



# 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

### REGIONAL OVERVIEW

## EUROPE "DISCOVERS" ASIA AND WASHINGTON "DISCOVERS" SEA, AMID AFGHAN ANXIETY

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Joe Biden pledged that the US would resume its traditional role as leader of US alliances, supporter of multilateralism, and champion of international law and institutions. Throughout its first nine months, his administration has labored to turn those words into reality, and for the first six months the focus was on Asia, at least Northeast Asia. During this reporting period, Biden himself worked on multilateral initiatives and while the primary venues were Atlanticist—the G7 summit, NATO, and the European Union—Asia figured prominently in those discussions. Chinese behavior loomed large in European discussions as NATO allies conducted ship visits and military exercises in the region to underscore these concerns. Meanwhile, a number of senior US foreign policy and security officials visited Asia, and Southeast Asia in particular, amidst complaints of neglect from Washington. Concerns about Chinese pressure against Taiwan also grew in the region and beyond. The impact of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, messy as it appeared to be, has thus far not resulted in a crisis of confidence regarding US commitment to the region.

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This article is extracted from *Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal of Bilateral Relations in the Indo-Pacific*, Vol. 23, No. 2, September 2021. Preferred citation: Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman, "Regional Overview: Europe "Discovers" Asia and Washington "Discovers" SEA, Amid Afghan Anxiety," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp 1-6.

## Trans-Atlantic Meetings with an Asian Flavor

At the June G7 meeting that British Prime Minister Boris Johnson hosted in Cornwall, the leaders [pledged](#) to donate over 1 billion doses of COVID vaccines to help developing nations overcome the pandemic. Significantly (and for our purposes), they also expressed “serious concern” over China’s maritime advancement and stressed the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, the first-ever mention of the Taiwan Strait by the G7. China also hovered over the group’s deliberations when attendees agreed to launch an initiative to help developing nations build infrastructure, a project that aimed to counter China’s Belt and Road Initiative. [Build Back Better World](#) (BBBW) will help low- and middle-income nations around the world address their “tremendous infrastructure needs.” Through it, “the G7 and other like-minded partners will coordinate to mobilize private-sector capital in four areas—climate, health and health security, digital technology, and gender equity and equality—with catalytic investments from our respective development finance institutions.”

At the EU and NATO meetings that Biden attended afterward, China was also prominent on the agenda. US and European leaders [said](#) that they would “closely consult and cooperate on the full range of issues” as they deal with China, addressing “ongoing human rights violations in Xinjiang and Tibet; the erosion of autonomy and democratic processes in Hong Kong; economic coercion; disinformation campaigns; and regional security issues.” The latter included “the situation in the East and South China Seas,” and the leaders “strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo and increase tensions.” Again, Taiwan was mentioned: “We underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues.” Importantly, while the statement acknowledged the need to cooperate with Beijing, it explicitly called for efforts “to coordinate on our constructive engagement with China on issues such as climate change and non-proliferation, and on certain regional issues.” The US-EU joint statement also backed the G7 pledge to help Build Back Better, efforts to provide 2 billion COVID vaccines, and launched a Joint EU-US COVID Manufacturing and Supply Chain Taskforce “to deepen cooperation and identify and resolve issues around expanding vaccine and therapeutics production capacity, including by

building new production facilities, maintaining open and secure supply chains, avoiding any unnecessary export restrictions, and encouraging voluntary sharing of know-how and technology on mutually-determined terms...”

The NATO summit covered similar ground, although its statement understandably focused more on security issues. It [noted](#) “China’s growing influence and international policies can present challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance” and promised to “engage China in constructive dialogue ... with a view to defending the security interests of the Alliance.” It asserted that “China’s stated ambitions and assertive behavior present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to Alliance security” and the group expressed concern about “coercive policies which stand in contrast to the fundamental values enshrined in the Washington Treaty.” The NATO statement defined the China threat—and its response to it—broadly. It requires efforts “to protect critical infrastructure, strengthen resilience, maintain our technological edge, and address these challenges to the rules-based international order.”



Figure 1 During a NATO summit in Brussels, leaders asserted that China presents “systemic challenges” to international order. Photo: Jacques Witt/ AP via The Guardian

The alignment of views is salutary but there are worries about important distinctions between US and European thinking about China. There is considerably less enthusiasm in Europe than in the US about building an “anti-China” coalition, although that isn’t a fair characterization of US policy. After all, the US isn’t opposed to all engagement with Beijing. The trick will be containing trans-Atlantic tension and friction when governments draw different lines. It isn’t impossible but it will take work, patience, and understanding of the other side’s interests and

equities. Much will depend on the tone set by the top leadership; questions about US thinking may have been (temporarily) assuaged, but there will soon be a new leader in Berlin, which could be a new source of discord.

### Naval Deployments are All the Rage

While some credit (or blame) the US for getting or elevating China on the trans-Atlantic agenda, those governments on their own are evincing greater interest in and concern about the Indo-Pacific. The French-[led](#) exercises in the Bay of Bengal that included for the first time all the Quad navies—the US, Japan, Australia, and India—in April. The following month, US, Japanese, Australian, and French forces held a joint military drill in the East China Sea, the first time France had joined such exercises.

