEMMAS, CLASHING IDENTITIES, AND FREE TRADE

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PRC State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi's November visit to Seoul produced limited substantive results while signaling Beijing's deeper strategic intentions toward the United States' Asian allies. China's commemorations of the Korean War's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary in October provided reassurances to North Korea while triggering a war of words with South Koreans, ranging from the foreign ministry to the K-pop group BTS. On social media, the history controversy was a prelude to wider cultural clashes on a host of issues. While the repercussions of COVID-19 and US-China trade tensions challenge China and South Korea's economic agenda, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership's signing in November raised prospects for regional multilateralism. Meanwhile, North Korea's self-imposed quarantine resulted in a precipitous drop in North Korean imports from China according to China's official trade statistics. UN Panel of Experts-led monitoring of North Korean off-the-books exports of coal and sand to China drew harsh US criticisms and catalyzed the announcement of a US Treasury-administered rewards program for reporting on primarily Chinese entities engaged in illicit trade with North Korea. Coupled with the incoming Biden administration's envisioned regional architecture and the campaign's declared reliance on multilateral approaches to North Korea, Asia's multilateral initiatives may heighten Seoul's US-China dilemma.

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## Wang Yi's Visit to Seoul: 'Shared Aspirations' or 'Unanswered Courtship'?

Wang Yi's Nov. 25-27 visit to Seoul included meetings with President Moon Jae-in, Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha, National Assembly Speaker Park Byeong-seug, Special Presidential Advisor for Foreign and Security Affairs Moon Chung-in, and ruling party leaders. Paired with Wang's Tokyo visit, it was widely perceived as an effort to consolidate ties with US allies ahead of the Biden administration's inauguration. The visit fell short of South Korean expectations for a Xi-Moon summit in Seoul by the end of 2020. Wang [conveyed](#) Xi's message of "personal friendship and mutual trust" to Moon, and [reminded](#) his counterpart Kang that "the US is not the only country in this world." To Park, Wang expressed support for an inter-Korean peace process without external interference, [stating](#), "the fate of the peninsula should be given to the two countries." He [championed](#) multilateralism over "neo-Cold War" during talks with Moon Chung-in. According to China's state media, Wang's Northeast Asia tour [demonstrated](#) "regional cohesion" and "resilience against outside pressure." His Seoul visit in particular [forged](#) a "model for practical diplomacy" [signifying](#) "shared aspirations" of "strategic partners." As Wang [claimed](#), "My visit to South Korea ... is intended to show the importance we attach to China-South Korea relations through actual action."



Figure 1 Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets South Korean President Moon Jae-in in Seoul. Photo: Yonhap

China's foreign ministry released a 10-point [consensus](#) between Wang and Kang on Nov. 26, pledging cooperation on COVID-19, cultural exchanges, development and trade, peninsula peace and stability, and dialogue mechanisms. Seoul's [version](#) of the meeting outcome did not include Beijing's envisioned "2+2" dialogue on

diplomatic and security affairs. A *Korea Herald* [editorial](#) on China's "unanswered courtship" argued that Wang "was lavish in his rhetoric ... but failed to commit to substantial measures." *The Dong-A Ilbo* [noted](#) "no progress" in Beijing's THAAD demands and restrictions on Korean cultural content. While Korean observers largely dismissed the "consensus" for lacking substance, even liberal outlets like *Hankyoreh* [appeared](#) wary of Beijing's deeper intentions of "recruiting Seoul to its side." As Kim Heung-kyu at Ajou University argued, the most important [reason](#) for Wang's visit was "US-China strategic competition." A *Korea Times* editorial [concluded](#) that "Wang Yi's visit raises both hope and anxiety," requiring "flexible diplomacy" that can "strike a balance between Beijing and Washington."

PRC and ROK officials discussed a range of issues reaffirming the Xi-Moon agreements from December 2019. Telephone talks were [held](#) on Sept. 10 between nuclear envoys Luo Zhaohui and Lee Do-hoon, and on Oct. 21 between defense [ministers](#) Wei Fenghe and Suh Wook. Fisheries officials on [Nov. 6](#) and [Dec. 17](#) agreed to reduce fishing boat quotas in exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and strengthen responses to illegal fishing. According to Korean lawmakers, the number of reported cases of China's illegal fishing in ROK waters more than [doubled](#) in 2017-2019, and PRC warships crossing the EEZ median line [represented](#) almost 80% of cases in 2019. In video talks with PRC counterpart Le Yucheng on Dec. 23, Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun also raised concern over China's [entry](#) into South Korea's KADIZ during China-Russia air exercises. In more positive developments, foreign ministry officials [held](#) video talks on Nov. 9 ahead of ASEAN summits marking RCEP's signing. Environment ministers Huang Runqiu and Cho Myung-rae [held](#) virtual talks on Nov. 11, citing Xi and Moon's recently announced plans to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 and 2060 respectively.

As seen during Wang Yi's [visit](#), recent bilateral meetings received Korean media attacks on China's "arrogance" and Moon's "submissive" leadership. As a *Korea Herald* editorial [argued](#) after the apparent suspension of Samsung-chartered flights to China in November: "China's arrogance toward Korea is a problem, but as problematic is the submissive attitude of the Moon administration." A *Dong-A Ilbo* [article](#) on ultrafine dust pollution from China

similarly urged Seoul to “abandon its submissive attitude.”

### Commemorating the War to Resist US Aggression ...

The Korean War’s 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, [sixth](#) in *Xinhua*’s top 10 China news events in 2020, appeared to draw more attention from Beijing than did the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary events of World War II in 2015. Commemorations reflected what Zhao Ma at Washington University in St. Louis described as the Korean War’s [evolution](#) “from a socialist crusade to a nationalist mission” in China’s national memory. After a six-year closure, China’s only Memorial Hall centered on the war [reopened](#) on Sept. 18 in Dandong, [displaying](#): “On June 25, 1950, the Korean civil war broke out.” During a [visit](#) to a Korean War exhibition at the Beijing Military Museum of the Chinese People’s Revolution on Oct. 19, President Xi remembered the war as “a victory of justice, a victory of peace and a victory of the people.” Vice President Wang Qishan and all CPC Politburo Standing Committee members accompanied him. In his Oct. 23 address in Beijing, Xi [stated](#) that “China will not compromise on its national sovereignty, security and interests,” noting current “challenges of unilateralism, protectionism and hegemonism.” As *Global Times* [reported](#), Xi’s speech “delivered a clear message that the attempt by the US and any other forces to contain China will never succeed.”



Figure 2 Memorial Hall of the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea reopens in Dandong. Photo: Xinhua

In South Korea’s seventh return since 2014, the remains of 117 Chinese soldiers of the Korean War [arrived](#) on Sept. 27 in Shenyang. Vice Premier [Sun](#) Chunlan and Minister of Veteran Affairs [Sun](#) Shaocheng addressed two-day events leading to Martyrs’ Day, including what *Global Times* [called](#) the “state’s highest

greeting ceremony” signaling that China will “fight hegemony till end.” As Li Jingxian at the Ministry of Veterans Affairs [emphasized](#), the PLA aircraft used to repatriate the remains embodied China’s stronger “national image.” According to Lyu Chao at the Liaoning Academy of Sciences, the latest exchange reflected China’s “friendly and peaceful settlement” with [South Korea](#) and “undeniably stronger” ties with [North Korea](#). Xi’s history discourse prompted the ROK Foreign Ministry to [issue](#) a statement on Oct. 24 reaffirming Seoul’s position: “That the Korean War broke out due to North Korea’s invasion is an undeniable historical fact.” The Communist Youth League of China’s Weibo comments a day later prompted the ministry to [reiterate](#) this position on Oct. 28. A *Korea Times* [editorial](#) on Oct. 26 responded to Seoul’s “lukewarm reaction,” arguing, “Xi deserves criticism ... we urge Xi to face up to history and respect South Korea.” South Korea’s backlash came a month after Moon proposed an end-of-war declaration in a [speech](#) at the UN General Assembly, reviving debate over China’s role. PRC Ambassador Xing Haiming [told](#) *JoongAng Daily* on Oct. 14, “China cannot be left out of the process.”

China’s state and popular platforms disseminated official narratives of the Korean War throughout October. The Foreign Languages Press and Military Science Publishing House released the English edition of *The War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea*, “a Chinese interpretation and justification of the war” according to a *Global Times* [review](#). In a *Global Times* [article](#) on Oct. 1, China’s National Day, PLA Lt. Gen. He Lei argued, “revisiting the essence of China’s strategic decision-making ... is of great significance to the continuous victory.” CGTN featured interviews of war veterans [claiming](#), “our army isn’t like the one before.” A *Global Times* [editorial](#) on Oct. 22 concluded: “When China was very poor, it didn’t surrender to US pressure and stood out to resist and finally defeat the US on the Korean Peninsula. Today, China has grown to be a strong country, so there is no reason for China to fear the US threats and suppression.” Popular commemorations included [CCTV documentaries](#) and TV [series](#), [plays](#) and dance [shows](#), an animated [film](#), and *The Sacrifice*, which [led](#) mainland China’s box office for four weeks. According to China’s state media, filmmaker Zhang Yimou’s *The Coldest Gun* [will](#) promote “patriotic sentiments” and “courage and

determination in response to the US' increasing aggression."

A CGTN [commentator](#) dismissed global reactions to the state propaganda-led "[War of Words](#)," asking, "why do media suggest China wants war when it commemorates peace?" International [debate](#) centered on the repercussions of Beijing's nationalist discourse on public diplomacy with Seoul amid ongoing US-China tensions. The Voluntary Agency Network of Korea [stated](#) in a Change.org petition in September, "We oppose the extreme attitude of attacking others in the name of nationalism." Comparing Chinese, Korean, and Japanese nationalism, Park Won-gon at Handong Global University [told](#) *The Korea Times*, "Chinese patriotism is different from the two others' as it is mainly government-driven." At the paper's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary ceremony on Oct. 29, US Ambassador Harry Harris [reflected](#) on the Korean War by stating, "our two nations' commitment and resolve to democracy was put to the test ... the fight for democracy has continued in other equally crucial ways off the battlefield."

### **... And Aid, Not Trade, With North Korea**

While the topline message from Xi's commemorative speech on the 70th anniversary of the Korean War emphasized China's capability and will to resist US aggression, the accompanying signal of support to North Korea—even if it was a by-product of Xi's efforts to harness Chinese nationalism in response to perceived modern-day US aggression—were well-received by Kim Jong Un. The consolidation of formal China-North Korean ties has been reflected primarily in reaffirmation around commemorative dates of an active public correspondence between Xi and Kim in light of the focus on Trump-Kim "love letters" and revelations of an active but seemingly ineffectual correspondence between Kim and Moon. Xi and Kim regularly exchanged well-wishes on major anniversaries including the [71<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the founding of the PRC](#) and the [75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Korean Workers' Party](#). [Reporting on this correspondence](#) as well as [exchanges of floral baskets between top party institutions](#) and with [associations of overseas Koreans in China](#) signified the restoration of an active and close relationship between the two countries. Placing a spotlight on these symbolic exchanges at the individual and institutional levels evokes

memories of the longstanding special relationship between the two countries throughout the Cold War.

Kim Jong Un reinforced images of a close China-North Korea relationship by making a visit to the [Cemetery of the Martyrs of the Chinese People's Volunteers](#) and to the grave of Mao Zedong's son, Mao Anying, a casualty of the Korean War. The restoration of closer China-North Korea relations follows North Korea's active and vocal support over the summer for the promulgation of a new National Security Law for Hong Kong as a defense of China's sovereignty and coincides with the downturn in China-US relations. In this respect, historical commemoration of China's role in the Korean War is intricately linked with rising Chinese nationalism and the downturn in China-US relations.

The most significant revival of Chinese aid to North Korea was documented by the UN Panel of Experts, which reported on apparent breaches of UN Security Council mandated caps on North Korean exports of coal and import of refined petroleum through ship-to-ship transfers and direct deliveries. While UN diplomats quibbled over whether limits on petroleum transfers to North Korea should be measured in barrels or metric tons, North Korean ships were recorded by satellite and other means engaging in increasingly [brazen and regular traffic](#) to Chinese territorial waters and ports. Despite photographic and satellite evidence of being caught red-handed, Chinese and North Korean authorities brushed off international criticisms, resulting in significant volumes of North Korean exports in breach of UN sanctions that blew a gaping hole in the UN sanctions regime.

Deputy Assistant Representative Alex Wong [stated](#) in a public speech on Dec. 22 that the United States had provided information to Chinese Navy or Coast Guard vessels information regarding DPRK fuel smuggling into Chinese coastal waters on 46 separate occasions, and that the US had observed ships carrying UN-prohibited coal or other sanctioned goods from North Korea into China on 555 separate occasions. Chinese diplomats called for lifting sanctions on North Korea while enabling significant sanctions evasion, rewarding North Korea's leadership by meeting primary demands that the US had disregarded at the US-North Korea summit in Hanoi, but with no

apparent Chinese insistence on North Korean denuclearization quid pro quos. After months of mounting US frustration over China's non-adherence to the sanctions regime, the US announced a [rewards plan of up to \\$5 million](#) for reporting of violators of UN sanctions on North Korea.

Given China-North Korea sanctions evasion efforts, the accuracy of Chinese records of official economic transactions with North Korea was subject to scrutiny and doubt. But even if Chinese statistics were unrepresentative of the reality of China's exports to North Korea, the sudden and prolonged drop in official North Korean exports to China resulting from North Korea's anti-COVID-19 self-quarantine efforts was striking. The level of officially recorded North Korean exports to China [dropped in October](#) by 92% from the previous month to \$1.7 million, and recorded a drop through the first 10 months of 2020 from the previous year by as much as 76%. This decline exceeded the dramatic drop in recorded Chinese exports to North Korea that occurred at the height of the North Korean missile testing crisis at in 2017-2018. It also [combined with exchange rate fluctuations](#) between the won and dollar and the won and renminbi following an extended period of exchange rate stability, raising questions about what to expect in the run-up to the Eighth Party Congress in January 2021. North Korea's efforts to raise foreign currency by floating domestic bonds in spring 2020 and the unreliability and continued lack of transparency of North Korea-related trade statistics made it increasingly difficult to make judgements about North Korea's economic stability or the extent to which China may have provided subsidies designed to forestall North Korea's economic collapse.

### **China-ROK Economic Plans: Post-Pandemic Challenges and Opportunities**

Wang Yi's November visit to Seoul reaffirmed plans to advance coordinated development, the bilateral FTA, and multilateral initiatives, supporting both partners' quest to expand into emerging industries and third-party markets. His meeting with Foreign Minister Kang drew attention to a Joint Plan for economic and trade cooperation for 2021-2025, expected to facilitate post-pandemic recovery and China's 14<sup>th</sup> [Five Year Plan](#), [according](#) to Xiang Haoyu of the China Institute of International Studies. National Development and Reform Commission

Chairman He Lifeng and ROK Finance Minister Hong Nam-ki [discussed](#) key bilateral issues on Oct. 16 before [talks](#) between trade officials on the FTA's expansion. The China-ROK currency swap agreement's five-year [renewal](#) that month raised prospects for trade and regional financial stabilization. Based on Korea International Trade Association (KITA) data, ROK exports to China reached \$120 billion in January-November, a 3% decline compared to the same period last year, while imports amounted to \$98 billion, a 0.2% decline. China's share of South Korea's foreign trade grew from 23% to 24%. While overall FDI in South Korea shrank by 22%, Chinese investment more than [doubled](#) to \$856 million in the first half of 2020, increasing its share of FDI in South Korea from 3% to 11%. Chief of the KITA Beijing office Park Min-young [reassured](#) *Global Times* that Korean investment in China is likely to grow in the post-pandemic period. Zhang Huizhi at Jilin University also [predicted](#) a 70% recovery in South Korean exports to China in 2021, boosted by US trade restrictions on China.

Although the combined effects of COVID-19 and US-China trade tensions heighten the risks of dependence on China, Korean businesses are relying on Chinese and Southeast Asian markets to drive recovery. Seoul's [efforts](#) to incentivize companies to relocate home from China, recently targeting the service and IT sectors, appear limited in impact. As the *Financial Times* [reported](#) in September, one survey showed that only 8% of 200 South Korean SMEs in China and Vietnam were willing to return. A KITA survey of more than 1,000 local exporters in October [suggested](#) cautious optimism: 20% anticipated the regional trade environment to improve the most in China, while 18% expected worsening trade terms with China.

In a November survey of 300 Korean manufacturers by the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 61% of respondents [projected](#) eased US-China trade tensions under the Biden administration. The implications of those tensions for South Korea are also mixed. US sanctions on Huawei raised concerns over the costs to chip exports to mainland China and Hong Kong, which together [accounted](#) for more than 60% of South Korean chip exports in January-July. But US restrictions may also imply long-term gains for rivals like Samsung, which [reclaimed](#) the biggest share of the global smartphone market by the third quarter of

2020, capturing 22% compared to Huawei's 14%.

At the regional level, the Nov. 15 [signing](#) of RCEP boosted Wang Yi's outreach in Seoul and Tokyo days later. RCEP's signing was a "historic moment" [according](#) to Moon and a "victory of multilateralism and free trade" [according](#) to Premier Li Keqiang. China's Commerce Ministry [predicts](#) that RCEP could increase exports among member countries by 10.4%, investment by 2.6%, and GDP by 1.8% by 2025. Chinese and Korean reactions focused largely on the implications for the United States' regional position and trilateral relations with Japan. CGTN [featured](#) an opinion piece calling the deal a "fatal blow" to US regional initiatives, while China's Commerce Ministry [emphasized](#) the acceleration of China-Japan-ROK FTA talks. China's [expression of interest](#) in joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) paved the way for Moon [to suggest](#) that South Korea would also be interested in joining the CPTPP. But South Korean skeptics remain [cautious](#) about Beijing's leadership of regional free trade and multilateralism, pointing to its "practice of resorting to economic coercion." UNCTAD [identified](#) geopolitical and trade tensions as key challenges for RCEP-led regional integration.



Figure 3 Korean President Moon Jae-in and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang attend the virtual signing ceremony of the RCEP agreement. Photo: Xinhua

### A Virtual Clash of Civilizations

Fueled by social media, Beijing and Seoul's history controversy uncovered a much wider clash of identities at the societal level. Boy band BTS' references to South Korea's shared history with the United States after receiving the General James A. Van Fleet Award in October [ignited](#) outrage among Chinese netizens. In Korea, a petition on the Blue House website [urged](#) Seoul to ban Chinese artists who "distort

the history of the Korean War." After BTS became the first K-pop band to gain a Grammy nomination in November, *Global Times* [noted](#) the monetary contributions of Chinese fans known as ARMY, warning, "if Chinese are hurt a second time, it may cause a further loss of the Chinese ARMY members."

Accusations of "[cultural plagiarism](#)" continued through the end of the year, against Seoul city's annual [celebrations](#) of cultural exchange with China in October-December. To the [surprise](#) of Chinese observers, online [clashes](#) over traditional dress in early November [sparked](#) protests by Korean lawmakers and forced a Chinese mobile gaming company to close its Korean server. Producer Yu Zheng [shared](#) ancient Chinese paintings on Instagram with the comments: "Korea is China's vassal state in the Ming Dynasty! Korean costumes are adopted from the Ming Dynasty! Here is the evidence!" The *Hanfu* vs. *Hanbok* debate coincided with Chinese uproar over K-pop band Blackpink's [handling](#) of pandas, including the first South Korea-born panda cub *Fubao*. The panda debacle [inspired](#) the Weibo hashtag "why we cannot touch pandas with bare hands," [prompted](#) China Wildlife Conservation Association to send a complaint to the zoo, and [forced](#) YG Entertainment to drop the reality TV show's final episode.

Later [confrontations](#) extended to lantern lighting traditions featured in a Chinese TV drama. The Cultural Heritage of Administration of Korea [boosted](#) expectations for the approval of South Korea's own *Yeondeunghoe* on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list, [affirmed](#) on December 16. Subsequent reports of Beijing's certification from the International Organization for Standardization for pickled cabbage prompted South Korea's Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs to draw a clear distinction between Korean *kimchi* and Chinese *paocai*. In a *Yonhap News* interview, Seo Kyoung-duk at Sungshin Women's University [urged](#) the government and civil society to "take strong action against China's moves to take cultural assets away from Korea." The kimchi vs. *paocai* debate spiraled into online [disputes](#) over what Koreans netizens called Chinese attempts at "economic coercion." *Global Times* traced *paocai* to the Three Kingdoms (220-280) period, [claiming](#) that 99% of napa cabbage in South Korea now comes from China. China's foreign ministry [denied](#) awareness of the virtual feud, stating,

“shared benefits surely outweigh that.” Asia Society Korea hosted a [webcast](#) two weeks later on “Beating the COVID-19 Blues with Homemade Kimchi,” featuring US Ambassador Harry Harris saying “there’s nothing more Korean than kimchi.”