In July, nine countries joined the US-Australia *Talisman Sabre* joint exercises. Among the participating militaries were forces from Japan, the UK, Canada, South Korea, and New Zealand while India, Indonesia, Germany, and France were observers.



Figure 2 USS America (LHA-6) with the Royal Australian Navy frigate HMAS Ballarat (FFH155) during the Exercise Talisman Sabre 21. Photo: US Navy Photo via USNI News

Following Japan's [urgings](#) last year, in August Germany dispatched a warship for a six-month deployment that will include a transit of the South China Sea for the first time in two decades. As Foreign Minister Heiko Maas [explained](#), "We aim to be involved and to take responsibility for maintaining the rule-based international order." Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer added that "For our partners in the Indo-Pacific, it is a reality that sea routes are no longer open and secure, and that claims to territory are being applied by the law of might is right." In the Indo-Pacific region, "important

decisions on peace, security and prosperity will be made," Kramp-Karrenbauer said.

And as summer drew to a close, the *HMS Queen Elizabeth* made the first port call in Japan by a British aircraft carrier when it arrived at the Yokosuka naval base. The British carrier strike group conducted joint exercises with the US Navy, Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force, and a Dutch frigate in late August. The head of the strike force, Commodore Steve Moorhouse, [said](#) the visit demonstrates "the UK's commitment to investing in our partnership with Japan." Japanese Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo said the visit, like that of other European nations, will contribute to peace and security and signals the transition of the Japan-UK defense relationship to a new stage.

### Southeast Asia in the Spotlight

Last trimester's [focus](#) was clearly on Northeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific, with the first (virtual) Quad summit (involving Australia, India, Japan, and the US) plus [Japan](#) and [Korea](#) 2+2 meetings and other senior-level gatherings. This trimester the focus shifted southward with a number of high-level visits, including Vice President Kamela Harris' first major overseas trip, to the region.

Harris' visit was preceded by a week-long visit to Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in July. Both visits focused on the joint effort to combat COVID. But security issues were not overlooked. During his [Fullerton Lecture](#) to the IISS in Singapore (the annual IISS Shangri-La Dialogue was canceled this year due to COVID concerns), he reaffirmed "enduring American commitments" and stressed the "strategic imperative of partnership": "I've come to Southeast Asia to deepen America's bonds with the allies and partners on whom our common security depends. Our network of alliances and friendships is an unparalleled strategic asset. And I never take an ally for granted." Austin stressed his 21<sup>st</sup>-century vision of integrated deterrence: "using every military and non-military tool in our toolbox, in lock-step with our allies and partners. ... using existing capabilities, and building new ones, and deploying them all in new and networked ways."

Concern about stability across the Taiwan Strait, noted in prior US statements with Japan, Korea, Australia, and European allies but rarely discussed with Southeast Asians, also figured

prominently in Austin's comments in Singapore and elsewhere: "we are working with Taiwan to enhance its own capabilities and to increase its readiness to deter threats and coercion ... upholding our commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act, and consistent with our one-China policy."

Vice President Harris' trip in August was aimed at reinforcing US commitment to the region and the timing could not have been better (or worse, depending on one's point of view), coming in the midst of the troubled Afghan withdrawal. At her [joint press conference](#) with Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, she reaffirmed "the United States' commitment to working with our allies and partners around the Indo-Pacific to uphold the rules-based international order and freedom of navigation, including in the South China Sea."



Figure 3 At a joint press conference with Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, US Vice President Kamala Harris reaffirms the United States' commitment to working with allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. Photo: Reuters via Nikkei Asia

Prime Minister Lee addressed the question of US commitment to the region in the wake of the then-in progress Afghan withdrawal head on: "what will influence perceptions of US resolve and commitment to the region will be what the US does going forward, how it repositions itself in the region, how it engages its broad range of friends and partners and allies in the region, and how it continues the fight against terrorism. ... There have also been, over decades, dramatic transformations in Asia, wrought by the benign and constructive influence of the United States as a regional guarantor of security and support of prosperity. And Singapore hopes and works on the basis that the US will continue to play that role and continue to engage the region for many more years to come." More on this subject later.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken also (virtually) [participated](#) in a series of ASEAN-related forums including the US-ASEAN and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) ministerials and a prep session for this fall's East Asia Summit. The virtual format allowed him to participate with, without being in the same room as, his Myanmar counterpart. North Korea's ambassador to Indonesia, An Kwang Il, also attended the ARF session. While a State Department official [said](#) that no back-and-forth occurred between An and Blinken, he noted that "In terms of possible discussions down the road, the secretary mentioned that he was open to different possibilities," and he hoped that "the DPRK side heard us and will take those messages back to Pyongyang, and we'll see what happens." Nonetheless, Blinken "reiterated an interest in a sort of comprehensive, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

Blinken made the usual statements in support of ASEAN centrality, as did the [ARF Chairman's Statement](#) issued by this year's host, Brunei. We talked in our last report about how ASEAN, at Indonesia's insistence, had stepped up, tentatively, in proclaiming a Five Point Consensus on dealing with the turmoil in Myanmar. While welcoming Myanmar's "commitment" to this plan, the Statement sadly noted that, with the exception of the appointment of Brunei's second foreign minister as Special Envoy, literally nothing had been done to halt the violence. It did note that "the Meeting also heard calls for the release of political detainees including foreigners," a pointed reference to the sixth Consensus item which did not make the cut in Jakarta.