2020’s virtual clashes ended on the Taiwan issue after Korean TV show *Running Man* featured adjacent PRC and ROC flags in a December episode. The segment prompted Chinese calls for a boycott and the episode’s removal online. As one Weibo user [warned](#), “This is an issue that crosses the line for all Chinese people.” Sun Jiashan of the Chinese National Academy of Arts in a *Global Times* article in December [called](#) Korean entertainers’ attacks on China “a manifestation of cultural inferiority.” After months of public hostility, ROK Ambassador to Beijing Jang Ha-sung [stressed](#) the media’s role in “fostering the bonds of friendship” to “avoid unnecessary misunderstanding.” At the 12<sup>th</sup> China-ROK media dialogue in September, State Council Information Office Minister Xu Lin [urged](#) the media to “play the leading role of public opinion.” Some Chinese analysts [described](#) recent controversies as a “misunderstanding in translation,” reminding both sides, “the history of traditional Korean culture and Chinese culture are inseparable.”

### **Conclusion: Prospects under the Biden Administration**

To mark their 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, China and South Korea [will](#) celebrate Cultural Exchange Years 2021-2022 and create a committee for the next 30-year development of ties. As China’s foreign ministry [indicated](#) in November, the neighbors led regional cooperation in 2020 through COVID-19 prevention and control mechanisms and measures for resuming economic exchanges. 2021 confronts two challenges to post-pandemic relations: US-China tensions amid leadership transition in Washington, and cultural frictions undermining public diplomacy. Pew [poll](#) findings in October showed an increase in unfavorable views of China in South Korea from 63% to 75% in 2019-2020. Chinese are now [wondering](#) if “Biden’s diplomatic policy will drag South Korea into an alliance confronting China,” while South Koreans are [bracing](#) for Beijing’s “attempts to pull Korea away from its alliance with the US.”

Wang’s latest visit to neighbors sharpened attention on regional relations with Washington, where President-elect Biden seeks to consolidate US alliance networks in Asia. Addressing the Korea China Friendship Forum in Seoul on Nov. 19, PRC Ambassador Xing Haiming [assured](#) Koreans, “mutual beneficial cooperation will definitely supersede the zero-sum game; and multilateralism will definitely win over unilateralism.” Seoul’s US-China dilemma has raised [calls](#) for relying on multilateral frameworks as “strategic ambiguity” appears increasingly unsustainable. Washington and Beijing’s respective multilateralisms, however, may only heighten this dilemma. The Moon administration also faces growing pressure from his conservative opponents, which surfaced in October after ROK Ambassador to Washington Lee Soo-hyuck stated: “Just because South Korea chose the US 70 years ago doesn’t mean it must choose the US for the next 70 years.” [According](#) to Special Presidential Advisor Moon Chung-in, “shared values and historical continuity, while important, cannot take priority to the national interest.” As *The Dong-A Ilbo* [suggests](#), “Biden-style internationalism based on rules and values ... may put South Korea at the crossroads of unavoidable choices.”

*Research assistance and chronology compilation provided by Chenglong Lin, San Francisco State University.*

# CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2020

**Sept. 7, 2020:** South Korea's First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun [holds](#) separate meetings with PRC and Japanese ambassadors.

**Sept. 9, 2020:** President Xi Jinping sends a [congratulatory message](#) to Kim Jong Un on the 72nd anniversary of the DPRK's founding.

**Sept. 5, 2020:** Chongqing-Seoul international passenger flights [resume](#), leading further post-COVID-19 flight [resumptions](#) between China and South Korea.

**Sept. 9, 2020:** The 10<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting and 21<sup>st</sup> ASEAN+3 Foreign Ministers' Meeting are [held](#) online.

**Sept. 10, 2020:** Luo Zhaohui, China's vice-minister of foreign affairs, and Lee Do-hoon, South Korea's special representative for Korea Peninsula peace and security affairs, [hold](#) telephone talks.

**Sept. 10, 2020:** USFK Commander Gen. Robert Abrams [confirms](#) that North Korea has set up a shoot-to-kill zone along its border with China. The DPRK Embassy in Beijing [releases](#) an agreement with China on measures to protect Chinese nationals.

**Sept. 12, 2020:** PRC Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui, ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha, DPRK Ambassador to Indonesia An Kwang-il, and US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun attend the [virtual](#) 27<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum.

**Sept. 14, 2020:** Kim Jong Un [sends](#) a reply message to Xi.

**Sept. 14, 2020:** A North Korean smuggler is [shot](#) dead while crossing the China-DPRK border.

**Sept. 14, 2020:** Changes to China's national curriculum require northeast schools to replace Korean teaching material with Mandarin Chinese material according to local media [reports](#).

**Sept. 17, 2020:** Disney's *Mulan* premiere [leads](#) South Korea's box office despite boycotts.

**Sept. 18, 2020:** PRC, ROK, and Japanese finance ministers [hold](#) online talks on the sidelines of the 23<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN+3 Finance Ministers' and Central Bank Governors' [Meeting](#).

**Sept. 18, 2020:** China's foreign ministry [reiterates](#) Beijing's "dual-track approach" on the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the September 2005 Six Party Talks Joint Statement.

**Sept. 19, 2020:** Memorial [Hall](#) of the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea reopens in Dandong.

**Sept. 25, 2020:** Minister of China's State Council Information Office Xu Lin and ROK Culture Minister Park Yang-woo address the 12<sup>th</sup> China-ROK high-level media dialogue online.

**Sept. 25, 2020:** Sixth China-Japan-Korea Industries Expo [starts](#) in Weifang, Shandong province, where the China-Japan-Korea (Weifang) Industrial Park is launched.

**Sept. 25-26, 2020:** Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, ROK Ministry of Education, and National Research Foundation of Korea [host](#) the 2020 China-Korea Humanities Forum.

**Sept. 26-28, 2020:** Seventh [ceremony](#) for Chinese soldiers killed in the Korean War is [held](#) in Incheon. The remains of 117 soldiers [arrive](#) in Shenyang, where Vice Premier Sun Chunlan and Minister of Veteran Affairs Sun Shaocheng [address](#) welcoming and burial ceremonies.

**Sept. 29, 2020:** UN panel of experts [reports](#) on North Korea's continued violation of UNSC sanctions.

**Sept. 29, 2020:** South Korea's chief prosecutor Yoon Seok-young and PRC Ambassador to Seoul Xing Haiming [discuss](#) law enforcement cooperation.

**Oct. 1, 2020:** Kim [sends](#) a message to Xi on the PRC's 71<sup>st</sup> founding anniversary.

**Oct. 10, 2020:** Kim [receives](#) a message from Xi on the WPK's 75<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary.

**Oct. 13, 2020:** PRC Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui [attends](#) ROK Embassy reception for South Korea's National Foundation Day and Military Foundation Day.

**Oct. 16, 2020:** NDRC Chairman He Lifeng and ROK Finance Minister Hong Nam-ki [hold](#) online economic ministerial talks.

**Oct. 16, 2020:** The 2020 China-South Korea Outstanding Women's Forum [is held](#) online.

**Oct. 19, 2020:** Xi Jinping and China's top leaders visit Korean War exhibition at the Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution in Beijing.

**Oct. 19, 2020:** Kim [sends](#) a reply message to Xi.

**Oct. 20-Dec. 31, 2020:** Seoul city [holds](#) its Eighth "China Day" celebrations online.

**Oct. 21, 2020:** PRC State Councilor and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe and ROK Defense Minister Suh Wook [hold](#) telephone talks.

**Oct. 21, 2020:** PRC Ambassador to the DPRK Li Jinjun [attends](#) a ceremony marking the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CPV's entry into the Korean War.

**Oct. 22, 2020:** Kim Jong Un, accompanied by senior officials, [visits](#) the CPV cemetery in Hoechang County and lays a floral basket at the grave of [Mao Anying](#), Mao Zedong's son.

**Oct. 22, 2020:** The People's Bank of China and Bank of Korea [extend](#) their currency swap deal.

**Oct. 22, 2020:** Ninth biennial ASEAN+3 Culture Ministers' Meeting is [held](#) online.

**Oct. 23, 2020:** Xi [addresses](#) meeting marking the Korean War's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary. [China](#) and [North Korea's](#) state media report on ceremonies at their memorial sites.

**Oct. 23, 2020:** Photo exhibition marking the Korean War's 70th anniversary [opens](#) in Beijing.

**Oct. 24, 2020:** Kim Jong Un [receives](#) a reply message from Xi.

**Oct. 26-30, 2020:** China and South Korea [hold](#) ninth round of talks online on expanding the FTA's scope.

**Oct. 28-Nov. 30, 2020:** A photo exhibition marking the Korean War's 70th anniversary is [held](#) at the Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution in Beijing.

**Oct. 30, 2020:** Direct flights from Seoul to Beijing [resume](#).

**Nov. 04, 2020:** North Korea's *Tongil Sinbo* [emphasizes](#) the country's "special relationship" and "undefeatable friendship" with China.

**Nov. 6, 2020:** PRC and ROK fisheries officials [agree](#) to reduce fishing boat quotas in each other's EEZ.

**Nov. 9, 2020:** ROK Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Gunn and PRC counterpart Luo Zhaohui [hold](#) video talks ahead of ASEAN-led summits.

**Nov. 11, 2020:** PRC and ROK environment ministers [hold](#) online talks.

**Nov. 12, 2020:** PRC foreign ministry [denies](#) reports about the suspension of Samsung's chartered flight to China.

**Nov. 14-15, 2020:** President Moon Jae-in and Premier Li Keqiang attend virtual ASEAN+3 summit, East Asia Summit, and RCEP summit.

**Nov. 13-17, 2020:** The China-South Korea Investment and Trade Fair and China (Shenyang) South Korea Week is [held](#) alongside the Liaoning International [Fair](#) for Investment and Trade.

**Nov. 19, 2020:** The ASEAN Defense Senior Officials' Meeting Plus is held online.

**Nov. 19, 2020:** The PRC Embassy and Korea-China City Friendship Association [hold](#) the China-ROK Friendship Youth Forum 2020 in Seoul.

**Nov. 21, 2020:** The 27<sup>th</sup> APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting is held.

**Nov. 25–27, 2020:** PRC State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi visits Seoul.

**Nov. 30, 2020:** Liu Youbin, spokesperson for China's Ministry of Ecology and Environment, [calls](#) for strengthening cooperation with South Korea.

**Dec. 2, 2020:** *RFA* [reports](#) that North Korea has sent anti-aircraft units to the Chinese border.

**Dec. 2, 2020:** PRC foreign ministry [responds](#) to US accusations of DPRK sanctions violations.

**Dec. 9, 2020:** PRC foreign ministry [responds](#) to new US [sanctions](#) on China-based entities for supporting DPRK coal exports.

**Dec. 10, 2020:** The 7th ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus is [held](#) online.

**Dec. 11, 2020:** PRC, ROK, and Japanese health ministers [hold](#) annual talks online.

**Dec. 17, 2020:** China and South Korea hold working-level fisheries cooperation talks.

**Dec. 23, 2020:** ROK Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun and PRC counterpart Le Yucheng [hold](#) video talks.

**Dec. 23, 2020:** China's foreign ministry [affirms](#) that Chinese and Russian aircraft “did not enter the airspace of other countries” in response to regional concerns over joint patrols.

**Dec. 29, 2020:** South Korea's new chief nuclear envoy Noh Kyu-duk and PRC counterpart Wu Jianghao [hold](#) telephone talks.

*Research assistance and chronology compilation provided by Chenglong Lin, San Francisco State University.*



# 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-ASIA-PACIFIC

**JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS**

## TREADING WATER

JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

Perhaps the biggest news of the last third of 2020 was that Xi Jinping's often-postponed state visit to Japan will not take place in spring 2021 and may be postponed to September 2022, in commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the normalization of China-Japan diplomatic relations. Both countries' economies recovered well from the pandemic, with robust trade between them even as they continued to snipe at each other politically and upgrade their military capabilities. China continued to expand its presence in waters of the East China Sea claimed by Japan.

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## Politics

With continued inability to agree on the text of the joint communique, each side made efforts to burnish its image with potential partners. Tellingly, Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide's first overseas trip after taking office took place in October was to emphasize the importance of Japan's ties to Southeast Asia, and that Japan's commitment to a rules-based international order makes it a better partner for ASEAN nations than China, given its escalating unilateral actions in the area. China denounced Japan's sponsorship of a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and Suga's trip as a strategy meant to walk in step with the United States and deepen confrontation in the region.

The reporting period started on a diplomatic note, but this did not last. *Global Times* [described](#) China's commemoration of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression on Sept. 3 as low-key, which the paper attributed to improving China-Japan relations. President Xi Jinping did not deliver a speech during the commemoration, and Chinese media did not criticize Japan. It cited unnamed analysts as saying that, given US unilateralism and provocation to regional peace and stability, there was a growing need for China and Japan to strengthen cooperation to maintain regional stability and prosperity. However, on the next day *China Daily* struck a more truculent note in a [report](#) on the opening in Heilongjiang of a major exhibition related to the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression that, according to the paper, presented new evidence of Japan's human experiments and biochemical weapons.



Figure 1 An exhibition at the commemoration of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. Photo: *China Daily*

In December, Chen Xi, head of the party's Organization Department and a Poliburo member, [spoke](#) at the seventh national memorial day for the victims of the Nanjing Massacre slaughtered by Japanese troops in 1937, describing it as a painful memory that should not be forgotten or tampered with. However, for the third year in a row, Xi did not attend.

*Nikkei* observed that active [recruitment](#) by the Even before assuming the top job, Suga indicated he would take a tough stance on China. [Debating](#) with other contenders for the presidency of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)—and therefore the prime ministership—in mid-September Suga vowed that, if elected, he would stand his ground with Beijing. Chinese specialists on Japan [dismissed](#) his and other candidates' remarks as campaign rhetoric, opining that no leader would abandon the benefits that have been achieved during the past few years, especially those relating to the economy and trade. Although the specialists observed that all candidates took a hardline, they expressed a desire for Japan to mediate between China and the US.

Chinese papers were skeptical, saying that while China would welcome mediation, Japan could not play such a role since it is not an "independent" country but "Washington's loyal follower which still has huge military presence." *Global Times* [editorialized](#) that the question of whether Suga's attitude would be better than Abe's was "insignificant" as "China should continue to boost its attractiveness to Japan, weaken Japan's ability to restrict China's development, and gradually suppress Japan's idea of taking an opportunistic line toward China amid worsening China-US relations."

*China Daily* [predicted](#) that Suga would try to further improve relations with China but at the same time take a tough stance against China in defense and security policies. If, for example, he does not admit Japan has a dispute with China over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, this "could sour Sino-Japanese ties." Only two days after Suga's election as prime minister, one of his major backers, influential LDP heavyweight and China-friendly Nikai Toshihiro, [voiced](#) hope that Xi's state visit would take place soon and that a fifth political document would establish China-Japan intentions for "co-creation to achieve world peace and prosperity led by Japan and China together." This ran counter to Suga's

stated intention to base Japan's security on a close relationship with the US.

Contemporary relations remained hindered by the two countries' fraught pasts. Abe Shinzo [tweeted](#) in mid-September that he had visited Yasukuni Shrine after resigning to report his resignation to the souls of the war dead. This was Abe's first visit to the shrine since 2013, although China regularly objected to the offerings Abe sent at regular intervals while he was prime minister. *Global Times* [reported](#) that the visit was "blasted" on social media, showed that Japan's rightwing politicians had yet to reflect on their country's war crimes even as they try to be friendly with China, and would set a bad example for Suga. Suga did not attend the shrine's autumn festival, but did send a ritual offering, which *Global Times*, in a separate [protest article](#), referred to as a "potted plant." Noting that Suga had not sent such offerings while serving as chief Cabinet secretary, the paper interpreted his gesture as indicating that he would adhere to the Abe administration's policies on the shrine and that he was trying to win support from the Japanese right and "some public opinion."

Some complications concerned the more recent past. Disclosing hitherto unknown details of the secret negotiations involving a Chinese fishing boat ramming two Japanese Coast Guard vessels a decade ago, *Nikkei* [commented](#) in early September that China's unwillingness to compromise meant that "Japan once again faces the question of whether it is ready to tackle big issues regarding its powerful neighbor—and at what cost." In mid-November, Japanese diplomatic sources revealed that [plans](#) in 2016 for a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea in response to Chinese pressure on the Diaoyu/Senkakus was called off because then-Prime Minister Abe feared it would jeopardize a visit by Xi that he had been hoping for.

Suga and Xi held their first telephone call on Sept. 25, with no mention of Xi's long-postponed state visit to Japan. *Xinhua* [reported](#) that Xi told Suga he is ready to join hands with him to promote new development in the two countries' relationship and that China supported Japan in hosting the Olympic games. Tellingly, the call took place only after Suga had spoken with President Trump and, separately, with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Suga and Modi [agreed](#) to elevate their special

strategic and global partnership and stepped up cooperation in security and economic efforts in support of a "free and open Indo-Pacific," with the US and Australia, code language for opposition to Chinese assertiveness in the area. *Nikkei* [editorialized](#) that Suga first seek the understanding of the Japanese people before trying to improve relations with China. Japanese concerns over such issues as the PRC's encroachments in the East China and South China seas and its repressive actions in Xinjiang and Hong Kong must, said the paper, be frankly conveyed to China.

As September ended, a *Nikkei* correspondent [interpreted](#) *Renmin Ribao's* prominent coverage of Xi's phone call with Angolan President Joao Lourenco vis-à-vis *RMRB's* treatment of his call with Suga as a message to Japan that it will not receive preferential treatment from the PRC. Reciprocally, he noted, Xi was number seven on Suga's call list. The correspondent also took note of a video that showed a kindergarten-aged girl wearing a military uniform shooting Japanese army soldiers with a toy gun. The video ended with the girl, having disposed of the Japanese soldiers, triumphantly bearing the Chinese flag and being saluted by dozens of other children as martial music played in the background.

Speaking at a meeting of the Quad with Australia, India, and the US the following week, Suga [indicated](#) that he would follow Abe's strong commitment to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) to counter China's growing assertiveness. The Chinese government [announced](#) the creation of a 3D museum including archives and maps that reiterates Beijing claim to the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, with the Japanese government immediately [lodging](#) a protest through diplomatic channels.

A Pew poll in October [showed](#) a rise in unfavorable views of China in 14 countries including Japan, where 52% of respondents said their views were "very unfavorable" and 34% "somewhat unfavorable," 1 percentage point higher than last year. Other countries' views were also unfavorable, with those of nine states reaching their highest points since polling began a decade ago.

A *Global Times* opinion piece [described](#) the new generation of Japanese politicians as focused on cooperation with the US, Europe, and the Indo-

Pacific strategy, with containment a core concern. China must be vigilant on where they will take Japan's future policies, it argued. Suga [visited](#) Vietnam, which currently chairs the 10-member ASEAN, and Indonesia, ASEAN's largest economy, to discuss ways to enhance security ties while not explicitly asking that they push back against China. During his visit to Hanoi, Suga, though never mentioning China by name, [said](#) that Japan would cooperate with ASEAN nations to establish the rule of law in waters in the region. He and Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc reached an agreement in principle on defining conditions for Japanese defense equipment and national security technology to be exported to Vietnam.

In Indonesia, Suga [emphasized](#) Japan's commitment to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, also endorsing the Jakarta-initiated ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Suga and Prime Minister Joko Widodo will work toward holding a second "two-plus-two" foreign and defense ministerial talks, Indonesia being the only ASEAN member to have such a channel. The two prime ministers also agreed to achieve a defense equipment and technology transfer agreement. As in Suga's trip to Hanoi, the impetus for this, Chinese expansionism, was not mentioned. *Xinhua* described Suga's visits to Vietnam and Indonesia as an [attempt](#) to bring ASEAN into the Indo-Pacific framework being pushed by the US and Japan.

*Yomiuri* [editorialized](#) that, in light of large-scale acquisitions in Hokkaido and other areas in Japan by Chinese and Chinese-related companies, the government should move quickly on legislation to monitor the sale of land around SDF bases and on remote border islands. The government should also consider identifying vital plots of land and directly buying them up, as well as encouraging repopulation of remote border islands to discourage illegal entry from abroad.

US information security company Crowdstrike [revealed](#) in October that Japanese research institutions developing coronavirus vaccines have been hit by cyberattacks, apparently from China. In November, Mitsubishi Electric, which plays a major role in supporting Japan's national security and infrastructure, was again the [target](#) of a sophisticated cyberattack. After last year's attack, likely orchestrated by a Chinese group, Mitsubishi implemented new cybersecurity measures.

Osaka police in October [announced](#) the arrest of a former employee of a major chemical firm for disclosing information to China on the manufacturing process of conductive particles used in smartphone touch panels. At the beginning of the next month, Tokyo's Metropolitan Police Department announced that it will [separate](#) its China and North Korea operations in what seems a belated response to China's 2017 requirement for its citizens to cooperate with the government's espionage activities and repeated intrusions off the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands. Japanese police have repeatedly uncovered leaks of data believed to have been perpetrated by China-based hackers and others.