#### APEC Comes Together to Fight COVID

New Zealand, the chair this year of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, held an extraordinary virtual "informal leaders' retreat" in July that focused on efforts to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. Acknowledging that the outbreak is having "a devastating impact on our region's people and economies"—there have been over 50 million cases of COVID in APEC countries, claiming more than 1 million lives and shrinking GDP across the group by a collective 1.9%—the leaders [promised](#) to "[accelerate] equitable access to safe, effective, quality-assured, and affordable COVID-19 vaccines" to fight the pandemic. They said that they would "redouble our efforts to expand vaccine manufacture and supply, support global vaccine sharing efforts, and encourage the

voluntary transfer of vaccine production technologies on mutually agreed terms.” The key, as New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, APEC 2021 chair, [explained](#) after the meeting, was moving beyond vaccine nationalism to a concerted “global vaccination effort—making vaccines, sharing vaccines and using vaccines.”

This was the first-ever extraordinary meeting, and the rhetoric was a pointed contrast with recent APEC leaders get-togethers. The group couldn’t reach consensus to issue a communique in 2018, the 2019 meeting in Chile was canceled because of domestic protests, and last year host Malaysia had to scramble to organize a virtual leaders chat as the pandemic intensified. In June, APEC trade ministers agreed to review trade barriers and expedite the cross-border transit of vaccines and related goods, but they would not commit to eliminating all related tariffs. The issue will likely be taken up again at the annual leaders meeting, currently scheduled for November, which will hopefully be held in person.

#### **Afghan Withdrawal Undercuts Biden’s Plan to Focus on Real Challenges**

In April, President Biden announced that he would withdraw all US troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the al-Qaeda attacks on the United States. He reiterated that pledge in July, repeating his logic and noting that preparations were underway, emphasizing the readiness to evacuate and welcome the thousands of Afghans who had assisted the allied effort and whose lives would be threatened if the Taliban were to return to power.

In mid-August, the government of Afghanistan collapsed, President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, and the military handed over its weapons to the Taliban and melted away. The world watched as chaos descended on Kabul’s Hamid Karzai airport as thousands of Afghans tried to escape the country and the Taliban. All belied the notion that the US had prepared for withdrawal and instead offered an image of confusion and incompetence, raising questions of US credibility, capability, and commitment. A terrorist attack by ISIS-K on the airport, which claimed the lives of 13 US service personnel and more than 100 Afghans, underscored the seeming re-emergence of the threat the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan was supposed to end.

In fact, the chaos was temporary and by the time the last US serviceperson had left the country over 100,000 people had been evacuated. Echoing Prime Minister Lee’s earlier cited comments, other friends and allies in Asia [insisted](#) that their faith in the US remained strong; they distinguished their relationships with the US from that of Afghanistan. More importantly, Biden [argued](#) that withdrawal was intended to facilitate a focus on the real challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “the strategic competition with China and other nations that is really going to determine—determine our future.” If Biden can do that, and that new focus can be sustained, then US credibility and capability should be enhanced rather than diminished by this grim episode.

# REGIONAL CHRONOLOGY

## MAY – AUGUST 2021

**May 3, 2021:** Japanese government [lodges](#) diplomatic protest against the presence of a Chinese marine research vessel conducting unauthorized research within Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone, the first confirmed incursion around the Okinawa area since July 2019.

**May 4, 2021:** US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [calls](#) for coordinated efforts to denuclearize North Korea at the G7 summit.

**May 5, 2021:** G7 foreign ministers, including those from Japan and the US, [issue](#) a joint statement warning China not to escalate cross-strait tensions with Taiwan.

**May 5, 2021:** US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [suggests](#) a new concept of integrated deterrence that calls for Japan to assume a role in the numerous chokepoints of the Nansei Islands group.

**May 6, 2021:** Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-young [meet](#) in London on the sidelines of the G7 foreign ministers' summit.

**May 6, 2021:** China [suspends](#) its Strategic Economic Dialogue with Australia.

**May 9, 2021:** China and Indonesia [conduct](#) a joint naval exercise off the coast of Jakarta.

**May 11-16, 2021:** US, Japan, France, and Australia [conduct](#) joint training exercise *Jeanne D'Arc 21* in Japan.

**May 16, 2021:** For the first time, the Japanese government publicly [identifies](#) China as responsible for a cyberattack.

**May 12, 2021:** State Department [transmits](#) its 2020 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom to Congress and announces sanctions against Chinese citizen Yu Hui, former Office Director of the "Central Leading Group on Preventing and Dealing with Heretical Religions" for his involvement in human rights violations such as the detention of Falun Gong practitioners.

**May 14, 2021:** Hong Kong police [freeze](#) the assets of media mogul Jimmy Lai, citing the National Security Law.

**May 17, 2021:** Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide and Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh [have phone talks](#) discussing China's maritime actions and cooperation.

**May 18, 2021:** President Joe Biden [says](#) that the United States will provide up to 80 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to other countries by the end of next month, reiterating his pledge to turn the US into an "arsenal" of vaccines for the entire world.

**May 18, 2021:** US Senate [passes](#) the Endless Frontier Act 86-11. It would provide \$120 billion to expand research into cutting-edge technologies to make the US more competitive with China.