*Global Times* in October [responded](#) favorably to Suga's first policy speech to the Diet since his inauguration, interpreting his statement in support of a stable China-Japan relationship as indicative of a "mild" attitude. However, rhetoric and moves conducive to positive developments do not represent the whole picture of the Suga administration's China policy.

For instance, in November, *Jiefang Junbao*, China's leading military newspaper, [cautioned](#) Japan against allowing relations to deteriorate again due to "external factors." Taking note of President-elect Biden's commitment to applying Article 5 of the Japan-US Security Treaty to the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, Biden's interference in the disputed islands, and "other issues," *JFJB* predicted that China-Japan ties "will probably fall into a dilemma again."

*Nikkei* reported that [repeated](#) Chinese incursions into the Diaoyu/Senkaku area was the key topic of the 20-minute November meeting between Suga and visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Wang replied that the islands should not stand in the way of advancing bilateral relations and that the two countries should work together on economic recovery and the pandemic. Suga raised concerns about the situation in Hong Kong and asked China to end import restrictions on Japanese food, including beef. The two sides affirmed cooperation on the Summer Olympic and Paralympic games in Tokyo and the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. They did not discuss a new date for Xi Jinping's often-postponed state visit to Japan.



Figure 2 Wang Yi meets Japanese Prime Minister Suga.  
Photo: Nikkei

Wang's late November discussion with Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu [resulted](#) in an agreement to establish a fast-lane travel corridor for essential personal exchanges by the end of November to facilitate the resumption of business activities. According to *China Daily*, they also discussed establishing a consultation mechanism on climate change policies, and opening a direct telephone line under the air and maritime contact mechanism to manage risks and enhance mutual trust.

*Asahi*, [noting](#) that Wang's hardline stance on the Senkakus and other issues angered LDP lawmakers and that there is little enthusiasm for an early visit to Japan by Xi, predicted that it will not take place until 2022, perhaps on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the normalization of China-Japan diplomatic relations. The invitation was originally extended in June 2019.

Chinese government has increased the trend of Japanese scientists taking jobs in China due to higher salaries and better research opportunities. This has aroused fears of a technology outflow, as well as a brain drain.

In mid-December, in his first [press conference](#) since being appointed ambassador to Beijing, Tarumi Hideo, despite being a member of the "China School" of the Japanese foreign ministry and having ties to notably pro-China LDP secretary-general Nikai Yoshihide, called China's stance on the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands "completely unacceptable." Tarumi also expressed doubt on China's suitability to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) since the PRC did not meet the criteria of high levels of market access and rules and "it would be out of the question to bend the rules and insert exceptions." On the matter of Xi's postponed state visit to Tokyo, the ambassador said the two sides were not at the stage of discussing

concrete details and "looked forward to building relations that are fair, stable, and constructive."

*China Daily*, [noting](#) that the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention has been working with Japan's National Institute of Infectious Diseases, in mid-December suggested that collaboration be expanded to prevent future outbreaks and emerging infectious diseases.

## Economics

The economies of both countries rebounded well from the coronavirus. Japan [reported](#) a 22.9% expansion in Q3, after a 29.2% contraction in Q2, and China's economy grew by 4.9% year-on-year in Q3. Japan is now officially out of recession and, on the last trading day of 2020, the Nikkei 225 index [hit](#) a 30-year high. The PRC will be the world's only major economy to [grow](#) this year, albeit by a modest 2%.

There was also renewed friction over Chinese encroachment on Japanese fishing areas. According to a *Yomiuri* [report](#), the Japanese government has asked Beijing to suspend its illegal operations on Chinese fishing vessels in and around the Yamato Bank area, which is part of Japan's EEZ. As of Nov. 2, the Japanese Coast Guard had issued warnings to 102 such boats, depleting aquatic resources and preventing Japanese fishing boats from entering the area. Reports that Japanese casual wear retailer Uniqlo now has more directly managed shops in China, 767, than in Japan, 764 (though its franchise stores are more numerous in the home country) is evidence of the linkage of the two economies. Uniqlo enjoys a more upscale brand image in China than in Japan, meaning that its consumers buy higher-priced items and hence enhance the chain's profits. Sensitive to the risks inherent in uncertain bilateral relations, Uniqlo does not use its Japanese-language logo in China, although it does elsewhere in the world. Miki House, purveyor of upscale children's apparel, is [targeting](#) affluent customers in Asia as the Japanese birthrate continues to decline, with 80% of new shops that have been opened outside Japan since 2019.

Japan, Australia, and India have [agreed](#) to diversify supply chains away from China, a major trading partner for all three. Japan has already begun supply chain cooperation discussions with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and will seek ways to

combine the two initiatives. An Indian expert interviewed by *Nikkei*, though approving the concept, believes that it will have limited impact.

Taking note of Xi's plans for future development of the PRC's economy, center-left *Asahi editorialized* that China is aiming for self-imposed isolation. Objecting to Beijing's forcing foreign companies operating in China to transfer their technologies and punishing countries by imposing trade restrictions on them, the paper reminded Chinese leaders that their country's affluence depends on the international community's expectations for, and trust in, the openness of China's economy.

Linkages between the two countries continue to expand, however, regardless of the disputes. In mid-November, after years of hesitation, Japan *signed* the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) pact, marking Japan's first free trade agreement with both China and South Korea. Although conceding that the rules are relatively lax, the agreement's supporters expressed hope that the standards could possibly be raised to a higher level later. Tariffs are to be eliminated on 86% of industrial goods exported from Japan to China.

Japanese exports to *China* rose 3.8% in November, weaker than the 10% rise in October, even as exports as a whole declined by 4% from a year earlier. That same month an air freight route was *launched* linking Changsha, in central China, with Osaka. Japan expressed interest in opening a *consulate* in Wuhan, a core transportation hub and key auto production center, where a growing number of its companies have been setting up plants and offices. Japan and China in December signed a memorandum of understanding to *create* one of the world's largest methane production facilities in northern China. The methane will be produced from hydrogen and carbon dioxide emitted from industrial production in a Shaanxi redevelopment zone, reducing greenhouse gas emissions. During this reporting period the major Japanese bookseller Tsutaya *opened* the first two of a planned 100 stores in China, which is experiencing a boom in bookstores.

In other areas, Japan appeared skeptical of Chinese growth or even sought to head it off. Reacting to a Xi Jinping announcement in November that China would consider joining the CPTPP, a *Yomiuri editorial* expressed doubt that

the PRC would submit to its rules and urged member nations to build a consensus to abide by them. In December, meeting at a trilateral forum, Japan and the US *pledged* to provide financial assistance to Vietnam for the construction of LNG-fired power plants as part of a plan to offset Chinese influence. Shortly thereafter, in what *Nikkei* described as an *effort* to offset Africa's China tilt, Foreign Minister Motegi visited Tunisia, Mozambique, South Africa, and Mauritius. The last three are located at the easternmost point of a free and open Indo-Pacific. Motegi emphasized Tokyo's more transparent business environment as making it a more attractive business partner than China.

## Defense

As China announced its newest advances in military capabilities, Japan continued to push the limits of interpretation of Article 5 of its constitution forswearing the use of force except in self-defense in response to an increasingly aggressive China. It has also made efforts to solidify relations with the Quad countries. No satisfactory solution has been found on how to replace the canceled *Aegis Ashore* missile defense system. Various measures are being considered to shore up defense of the remote islands, including repopulation and stationing troops there.

The Japanese government continued to wrestle with the costs and feasibility questions of a replacement for its canceled *Aegis Ashore* system. The Japanese defense industry is *advocating* deploying a missile-defense system on a floating platform that will use the radar and other equipment from the abandoned land-based *Aegis Ashore* project. The floating platform option could be equipped with components of the *Aegis Ashore* system, allowing Japan to avoid the penalties for breaking its contract with the US. However, there are concerns over whether the transplanted system can provide seamless around-the-clock protection against ballistic missiles, as well as weather conditions. Additionally, the burden of maintaining equipment at sea could make it difficult to keep the system operational at all times.

### Examples of floating platform plan being considered by Defense Ministry

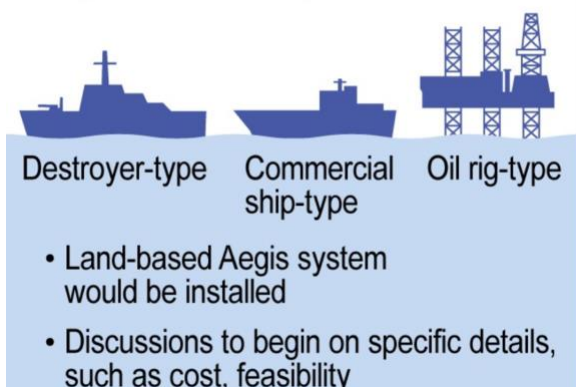


Figure 3 Examples of floating platform plan. Source: Asahi

[According](#) to a private sector study commissioned by the defense ministry, the costs of building two additional *Aegis*-class ships and their equipment will be about ¥500 billion (about \$5 billion), vis-à-vis the ¥400 billion cost of *Aegis Ashore*. An internal Japanese defense ministry document [indicated](#) that the alternative to the *Aegis Ashore* system will cost 1.5 times as much. Compounding the ministry's problems, [staffing](#) the two additional MSDF destroyers needed for the alternative will be challenging due to shortfalls in recruiting personnel. Even if equipped with the *Aegis Ashore* land-based equipment, the ships could not easily be [moved](#) to the East China Sea where China is making increasing inroads. *Renmin Ribao* [cited](#) Japanese opposition parties' objection to building two ships equipped with *Aegis* missile interceptors as being unconstitutional. It also took note of Japanese Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo's announcement that Japan plans to develop standoff missiles that could be launched at targets from outside the range of enemy missiles.

[Speaking](#) at a Washington think tank in September, Kono Taro explained that although as foreign minister he referred to China as a grave concern, as defense minister, he must say that China is a security threat to Japan. In September *Yomiuri* [reported](#) that, due to China's continued provocations in areas surrounding Japan despite the pandemic, Japanese Ground Self-Defense units conducted large scale drills in Nagasaki prefecture and Hokkaido to prepare for the defense of remote islands. A record number of 17,000 personnel participated in the Hokkaido exercises. Also in September, India and Japan [signed](#) a pact for the reciprocal

provision of supplies and services between their armed forces, seen as strengthening Quad—with Australia and the US—efforts to contain China's influence in the Indo-Pacific. [Reviewing](#) the fifth anniversary of the enactment of a set of new security laws in the middle of that month, *Yomiuri* assessed that they had strengthened the US-Japan alliance against China's maritime push and North Korea's nuclear and missile development programs. In November, the paper [noted](#) that the Japanese government's unwillingness to use the word "threat" when discussing China for fear of provoking the PRC has proved ineffective as a deterrent and advised Tokyo to maintain relations with Beijing "while augmenting a military buildup that is firm enough not to give China the smallest opening to pounce upon."

A columnist for the *Japan Times* [argued](#) at the end of September that Japan had spent too long on the defensive, and must frustrate China's strategy of incrementally altering the status quo without incurring substantive costs. If provocative actions such as chasing Japanese fishing vessels inside Japanese territorial waters persist, the Japanese Coast Guard should selectively act against some intruding Chinese ships.

[Concerned](#) about Chinese purchases of water sources and tracts of land -- particularly those on remote islands and near Self-Defense Forces bases-- the Japanese government said in October that it will establish a law to more closely monitor them. At present, it has no authority to collect personal information about owners and changing names on property registration documents is voluntary. The new law will enable the government to investigate for national security reasons. Earmarked in the Japanese government's 2021 budget request is 6.2 billion yen to [promote](#) "workations," combining work with vacation on its remote islands as a way to preserve the nation's territory while also promoting tourism. The appropriation will partially subsidize the creation of satellite offices for companies, Wi-Fi development, the construction of new work space for hotel guests, and charter flight operation.

In October, three MSDF vessels [conducted](#) anti-submarine drills in the South China Sea. The Japanese defense ministry gave no details on the geographical location of the drills, but noted that the three vessels would stop in Vietnam, which contests part of the South China Sea with

the PRC, “to replenish supplies.” *Global Times* commented that China was firmly opposed to such activities and would continue to defend its sovereignty and development interests. Two of the Chinese vessels approached a Japanese fishing boat.

Also in October, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato Katsunobu “[strictly protested](#)” the entry of Chinese Coast Guard ships into disputed East China Sea waters for three days and their refusal to leave despite repeated warnings, with the Chinese foreign ministry replying that “it is China’s inherent right to carry out law enforcement patrol in the waters of the Diaoyu Islands, and the Japanese side should respect this.” Two of the Chinese vessels approached a Japanese fishing boat.

Center-right *Yomiuri Shimbun* [speculated](#) that China’s recent intrusions into the area around the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands was related to Japanese participation in the Quad nations that oppose Chinese expansionism. The article noted that the Standing Committee of China’s National People’s Congress had begun deliberations on the specific duties of the coast guard which could lead to an increase in provocative actions in the disputed waters in cooperation with the Chinese navy.

A commentator for *Japan Times* [characterized](#) China’s recent intrusions into Japanese territorial waters—a record 111 consecutive days from April to August 2020 plus two Chinese coast guard vessels spending a record 57 hours and 39 minutes while engaging a Japanese fishing boat—as both a test for the new prime minister and a continuation of its policy of normalizing its presence in the area. Responding to the intrusion of an unusually large number of Chinese fishing boats into Japan’s Exclusive Economic Zone, the Japanese Fisheries Agency [requested](#) that the Japanese boats avoid those areas, to the annoyance of the impacted fishermen.

In a tightening of relations among Japan, India, the US, and Australia to counter Chinese pressure, Australia [rejoined](#) the annual *Malabar* exercises, having withdrawn in 2007 after pressure from China. In November, as India, US, Japan, and Australia [began](#) these, their largest naval exercises in more than a decade, Beijing complained of a “cold war mentality” and Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato [termed](#) the presence of Chinese ships in the contiguous

zone off the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands for the 283<sup>rd</sup> day this year “an extremely serious matter.”

During a visit to Hanoi, Suga, though never mentioning China by name, [said](#) that Japan would cooperate with ASEAN nations to establish the rule of law in waters in the region. He and Vietnamese counterpart Nguyen Xuan Phuc reached an agreement in principle on defining conditions for Japanese defense equipment and national security technology to be exported to Vietnam. In Indonesia, Suga emphasized Japan’s commitment to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, also endorsing the Jakarta-initiated ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Suga and Prime Minister Joko Widodo agreed to work toward holding a second “two-plus-two” foreign and defense ministerial talks, Indonesia being the only ASEAN member to have such a channel. The two prime ministers also agreed to achieve a defense equipment and technology transfer agreement. As in Suga’s trip to Hanoi, the impetus for this, Chinese expansionism, was not mentioned.

*Global Times*, [reacting](#) to a *Kyodo* dispatch that Japan’s Defense Ministry is mulling the construction of what would be the MSDF’s largest destroyer in response to China’s growing activities in the East China Sea and North Korean missile threats, termed it an excuse to break through the limits of Japan’s peace constitution by hyping threats from neighboring countries.

Also in November, in a move with grave implications for the waters and islands disputed between the PRC and Japan, China’s National People’s Congress [posted](#) draft legislation that empowers the country’s coast guard to investigate and seize foreign ships venturing into territorial waters claimed by China, and to use weapons under certain conditions. Any construction work done without prior Chinese authorization would have those structures removed by the coast guard. On the following day, pointedly accompanying its article with a photograph of a China Maritime Surveillance ship patrolling around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, *Global Times* [accused](#) foreign media of “stirring up trouble” and averring that every country has the right to carry out waters and airspace under its jurisdiction, including the use of force.

In November, the Japanese Coast Guard was revealed to be [test-flying](#) the US-made

*SeaGuardian* drone, which is able to patrol a wider part of the Pacific and allow the coast guard to concentrate more personnel and equipment in waters near the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. *Yomiuri* reported that the Japanese government will [replace](#) over 1,000 of its drones “aimed from a national security standpoint at effectively eliminating Chinese-made units currently in use.” The new drones will be equipped with higher security functions. It was also revealed in November that, as part of its efforts to [deter](#) Chinese activities in and near its remote islands, the uninhabited island of Mageshima will become an SDF base in addition to serving for field carrier landing practice for US carrier-borne aircraft.

During this reporting period it was also revealed that Japan’s Defense Ministry, alarmed at a [report](#) that crucial defense subcontractors were going out of business, commissioned a consultancy to help them apply for tax incentives and subsidies. The goal is to ensure that existing technologies that are crucial parts of the supply chain do not disappear. Unlike China, Japan has no nationally operated weapons factories: all the SDF’s equipment is produced and supplied by private-sector companies.

Japanese Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo and Chinese counterpart Wei Fenghe in mid-December held their first [discussion](#), via telephone, since Kishi took office in September. Kishi expressed concerns about Chinese ships encroaching on waters around the disputed islands. The two also discussed setting up a communications mechanism to prevent the escalation of air and maritime encounters, a topic long under discussion. No hotline has been installed. Elsewhere that same month, Kishi described to a domestic audience the security environment around the southwestern islands as [harsh](#), and said that Japan would develop new standoff weapons: anti-ship missiles that can target warships at greater distances around the chain, including near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. This first major defense policy decision under the Suga administration would expand Japan’s anti-access area denial (A2AD) strategy to stop foreign forces from operating freely in waters close to its home territory.

*Global Times* in December [reprinted](#) Reuters’ report on the 1.1% increase in Japan’s fiscal year 2021 budget while omitting the [phrases](#) “to counter China’s growing military power,”

against potential foes “including neighboring China.” China plans to raise its military spending 6.6% this year, the smallest increase in three decades” and to strike distant land targets “in China, North Korea, and other parts of Asia.” [Reacting](#) to the 1.1% increase, leading Chinese military newspaper *Jiefang Junbao* criticized Japan for “chanting” its defense-only principle while introducing military equipment that would practically refute this principle. This, the paper said, is bound to increase instability factors in the region and even incur a regional arms race.

In response to increasing Chinese incursions, Japan will [assign](#) 22 coast guard ships of 1,000 tons or larger to the East China Sea chain by 2023. Twelve currently patrol the Diaoyu/Senkaku area, while three others are stationed there for other purposes, such as watching for illegal operations by North Korean fishing boats. The conservative *Sankei Shimbun* daily [disclosed](#) that research and development is being conducted on a new type of weapon akin to domestic *Tomahawks*. If deployed on the Nansei Islands, they could reach Pyongyang and Beijing. However, since doing so might cause North Korea and China to attack Japan, *Sankei* opined that such concerns might discourage the project.

*Global Times*, although a frequent critic of what it sees as creeping Japanese militarism, [predicted](#) at the end of the year that China’s third aircraft carrier, carrier-based stealth fighter jets, and a newly developed frigate with integrated propulsion system will be among the new weapons debuting in 2021 and that “there is no doubt that China will continue to develop new, world-class weapons for years to come.”

As the year closed, *Yomiuri*, [citing](#) unnamed sources familiar with China-Russia relations, stated that the two states had agreed to aim missiles at Japan or other US allies in Asia if the United States deployed missiles in those nations. German defense minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, [responding](#) to reports that the frigate *Hamburg* would be dispatched to the Indo-Pacific out of concern for a rising China, confirmed that deployment routes, dates, port visits, and potential participation in military exercises were being discussed, adding that Germany’s engagement in the region is not directed against anything or anyone but rather about working for stability and prosperity in a rules-based order.

## Culture

The annual Japan-China opinion [poll](#) conducted by Japanese nonprofit think tank Genron NPO found that 89.7% of Japanese respondents have an unfavorable or somewhat unfavorable impression of China, up 5 percentage points from last year. More respondents cited China's behavior in the international arena and its military buildup as reasons.

Chinese authorities [canceled](#) the anti-Japanese war-themed drama series *Leiting Zhanjiang* (Lightning General) because of its "excessive entertainment factor." Soldiers of the party's famed 8<sup>th</sup> Route Army were portrayed as sleeping in a luxurious villa and having carefully styled hair.

Prickly Sino-Japanese relations and pandemic notwithstanding, 8<sup>th</sup> century cultural treasures [loaned](#) to a Shanghai museum was returned to the Toshodaiji temple which had lent them, enabling the performance of a rite that the temple had performed annually for eight centuries without fail.

Xi's failure to [visit](#) the Daming Temple during his November visit to Yangzhou was seen as a subtle snub to Japan. The temple, associated with Tang dynasty-era monk Ganjin (Chinese: Jianzhen) is seen as a symbol of historical ties between Japan and China.