**May 19, 2021:** Prime Minister Suga and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte [agree](#) to cooperate in maintaining regional peace and stability during phone talks.

**May 20, 2021:** Chinese military's Southern Theatre Command [says](#) *USS Curtis Wilbur* illegally entered waters near the Paracel islands without permission, which violates its sovereignty and undermines regional peace and stability.

**May 20, 2021:** Secretary Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov [meet](#) in Reykjavik on the sidelines of the Arctic Council meeting.

**May 20, 2021:** Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin [join](#) the groundbreaking ceremony for the construction of four nuclear reactors made with Russian technology via video conference.

**May 21, 2021:** Japanese apparel companies World and Mizuno announce they [will stop](#) using Xinjiang cotton in response to allegations of human rights abuses by the Chinese government.

**May 22, 2021:** President Biden [meets](#) South Korean President Moon Jae-in, the second foreign leader Biden hosts in Washington. During a joint press conference, Biden announces appointment of Sung Kim as special envoy for North Korea. Moon [announces](#) a joint decision with the US to end guidelines that restricted Seoul's development of missiles, and [an agreement](#) to work together to build stable supply chains for semiconductors, electric vehicle batteries, and medical supplies.

**May 22, 2021:** China and the Philippines [hold](#) talks on the South China Sea under a bilateral consultation mechanism set up in 2016 to address tensions in the maritime dispute. Senior officials from both sides confirm that the talks are "friendly and candid."

**May 24, 2021:** Indonesian Investment Minister Bahlil Lahadalia [announces](#) that state-owned Indonesia Battery Corporation and South Korea's LG will build a new \$1.2 billion battery plant in Bekasi, Indonesia.

**May 25, 2021:** Meeting between Secretary Blinken and Southeast Asian foreign ministers is rescheduled for next week due to a technical [glitch](#) on the US end.

**May 25, 2021:** 16th China-Russia strategic security consultation is [held](#) in Moscow.

**May 26, 2021:** US Ambassador to Indonesia Sung Kim [begins](#) work as a special representative for North Korea, speaking with his Japanese counterpart, Takehiro Funakoshi.

**May 27, 2021:** Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam propose to Liechtenstein to [drop](#) the Myanmar arms embargo.

**May 27, 2021:** US and Japanese interagency representatives [hold](#) first US-Japan Global Digital Connectivity Partnership meeting.

**May 27, 2021:** Shanghai Cooperation Organisation [holds](#) an online meeting of experts to prepare for the first meeting of Security Council Secretaries in Tashkent.

**May 28, 2021:** South Asian countries, such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, [turn](#) to China for vaccines for COVID-19 after India's suspension of vaccine exports.

**May 28, 2021:** Japanese and EU leaders [release](#) joint statement that "underscored the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" and calls for "enhanced cooperation for a free and open Pacific."

**May 28, 2021:** *38 North* [says](#) that North Korea appears to be continuing activities at its Yongbyon nuclear complex but no clear evidence has been detected to determine if spent fuel rods have been transferred from the storage facility to produce plutonium.

**May 29, 2021:** Philippines lifts [ban](#) in Filipino workers traveling to Saudi Arabia for jobs.

**May 31, 2021:** Malaysia's foreign ministry accuses China of [violating](#) its airspace and emphasizes that national security is uncompromising.

**May 31, 2021:** North Korea [slams](#) US lifting of missile restrictions on South Korea as a “stark reminder” of Washington’s hostile approach to Pyongyang, saying the recently unveiled US policy on North Korea is “just trickery.”

**June 1, 2021:** Taiwan cuts [water](#) supply for chip-making hub Taichung because of drought.

**June 2, 2021:** Indonesian government ends the [salvage](#) efforts to retrieve a sunken submarine that claimed 53 lives.

**June 2, 2021:** Secretary Blinken [has](#) called on NATO members to deepen their cooperation with South Korea amid US efforts to reinforce cooperation between US allies.

**June 2, 2021:** Cambodian Defense Minister Tea Banh [announces](#) that China will help expand and modernize Ream port, Cambodia’s largest naval base.

**June 3, 2021:** Suga, speaking at Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting, [urges](#) the 18 nations to unite against authoritarianism and in favor of freedom navigation in the high seas and respect for international law.

**June 3, 2021:** Biden [issues](#) order banning US investment in Chinese firms that aid surveillance and repression both inside and outside China. It expands on EO13959 of Nov. 12, 2020.

**June 4, 2021:** Hong Kong police bans [vigil](#) commemorating the crackdown of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

**June 4, 2021:** Japanese Coast Guard [confirms](#) presence of four China Coast Guard vessels in the contiguous zone off the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands; they mark a record 112 consecutive days of such intrusions.

**June 5, 2021:** Ministers from [APEC](#) commit to work to facilitate movement of essential goods and COVID-19 vaccines.

**June 6, 2021:** As three US senators visit Taiwan, President Tsai Ing-wen expresses gratitude for the US plan to [donate](#) 750,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses to Taiwan.

**June 7, 2021:** US and Japan [begin](#) their annual *Orient Shield* military exercise.

**June 7, 2021:** Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi attends and [co-chairs](#) meetings with foreign ministers of ASEAN countries.