## Taiwan

In September China [expressed](#) concern with Suga's appointment of Kishi Nobuo, a known friend of Taiwan, as defense minister, with PRC foreign ministry spokesperson expressing China's hope that "the Japanese side will abide by the "one China" principle and refrain from any form of official exchanges with the Taiwan region." Kishi, who is former prime minister Abe's younger brother and grandson of former hardline prime minister Kishi Nobusuke, chairs a cross-party group of Diet members that seeks to promote exchanges with Taiwan; in 2015, he served as guide for then-opposition leader and now president Tsai Ing-wen during a trip to Japan.

Earlier in 2020, former Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro [attended](#) the funeral of former Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui. He evaded answering questions about Taiwan and Japan developing security cooperation in the face of China's

military intimidation, but said that Prime Minister Suga had called him to express the hope of talking with President Tsai "if there were an opportunity." *Taipei Times* [observed](#) on Sept. 20 that the interpreter did not translate that into Chinese. Nonetheless, both Taiwanese and Japanese officials declared that there were no [plans](#) for a conversation.

In October Taiwan's Legislative Yuan's friendship association for the East Asian region officially [invited](#) former Prime Minister Abe to give a speech to the LY. It noted that Abe had made it possible for former President Lee to address the Diet. The association's president, citing the strong friendship between the two countries, hoped that in the future high-level government officials would be able to visit one another.

Near the end of the year, Japanese press agency *Jiji* [reported](#) that five young Taiwanese members of the Fukushima Zenshin-dan visited the tsunami-nuclear meltdown area of Fukushima, sponsored by the Taiwan Society of Tokyo. The group, which is working to dispel negative rumors about radiation levels in Fukushima, will hold an event in Taipei to report about progress in the area's reconstruction.

In late December, Japanese State Minister of Defense Nakayama Yasuhide [urged](#) US president-elect Biden to "be strong" in supporting Taiwan in the face of an aggressive China and quickly announce a policy on Taiwan so that Japan could prepare its response in accordance with it.

## Conclusions: Implications for the Future

The economies of both China and Japan rebounded well from the pandemic, suggesting a strong start to 2021, with their trade relations with each other an important part of the recovery. These should provide a mitigating effect on enduring political and territorial disputes where no resolution seems likely. Xi's long-awaited state visit to Tokyo will depend on whether the two sides can agree on the text of the communiqué that the Chinese side has made plain is a precondition for the visit.

# CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2020

**Sept. 1, 2020:** Japan, Australia, and India [agree](#) to diversify supply chains away from China, a major trading partner for all three.

**Sept. 3, 2020:** *Global Times* [describes](#) China's commemoration of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the victory of the Chinese people's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression as low-key, which it attributes to improving China-Japan relations.

**Sept. 4, 2020:** *China Daily* [reports](#) on the opening in Heilongjiang of a major exhibition related to the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression that it says presents mainly new evidence of Japan's human experiments and biochemical weapons.

**Sept. 5, 2020:** Disclosing hitherto unknown details of secret negotiations involving a Chinese fishing boat ramming two Japanese Coast Guard vessels a decade ago, *Nikkei* [comments](#) that China's unwillingness to compromise means that "Japan once again faces the question of whether it is ready to tackle big issues regarding its powerful neighbor—and at what cost."

**Sept. 9, 2020:** [Speaking](#) at think tank in Washington, then-Defense Minister Kono Taro explains that although as foreign minister he referred to China as a grave concern, as defense minister, he must say that China is a security threat to Japan.

**Sept. 9, 2020:** India and Japan [sign](#) a pact for reciprocal provision of supplies and services between their armed forces, seen as strengthening Quad—with Australia and the US—efforts to contain China's influence in the Indo-Pacific.

**Sept. 10, 2020:** *Yomiuri* [reports](#) that, due to China's continued provocations in areas surrounding Japan despite the pandemic, Japanese Ground Self-Defense units have been conducting large-scale drills in Nagasaki and Hokkaido prefectures to prepare for the defense on remote islands. A record number of 17,000 personnel participated in the Hokkaido exercises.

**Sept. 13, 2020:** [Debating](#) with contenders for the presidency of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the prime ministership, front-runner Suga Yoshihide vows that, if elected, he would stand his ground with Beijing.

**Sept. 13, 2020:** Chinese specialists on Japan [dismiss](#) Suga and other candidates' remarks as campaign rhetoric, opining that no leader would abandon the benefits achieved during the past few years, especially those relating to the economy and trade.

**Sept. 14, 2020:** *Global Times* [editorializes](#) that the question of whether Suga's attitude will be better is "insignificant," and that China should continue to boost its attractiveness to Japan, weaken Japan's ability to restrict China's development, and gradually suppress Japan's idea of taking an opportunistic line toward China.

**Sept. 16, 2020:** *China Daily* [predicts](#) that Suga will try to further improve relations with China but at the same time take a tough stance in defense and security policies.

**Sept. 17, 2020:** Speaking just two days after Suga's election, one of his major backers, LDP heavyweight and China-friendly Nikai Toshihiro, [voices](#) hope that Xi Jinping's state visit will take place soon and that a fifth political document will establish China-Japan intentions for "co-creation to achieve world peace and prosperity led by Japan and China together."

**Sept. 19, 2020:** [Reviewing](#) the fifth anniversary of the enactment of a set of new security laws, *Yomiuri* assesses that they have strengthened the US-Japan alliance against China's maritime push and North Korea's nuclear and missile development programs.

**Sept. 19, 2020:** China [expresses](#) concern with Suga's appointment of Kishi Nobuo, a friend of Taiwan, as defense minister, with PRC foreign ministry spokesperson expressing China's hope that "the Japanese side will abide by the 'One China' principle and refrain from any form of official exchanges with the Taiwan region."

**Sept. 19, 2020:** Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo [tweets](#) that he visited Yasukuni Shrine after resigning to report his resignation to the souls of the war dead. This was Abe's first physical visit to the shrine since 2013.

**Sept. 19, 2020:** *Global Times* [reports](#) that Abe's visit to Yasukuni was "blasted" on social media, which it says shows that rightwing politicians have yet to reflect on their country's war crimes even as they try to be friendly with China, and predicts that Abe's visit will set a bad example for Suga.

**Sept. 19, 2020:** Former Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro [attends](#) a memorial service for former Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui. He evades questions about Taiwan and Japan developing security cooperation in the face of China's military intimidation, but says that Suga had called him to express hope of talking with President Tsai Ing-wen "if there were an opportunity." Both sides declare that there are no [plans](#) for such a conversation.

**Sept. 23, 2020:** The Japanese defense industry [advocates](#) deploying a missile-defense system on a floating platform that will use the radar and other equipment from the abandoned land-based Aegis Ashore project.

**Sept. 25, 2020:** Suga and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi [agree](#) to elevate their special strategic and global partnership and step up cooperation in security and economic efforts in support of a "free and open Indo-Pacific," with the US and Australia, code language for opposition to Chinese assertiveness in the area.

**Sept. 25, 2020:** Xinhua [reports](#) that, in a telephone call with Suga, Xi Jinping said that China stands ready to work with Suga's government to properly handle key sensitive issues and that China supports Japan in hosting a successful Olympic games next year.

**Sept. 28, 2020:** *Nikkei's* Beijing correspondent [interprets](#) *Renmin Ribao's* prominent coverage of Xi's phone call with Angolan President Joao Lourenco vis-à-vis its treatment of his call with Suga as a message to Japan that it will not receive preferential treatment from the PRC. Xi was number seven on Suga's call list.

**Sept. 30, 2020:** Columnist for the *Japan Times* [argued](#) that Japan had spent too long on the defensive, and must frustrate China's strategy of incrementally altering the status quo without incurring substantive costs.

**Sept. 30, 2020:** *Nikkei* [editorializes](#) that Suga obtain the understanding of the Japanese people before trying to improve relations with China.

**Oct. 3, 2020:** Chinese government [announces](#) the creation of a 3-D museum including archives and maps that reiterate Beijing's claim to the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands

**Oct. 6, 2020:** Japan's government [lodges](#) a diplomatic protest against China's new 3-D museum.

**Oct. 6, 2020:** Speaking at a meeting of the Quad with Australia, India, and the US, Suga [indicates](#) that he will follow Abe's strong commitment to a Free and Open Pacific (FOIP) to counter China's growing assertiveness.

**Oct. 6, 2020:** Pew poll [shows](#) a rise in unfavorable views of China in 14 countries, including Japan, where 52% said their views were "very unfavorable" and 34% "somewhat unfavorable."

**Oct. 9, 2020:** Concerned about Chinese purchases of water sources and tracts of land (particularly those on remote islands and near Self-Defense Force bases), Japan's government [reportedly](#) will establish a law to more closely monitor them.

**Oct. 9, 2020:** Earmarked in the Japanese government's 2021 budget request is 6.2 billion yen (\$60 million) to [promote](#) "workations," combining work with vacation, on remote islands as a way to preserve the nation's territory while also promoting tourism.

**Oct. 10, 2020:** Three MSDF vessels [conduct](#) anti-submarine drills in the South China Sea. Japan's Defense Ministry gives no details on the geographical location of the drills, but notes that the three vessels will stop in Vietnam, which contests part of the South China Sea with the PRC, "to replenish supplies."

**Oct. 12, 2020:** A *Global Times* opinion piece [describes](#) the new generation of Japanese politicians as focused on cooperation with the US, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific strategy, with containment a core concern. China must be vigilant on where they will take Japan's future policies.

**Oct. 13, 2020:** Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato Katsunobu "[strictly protests](#)" the entry of Chinese Coast Guard ships into disputed East China Sea waters for three days and their refusal to leave despite repeated warnings.

**Oct. 14, 2020:** Taiwan's Legislative Yuan's Friendship Association for the East Asian region officially [invites](#) Abe to give a speech to the LY next year.

**Oct. 14, 2020:** Miki House, purveyor of upscale children's apparel, is [targeting](#) affluent customers in China and elsewhere in Asia as the Japanese birthrate declined, with 80% of its new shops having opened outside Japan since 2019.

**Oct. 14, 2020:** Japan [launches](#) the first of a new class of diesel-electric submarines, the *Taigei* (Big Whale), in a response to China's military modernization and increasing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific.

**Oct. 14, 2020:** Osaka police [announce](#) arrest of a former worker at a major Japanese chemical firm suspected of disclosing information to China on the manufacturing process of conductive particles which are used in smartphone touch panels.

**Oct. 15, 2020:** *Yomiuri Shimbun* [speculates](#) that China's recent intrusions into the area around the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands was related to Japanese participation in the Quad, which opposes Chinese expansionism. The article notes that the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress has begun deliberations on the specific duties of the coast guard that could lead to an increase in provocative actions in the disputed waters in cooperation with the Chinese navy.

**Oct. 15, 2020:** A commentator for the *Japan Times* [characterizes](#) China's recent intrusions into Japanese territorial waters as a test for Suga and a continuation of its policy of normalizing its presence in the area.

**Oct. 16, 2020:** In a modest effort to enhance control over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, Japan's environment ministry reportedly will [conduct](#) a survey of the islands' endangered species and overall ecology, using satellite imagery to avoid an actual physical presence there.

**Oct. 17, 2020:** *Global Times* [protests](#) the ritual offering, referring to it as a "potted plant," that Suga sent for the Yasukuni Shrine's autumn festival.

**Oct. 18, 2020:** *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) that, in light of large-scale acquisitions in Hokkaido and other areas in Japan by Chinese and Chinese-related companies, the government should move quickly on legislation to monitor the sale of land around SDF bases and on remote border islands.

**Oct. 19, 2020:** US information security company CrowdStrike [reveals](#) that some Japanese research institutions developing coronavirus vaccines have been hit by cyberattacks, apparently from China.

**Oct. 20, 2020:** Suga, in Indonesia, [emphasizes](#) Japan's commitment to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, also endorsing the Jakarta-initiated ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Suga and Prime Minister Joko Widodo will work toward holding a second "two-plus-two" round of foreign and defense ministerial talks, Indonesia being the only ASEAN member with such a channel.

**Oct. 21, 2020:** Responding to the intrusion of an unusually large number of Chinese fishing boats into Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone, the Japanese Fisheries Agency [requests](#) that Japanese boats avoid those areas, to the annoyance of the impacted fishermen.

**Oct. 22, 2020:** *Xinhua* describes Suga's visits to Vietnam and Indonesia as an [attempt](#) to bring ASEAN into the Indo-Pacific framework being pushed by the US and Japan.

**Oct. 27, 2020:** *Global Times* [responds](#) favorably to Suga's first policy speech to the Diet since his inauguration interpreting his statement that a stable China-Japan relationship as indicative of a "mild" attitude, adding that recent rhetoric and moves that are not conducive to positive developments do not represent the whole picture of the Suga administration's China policy.

**Nov. 2, 2020:** Sources say Tokyo's Metropolitan Police Department will [separate](#) its China and North Korea operations in what seems a belated response to China's 2017 requirement for its citizens to cooperate with the government's espionage activities and repeated intrusions off the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands.

**Nov. 2, 2020:** Taking note of Xi's plans for future development of the PRC's economy, the *Asahi Shimbun* [editorializes](#) concern that China is aiming for a self-imposed isolation.

**Nov. 2, 2020:** *Global Times* [reacts](#) to a *Kyodo* dispatch that Japan's Defense Ministry is mulling construction of what would be the MSDF's largest destroyer by calling it an excuse to break through the limits of Japan's peace constitution by hyping threats from neighboring countries.

**Nov. 3, 2020:** As India, US, Japan, and Australia [begin](#) their largest naval exercises in more than a decade, Beijing complains of a "cold war mentality."

**Nov. 3, 2020:** Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato Katsunobu [terms](#) the presence of Chinese ships in the contiguous zone off the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands for the 283<sup>rd</sup> day this year as "an extremely serious matter."

**Nov. 4, 2020:** *Yomiuri* [reports](#) that the Japanese government has asked Beijing to suspend the illegal operations of Chinese fishing boats in and around the Yamato Bank area, which is part of Japan's EEZ.

**Nov. 4, 2020:** China's National People's Congress [posts](#) draft legislation that empowers the coast guard to investigate and seize foreign ships venturing into territorial waters claimed by China, and to use weapons under certain conditions.

**Nov. 5, 2020:** *Global Times* [accuses](#) foreign media of "stirring up trouble" and avers that every country has the right to carry out activities in waters and airspace under its jurisdiction, including the use of force, pointedly accompanying its article with a photograph of a China Maritime Surveillance ship patrolling the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

**Nov. 10, 2020:** Japan's Coast Guard is [test-flying](#) the US-made *SeaGuardian* drone, able to patrol a wider part of the Pacific and allow the coast guard to concentrate personnel and equipment in waters near the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.

**Nov. 14, 2020:** An internal Japanese defense ministry document [indicates](#) that the alternative to the *Aegis Ashore* system that was scrapped a few months ago will cost 1.5 times as much.

**Nov. 15, 2020:** Japan [signs](#) the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) pact, marking Japan's first free trade agreement with both China and South Korea.

**Nov. 17, 2020:** *Yomiuri* [notes](#) that the Japanese government's unwillingness to use the word "threat" when discussing China for fear of provoking the PRC has proved ineffective as a deterrent and advises augment "a military buildup that is firm enough not to give China the smallest opening to pounce upon."

**Nov. 17, 2020:** Taking note of President-elect Biden's commitment to applying Article 5 of the Japan-US Security Treaty to the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, China's leading military newspaper [cautions](#) Japan against allowing relations to deteriorate again due to "external factors."

**Nov. 17, 2020:** Annual Japan-China opinion [poll](#) conducted by Japanese nonprofit think tank Genron NPO finds that 89.7% of Japanese respondents have an unfavorable or somewhat unfavorable impression of China.

**Nov. 17, 2020:** A new air freight route is [launched](#) linking Changsha, in central China, with Osaka.

**Nov. 18, 2020:** 8<sup>th</sup> century cultural treasures [loaned](#) to a Shanghai museum are returned to Toshodaiji temple which had lent them, enabling performance of a rite that the temple has performed annually for eight centuries without fail.

**Nov. 19, 2020:** Chinese authorities [cancel](#) the anti-Japanese war-themed drama series *Leiting Zhanjiang* (Lightning General) because of its “excessive entertainment factor.”

**Nov. 19, 2020:** As part of efforts to deter Chinese activities in and near its remote islands, the uninhabited island of Mageshima is to [become](#) an SDF base in addition to serving for field carrier landing practice for US carrier-borne aircraft.

**Nov. 20, 2020:** Mitsubishi Electric, which plays a major role in supporting Japan’s national security and infrastructure, is again [targeted](#) in a sophisticated cyberattack.

**Nov. 21, 2020:** Japanese diplomatic sources reveal that 2016 [plans](#) for a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea in response to Chinese pressure on the Diaoyu/Senkaku were called off because Abe feared it would jeopardize a visit by Xi.

**Nov. 23, 2020:** According to a private sector study commissioned by the defense ministry, the costs of building two additional *Aegis* class ships and their equipment will [amount](#) to about ¥500 billion, vis-à-vis the ¥400 billion cost of *Aegis Ashore*.

**Nov. 25, 2020:** *Nikkei* reports that [repeated](#) Chinese incursions into the Diaoyu/Senkaku area was the key topic of the 20-minute meeting between Suga and visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Wang replies that the islands should not stand in the way of advancing bilateral relations and that the two countries should work together on economic recovery and the pandemic.

**Nov. 25, 2020:** Wang’s discussions with Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu [result](#) in agreement to establish a fast-lane travel corridor for essential personal exchanges by the end of November so as to facilitate the resumption of business activities.

**Nov. 27, 2020:** *Asahi* [predicts](#) Xi’s long-awaited visit to Japan will not take place until 2022, perhaps on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the normalization of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations.

**Nov. 28, 2020:** *Nikkei* [observes](#) that active recruitment by the Chinese government has increased the trend of Japanese scientists taking jobs in China due to higher salaries and better research opportunities.

**Nov. 30, 2020:** According to *Yomiuri*, the Japanese government will [replace](#) over 1,000 of its drones “aimed from a national security standpoint at effectively eliminating Chinese-made units currently in use

**Dec. 1, 2020:** Jiji [reports](#) that five young Taiwanese members of the Fukushima Zenshinden visited the tsunami-nuclear meltdown area of Fukushima, sponsored by the Taiwan Society of Tokyo.

**Dec. 1, 2020:** Reacting to Xi’s announcement that China would consider joining the CPTPP, a *Yomiuri* [editorial](#) expresses doubt that the PRC will submit to its rules and urges member nations to build a consensus to abide by them.

**Dec. 4, 2020:** Meeting at a trilateral forum, Japan and the US [pledge](#) to provide financial assistance to Vietnam for the construction of LNG-fired power plants as part of a plan to offset Chinese influence.

**Dec. 7, 2020:** In what *Nikkei* describes as an [effort](#) to offset Africa’s China tilt, FM Motegi leaves to visit Tunisia, Mozambique, South Africa, and Mauritius, where he emphasizes Tokyo’s more transparent business environment.

**Dec. 9, 2020:** *Renmin Ribao* [cites](#) Japanese opposition parties’ objection to building two ships equipped with *Aegis* missile interceptors as unconstitutional.

**Dec. 12, 2020:** In his first press conference since being appointed ambassador to Beijing, Tarumi Hideo, despite being a member of the “China School” of the Japanese foreign ministry and ties to pro-China LDP secretary-general Nikai, [calls](#) China’s stance on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands “completely unacceptable.”

**Dec. 13, 2020:** Chen Xi, head of the CCP’s Organization Department and a Politburo member [speaks](#) at the seventh national memorial day for the victims of the Nanjing Massacre slaughtered by Japanese troops in 1937.

**Dec. 13, 2020:** Japanese defense ministry [commissions](#) a consultancy to help crucial defense subcontractors in danger of going out of business apply for tax incentives and subsidies.

**Dec. 14, 2020:** Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo and Chinese counterpart Wei Fenghe [take part](#) in their first discussion, via telephone, since Kishi took office in September.

**Dec. 14, 2020:** *China Daily*, [noting](#) that the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention has been working with Japan’s National Institute of Infectious Diseases, suggests that collaboration be expanded to prevent future outbreaks and emerging infectious diseases.

**Dec. 16, 2020:** Japanese exports to [China](#) rose 3.8% in November, weaker than the 10% rise in October, even as Japan’s exports as a whole declined by 4% from a year earlier.

**Dec. 16, 2020:** Xi’s failure to [visit](#) the Daming Temple during his November visit to Yangzhou is seen as a snub to Japan.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** Kishi [says](#) Japan will develop new standoff weapons and anti-ship missiles that can target warships at greater distances around the chain of southwestern Okinawa island chain, including near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

**Dec. 20, 2020:** Japan and China [sign](#) a memorandum of understanding to create one of the world’s largest methane production facilities in northern China.

**Dec. 21, 2020:** *Global Times* [reprints](#) *Reuters*’ report on the 1.1% increase in Japan’s fiscal year 2021 defense budget while omitting the *Reuters*’ [phrases](#) “to counter China’s growing military power,” against potential foes “including neighboring China.”