**June 8, 2021:** US and Australian authorities [arrest](#) suspected organized crime figures in 18 countries as a result of the two countries’ joint operation.

**June 8, 2021:** US Senate Committee on Armed Services [holds](#) a hearing entitled “The United States’ Strategic Competition with China.”

**June 9, 2021:** Samoa’s leader Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi [promises](#) to build a port at Vaiusu, west of the capital Apia, with \$100 million in Chinese aid.

**June 9, 2021:** President Biden [revokes](#) executive orders targeting Chinese-owned TikTok and WeChat apps initiated by President Trump and signs a new order directing the Commerce Department to evaluate all software applications with potential ties to foreign adversaries including China and take action to protect data on US citizens gathered by the apps.

**June 9, 2021:** Secretary of Defense Austin [issues](#) a directive to reorient the US military to better compete with Beijing. Few details are known, but its said to contribute to whole-of-government efforts to address challenges from China.

**June 10, 2021:** China’s legislature, the National People’s Congress, [passes](#) Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law to provide a legal foundation to counter US and EU sanctions over trade, technology, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang.

**June 12, 2021:** At G7 summit, leaders commit to creating an infrastructure financing mechanism to serve as an [alternative](#) to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

**June 13, 2021:** G7 leaders [pledge](#) to donate more than 1 billion doses of COVID vaccines to help developing nations overcome the pandemic. G7 nations also [issue](#) a joint statement calling for the complete denuclearization of North Korea, welcoming the commitment of Washington to engage with Pyongyang through diplomacy, as well as a [criticisms](#) of China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang, calls for Hong Kong to maintain a high degree of autonomy, and emphasis on the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. China denounces the statement.

**June 14, 2021:** Myanmar's opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi goes on trial for [corruption](#) charges.

**June 14, 2021:** China [flies](#) 28 warplanes into Taiwan-controlled airspace, the biggest sortie of its kind since the Taiwanese government began publishing information about incursions last year.

**June 14, 2021:** Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Locsin [announces](#) that Manila will further delay its decision to suspend the Visiting Forces Agreement with the US, citing tension in disputed waters in the South China Sea between the Philippines and China.

**June 14, 2021:** Heads of state and government at the NATO summit [release](#) a statement noting that "China's growing influence and international policies can present challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance" and promised to "engage China in constructive dialogue ... with a view to defending the security interests of the Alliance."

**June 15, 2021:** US and European leaders [say](#) they will "closely consult and cooperate on the full range of issues" as they deal with China, addressing "ongoing human rights violations in Xinjiang and Tibet; the erosion of autonomy and democratic processes in Hong Kong; economic coercion; disinformation campaigns; and regional security issues."

**June 16, 2021:** Hong Kong police arrest pro-democracy [Apple Daily](#) newspaper's five editors and executives under Hong Kong's national security law.

**June 16, 2021:** At the ADMM Plus meeting, China's defense minister [refers](#) to the South China Sea as a "core interest," saying "On issues related to Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea, China is determined to safeguard the country's core interests."

**June 16, 2021:** Draft of Japan's Defense 2021 white paper [states](#), for the first time, the strategic importance of Taiwan for Japan's national security and stabilization of the international community.

**June 17, 2021:** Chinese Coast Guard 2301 fleet [conducts](#) a patrol in the territorial waters off the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, the sixth time since the beginning of 2021 such patrols have been publicly announced.

**June 18, 2021:** Australia takes China's anti-dumping duties on its [wine](#) imports to the World Trade Organization.

**June 19, 2021:** Cambodian Prime Minister [Hun Sen](#) says he is in quarantine for 14 days and cancels scheduled talks with British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab.

**June 20, 2021:** Myanmar [junta](#) leader Min Aung Hlaing arrives in Moscow to attend a security conference.

**June 22, 2021:** Singapore and Vietnam [sign](#) agreements to accelerate development of the digital economy.

**June 22, 2021:** Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer, *USS Curtis Wilbur*, [sails](#) through the Taiwan Strait.

**June 23, 2021:** China [convenes](#) virtual conference on the Belt and Road Initiative with representatives from more than 30 countries and regional and international organizations.

**June 23, 2021:** Russia commits to strengthening military ties with Myanmar's [junta](#) through bilateral visits and arms deals.

**June 23, 2021:** Hong Kong's pro-democracy newspaper [Apple Daily](#) announces it will print its last edition June 24.

**June 23, 2021:** China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi chairs the Asia and Pacific High-level Conference on [Belt and Road Cooperation](#) via video link in Beijing.

**June 24, 2021:** A senior US diplomat says that Washington no longer sees [Taiwan](#) as a problem in its relations with Beijing but as an opportunity to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific.

**June 24, 2021:** Department of Labor's Bureau of International Labor Affairs [publishes](#) a Federal Register Notice updating its "List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor" to include polysilicon produced in China.

**June 24, 2021:** Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force [joins](#) the US and Sri Lanka for the first time in the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercises.

**June 25, 2021:** Pentagon announces that the State Department approved the [sale](#) of F-15 fighter jets and two types of missiles to the Philippines.

**June 25, 2021:** Japan [ratifies](#) Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

**July 27, 2021:** Secretary of Defense Austin [says](#) during a speech in Singapore that China's claims over the Taiwan Strait have no basis in international law, and that the US will enhance its capabilities to deter China, consistent with its commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act and the US one-China policy.

**June 27, 2021:** India [deploys](#) 50,000 soldiers to the Chinese border amid a stalemate in the disengagement process in eastern Ladakh.

**June 28, 2021:** Seoul approves plans to pursue a \$2.6-billion "Korean Iron Dome" [air defense artillery](#) system to counter North Korea's long range guns and missiles.

**June 28, 2021:** President Xi Jinping and Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin [hold](#) video conference for 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation.

**June 29, 2021:** North Korean leader [Kim Jong Un](#) reprimands top ruling party officials for failures in anti-epidemic work.

**June 29, 2021:** US State Department [appoints](#) Atul Keshap as Chargé d'Affaires (CDA) ad interim to replace Daniel Smith in New Delhi.

**June 30, 2021:** *Financial Times* [reports](#) that the US and Japan have been conducting war games and joint military exercises in the event of a conflict with China over Taiwan.

**June 30, 2021:** Taiwan and the United States hold bilateral [trade talks](#) on issues related to supply chains, market access for US pork producers, and vaccine production.

**July 1, 2021:** At Tiananmen Square, on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Communist Party's founding, Xi Jinping warns that Beijing will not [tolerate](#) foreign obstruction on the country's path to becoming a superpower.

**July 2, 2021:** US [shortlists](#) North Korea as a nation complicit in human trafficking and forced labor again.

**July 5, 2021:** Deputy Prime Minister Aso Taro [states](#) that if China were to invade Taiwan, the move could be interpreted as a threat to Japan's survival, enabling the SDF to be deployed for collective self-defense under security laws enacted in 2015.

**July 6, 2021:** US top envoy for North Korea speaks with Chinese counterpart after Pyongyang's repeated [rejection](#) of efforts to establish a dialogue with the Biden administration.

**July 6, 2021:** Russian FM Lavrov says ASEAN's Five Point [Consensus](#) should be the basis to end the political crisis in Myanmar.

**July 8, 2021:** Amid growing suspicions that the COVID-19 pandemic began with a lab leak in China, a group of renowned international scientists [say](#) that coronavirus most likely came from animals rather than a laboratory leak.

**July 8, 2021:** Taiwan [asks](#) the US not to cause "unnecessary speculation or misunderstanding" after the White House deleted a social media post on COVID-19 vaccine donations that included the ROC flag.

**July 9, 2021:** The US government adds 14 Chinese companies and other entities to its economic [black list](#) over alleged human rights abuse and high-tech surveillance in Xinjiang.

**July 9, 2021:** North Korea [rejects](#) planned shipments of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine that were being organized under the Covax distribution scheme due to concerns over side effects.

**July 10, 2021:** Vietnam receives [2 million](#) COVID-19 vaccines donated by the US government as it battles its worst outbreak of the pandemic.

**July 10, 2021:** Bangladesh has [secured](#) deals for 17.5 million more COVID-19 vaccines from the Covax international alliance and China.

**July 12, 2021:** New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern [chairs](#) an informal meeting of leaders from countries in the Asia-Pacific trade group APEC to discuss COVID-19 pandemic.

**July 12, 2021:** Taiwan's Foxconn and Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co say they have reached deals to [purchase](#) 10 million doses of Germany's BioNTech's SE's COVID-19 vaccine.

**July 12, 2021:** China's military says it "[drove away](#)" a US warship that illegally entered Chinese waters near the Paracel Islands.

**July 13, 2021:** Japan's 2021 defense white paper [is released](#), devoting three times as much coverage to China than to the United States in outlining the defense programs of various nations.

**July 13, 2021:** Secretary Blinken [meets](#) with ASEAN counterparts and reiterated Washington's position that it will not accept China's claims in the South China Sea.

**July 14, 2021:** India and China agree to seek mutually acceptable [solution](#) to Western Himalayas border problem.

**July 14, 2021:** Manila [accuses](#) Chinese fishing boats and trawlers of dumping raw sewage on coral reefs in the South China Sea.

**July 16, 2021:** APEC leaders [issue](#) a statement that extensive COVID-19 immunization is a global public good and accelerating access to vaccines is essential to overcoming the pandemic.

**July 16, 2021:** Chinese President Xi's remarks at the APEC Informal Economic Leaders' Retreat [highlight](#) China's vaccine diplomacy and contributions to the Global South, as well as China's commitment to strengthening regional and global trade and economic recovery through such trade initiatives as RCEP.

**July 16, 2021:** Departments of State, Treasury, Commerce, and Homeland Security [issue](#) a business advisory to warn US businesses of risks to their activities in Hong Kong and encourage due diligence to mitigate such risks.

**July 17, 2021:** South Korea [summons](#) the Japanese ambassador over "undiplomatic" remarks about President Moon Jae-in and the possibility of a summit during the Tokyo Olympics.

**July 17, 2021:** Treasury Department [adds](#) seven people from China's Hong Kong Liaison office to its "specially designated nationals list."

**July 19, 2021:** China's President Xi [tells](#) Mongolian president that the neighbors should 'support each other's ... concerns' ahead of a US official's visit.

**July 19, 2021:** Department of Justice [charges](#) four Chinese nationals who allegedly work for the Hainan State Security Department, a provincial arm of the Ministry of State Security, with hacking the computer systems of dozens of companies, universities, and government entities in the US and abroad between 2011 and 2018.