**Dec. 22, 2020:** [Reacting](#) to Japan’s 1.1% increase in the FY 2021 defense budget, leading Chinese military newspaper *Jiefang Junbao* criticizes Japan for “chanting” its defense only principle while introducing military equipment that would empty the principle.

**Dec. 23, 2020:** In response to increasing Chinese incursions, Japan reportedly will [assign](#) 22 coast guard ships of 1,000 tons or more to the East China Sea chain by 2023.

**Dec. 25, 2020:** Japanese bookseller Tsutaya [opened](#) the second of a planned 100 stores in China, which is experiencing a boom in bookstores.

**Dec. 27, 2020:** State Minister of Defense Nakayama Yasuhide [urges](#) president-elect Biden to “be strong” in supporting Taiwan in the face of an aggressive China and quickly announce a policy on Taiwan so that Japan could prepare its response in accordance with it.

**Dec. 29, 2020:** *Sankei Shimbun* [discloses](#) that research and development is being conducted on a new type of weapon akin to domestic *Tomahawks*. If deployed on the Nansei Islands, they could reach Pyongyang and Beijing.

**Dec. 30, 2020:** *Global Times* [predicts](#) that China’s third aircraft carrier, carrier-based stealth fighter jets, and a newly developed frigate with integrated propulsion system will be among the new weapons debuting in 2021 and that “there is no doubt that China will continue to develop new, world-class weapons for years to come.”

**Dec. 30, 2020:** *Yomiuri*, [citing](#) unnamed sources familiar with China-Russia relations, states that the two states have agreed to aim missiles at Japan or other US allies in Asia if the US deployed missiles in those nations.

**Dec. 31, 2020:** Japanese newspapers comment approvingly in [response](#) to reports that the frigate *Hamburg* will be dispatched to the Indo-Pacific out of concern for a rising China.

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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**

## A NEW LEADER IN JAPAN AND UNCERTAIN FUTURE SCENARIOS

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The inauguration of Suga Yoshihide as Japan's prime minister in September 2020 did not lead to a breakthrough in the stalled Japan-South Korea relationship. However, it provided an opportunity for South Korea to signal that President Moon Jae-in would be interested in a summit meeting with Suga. In the final months of 2020, it became apparent that both governments in Seoul and Tokyo felt the need to improve bilateral ties, but had not yet found a way to make that happen.

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South Korea reached out to Japan, perhaps with eyes on the planned Tokyo Olympics in 2021, to use the occasion as a platform for a diplomatic breakthrough between North Korea and the international community, with Japan on board. While welcoming Seoul's gesture of goodwill, the Suga administration adhered to the position that South Korea should first take a step toward a solution for forced labor compensation issues. Suga's decision not to attend a Beijing-Seoul-Tokyo trilateral meeting scheduled for December, which South Korea was to host, came in the context that Japan's new prime minister could not visit Seoul without assurance that Japanese companies' assets would not be liquidated. This decision seemed to confirm the speculation of those who believe that Suga's Korea policies would not differ much from those of his predecessor, Abe Shinzo. But amid the growing uncertainties of domestic political challenges and the COVID-19 crisis, it remains to be seen how things will evolve in 2021, especially given the Biden administration's emphasis on a trilateral partnership with Tokyo and Seoul, and North Korea's possible participation in the Tokyo Olympics—assuming the event takes place.

### **A Glass Half Empty or Half Full? Seoul-Tokyo Diplomatic Activities**

In the conduct of foreign relations, leadership changes and summit meetings that ensue can create new opportunities to “reset” difficult relations. Prior to the Park Geun-hye and Abe Shinzo administrations, Japan-South Korea relations repeated this pattern during much of the 2000s. The inauguration of a new leader in either country tended to bring Seoul and Tokyo together to promise a future-oriented relationship, only for territorial and historical flareups to lead them to express regret and lodge diplomatic protests against the other. Stalled periods of “cold politics” typically followed, with high-profile meetings and bilateral negotiations cancelled or suspended. In current circumstances, the change in political leadership will not resolve outstanding bilateral problems, but could provide momentum for fresh engagement and dialogue amid exchanges of goodwill, which could culminate in a first summit.

The inauguration of Suga as Japan's new prime minister in September led to a “glass half empty or half full” situation; that is, while the Moon and Suga administrations sent signals to each

other that they were interested in improving bilateral ties, in the final months of 2020 they stopped short of any tangible steps toward the resolution of forced labor compensation and export restrictions issues. At the start of January 2021, there is no clear indication of when their first summit will be held. Optimists would consider how, compared to former Prime Minister Abe, Japan's pragmatic new prime minister might try to cooperate with South Korea, especially as both Seoul and Tokyo have incentives to avoid the further deterioration of relations and work closely for the success of the Tokyo Olympics. The incoming Biden administration's likely emphasis on better relations between two of its key Asian allies is another consideration. Pessimists point to Suga's decision not to attend a trilateral China-Japan-South Korea summit Seoul was to host in December over the forced labor compensation issue as an early sign that bilateral relations will likely remain frosty, and not very different from those under Abe.

From the day that the Japanese Diet elected Suga as prime minister, there were signs suggesting the glass is half full. Moon reached out to Suga with [a letter](#) that stated he was “ready to sit down for a summit anytime with his counterpart in Japan, Korea's closest friend culturally and geographically, and a neighbor that shares fundamental values and strategic interests.” The US State Department welcomed Seoul's move. Suga conveyed his appreciation and his hope that the two countries would develop forward-looking relations as “important neighbors.” About a week later, a telephone conversation between Suga and Moon marked the first time that the leaders of the two countries had spoken since December 2019. During [their call](#), Moon expressed his desire to move relations forward and find a solution to forced labor compensation issues. Suga said bilateral relations could not remain in their current state, urging South Korea to take appropriate action. They agreed to cooperate on COVID-19 responses, such as easing entry restrictions on essential travelers, like businessmen, between the two countries.



*Figure 1 South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga spoke by phone on September 24, 2020, marking the first direct talks between leaders of the two countries since December 2019. Photo: Reuters/Masayuki Terazawa via Nikkei Asia*

After Moon and Suga showed their willingness to seek ways of mending relations, reciprocal diplomatic activities followed. On Oct. 18, South Korea's ruling Democratic Party chairman and potential presidential candidate Lee Nak-yeon met Japan's former chief Cabinet secretary and the current head of the Japan-Korea Parliamentary Group Kawamura Takeo. On Oct. 29, Takizaki Shigeki, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' director-general of the Asian and Oceanic Affairs Bureau, visited Seoul on a three-day visit and met his counterpart Kim Jung-han, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' director-general for Asian and Pacific affairs. On the forced labor compensation issue, the South Korea government [urged](#) the Japanese government to show a more sincere attitude toward resolution of the problem, while Japan [urged](#) South Korea to offer a resolution that was "acceptable to the Japanese side." Japan reiterated that a liquidation of Japanese companies' assets could "lead to an extremely grave situation and must be avoided at all costs." South Korea requested that Tokyo ease its restrictions on the exports of key industrial materials.

Seoul's eagerness to mend relations was further evidenced by a visit to Tokyo by Park Ji-won, South Korea's director of the National Intelligence Service, during which he met with Suga for about a half an hour on Nov. 10. Park also met Nikai Toshihiro, the Liberal Democratic Party secretary general, Shigeru Kitamura, head of the National Security Secretariat of Japan, and Takizawa Hiroaki, director of Japan's Cabinet Intelligence. A bipartisan group of South Korean lawmakers of the Korea-Japan Parliamentarians' Union then made a three-day visit to Japan, and met Suga on Nov. 13, together with their Japanese

counterparts, the Japan-Korea Parliamentarians' Union. On the following day, Moon [draw media attention](#) in South Korea and Japan when he singled out and welcomed Suga during greetings at the virtual East Asia Summit.

### **Suga's Policies and the Likely Future of Bilateral Ties**

Japan's approach to South Korea was more reserved. While it is too early to tell if Suga's Korea policies will remain more or less the same as Abe's, sentiment within Japan did not seem optimistic about the possibility that South Korea would change course on thorny bilateral issues. According to [Kyodo News](#) in late September 2020, the Suga administration clarified its position that a summit meeting with South Korea was tied to the forced labor compensation issue, and that it would be "impossible" for Suga to visit Seoul without "proper measures" from the Moon administration toward its resolution. In response, South Korea's Blue House [commented](#) that "There is not much room for a solution if Japan puts forward such a condition." Later that month, during his first address to the Diet as prime minister, Suga [stated](#) that the Japanese government would "strongly urge an appropriate response [from South Korea] in line with Japan's consistent position." In November, during a meeting with Kim Jin-pyo and other South Korean officials, Suga was reported to have asked for the same message to be relayed to Moon—that South Korea should first take action to resolve the issue. A Seoul-Tokyo-Beijing trilateral meeting that South Korea had hoped to host in December might have brought about a summit between Suga and Moon, but did not happen.

When Suga became leader of Japan, experts and observers in South Korea were divided over the prospects for Tokyo's bilateral ties with South Korea. Suga's decision not to visit Seoul for the Beijing-Seoul-Tokyo trilateral meeting led South Korea's [JoongAng Ilbo](#) to report that "Suga adopts Abe's hardline toward South Korea." Another South Korea daily, [Hankyoreh](#), described Suga's responses to Moon's message calling for improved relations as "noncommittal" and reported that Suga's impression of South Korea was shaped by the Moon administration's reversal of the 2015 agreement designed to resolve the issue of the Korean "comfort women."

There are at least three considerations that might explain South Korea's diplomatic efforts in the final months of 2020 and the desire to repair relations with Japan. First, South Korea needs to ease Japan's export restrictions on three key industrial materials—photoresists, hydrogen fluoride, and fluorinated polyimide—which are critical for South Korea's technological industries. Second, Seoul's successful management of its alliance with the United States is at least indirectly related to its working relationship with Tokyo. Allies have expectations toward their alliance partners. The Biden administration will likely expect South Korea to tighten the Seoul-Tokyo-Washington trilateral relationship, by managing its bilateral ties with Tokyo. Third, in light of Moon's experience with the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, it appears that South Korean policymakers consider the Tokyo Olympics in the context of aiding their North Korea policy, by leveraging the Olympics as a venue where the international community, including Japan, could bring North Korea into dialogue and possible negotiations. Rep. Kim Jin-pyo of the ruling Democratic Party, leader of the South Korean delegation of the Korea-Japan Parliamentarians' Union, [said](#) that he "looks forward to the Tokyo Olympics next year [2021] to be a major occasion to improve inter-Korean and South Korea-Japan relations, and relations in Northeast Asia. We plan to actively support the Tokyo Olympics becoming an Olympics of peace." When asked by Constitutional Democratic Party lawmaker Haku Shinkun at the House of Councillors Committee on the Budget in Japan, Suga [said](#) the Tokyo Olympics would be "a very good opportunity" for leaders to come together to have talks on North Korean nuclear issues. Haku is [reported](#) to have proposed that Japan take the initiative and invite Moon and other leaders to the Olympics, using the occasion as an opportunity to resume talks on the North Korean nuclear issue.

Given the [stated](#) position of Suga that his mission is to "inherit and facilitate policies promoted by Prime Minister Abe," it is not far-fetched to expect that without major concessions from the Moon administration, Tokyo-Seoul relations would continue to experience "[cold economics, cold politics](#)," if not a downward spiral. On the question of forced labor compensation, the Japanese government's position appears to be firmly set: there will be no improvement of relations with Seoul unless South Korea provides measures

that stop the liquidation of Japanese companies' assets. The Abe administration warned of countermeasures if that were to take place.

### **Symbolic Politics—'Comfort Women' Statue in Berlin and the Yasukuni Shrine**

A statue of a girl symbolizing Korean victims of wartime sexual slavery—the so-called "comfort women" statue, also known as the "Statue of Peace"—in Berlin became the source of a diplomatic spat involving Germany as well as Japan and South Korea. In September, the statue was installed near the Japanese Embassy in Berlin by Korea Verband, a civic group of South Koreans based in Berlin, after receiving permission from the Mitte district office to display it for one year. Berlin is not the first global city outside South Korea where the statue has been erected. David Chapman in "Visualizing Korea: The Politics of the Statue of Peace," in *Asian Studies Review* (2020) [writes](#) about the statue describing it as a form of "visual politics":

The statue is a girl dressed in traditional hanbok sitting next to an empty chair that is symbolically provided for deceased victims. However, the chair is often used by members of the public to sit, reflect and participate in protest. The girl has a bird on her shoulder that symbolizes the link between the victims who are still alive and those who have passed away ... The location and positioning of the statue are often highly strategic. Its location across from the Japanese Embassy is especially impactful: it presents itself to the Japanese government as a perpetual reminder of the colonial past and its link to the present.



Figure 2 A statue commemorating comfort women remained erected in central Berlin following Japanese officials' requests for its removal. Photo: AP Photo/Markus Schreiber

Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu asked German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas to remove the statue. South Korea responded by [saying](#) that it was “not desirable for (governments) to get diplomatically involved.” The Mitte district office reversed its decision and ordered Korea Verband to remove the statue. Korea Verband filed a petition to suspend the order. While Korea Verband activists and South Korean expatriates marched to the Mitte district office in Berlin, a civic group based in South Korea's port city Busan—the Busan Women's Action to Resolve the Japanese Military “Comfort Women” Issue—held demonstrations, protesting Japan's request to remove the statue in Berlin. On Dec. 1, 24 of 29 members of the Mitte district council passed a resolution to maintain the statue at least until September 2021, with the possibility of finding a solution for its permanent exhibition. Kato Katsunobu, Japan's chief Cabinet secretary, vowed that the Japanese government would press for immediate removal of the statue. The issue could emerge again as an obstacle for Japan-South Korea relations in 2021.

Meanwhile, news of South Korean “comfort women” activist-turned lawmaker Yoon Mi-hyang's indictment received Japanese and international media attention. Yoon was the head of Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, a civic group that has led a protest demanding Japan's apologies for “comfort women” victims every Wednesday near the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. Under the Moon administration, Yoon made a political career as the ruling Democratic Party's proportional representative out of her reputation as a longtime activist who worked

for “comfort women” victims. In September, the Seoul Western District Prosecutor's Office indicted her on charges of embezzlement of and fraud regarding funds intended to help the victims. The ruling Democratic Party suspended her party membership. In May, one of the “comfort women” victims, a 91-year-old survivor Lee Yong-soo publicly announced that Yoon had exploited her and other victims for decades, which led to the prosecutors' investigation.

Abe [said](#) that he visited the Yasukuni Shrine in September to report his resignation as prime minister, to which South Korea's Foreign Ministry expressed its “deep concern.” South Koreans tend to interpret Japanese leaders' stance on the Yasukuni Shrine as a litmus test of their take on history issues, and then views visits as important signals on the state of bilateral relations. In October, in commemoration of the autumn harvest festival, Suga sent offerings to Yasukuni Shrine, following the position that Abe took during his tenure as prime minister.

### Japan's North Korea Policy under Suga

What will be Japan's North Korea policy under Suga's leadership? On multiple occasions, Suga said that he is willing to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. It is likely that Suga will inherit the Abe administration's policy to solve the issue of abduction of Japanese citizens by North Korea. In October, Suga and Abe attended a memorial that honored Yokota Shigeru, whose daughter Megumi was abducted by North Korea at age 13 and never returned to Japan. The late Yokota campaigned for the return of his daughter and other abductees. Suga [said](#), “It is heartbreaking to imagine the pain of the family members who passed, after working so hard to rescue their dearest children and yet not achieving a reunion in the end.” Suga was the minister of the abduction issue when he was chief Cabinet secretary under Abe.

In 2021, one of the key questions for Japan's relations with North Korea as well as with South Korea will be whether Japan decides to invite Kim Jong Un to the Tokyo Olympics and whether Kim would accept the invitation. Past summit meetings between Japan and North Korea all took place in Pyongyang in 2002 and 2004.

## Ties that Bind

Both Japan and South Korea become members of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), along with China, Australia, New Zealand, and the 10 members of ASEAN. This is the first time that Seoul and Tokyo are parties to the same free trade agreement; their negotiations for a bilateral FTA have long been suspended. Under the agreement, Japan will get rid of tariffs on 49% of farm products imported from South Korea, 56% of those from China, and 61% from ASEAN, Australia, and New Zealand. Under the agreement, South Korea's automobile and auto component manufacturers [are expected](#) to experience stronger competition from Japanese and Chinese counterparts, but its steel and automobile products will likely benefit from the deal. Maekyung's *Pulse* [reported](#) that South Korea and Japan will remove tariffs on 83% export items from each other.

The two governments had allowed travel to resume between their two countries for short and long-term business travel before Japan halted the entry of foreign nationals as the COVID-19 situation worsened in December 2020.



*Figure 3 Japanese businesspersons speak during an annual meeting with their South Korean counterparts via video at a Tokyo hotel on November 27, 2020. Photo: Yonhap*

On Nov. 27, business leaders of South Korea and Japan held a virtual conference, Japan-Korea Cooperation that Opens the Future: The New Era of SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) 2020. Welcoming Seoul and Tokyo's membership in the RCEP, they called for better relations between the two countries, including by increasing the level of exchanges in people, economies and cultures, and promised cooperation toward a successful Olympics and Paralympics in 2021.

## Looking Ahead

Japan and South Korea face an uncertain future in 2021. Two factors—the inauguration of the Biden administration in the United States and its likely diplomatic initiatives, and the Tokyo Olympics, if held as planned—may provide the Moon and Suga government much-needed opportunities for reconciliation. But the forced labor compensation and “comfort women” issues remain major obstacles to conciliatory positions, due in large part to each government's need to consider domestic political constituencies. Other issues like the worsening of the COVID-19 spread and the struggling approval ratings of the two national leaders can also complicate efforts to focus on any improvement in bilateral relations.

# CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2020

**Sept. 4, 2020:** Osaka International Peace Center [allows](#) families of Korean victims of wartime air raids to request listing of relatives by ethnic Korean names instead of Japanese names.

**Sept. 5, 2020:** Center for Strategic and International Studies [reports](#) that satellite imagery of North Korean shipyard indicates preparation for tests of medium-range submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

**Sept. 7, 2020:** South Korean Foreign Ministry official [tells](#) reporters “We are making efforts to send out the message that it is crucial to bring back North Korea to dialogue” ahead of South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha’s participation in virtual meetings with the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and ASEAN Plus Three.

**Sept. 9, 2020:** During the 10<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit, ROK FM Kang [seeks](#) support from the international community for peace between the two Koreas, explaining that the government of South Korea is “making efforts to improve the livelihood of North Korean people and improve South-North relations through inter-Korean cooperation.”

**Sept. 11, 2020:** South Korea and the United States [create](#) the “Alliance Dialogue,” a new channel for dialogue between their high-level diplomats. After talks with US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun, South Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun tells reporters in Washington that “We agreed that Korea and the United States should continue cooperation and communication based on ironclad trust.”

**Sept. 14, 2020:** Seoul Western District Prosecutor’s Office [indicts](#) South Korean Democratic Party Representative Yoon Mi-hyang for misappropriating funds intended to help comfort women victims. Two days later, the Democratic Party [suspends](#) her party membership.

**Sept. 16, 2020:** Japan’s Diet [elects](#) Suga Yoshihide as prime minister. South Korean President Moon Jae-in [sends](#) a congratulatory letter to Suga.

**Sept. 19, 2020:** Former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo [visits](#) Yasukuni Shrine. ROK Foreign Ministry spokesman Kim In-chul reacts by expressing “deep concern and regret.”

**Sept. 21, 2020:** Blue House spokesman Kang Min-seok [reports](#) that Suga “expressed thanks for President Moon’s congratulatory letter and stressed that the two countries are important neighbors” in a letter sent to the South Korean president.

**Sept. 22, 2020:** Moon delivers [speech](#) by video at the 75th UN General Assembly stating, “I hope that the UN and the international community provide support so that we can advance into an era of reconciliation and prosperity through the end-of-war declaration.”

**Sept. 23, 2020:** South Korea’s Ministry of Defense [issues](#) statement saying that missing South Korean official may be in North Korea. It is later revealed that the North Korean side shot the official and burned his body.

**Sept. 24, 2020:** Suga and Moon [hold](#) their first phone call. After the call, Suga briefs Japanese reporters stating, “I told President Moon that we must not leave bilateral relations in the current serious state, such as the feud over the forced labor issue.” According to ROK presidential spokesman Kang Min-seok, “President Moon said the two countries should step up efforts based on a new attitude to resolve pending bilateral issues, including the forced labor issue.”

**Sept. 25, 2020:** North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [apologizes](#) for death of missing South Korean official saying he is “very sorry” about the unexpected and unfortunate situation.

**Sept. 28, 2020:** After a meeting at the US Department of State with South Korean nuclear envoy Lee Do-hoon, Deputy Secretary Biegun [tells](#) reporters “The United States and the Republic of Korea remain fully committed to diplomacy as a way to reach an enduring peace on the Korean Peninsula, to achieve denuclearization, to bring about a brighter future for all of the Korean people, and to bring about normalcy in the United States’ relationship with the DPRK.”