**July 20, 2021:** Russian tanks are [deployed](#) near the Afghan-Tajik border ahead of military exercises next month and Moscow announced more drills in neighboring Uzbekistan.

**July 21, 2021:** Deputy Secretary of State Sherman [meets](#) Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Mori Takeo and Republic of Korea First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong Kun today in Tokyo.

**July 22, 2021:** Chinese government [offers](#) indirect thank you to Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen for her message of concern over devastating floods in the Chinese province of Henan.

**July 23, 2021:** Opening ceremonies for the Summer Olympics are [held](#) in Tokyo.

**July 23, 2021:** China retaliates against the July 16 US imposition of financial sanctions on officials in the Liaison Office of the Hong Kong government, [imposing](#) sanctions on seven US individuals and an entity, including former Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross.

**July 26, 2021:** China [hands](#) the US a list of grievances and a list of red line issues but agreed to maintain communication with Washington.

**July 27, 2021:** Secretary of Defense Austin says that the US seeks [no confrontation](#) with China but "will not flinch" during his visit in Singapore.

**July 27, 2021:** Samoa's 1st female prime minister Fiame Naomi Mata'afa takes [office](#) after her predecessor Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi had been reluctant to relinquish his power.

**July 27, 2021:** President Biden [warns](#) that the US could end up in a "real shooting war" with a "major power" as the result of a significant cyber-attack on the country.

**July 28, 2021:** Shanghai Cooperation Organization defense ministers [hold](#) their annual meeting in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

**July 28, 2021:** US destroyer USS *Benfold*, [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait.

**July 28, 2021:** China's National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee takes first steps toward imposing an [anti-sanctions law](#) on Hong Kong.

**July 28, 2021:** Taiwan authorities announce they are [investigating](#) a former deputy defense minister and several other serving and retired military officers over contacts with China.

**July 30, 2021:** Philippines President Duterte [announces](#) decision to restore the Visiting Forces Agreement with the US. The agreement would continue to allow the rotation of thousands of US troops in and out of the Philippines for military exercises. The decision is announced during US Secretary of Defense Austin's visit to Manila.

**Aug. 1, 2021:** Kim Yo Jong, the sister of Kim Jong Un, warns that US-South Korea joint military exercise will [damage](#) the resolve of the two Koreas to rebuild relations.

**Aug. 1, 2021:** Myanmar's military ruler Min Aung Hlaing [promises](#) new multi-party elections and says his government is ready to work with any special envoy from the ASEAN.

**Aug. 1, 2021:** New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern [issues](#) a somber state apology to the Pacific Islander community for racially targeted immigration raids in the 1970s.

**Aug. 2, 2021:** US, Japan, Australia, and UK [begin](#) US-led *Large Scale Global Exercise 21*.

**Aug. 2, 2021:** Germany [dispatches](#) a warship for a six-month deployment that will include a transit of the South China Sea for the first time in two decades.

**Aug. 2-6, 2021:** Secretary Blinken [participates](#) virtually in five virtual ASEAN-related ministerial meetings: U.S.-ASEAN, East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Mekong-U.S. Partnership, and Friends of the Mekong ministerial meetings.

**Aug. 3, 2021:** Foreign ministers of Japan and ASEAN [agree](#) on the importance of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

**Aug. 3, 2021:** Secretary Blinken [initiates](#) "strategic dialogue" between the US and Indonesia at talks in Washington with Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi.

**Aug. 3, 2021:** State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi [attends](#) the ASEAN-China Ministerial Meeting via video link.

**Aug. 4, 2021:** ASEAN [appoints](#) Erywan Yusof, one of Brunei's top diplomats, as special envoy to Myanmar.

**Aug. 4, 2021:** Defense Security Cooperation Agency [announces](#) that the State Department has approved the sale of a new arms package to Taiwan. The package features 40 155mm M109A6 Medium Self-Propelled Howitzer Systems, among other equipment.

**Aug. 4, 2021:** India [deploys](#) a naval task force to the South China Sea this month to expand security ties with friendly countries, signaling its intent to play a bigger role in the region.

**Aug. 6, 2021:** President Biden [offers](#) temporary "safe haven" to Hong Kong residents in the US.

**Aug. 8, 2021:** South Korea [decides](#) to conduct military exercise with the US as planned despite North Korea's warning not to proceed.

**Aug. 9-13, 2021:** China and Russia [conduct](#) strategic exercise "*WestCoordination-2021*" in northwestern China.

**Aug. 9, 2021:** Nagasaki [commemorates](#) the 76th anniversary of its destruction by a US atomic bomb, with the mayor advocating to build on a new global nuclear ban treaty.

**Aug. 9, 2021:** Secretary Blinken [says](#) the US is willing to consider different "options" and "possibilities" with North Korea and calls for Pyongyang's return to dialogue, even as a State Department official confirms that no contact between US and North Korean representatives took place as the ASEAN Regional Forum.

**Aug. 10, 2021:** China said the United States is [not qualified](#) to make irresponsible remarks on the issue of the South China Sea during a UN Security Council meeting on maritime security.