**Oct. 1, 2020:** Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu [requests](#) removal of Berlin comfort woman statue during a call with German counterpart Heiko Maas and says the statue “goes against the position of the Japanese government.”

**Oct. 6, 2020:** South Korea and Japan [agree](#) to ease restrictions and exempt businesspeople from each country from a 14-day mandatory quarantine if they obtain documentation showing they have no health issues within 72 hours of travel.

**Oct. 8, 2020:** During a press briefing, South Korean spokesman Kim In-chul [comments](#) on Japan’s request to remove a comfort women statue near the Japanese embassy in Berlin and states that “the government stepping in to force its removal does not help resolve the problem at all. It also goes against the spirit of the sense of responsibility and self-reflection and apology that Japan has revealed itself.”

**Oct. 12, 2020:** At a press conference, Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato Katsunobu [says](#) “in order to respond to threats that are diversifying and complex, we will firmly work to strengthen our comprehensive missile deterrence capability.”

**Oct. 12, 2020:** Moon [holds](#) a special strategy session with top aides to discuss supporting the campaign of Yoo Myung-hee to be director general of the World Trade Organization.

**Oct. 13, 2020:** *Kyodo News* [reports](#) that a Japanese government source states that Suga will not attend a trilateral summit between South Korea, China, and Japan without resolution to the South Korean Supreme Court decision to liquidate assets of Japanese companies Nippon Steel and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries.

**Oct. 13, 2020:** In a press release, Mitte District Mayor Stephan von Dassel [promises](#) to review Berlin comfort women statue issue from South Korean and Japanese perspectives along with the district perspective prior to a decision regarding whether the statue will be removed.

**Oct. 17, 2020:** Suga [sends](#) offering to Yasukuni Shrine to commemorate the Japanese autumn festival.

**Oct. 18, 2020:** ROK Democratic Party Chairman Lee Nak-yon [meets](#) head of Japan-Korea parliamentary group Takeo Kawamura at the National Assembly in Seoul to discuss bilateral relations.

**Oct. 20, 2020:** During a press conference at the National Assembly, Jeju Governor Won Hee-ryong [says](#) “if the Japanese government pushes ahead with releasing contaminated water from Fukushima into the ocean, Jeju Island will take the lead in filing lawsuits in both the South Korean and Japanese courts and at international tribunals. Jeju Island and the Republic of Korea will not tolerate a single drop of contaminated water from Fukushima.”

**Oct. 26, 2020:** In an address to the Japanese Diet, Suga [refers](#) to South Korea as “a very important neighboring country,” and says that the Japanese government will “strongly urge an appropriate response in line with Japan’s consistent position” on the forced labor issue.

**Oct. 28, 2020:** The group Busan Women’s Action to Resolve the Japanese Military “Comfort Women” Issue [holds](#) a demonstration in front of Japanese Consulate in Busan to protest Japanese government request to remove comfort women statue in Berlin.

**Oct. 29, 2020:** Japan’s Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Shigeki Takizaki [attends](#) in-person meetings with South Korean counterpart Kim Jung-han and South Korean nuclear envoy Lee Do-hoon in Seoul.

**Nov. 5, 2020:** During a meeting with the House of Councilors Budget Committee, Suga responds to question regarding six-party talks during the Tokyo Summer Olympics and [says](#) “in diplomatic terms, it will be a very important opportunity.”

**Nov. 6, 2020:** South Korean Director of the Blue House National Security Office Suh Hoon meets Japanese counterpart Shigeru Kitamura and US counterpart Robert O’Brien by video. Blue House spokesman Kang Min-seok [says](#) “they shared their assessments on the latest affairs concerning the Korean Peninsula and discussed ways to engage North Korea to resume talks.”

**Nov. 8, 2020:** South Korean Director of the National Intelligence Service (NIS) Park Jie-won [meets](#) with Liberal Democratic Party Secretary General Nikai Toshihiro and other senior officials in Tokyo to talk about compensation of forced labor victims and export restrictions.

**Nov. 9, 2020:** Environmental civic groups [campaign](#) against Japanese seafood near the Japanese embassy in Seoul due to Japan’s plan to discharge radioactive water into the ocean.

**Nov. 10, 2020:** Park [tells](#) reporters in Tokyo “I conveyed to Prime Minister Suga President Moon Jae-in’s earnest greetings and intent to normalize Korea-Japan relations, and we had good discussions on the North Korea issue.”

**Nov. 12, 2020:** ROK representative and head of Korea-Japan Parliamentarian’s Union Kim Jin-pyo and a seven-member delegation meet Japanese counterparts in Tokyo. At Narita International Airport, Representative Kim [tells](#) reporters “It is time for the leaders of the countries to meet to discuss the pending issues between Korea and Japan and make a political decision.”

**Nov. 12, 2020:** US President-elect Joe Biden [talks](#) with Suga and has first phone call with Moon.

**Nov. 14, 2020:** During a virtual summit for leaders of ASEAN nations, plus China, South Korea, and Japan, President Moon [begins](#) keynote speech by saying, “Honorable chair, excellences. In particular, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Prime Minister Suga of Japan.”

**Nov. 16, 2020:** International Hydrographic Organization Assembly [adopts a proposal](#) to label all seas with unique numerical codes instead of names.

**Nov. 17, 2020:** ROK Representative Kim Jin-pyo says he [was told](#) in a meeting with a high-ranking Japanese official in Tokyo a week earlier that “if Chairman Kim has intentions to attend, a formal invitation could be made” to invite Kim Jong-un to the Tokyo Summer Olympics.

**Nov. 17, 2020:** UN [passes](#) a resolution accusing the North Korean regime of human rights violations by consensus during meeting at UN headquarters. South Korea [declines](#) to sponsor the resolution.

**Nov. 20, 2020:** During a press conference at the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, an embassy official discusses the discharge radioactive water and [tells](#) reporters that Tokyo “will come up with ways to adequately control and monitor the discharge and discuss them with neighboring countries.”

**Nov. 23, 2020:** President Moon Jae-in [nominates](#) Kang Chang-il as new ambassador to Japan.

**Nov. 27, 2020:** Leadership from South Korean and Japanese businesses [discuss](#) Japan-South Korea relations during the 52<sup>nd</sup> Korea-Japan Business Conference. During his keynote address, chairman of the Korea Peace Foundation Hong Seok-hyun says “we need to begin the process of historical reconciliation starting now, with the target of 2025.”

**Dec. 1, 2020:** Berlin’s Mitte District council [adopts](#) resolution to permanently install the “comfort woman” statue. During a press briefing, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato [expresses](#) deep regret over Mitte Council’s decision to permanently install the “comfort woman” statue in Berlin.

**Dec. 7, 2020:** South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs official [tells](#) reporters that South Korea “has the right to request information to determine whether Japan’s plans [to discharge radioactive water] are safe.”

**Dec. 8, 2020:** South Korea [declines](#) Japanese government's request to resume flights between Haneda in Tokyo and Gimpo in Seoul due to potential complications with quarantine efforts.

**Dec. 22, 2020:** Governor's Association of Korea [issues](#) a statement requesting that the Japanese government "immediately halt discussions to release the radioactive water from Fukushima."

**Dec. 29, 2020:** Court in the South Korean city Daejeon [completes](#) process of serving notice to Mitsubishi Heavy Industries regarding asset seizure for compensation of forced labor victims.

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

## LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL?

YU BIN, WITTENBURG UNIVERSITY

The end of 2020 may well be an “[end-of-history](#)” moment for a world riddled with disease, death, despair, and de-linkage. Despite huge differences in how Russia and China coped with these challenges, bilateral cooperation in a variety of areas (SCO, COVID-19, response to the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, etc.) were sustained and even enhanced in the last months of 2020. A salient factor was Washington’s dual-adversary undertaking, which pushed Moscow and Beijing toward deeper and broader strategic coordination. The post-election instability also cast a long shadow over US domestic and foreign policies. As 2020 drew to a close, Beijing and Moscow stepped up their strategic coordination for a possible resetting of relations with the Biden administration, or perhaps even a Biden moment, thanks to Trump’s legacy.

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## SCO in Moscow

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese and Russian leaders managed to maintain “virtual” high-level contacts in the last few months of 2020. This included the annual Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit, the 12<sup>th</sup> BRICS summit, the annual (and 19<sup>th</sup>) SCO prime ministerial meeting, and the annual (and 25<sup>th</sup>) China-Russia prime ministerial meeting. Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin talked over the phone on Dec. 28, their fifth call in 2020.

Senior officials of the two countries were also busy with virtual and real contacts, including a dozen SCO and BRICS ministerial meetings. In early September, Moscow hosted the in-person SCO annual defense and foreign ministerial meetings. Russia overloaded these meetings with numerous “extras.” The [SCO defense ministerial meeting](#) on Sept. 4, for example, was augmented by an enlarged gathering with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) defense chiefs.



Figure 1 SCO/CIS/CSTO defense chiefs' meeting in Kubinka, Moscow Region. Photo: [Russian Defense Ministry](#)

It was “the first meeting in the history of our international contacts at this level,” said Russian Defense Minister Sergey [Shoygu](#) in his opening remarks. Although the three security groups are defined as part of an “equal, respectful, and mutually beneficial partnership,” there was no question that Russia, not China, was the main driver of the trio because of the simple fact that China is not a member of CIS and CSTO. Russia’s effort was understandable given the growing turbulence in

many parts of the post-Soviet space (the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in July, the constitutional crises in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan in August, and escalating border disputes between India and China in late August).

Another topic of the defense chiefs’ meeting was the pandemic and biological threats, as well as possible measures and capabilities in dealing with them (the specifics of the bio-threat discussion are not available publicly). Throughout the summer and in early fall, however, top Russian officials (Vice Chairman of the Russian Security Council [Dmitry Medvedev](#) and Foreign Minister [Sergey Lavrov](#)) repeatedly voiced concern about US biological labs located around the world.

A week after the SCO/CIS/CSTO defense chiefs’ meeting, Moscow hosted the annual SCO foreign ministerial conference. Putin met with the foreign ministers via video a day before. Aside from the routine global and regional issues such as terrorism, drug trafficking, arms control, regional issues, etc., [COVID-19 and bio-threats were an important focus](#) of the meeting. “The coronavirus infection has triggered complex political and economic processes around the world and has had a heavy impact on the entire system of international relations, testing the resilience of country-to-country ties and multilateral institutions,” [remarked](#) Lavrov. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was more forthright, defining the US as the biggest destroyer of the international system. The SCO, therefore, should prevent the world from falling into “a jungle” in which the strong prey on the weak, added Wang.

SCO foreign ministers paid particular attention to cybersecurity. “The internet should not be used to disseminate the ideas of terrorism and extremism. Nor should it be used to intervene in the domestic affairs of sovereign states,” said the [news release](#) by the SCO foreign ministers. They also supported the need for UN cybersecurity regulations. For this, they drafted two relevant documents on international information security.



Figure 2 SCO's 17th annual foreign ministerial meeting in Moscow. Photo: [SCO website](#)

### Moscow's 'Indian Moment'

Russia had good reasons for over-sized in-person SCO meetings in Moscow: to broker a deal between Russia's two largest partners (India and China), whose border disputes continued into late summer and early fall. On the sidelines of both SCO defense and foreign ministers' meetings, an India-China meeting was held for the purpose of alleviating tension between the two large powers. Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe and his Indian counterpart Rajnath Singh, despite their disagreements, [concurred](#) that the current border conflict could be resolved through diplomatic means alone.

A week later, Wang Yi and S. Jaishankar held a "candid and constructive discussion" on bilateral relations, which included the border issue. They issued [a joint news release](#) with a five-point consensus for deescalation, dialogue, and disengagement. The two sides also agreed to speed up the creation of new confidence-building measures to improve stability in the border regions.

In addition to the two smaller meetings between India and China, Russia chaired the annual RIC (Russia, India, and China) foreign ministerial [lunch meeting](#). Satisfied with the outcome of his meeting with the Indian side and the RIC meeting, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi summarized "[seven broad and deep common interests and ideals](#)" between the three sides, which included mutual support for multipolarity, multilateralism, UN-related international law, non-interference of domestic affairs, globalization, development, and global governance. [A press release](#) noted that the three

foreign ministers agreed that "common development and cooperation of the three countries is conducive to promoting global growth, peace, and stability."

By late September, [commanders](#) of the Indian and Chinese militaries in the border region agreed to stop reinforcing border areas and unilaterally altering current postures. The border dispute is far from over, yet the Moscow meetings managed to reduce India-China tension.

For a long time, the SCO has been regarded as a [talking club](#) for its slow institutional development and lack of implementation capability. India's full membership in 2017 is widely regarded as another sign of the SCO's dysfunction because Delhi's border disputes have become an internal issue for the organization. This time, Russia's mediating role within the SCO demonstrated the potential for the organization to provide a platform for conflict management and resolution among member states, observed [Pan Guang](#), director of the SCO Center in Shanghai. The SCO started as a platform (the Shanghai Five) to solve border issues in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, recalled Pan. Its success in settling border issues should be a model for others, he added.

For [Wan Qingsong](#), associate research professor in the prominent Russian Studies Center of Shanghai's East China Normal University, Russia's role in the India-China border conflict can be considered one of "benevolent neutrality" (善意中立), meaning that Russia is independent in the US-China and India-China conflict. This posture has an internal dimension, said Wan, in that it would prevent China-US confrontation from being internalized in Russia's domestic discourse.

Russia's independence also means flexibility. That prevents Moscow from becoming entangled in China's conflicts with the US and with India, while cooperation with Beijing does not necessarily mean allying with China against the US and India. Largely because of this, Wan contends, Russia was able to continue and even accelerate deliveries of the [S-400 SAM system](#) upon India's request (as pausing arms delivery might have been seen as a sign of Russia siding with China), all the while providing diplomatic support to China.

In the last months of 2020, Russia's China and India policies seemed to follow this script, particularly regarding the US-led Quad formation (US, Japan, Australia, and India) within its Indo-Pacific framework. A day after the RIC foreign minister meeting in Moscow, Lavrov and Wang met formally. The two diplomats coordinated efforts for the next round of high-level exchanges between the two countries. While Wang pointed to "[certain extreme forces](#) in the US" in their "defaming China and Russia," Lavrov described the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy as "[destructive actions](#)" taken by the US in the Asia-Pacific. "They are fueling tensions in various parts of the world, including along the Russian and Chinese borders," said Lavrov in his joint press conference with Wang. "In this context, we stated that the so-called 'Indo-Pacific strategy' ... only leads to the separation of the region's states, and is therefore fraught with serious consequences for peace, security, and stability in the Asia-Pacific Region," he stressed.

By year's end, Russia's top diplomat further clarified Russia's principled opposition to the Indo-Pacific strategy. In a speech to Russia's International Affairs Council on Dec. 8, [Lavrov](#) accused the West of attempting to engage India in "anti-China games" to reinstate the unipolar world order that would exclude Moscow and Beijing. Lavrov particularly noted that the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy was trying to undermine Russia's "privileged relationship" with New Delhi.

Lavrov's rejection of the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy came after [significant internal discourse](#) and [heavy lobbying from India](#) to get Russia on board. However, being squeezed between India as its "[special privileged strategic partner](#)" (2018) and China as a "[strategic partner of comprehensive coordination in the new era](#)" (2019), Russia sought to preserve its balance between the two nations in order to enhance its independence in the unfolding game of great powers. India was not to be abandoned but brought back to its nonaligned tradition. As a token of Russia's continued friendship with India, three Russian warships, including the guided-missile cruiser *Varyag*, the flagship of the Russian Pacific Fleet, conducted [a joint exercise](#) with two Indian naval vessels in the Bay of Bengal a few days before

Lavrov's "second shoe" regarding the Indo-Pacific strategy.

## Valdai and Beyond

In retrospect, the COVID-19 pandemic frustrated almost all high-level bilateral interactions between Russia and China in 2020, including a military parade in Moscow's Red Square to mark the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II. Other important bilateral events disrupted because of the pandemic include the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, SCO, and BRICS summits, etc. The quality and frequency of high-level communication and policy coordination between the two countries, however, was not negatively affected, according to [Guan Guihai](#), a prominent Russologist in Peking University.

In their last telephone conversation on Dec. 28, President Xi and Russian President Putin [praised](#) bilateral ties, stating that they had reached "the highest level in history." 2020 was an extraordinary year for China and Russia, and the world because of the pandemic and its devastating effect on the world economy, said Xi. The crisis, however, indicated the prominence and value of the bilateral relationship. According to *Xinhua*, [Xi reportedly told Putin](#) that the relationship between China and Russia is in "a league of its own" (独立价值) and "is driven by strong bilateral forces" (具有强大内生动力); that Sino-Russian relations cannot be broken by any third nation and will weather all kinds of international crises; and that "strengthening strategic cooperation between China and Russia can effectively resist any attempt to suppress and divide the two countries."

These remarks may well be delayed reciprocity to Putin's exceptionally candid references to China as a "superpower" in the annual [Valdai](#) Discussion Club in late October. "China is moving quickly towards superpower status" because of its economic weight and political influence, said Putin at the forum. And as a result, the US "can hardly claim exceptionality any longer."

In a response to a question from Professor Yan Xuetong of Qinghua University in Beijing on the possibility of a military alliance with China, Putin's answer was both "yes" and "no." "It is

possible to imagine anything,” replied Putin, adding that “it is certainly imaginable, in theory.” A formal alliance, however, may not be necessary, suggested Putin, in that “[W]e have always believed that our relations have reached such a level of cooperation and trust that it is not necessary.” After a considerable discussion of Russia’s mil-mil relationship with China, including in the area of some “very sensitive issues,” Putin came around by saying that “in principle, we are not going to rule it (alliance) out, either. So we will see.”

For years, the annual Valdai forum has been a convenient venue for Putin to engage foreign audiences. Last year, he revealed in Valdai that Russia was helping China develop an [early warning system](#) for strategic missile defense.

Beijing remained cautious about Putin’s depiction of China as a rising “superpower.” A brief news release from [Xinhua](#) did not even mention the phrase. As a common Chinese saying goes, “High elevation means colder temperature” (高处不胜寒), which is precisely what Beijing tries to avoid in the age of heightened US sensitivity toward China. Putin seemed to fully understand China’s wariness regarding its “superpower” status, as he also used the term to describe Germany.

By toying with the alliance issue in Valdai, Putin left adequate space for strategic brainstorming and realpolitik. Both Russia and China would be able to enjoy freedom of action as large powers, while leaving the door open to future necessity. A veteran Chinese [commentator](#) described Putin’s ambiguity regarding the alliance issue as one of strategic deterrence while leaving room for [unlimited cooperation](#) between the two countries.

For many in China, Putin did a huge service in Valdai by deflecting US criticism of China’s nuclear arms control position. The Trump administration [went out of its way](#) to bring China into US-Russian strategic arms control talks. Because of its far smaller nuclear arsenal (about 300 vs. 5,800 for the US), Beijing has [repeatedly argued](#) that the US call is unfair and unnecessary. Responding to a question in Valdai, [Putin questioned](#) why only China should be involved in this process with the US and Russia. “Where are the other nuclear powers? Where is France that, as the press reports, has just tested another submarine-launched cruise

missile? Great Britain is also a nuclear power,” argued Putin. An influential Chinese [commentator](#) claimed that “only Putin is able to articulate in such a manner.”

## Winds of War in the Age of Uncertainty

Putin’s Valdai remarks came at a time of rising tension between the US and China, particularly regarding Taiwan. On Sept. 4, President Trump’s National Security Adviser [Robert O’Brien](#) publicly urged Taiwan to “fortify itself” against a mainland attack. On Sept. 16, Under Secretary of State [Keith Krach](#) visited Taiwan. As the highest-level official from the State Department to visit the island in decades, Krach’s trip was preceded by a high-profile trip in August by US Health Secretary Alex Azar, the highest-level US Cabinet official to visit Taiwan since the US switched formal relations from Taiwan to China in 1979. Throughout the fourth quarter of 2020, Washington also stepped up arms sales to the island (totaling \$5.1 billion). New Year’s Eve witnessed [a rare double-warship passing through the Taiwan Strait](#) (*USS John S. McCain* and *USS Curtis Wilbur*), marking the 13th passage of US naval vessels through the strait in 2020.

Beijing was furious. Its official media used the phrase “[radical deterioration](#)” (陡变) of cross-strait relations toward military confrontation. On Oct. 15, a [People’s Daily](#) editorial urged Taiwan intelligence personnel to defect to the mainland in times of war. Its title was the familiar “Don’t Say it is Unpredictable” (勿谓言之不预), equivalent to ultimatums issued before all the border wars the PRC has fought since its founding. This warning was accompanied by several largescale [exercises](#) including amphibious landings in September and October. Xi himself was seen inspecting [PLA Marines](#) on Oct. 13. A few days later, China reportedly deployed its super-sonic [DF-17](#) ballistic missiles to coastal regions. In his speech on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of China’s entry into the Korean War, [Xi](#) warned that “China will never allow its national sovereignty, security, and development interests to be undermined. China will never allow any forces to violate or separate its sacred territory.” Xi’s speech was delivered at the same time as the final US presidential debate in Nashville, where Trump and Biden competed in declarations of who would best stand up to China. On Dec. 26, China’s legislature passed the heavily amended [national](#)

[defense law](#) with explicit references to combating separatism.

For much of 2020, steadily worsening cross-strait relations occurred against the backdrop of Trump's highly ideological and militarized China policy. Rapidly degenerating relations with China may be the reason for the [US-China defense ministers' talks](#) on Oct. 28-29. In mid-November, former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who was instrumental in the normalizing of relations between the US and China in the 1970s, [urged](#) the incoming Biden administration to move quickly to restore lines of communication with China "for some cooperative action" or "the world will slide into a catastrophe comparable to World War I."

Kissinger's warning was echoed by Chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley](#) in early December, when he offered a "useful corrective" to those who believed that the US would prevail in violent confrontations with China and/or Russia. The limited "flare-ups" could not be controlled and deescalated easily and quickly, said Milley. Given the huge destruction of great power wars in the past, war with China and Russia is "not an acceptable outcome." In the age of great power competition, which is now the norm, the measure of success is not military victory but deterrence and, if war does happen, rapid de-escalation and conflict termination, added Milley.

Russia, too, was [alarmed](#) by rising China-US tension. Washington demonstrated "a little bit more restraint" for Russia only because of fear of Russia's nuclear potential, [wrote](#) Dmitry Yefremenko, deputy director of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Moscow benefited little from [the rising tension between Washington and Beijing](#) as US-led [sanctions continued unabated to the end of the year](#). By late December, the US was ready [to close its last two consulates](#) in Vladivostok and Yekaterinburg, leaving only its embassy in Moscow to serve the entirety of Russia. To many Russian elites, the Biden administration's declared goal of rebuilding relations with US allies suggests [a difficult time](#) ahead for Russia.

By late December, the bitterly contested US presidential election led to more uncertainties for China and Russia in their relations with the US. Trump continued to publicly defend Russia

by [contradicting](#) other senior officials on Dec. 19, stating that China, not Russia, was behind the extensive cyber-attack on US federal agencies. [Biden](#) opted for a different matrix for the two principal US rivals by describing Russia as an "opponent" and China as "a serious competitor." As such, the Russia and China factors were [fully internalized](#) as a zero-sum game in US domestic politics, for better or worse.

To many in [Russia](#) and [China](#), post-election US is a deeply divided society, reinforced by the fact that [both Biden and Trump broke Obama's record](#) for the most votes cast for a presidential candidate in US history (more than 81.2 million for Biden vs more than 74.2 million for Trump). Still, a mere change of the guard in the White House may mean so much, yet so little for both US domestic politics and its relationship with Russia and China.

Given these uncertainties, Moscow and Beijing chose to steady their partnership. On Dec. 15, Russian Defense Minister Shoigu and his Chinese counterpart Wei [signed a protocol](#) to extend the agreement on mutual notification for launching ballistic missiles. Just a week before, Russia [testfired](#) land, air, and sea-based offensive strategic missiles. On Dec. 22, two Russian *Tu-95s* and four Chinese *H-6K* bombers conducted a [second joint patrol](#) in the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. Shoigu [briefed](#) Putin about the joint patrol. The next day, Beijing's [Global Times](#) published an editor's note, titling "More US bullying means stronger Sino-Russian strategic coordination."

## Looking Ahead

While their militaries were coordinating for uncertain times ahead, China and Russia were looking to the post-Trump future. Frustrated by both natural (COVID-19) and artificial (trade war) barriers, the market also searched for different paths and potentials for growth. On Nov. 17, China established the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership ([RCEP](#)) with 14 other nations to form the single largest free-trade zone in history, accounting for 2.2 billion people (30% of the world's total) and 28% of global trade (based on 2019 data), with a combined GDP of \$26 trillion.

A few days later, Xi announced that China would actively consider joining the Comprehensive

and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a successor to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) promoted by the Obama administration. The TPP, which excluded China, never entered into force due to Trump's withdrawal shortly after his election. For Beijing, China's bid to join CPTPP is an opportunity to ease tensions with Washington, although this means China's commitment to higher-level market access and more binding intellectual property protection requirements.

Finally, China and the EU announced on Dec. 30 that they had agreed in principle to the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), after 35 rounds of negotiations over the course of seven years. The [EU](#) considers it "the most ambitious agreement that China has ever concluded with a third country" because it will give European companies greater access to Chinese markets.

China's three economic "strikes" attempted to both transcend and engage with post-Trump Washington. For Russia, however, the China market is both real and remote. For years, trade with China was the weakest link between the partners, despite the huge growth potential. On the positive side, bilateral trade in 2020 dipped only slightly to around [\\$100 billion](#), quite remarkable for the COVID era. Russia gained a significant market share in China for its farm products, minerals, LNG, etc. To further tap the potential in China, [Putin offered](#), on the eve of the China-EU agreement, to be the first foreign head of state to visit China in 2021.

None of this diplomatic, economic, and military posturing by Moscow and Beijing sought to neglect Washington. Both intend to regain a certain normality in relations with the US. "China-US relations have come to a new crossroads, and a new window of hope is opening," [said](#) Wang Yi in late December. "We hope the upcoming US administration can adopt a rational attitude toward Russia and China," echoed Russian ambassador to Beijing Andrey [Denisov](#) at the year-end.

Life continues despite the devastation caused by COVID-19. The new year means hope, but not without shadows of the past. For those who recall the Hobsbawmian "[short 20th century](#)" (1914-1991), 2021 is the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Russia has made a remarkable

comeback from what Putin branded the "[greatest geopolitical catastrophe](#)" of the 20th century—meaning the 1991 Soviet collapse—albeit by paying a huge price, [argued Feng Shaolei](#), a leading Russologist in China. Contrary to Francis Fukuyama's excessive optimism, history never ends but seems to be "going around in circles every 30 years" (三十年河东, 三十年河西), according to a Chinese saying. With the new year, a newly available vaccine, and a new administration in Washington, the rest of the world—including America's friends and foes, real or imagined—is waiting to see how Biden's America will engage with the outside world.

# CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2020

**Sept. 2, 2020:** Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Denisov [joins](#) a ceremony in Beijing to commemorate Soviet pilots in China during World War II. Chinese and Russian ambassadors to the US [Cui Tiankai and Anatoly Antonov](#) jointly pen an op-ed piece on *Defense One* titled “Honor World War II with a Better, Shared Future.”

**Sept. 3, 2020:** Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin [exchange](#) congratulatory [messages](#) on the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II.

**Sept. 4–5, 2020:** Defense ministers of the SCO, CIS, and CSTO countries [hold](#) a joint meeting in Kubinka, Moscow Region, chaired by Russia. Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe held separate meetings with his Indian and Russian counterparts on the sidelines of the group meetings.

**Sept. 10, 2020:** SCO [holds](#) its 17<sup>th</sup> annual foreign ministerial meeting in Moscow. Putin met with the SCO foreign ministers via video a day before.

**Sept. 10, 2020:** Trilateral lunch meeting [is held](#) in Moscow between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, External Affairs Minister of India Jaishankar, and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. A joint [press release](#) was issued afterward. Earlier in the day, Wang and Jaishankar held a bilateral meeting on the border issue.

**Sept. 10, 2020:** SCO holds its 17<sup>th</sup> Cultural Ministerial meeting via videoconference, chaired by the Russian minister of culture.

**Sept. 11–16, 2020:** In conjunction with the SCO annual foreign ministerial meeting, Wang and Lavrov [take part](#) in formal talks, attend a joint press conference, and issue a [joint statement](#).

**Sept. 15, 2020:** Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev [chairs](#) the SCO’s 15th Meeting of Security Council Secretaries via videoconference.

**Sept. 17, 2020:** BRICS nations [hold](#) the 10<sup>th</sup> conference (via video) for national security senior representatives.

**Sept. 21–26, 2020:** Russia [conducts](#) its “Caucasus 2020” strategic military drills with five foreign states (Armenia, Belarus, China, Myanmar, and Pakistan). It involved some 12,900 troops, 250 tanks, and around 450 infantry combat vehicles. China sent more than 200 personnel and light infantry vehicles. [India pulled out](#) of the exercises in late August, citing COVID-19 as the reason.

**Oct. 1, 2020:** Putin [sends](#) congratulatory telegraph to Xi for the 71<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the founding of the PRC.

**Oct. 20, 2020:** SEO [holds](#) 18th Meeting of Prosecutors General via videoconference, under Uzbekistan’s chairmanship. The next meeting will be in India in 2021.

**Oct. 21, 2020:** Russia [chairs](#) the fifth SCO ministers of agriculture meeting via videoconference.

**Oct. 21, 2020:** Vice Chairman of Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev [voices](#) concern over US bio-labs in many parts of the world, particularly in Commonwealth of Independent States regions. The next day, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian [urged](#) the US to offer a comprehensive clarification on its overseas biological activities.

**Oct. 22, 2020:** In his annual press conference at the Valdai Discussion Club, Putin [says](#), for the first time, that China “is moving quickly towards superpower status,” also saying Russia and China enjoy such a good relationship that there is no need to move to a formal alliance.

**Oct. 22–23, 2020:** Moscow [hosts](#) the SCO’s first inter-party forum via teleconference.

**Oct. 28, 2020:** SCO [holds](#) eighth Transport Ministers' meeting chaired by Russian Minister of Transport Yury Tsvetkov's via videoconference.

**Oct. 30, 2020:** Sixteenth meeting of SCO Interbank Consortium Board is [chaired](#) by Russia via videoconference, featuring board members and board chairs of leading banks in the SCO member states.

**Nov. 3, 2020:** Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Sergei Naryshkin [says](#) the SVR exchanges information with its Chinese counterpart, adding that the CIA was Russia's "main opponent." According to Chinese media, Naryshkin refers to cooperation with China as at "[a very high level](#)."

**Nov. 3, 2020:** Deputy Foreign Minister Le Yucheng [invites](#) Russian Ambassador Denisov to China to a Chinese exhibition of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of China's Korean War entrance in Beijing.

**Nov. 10, 2020:** Putin [chairs](#) the SCO [annual summit](#) via videoconference. The [Moscow Declaration](#) and [a news release](#) are issued after the summit.

**Nov. 12, 2020:** Russian FM Lavrov [says](#) Russia would not pressure China to join arms control talks with the US.

**Nov. 17, 2020:** Putin and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang join 15<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit via video, chaired by Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc.

**Nov. 17, 2020:** BRICS holds its 12<sup>th</sup> summit by video, chaired by Putin.

**Nov. 18, 2020:** Wang and Lavrov [discuss](#) bilateral, international, and regional issues over the phone.

**Nov. 23, 2020:** India [hosts](#) teleconference for the SCO's annual Business Council for more than 200 participants.

**Nov. 27, 2020:** SCO holds its "Regional Cooperation and Exchange Conference" in the Chinese city of Xuzhou. In addition to Chinese business, local and provincial officials, diplomats and trade representatives from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cambodia, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Thailand, and Uzbekistan, as well as international organizations join the meeting.

**Nov. 30, 2020:** SCO [holds](#) the 19<sup>th</sup> annual prime ministerial meeting by videoconference, issuing a [joint statement](#).

**Dec. 2, 2020:** Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and his Russian counterpart [hold](#) the 25<sup>th</sup> regular meeting between prime ministers via teleconference, with cooperation in Russia's Far Eastern region a key issue, and together issue a [joint communique](#).

**Dec. 4–5, 2020:** Three Russian warships of the Pacific Fleet [conduct](#) a joint exercise with two Indian naval vessels in the Bay of Bengal.

**Dec. 9, 2020:** Russia [testfires](#) its offensive strategic forces of land-based missiles, strategic bombers, and submarine-based launchers.

**Dec. 15, 2020:** Chinese DM Wei Fenghe and Russian counterpart Sergey Shoygu [sign](#) a protocol to extend an agreement on mutual notification for launches of ballistic missiles and carrier rockets, upon approval from the heads of the two states. The original document, inked on Oct. 13, 2009, was set to expire on Dec. 16, 2020.

**Dec. 22, 2020:** Two Russian *Tu-95s* and four Chinese *H-6K* bombers [conduct](#) a second joint patrol in the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. Russian DM Shoygu [briefed](#) Putin on the joint patrol. On July 23, 2019, long-range bombers of the two militaries conducted their first joint patrols.

**Dec. 22, 2020:** Wang and Lavrov [discuss](#) bilateral cooperation in foreign affairs and anti-pandemic measures.

**Dec. 28, 2020:** Xi and Putin [talk](#) over the phone, during which they recall major developments in bilateral relations over 2020 and look forward to the new year for more cooperation in global, regional, and bilateral affairs.

**Dec. 29, 2020:** Russian Ambassador to China Denisov [says](#) in a press briefing in Beijing that Putin would like to be the first foreign head of state to visit China when the pandemic is contained in 2021.

**Dec. 31, 2020:** Chinese and Russian presidents and prime ministers [send](#) each other New Year greeting messages.

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

INDIA-EAST ASIA RELATIONS

## INDIA-EAST ASIA RELATIONS: ACTING ACROSS THE INDO-PACIFIC, ACTUALLY AND VIRTUALLY

SATU LIMAYE, EAST-WEST CENTER

Despite the COVID-19 global pandemic, India's engagement with East Asia during 2020 remained reasonably active, both actually and virtually. India's external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, took several opportunities to emphasize that the Indo-Pacific concept (i.e., the inclusion of India and the Indian Ocean region) has gained wider acceptance. In his opening remarks at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Quad Ministerial Meeting, for example, he said "[i]t is a matter of satisfaction that the Indo-Pacific concept has gained increasingly wider acceptance." And he also repeatedly highlighted India's commitment to the concept, saying "The Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiative that [India] tabled at the East Asia Summit [in 2019] is a development with considerable promise in that context." He pointedly highlighted India's actions at the frontier of the western Pacific, telling an [Indonesia-Australia convened town hall](#) that "[i]t is revealing that in the midst of a global health crisis, Indian diplomacy has actually put its Indo-Pacific approach into practice. We provided assistance to Solomon Islands, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati, Tonga, Tuvalu and Palau for procurement of medical equipment and supplies to assist in their response to COVID-19." However, on two major counts—the decision by most regional countries to sign the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement (RCEP) without India (which had dropped out of the negotiations last year) and the confrontation-filled Sino-India relationship—India's East Asian relations were complicated rather than positive. Brighter spots included progress on the "Quad Consultations" (US, Japan, Australia, and India) and concomitant steady progress in bilateral security ties to Japan and Australia.

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## India & The Quad

The “Quad” grouping of countries met often in 2020; made meaningful in the context of China’s acutely negative bilateral relations with the United States, India, and Australia. In addition to two senior officials level meetings of the Quad in September and December, the main Quad event was only the second foreign ministers meeting, in-person, in Tokyo on Oct. 6. No dramatic initiatives were announced, however. The [September consultations](#) noted discussions of the “strategic implications of COVID-19 on the Indo-Pacific region” and agreement to “deepening practical cooperation on quality infrastructure, maritime security, counter-terrorism, cyber security and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.” Special care was devoted to reassuring Southeast Asia/ASEAN of the Quad countries’ “strong support for ASEAN’s unity and centrality as well as the ASEAN-led regional architecture” and “full support for the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific.” The December senior officials’ videoconference added a reference to the “importance of enhancing the resilience of supply chains for an expeditious and sustainable global economic recovery.” Aside from Quad diplomacy, the 24<sup>th</sup> iteration of the naval Exercise Malabar occurred in November, significantly with [the participation](#) of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) for the first time since 2007. There was some excitement among commentators about the Quad being expanded to a “Plus” format on the basis of a March telephone meeting which included the four Quad countries and Vietnam, New Zealand, and South Korea. India’s Ministry of External Affairs’ release did not refer either to the “Quad” or to “Plus” and explicitly [drew attention](#) to the fact that the meeting was “initiated by US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun for discussions among some countries in the Indo-Pacific region on issues related to countering COVID-19.”

Concomitant with various Quad-related activities, India’s bilateral engagements with Australia and Japan also moved forward.

### India-Australia

The first important event was [the visit](#) of Australia’s Foreign Minister Marise Payne to Delhi in mid-January (prior to the global pandemic declaration) for consultations on the bilateral strategic partnership. Three key issues

were highlighted. First, both agreed on the need to “... prioritize the building of a strong multi-faceted trade and economic cooperation as well as cooperation in Defense and Security”; suggesting that there is an asymmetry in the progress in the two spheres of bilateral ties. Defense diplomacy during the year included [the visit](#) of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) Ship HMAS Toowoomba to Mumbai in January to “further strengthen the good relations between India and Australia and underscore the shared interests in the maritime domain.”



*Figure 1 Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne meets Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swarja in New Delhi. Photo: Asian News International*

Second, and in the context of “balancing” defense-security ties with commercial ones, Australia “conveyed that that India could consider it as a stable, reliable, and trusted supplier of high-quality mineral resources to India and in this regard, both sides agreed to diversify and expand existing resources partnership.” Such a reference may partially reflect the pressures on Australian mineral resource imports from China given the downturn in relations, but may also reflect the fact that despite a change in Australian policy on providing uranium for India’s civilian nuclear program, apparently no major purchases have been made by India. Third, both countries “acknowledged that the growing threat of terrorism constituted a major threat to peace and security in the region ...” As a follow-up, in mid-December the 12<sup>th</sup> meeting of the India-Australia Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism took place virtually.

Payne’s visit provided the basis for a June 2020 virtual summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his counterpart Scott Morrison leading to a [joint statement](#)

announcing an upgrade of the “strategic partnership” to a “comprehensive strategic partnership,” including Australia’s support for India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). Several [joint declarations and MoUs](#) were also issued. Of particular importance to India-Australia defense and security ties were:

- [Joint Declaration](#) on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, which covered a range of regional engagement issues;
- Arrangement concerning Mutual Logistics Support (MLSA); and
- Implementing Arrangement concerning cooperation in Defense Science and Technology to the MoU on Defense Cooperation.

All in all, India-Australia relations amidst a pandemic showed notable progress on the diplomatic and defense fronts.

### India-Japan Relations

India and Japan held two summit telephone talks between their prime ministers; the first on Sept. 10, at which then-Prime Minister Abe Shinzo explained that he would resign from his position. Both prime ministers expressed satisfaction with the significant enhancement of Japan-India relations, including efforts toward the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific and the “Special Strategic and Global Partnership” between Japan and India. On Sept. 25 Modi held [another summit telephone](#) talk with Abe’s successor, Suga Yoshihide. Both prime ministers shared their view to continue to advance the “Special Strategic and Global Partnership.” Suga was reported to have stated that “he would like to promote cooperation in such multilateral mechanism[s] as Japan-Australia-India-US meetings and the United Nations as well as on issues related to North Korea, including the abductions issue.” Both countries look to 2022, the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations.

India and Japan also maintained momentum in their bilateral defense and security ties. An important development was the [Sept. 9 signing](#) of the agreement between the government of Japan and the government of the Republic of India Concerning Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services between the Self-Defense Forces of Japan and the Indian Armed Forces (so-called “Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement” or ACSA) providing the legal and

operational basis for reciprocal provision of supplies and services between the two countries’ militaries, hence promoting closer cooperation between them. A Japan-India maritime exercise was [completed](#) over three days in late September, followed by the [quadrilateral Malabar exercise](#) held in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea in November 2020. Japan’s Air Self Defense Forces (JASDF) chief of staff, Gen. Izutsu Shunji, [visited India](#) in December for discussions “to further enhance cooperation and interoperability between the two Air Forces ... the scope for enhancement of joint exercises and training ... [and] strengthening collective response to HADR contingencies ...” In addition to air force to air force issues, Shunji also held talks with the chiefs of India’s navy and army as well as Chief of Defense Staff (CDS). The fact that this visit took place in person amid a pandemic symbolized the high priority the two countries accord to their defense relationship.

### India & South Korea

India-South Korea relations in 2020 also moved forward—with India continuing to seek opportunities for defense industrial cooperation with Korea. In January, South Korea’s Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering [was named](#) one of five companies shortlisted for India’s P-75I submarine project.

On Feb. 4, 2020 India’s Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and South Korea’s Minister of National Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo held a [ministerial defense dialogue](#) in Delhi. An All-India Radio report of the dialogue noted that Indian’s chief of defense staff, army chief and navy chief all attended. Singh’s tweets highlighted progress in defense engagements, commonalities between India’s Indo-Pacific vision and South Korea’s New Southern Policy, and mutual recognition of the unity and centrality of ASEAN. On defense cooperation Singh reportedly stated that “defense industry cooperation has been one of the most vibrant aspect of bilateral defense cooperation” and that the two countries exchanged a “road map” of defense industries cooperation. Minister Rajnath also reportedly invited South Korean companies to invest in India’s “defense corridors” which provide “an excellent opportunity for South Korean industries to establish their manufacturing units, benefit from the skilled and economical labor force, natural resources and tailored incentives.”