**Aug. 11, 2021:** Chinese court in Dandong [sentences](#) a Canadian citizen to 11 years on a charge of espionage.

**Aug. 11, 2021:** China and Myanmar announce that they will continue to deepen bilateral economic relations. China [announces](#) that it will transfer over \$6 million to Myanmar to support nearly two dozen development projects in the country

**Aug. 11, 2021:** China's Director-General of the Department of Asian Affairs of the Foreign Ministry Liu Jinsong [meets](#) Nepalese Ambassador to China Mahendra Bahadur Pandey.

**Aug. 12, 2021:** Senior diplomats from the US, Japan, India, and Australia [hold](#) another round of talks, as the Quad continues to grow closer in the face of an increasingly assertive Beijing.

**Aug. 13, 2021:** South Korean navy [commissioned](#) its first domestically built submarine capable of launching ballistic missiles to hunt North Korean boats.

**Aug. 15, 2021:** 400,000 doses of Johnson & Johnson's Janssen COVID-19 vaccine that the US agreed to provide [arrive](#) in South Korea on Sunday, according to the US Embassy in Seoul.

**Aug. 15, 2021:** US [evacuates](#) embassy in Kabul as Taliban seizes control of the Afghani capital.

**Aug. 16, 2021:** South Korea and the US [start](#) annual joint military training amid North Korea's strong protest and threats of a serious security crisis.

**Aug. 17, 2021:** Taiwan would not [collapse](#) like Afghanistan in the event of an attack, Premier Su Tseng-chang says on Tuesday.

**Aug. 18, 2021:** Four student union leaders at the University of Hong Kong are [arrested](#) on suspicion of "advocating terrorism."

**Aug. 18, 2021:** Japan's defense ministry [announces](#) that it will seek a fiscal 2022 budget of more than ¥5.4 trillion (\$49.3 billion) that could surpass the longstanding cap of 1%.

**Aug. 19, 2021:** China's State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi [says](#) that Afghanistan should not be used as a geopolitical battleground by the international community.

**Aug. 20, 2021:** US Vice President Kamala Harris's [begins](#) trip to Singapore and Vietnam to show that the United States is in the region "to stay."

**Aug. 22, 2021:** VP Harris [arrives](#) in Singapore, at the start of a short trip to Southeast Asia.

**Aug. 23, 2021:** VP Harris' [reaffirms](#) "the United States' commitment to working with our allies and partners around the Indo-Pacific to uphold the rules-based international order and freedom of navigation, including in the South China Sea" during a joint press conference with Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

**Aug. 25, 2021:** China [decries](#) the US politicization of efforts to trace the origin of the virus ahead of the release of a US intelligence report.

**Aug. 25, 2021:** While meeting with President Nguyễn Xuân Phúc in Vietnam, VP Harris [urges](#) countries in the region to apply more pressure on China.

**Aug. 25, 2021:** China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) Y-20 transport plane arrives in Vietnam to [deliver](#) 200,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines.

**Aug. 26, 2021:** Suicide bombing at Kabul airport [kills](#) 13 US servicemen and 60 Afghans. Islamic State claims responsibility, and the bombing draws condemnation from around the world, including [China](#).

**Aug. 26, 2021:** Navies from the US, Japan, Australia, and India [begin](#) annual *Malabar* maritime exercises.

**Aug. 27, 2021:** Lawmakers from Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party [pledge](#) to support Taiwan's addition to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership during first-of-their-kind security talks with parliamentarians from Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party.

**Aug. 27, 2021:** Navy guided-missile destroyer *USS Kidd* and Coast Guard National Security Cutter *USCG Munro* [pass](#) through the Taiwan Strait, marking the eighth transit of the waters this year by a US warship.

**Aug. 27, 2021:** China [protests](#) the passage of a US Navy warship and Coast Guard cutter through the Strait of Taiwan.

**Aug. 27, 2021:** The first-ever Taiwan-Japan security talks [take place](#), largely focusing on Taiwanese chip makers' potential investment in Japan.

**Aug. 29, 2021:** North Korea [appears](#) to resume nuclear activities that are linked to the production of nuclear weapons.

**Aug. 30, 2021:** China says it [opposes](#) politicization of origins-tracing efforts or shifting blame of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Aug. 30, 2021:** UN nuclear watchdog [says](#) it has detected "deeply troubling" indications of Yongbyon nuclear reactor operating since July, including the release of cooling water. The White House reacts to the news by [stressing](#) the "urgent need" for dialogue and diplomacy, while *38 North* [publishes](#) additional evidence of the Yongbyon 5 MWe reactor's activation, namely "a discharge of cooling water into a new outflow channel."

**Aug. 30, 2021:** Taiwan's government [launches](#) English-language content platform called TaiwanPlus for the world to discover Taiwan.

**Aug. 31, 2021:** China's special envoy for Asian affairs [wraps](#) up week-long, unannounced visit to Myanmar.

**Aug. 31, 2021:** US [finishes](#) withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, concluding the two-decade war.

**Aug. 31, 2021:** India [holds](#) first formal meeting with Taliban political representatives in Qatar.

**Sept. 4, 2021:** *HMS Queen Elizabeth* [docks](#) at the Yokosuka naval base, the first port call in Japan by a British aircraft carrier.

*Regional Chronology by Pacific Forum Research Intern Yuan Zhi (Owen) Ou.*