And the year closed with a Dec. 23 [digital video conference](#) between India's Ministry of External Affairs Secretary (East) Riva Ganguly Das and South Korea's First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun.

## India-China Relations

2020 was an *annus horribilis* in India-China bilateral relations. The Embassy of China in India lists [14 bilateral interactions](#) among key officials in the 70<sup>th</sup> year of the establishment of diplomatic relations, but from mid-year onwards Delhi and Beijing were dealing with each other about deaths of soldiers on a disputed border, disengagement from the border clash, and commercial de-coupling efforts by India—not forms of cooperation.

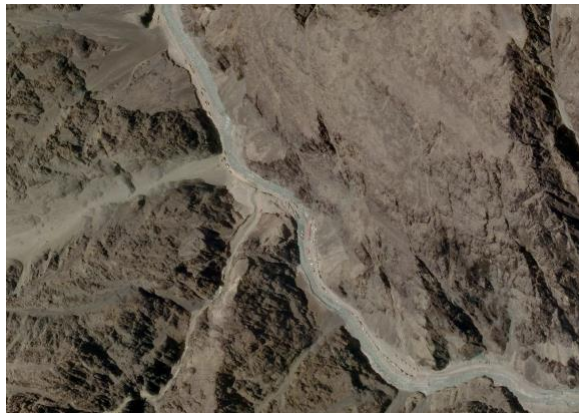


Figure 2 Satellite image of Galwan Valley. Photo: Planet Labs Inc via Reuters

The year started off amicably enough when a high-level Indian army delegation led by Northern Army Commander Lt. Gen. Ranbir Singh [visited China](#) to exchange views with Gen. Han Weiguo, Commander of People's Liberation Army Ground Force, on measures to enhance peace and tranquility along the borders. But by June there were a series of what India labelled as Chinese transgressions across the line of actual control; leading to a [violent incident in the Galwan Valley](#) on June 15. Estimates vary but reportedly 20 Indian soldiers were killed and over 40 PLA soldiers were killed or injured. Many analysts noted that this was the first fatal clash between India and China since 1975. India and China each accused the other of transgressing the LAC and seeking to change the status quo. So serious was the situation that [Modi addressed the nation on June 17](#).

Throughout this period, India and China maintained official contacts and discussions including a telephone call between External Affairs Minister, Jaishankar and the State Councillor and Foreign Minister of China Wang Yi on the same day as Modi's speech to the nation. As public sentiment about China in India soured, on June 29 the Indian government banned 59 Chinese mobile apps citing data security and privacy concerns. Even amid these very acute tensions, the two governments sought an agreement to dis-engage and de-escalate. In an important joint press statement resulting from a [Sept. 10 meeting](#) between Jaishankar and China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the two sides "agreed that the current situation in the border areas is not in the interest of either side. They agreed therefore that the border troops of both sides should continue their dialogue, quickly disengage, maintain proper distance and ease tensions." But according to an [official readout](#) of the Dec. 18 20<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs, at the end of the year the two sides are still talking about "work[ing] towards early and complete disengagement of troops along the LAC in accordance with the existing bilateral agreements and protocols, and fully restor[ing] peace and tranquility." Given the low-levels to which the bilateral Sino-Indian relationship has sunk in the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of bilateral relations, the prospects for an early settlement or even disengagement on the border seem bleak. Moreover, new issues keep arising, such as China's [alleged support](#) for Indian insurgents in the northeast, [establishment of villages](#) along the Bhutan-India border, and plans to build a [major new dam](#) on the upper Brahmaputra River, that complicate the maintenance of "peace and tranquility" beyond the border to bilateral relations generally.

## India & Southeast Asia

India-Southeast Asia relations in 2020 revolved around a number of leader-level bilateral telephone calls, India's interactions with ASEAN-led regional groupings such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), East Asia Summit (EAS) and the India-ASEAN annual summit which was held online.

The [17th India-ASEAN Summit](#), co-chaired by Modi and Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, took place online on Nov. 12. In his

[remarks](#), Modi “underlined the centrality of ASEAN,” “underscored the importance of strengthening convergence between India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative and the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific,” announced the contribution of \$1 million to the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, and “reiterated India’s offer of US\$1 billion Line of Credit to support ASEAN connectivity. A new [ASEAN-India Plan of Action](#) (2021-2025) also was adopted.

On the defense and security front, India’s Defense Minister Rajnath Singh [addressed](#) the 14<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus hosted online by Vietnam. India also continued its work through East Asia Summit, cooperating with Australia and Indonesia on an [EAS Conference on Maritime Security Cooperation](#) in February 2020. Another element of India’s security outreach to multiple Southeast Asian countries was the Indian Defense Industry Global Outreach for Collaborative Partnerships: Webinar and Expo for the purpose of achieving a defense export target of \$5 billion in the next five years. In 2020, such programs were held with Cambodia and Indonesia.

However, there was noticeable dissatisfaction with trade and investment relations. In a post-summit briefing, Indian officials noted that “review of ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) has been long pending” and that the prime minister had called for an early review in speaking to his counterpart leaders. India’s official in charge of ASEAN responded to questions about the pace of completion of the review and India’s membership in RCEP tersely, saying only that “we did not join RCEP as it does not address the outstanding issues and concerns of India,” but reiterated interest in deepening trade with ASEAN member countries. But when pressed about Modi’s own reference to “diversification and resilience of supply chains” she referred to the prime minister’s articulation of *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (“self-reliance” or “self-sufficiency”) which has been [criticized by some](#) as further distancing India from regional and global economic integration. Just a month earlier, speaking to a conference in India’s northeast, the minister of state for external affairs had been [much more blunt](#) about the state of India-ASEAN economic relations. Noting that ASEAN was India’s fourth-largest trade partner and accounts for about 18% of investment inflows into India since 2000, “we are long way from the target of US\$200 billion

by 2022” their leaders had set. He also emphasized that the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) has been “ordinately delayed” and a mid-August meeting of the 17th ASEAN- India Economic Ministers India Consultations only “instructed the senior officials to start the discussions to determine the scope of the review at the earliest to, inter-alia, make the AITIGA more user-friendly, simple and trade facilitative for businesses.”

India also continued interactions with sub-groups of ASEAN countries including such mechanisms as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the India-CMLV (Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam) grouping. For example, in early December the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the India-CMLV Business Conclave was held at which India’s Minister of State for External Affairs [delivered an address](#) focusing on India’s assistance on COVID-19 as well as human capital development. Though such organizations are low-key, they do provide India with an engagement platform to some of the Southeast Asian countries that are overlooked and, when combined with eastern South Asian states, provide India with an opportunity to pursue niche forms of connectivity, commerce, and diplomacy.

Apart from an ASEAN-wide and sub-regional approach in Southeast Asia, India continued to pursue interactions bilaterally. Of these, relations with Vietnam, Myanmar, and the Philippines were active in 2020.

### India-Vietnam Relations

India and Vietnam continued high-level exchanges in 2020. Vietnam’s vice president’s [visit to India](#) in February was billed as “a step closer towards strengthening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership established in 2016 between the two countries.” It was also important for India’s wider diplomacy given Hanoi’s non-permanent membership of the UNSC in 2020-2021 and incoming chair of ASEAN. Concretely, joint direct flights between Delhi and Hanoi were inaugurated and an agreement was signed to open a Voice of Vietnam office in Delhi. Vice President Dang Thi Ngoc Thinh also visited Bodh Gaya, a key Buddhist pilgrimage site, as symbolizing cultural connections between the two countries.

The [two prime ministers](#) had a telephone conversation on April 13 to discuss the situation arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic. In August, the 17<sup>th</sup> Joint Commission Meeting co-chaired by the two Foreign Ministers. And Defense Minister Rajnath Singh held an online meeting with his Vietnamese counterpart in November.

But the most important high-level interaction was the virtual summit between the two prime ministers on Dec. 21 at which a [Joint Vision on Peace, Prosperity and People](#) to guide the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was issued as was a related plan of action for the 2021-2023 time period. Modi also flagged, in his [opening remarks](#), the fact that both countries would be serving as non-permanent members of the UNSC in 2021. Of the nine agreements announced in areas such as energy (petroleum, solar and nuclear), health and peacekeeping operations, three were in the area of defense cooperation including an “implementing agreement” for promoting defense industrial cooperation, an Indian \$5 million grant for Vietnam National Defense University’s Telecommunications University Army Software Park, and announcements related to utilizing India’s \$100 million defense line of credit to Vietnam for high speed guard boats (HSGB) for its Border Guard Command.

### India-Myanmar Relations

The most important event of the year was the state visit of Myanmar’s U Win Myint President to India in late February. A 29-paragraph India-Myanmar [joint statement](#) was issued. Of particular importance was the 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph (the first substantive bilateral issue in the joint statement) reiterating “... mutual respect for the already-demarcated portion of the boundary between the two countries and affirm[ing] their commitments to settle pending issues through the existing bilateral mechanisms, such as the Joint Boundary Working Group Meeting.” The focus on managing border and cross-border activity was also referenced again in the section on defense and security in which “[b]oth sides reiterated their commitment to peace and stability along the border areas in order to promote the prosperity of the local people, the two countries and the region. They reiterated their commitment of not allowing any negative elements to use their respective soil for hostile activities against the other side.” The high

priority given to this issue is explained by India’s ongoing concerns about the use of Myanmar territory by ethnic insurgents in India’s northeast and a more recent uptick in Indian allegations that China is supporting these insurgents via the provision of arms; something China has denied and which some experts on the area say is also unlikely. Direct defense cooperation was also referenced.



*Figure 3 Myanmar President U Win Myint meets Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi. Photo: Myanmar News Agency*

[Additional areas of cooperation](#) on defense and security flowing from the July 2019 MoU on Defense Cooperation included in the joint statement included “positive momentum” in defense visits and exchanges, “capacity building of the Myanmar Defense Services,” and “enhanced maritime cooperation” including “the signing of an MoU on Maritime Security Cooperation (MSC), conduct of a first meeting of the Joint Working Group (JWG) in September 2019 and commencement of exchange of white shipping data, as important steps in the area.”

Earlier in the year, India’s chief of navy staff had [paid a visit](#) to Myanmar during which a range of navy and maritime interactions were highlighted including Myanmar Navy’s participation in the Indian-led Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and related activities as well as bilateral cooperation via staff talks, the joint working group meeting on maritime cooperation and other operational interactions which include port visits, coordinated patrols, bilateral exercises, training, and hydrography. In addition, both the navies also interact during maritime activities such as Admiral’s Cup, Goa Maritime Conclave and Exercise MILAN.

Oct. 1, India and Myanmar held the [19<sup>th</sup> round of Foreign Office Consultations](#), virtually. The Indian delegation was led by Foreign Secretary Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla and the Myanmar

delegation was led by Permanent Secretary U Soe Han. Interestingly, the official readout of these consultations does not refer to defense and security at all.

Just three days later, India's Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla [traveled to Myanmar](#) along with Chief of Army Staff General M.M. Naravane for bilateral discussions on a range of issues. While much of the visit was reportedly focused on connectivity, commercial ties, and development, the unusual joint visit of a foreign secretary with the chief of army staff clearly had security and defense elements. According to a summary of the visit provided by India's Ministry of External Affairs, "[t]he two sides discussed maintenance of security and stability in their border areas and reiterated their mutual commitment not to allow their respective territories to be used for activities inimical to each other. The Indian side expressed their appreciation to Myanmar for handing over of 22 cadres of Indian Insurgent Groups to India."

### **India-Philippines Relations**

In early June, Modi exchanged a [telephone call](#) with President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines in which "[t]he leaders shared their satisfaction at the progress seen in recent years in all aspects of the bilateral relationship, including defense cooperation. Modi emphasized that India sees the Philippines as a vital partner in the Indo-Pacific Region." Another important event was the virtual 4<sup>th</sup> India-Philippines Joint Commission meeting in November. Of the eight-point press release of the meeting, the first substantive issue of bilateral cooperation highlighted (after COVID-19) was agreement to "further strengthen defense engagement and maritime cooperation between the two countries, especially in military training and education, capacity building, regular good-will visits, and procurement of defense equipment. They agreed to enhance cooperation in the area of counter-terrorism with information exchange between concerned agencies and support in terms of specialized training needs." Analysts in India and the Philippines [have noted](#) that there are ongoing discussions and possibly even some training on weapons systems such as the Brahmos missile system.

### **Conclusion**

The year of 2020 will make history, mostly due to the novel coronavirus pandemic, not for India-East Asia relations. Still, India maintained ties throughout the region in a very difficult year. India's decision not to join RCEP is generally assessed as a failure in its economic integration with East Asia. On the other hand, it will be worth watching to see how quickly and fully RCEP is ratified and goes into effect, and with what results for the region. India's relations with China plummeted, but were matched in diplomatic downturn, if not deaths, by China's relations with the US, Australia, and Japan. It will be worth watching if 2021 creates a new calibration in China's relations with major Indo-Pacific countries, including India. And there are new variables likely to shape the Indo-Pacific in the year ahead too; most importantly perhaps, the new Biden administration. With India slated to take up a [non-permanent seat](#) on the UN Security Council in 2021 it will be most important to observe if US and Indian cooperation, including via the Quad, will keep apace in the year ahead.

# CHRONOLOGY OF INDIA-EAST ASIA RELATIONS

## JANUARY – DECEMBER 2020

**Jan. 6–9, 2020:** A high-level Indian army delegation led by Northern Army Commander Lt. Gen. Ranbir Singh [visits](#) China to exchange views with Gen. Han Weiguo, Commander of People's Liberation Army Ground Force, on measures to enhance peace and tranquility along their borders.

**Jan. 10, 2020:** External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar [meets](#) with Mongolian delegation for the [inaugural](#) Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Executive Program for Leadership and Policy Training.

**Jan. 15–16, 2020:** Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne visits New Delhi for consultations on the bilateral Strategic Partnership.

**Feb. 4, 2020:** India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and South Korea's Minister of National Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo conduct a ministerial defense dialogue in Delhi.

**Feb. 11–13, 2020:** Vietnam's Vice President Dang Thi Ngoc Thinh travels to Delhi for meetings with India's president, vice president, and prime minister.

**Feb. 17–20, 2020:** India's chief of navy staff, Adm. Karambir Singh, [visits](#) Myanmar for bilateral discussions with Admiral Tin Aung San, Commander in Chief of the Myanmar Navy and Commander in Chief of Defense Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, and other Myanmar officials.

**Feb. 25–28, 2020:** New Zealand's Minister of Foreign Affairs Winston Peters visits India for official consultations.

**Feb. 26–29, 2020:** President of Myanmar U Win Myint makes a state visit to India.

**April 23, 2020:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi [speaks](#) by phone with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore regarding responses to COVID-19 and “[b]oth leaders stressed the importance of the India-Singapore Strategic Partnership in the present context.”

**April 28, 2020:** Modi [speaks](#) by telephone to President Jokowi Widodo of Indonesia regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and “underlined the fact that Indonesia is an important maritime partner in India's extended neighborhood.”

**May 1, 2020:** Modi [speaks](#) by phone with Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha during which he says Thailand “is a valued maritime partner in India's extended neighborhood, with ethnic and ancient cultural links.”

**May 8, 2020:** India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh [conducts](#) a telephone conversation with Japan's Minister of Defense Kono Taro. The two ministers “conveyed their commitment to take forward the initiatives of bilateral security cooperation under the framework of the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership.”

**May 26, 2020:** India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and Australia's Minister of Defense Linda Reynolds consult by phone.

**June 4, 2020:** Modi and Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison [hold](#) a Leaders' Virtual Summit and issue a Joint Statement on a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Republic of India and Australia among other declarations and agreements.

**June 9, 2020:** Modi [speaks](#) by phone to President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines during which “[t]he leaders shared their satisfaction at the progress seen in recent years in all aspects of the bilateral relationship, including defense cooperation. Prime Minister Modi emphasized that India sees the Philippines as a vital partner in the Indo-Pacific Region.”

**June 12, 2020:** Modi [speaks](#) by phone to Laos Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith, primarily regarding the COVID-19 pandemic during which he highlights the historic and cultural links between the two countries including support for a World Heritage site and the Lao prime minister thanks India for supporting Lao's development programs and capacity building for scholarships. Modi describes Laos as a "valued partner in India's extended neighborhood."

**Aug. 29, 2020:** India's Minister of Commerce and Industry & Railways. Piyush Goyal, and Vietnam's Minister of Industry and Trade Tran Tuan Anh co-chaired a virtual meeting of the 17<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-India Economic Ministers Consultations primarily regarding the ASEAN India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGIA).

**Sept. 10, 2020:** Modi and outgoing Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzo [conduct](#) a 30-minute Summit Telephone Talk.

**Sept. 25, 2020:** Modi and Japan's new Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide [conduct](#) a 25-minute Summit Telephone Talk.

**Sept. 25, 2020:** Senior officials of India, Australia, Japan, and the United States confer by video as part of ongoing quadrilateral consultations.

**Sept. 25, 2020:** Senior Ministry of Defense officials from India and senior army leaders from Cambodia [participate](#) in a webinar intended to boost India's defense exports to achieve an export target of \$5 billion in the next five years.

**Oct. 1, 2020:** India and Myanmar, led respectively by Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla and Permanent Secretary U Soe Han, [hold](#) the 19<sup>th</sup> round of Foreign Office Consultations virtually.

**Oct. 4-5, 2020:** India's Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla [travels](#) to Myanmar along with India's Chief of Army Staff General M.M. Naravane for bilateral discussions on a range of issues.

**Oct. 7, 2020:** India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar [participates](#) in the 13<sup>th</sup> Japan-India Foreign Ministers Strategic Dialogue.

**Oct. 7, 2020:** Jaishankar [travels](#) to Tokyo, Japan for individual bilateral consultations with his Japanese, American, and Australian counterparts as well as for 2<sup>nd</sup> Quad Ministerial Meeting. Later in December, the Trump administration [confers](#) "Legion of Merit" awards to Modi, Abe, and Morrison.

**Oct. 26-27, 2020:** The 3<sup>rd</sup> India-United States 2 + 2 Meeting is held in person in India. The most important of the five agreements [signed](#) during the visit was the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) which provides the legal framework for exchanging geospatial data.

**Nov. 12, 2020:** Modi and Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc [co-chair](#) the 17<sup>th</sup> India-ASEAN Summit online.

**Nov. 17, 2020:** Modi [speaks](#) virtually at the 12<sup>th</sup> BRICS Summit (Virtual)

**Nov. 17, 2020:** India's Ministry of Defense's Department of Defense Production [organizes](#) a bilateral webinar and expo with Indonesia on Indian Defense Industry Global Outreach for Collaborative Partnerships as part of a series of such interactions with friendly foreign countries in order to boost defense exports and achieve defense export target of \$5 billion in the next five years.

**Nov. 30, 2020:** India's Vice President Muppavarapu Venkaiah Naidu chairs the 19<sup>th</sup> Session of the SCO Council of Heads of Government (which includes China and Russia).

**Dec. 3, 2020:** India's External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar and Mongolia's Chief Cabinet Secretary L Oyun-Erdene [co-chair](#) the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the India-Mongolia Joint Committee on Cooperation.

**Dec. 3, 2020:** Minister of State for External Affairs V. Muraleedharan speaks to the 6<sup>th</sup> India-CMLV (Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam) Business Conclave.

**Dec. 8, 2020:** India's External Affairs Ministry Secretary (East) Ms. Riva Ganguly Das addresses the 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting of BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Working Group.

**Dec. 10, 2020:** India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh [addresses](#) the 14<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus hosted online by Vietnam.

**Dec. 10, 2020:** India's Ministry of External Affairs Secretary (East) Riva Ganguly Das conducts a virtual meeting with Stanley Loh, second permanent secretary of Singapore.

**Dec. 18, 2020:** India-Australia-Japan-United States, or "Quad," Senior Officials Consultations [take place](#) via video conference.

**Dec. 21, 2020:** Modi and Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc hold a virtual summit in which they "provide guidance for the future development of India-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership."

**Dec. 21, 2020:** India's Ministry of External Affairs Secretary (East) Ms. Riva Ganguly Das delivers the Keynote Address at the 5<sup>th</sup> Meeting of BIMSTEC Network Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT).

**Dec. 22, 2020:** India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh [holds](#) a telephone call with his Japanese counterpart and both ministers "welcomed the successful conduct of JIMEX 2020, MALABAR 2020 and also the recent successful visit of Chief of Staff, JASDF to India."

**Dec. 23, 2020:** India's Ministry of External Affairs Secretary (East) Ms Riva Ganguly Das and South Korea's First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun [conduct](#) a digital video conference. India continues to seek opportunities for defense industrial cooperation with Korea. In January 2020 South Korea's Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering [was named](#) one of five companies shortlist for India's P-75I submarine project.

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