

# COMPARATIVE

---

## CONNECTIONS

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

US-JAPAN RELATIONS

## SUMMER TAKES AN UNEXPECTED TURN

SHEILA A. SMITH, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS  
CHARLES T. MCCLEAN, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

By the end of spring, the US-Japan relationship was [centerstage](#) in the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific diplomacy. From the first Quad (virtual) Summit to the visit of Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide to Washington, DC, relations between Tokyo and Washington could not have been better. A full calendar of follow-up meetings for the fall suggested even further deepening of the partnership. And on Aug. 20, President Joe Biden announced that he [intended to nominate](#) Rahm Emanuel, former mayor of Chicago and chief of staff for President Obama, as ambassador to Japan. Throughout the summer, the US and Japan continued to deepen and expand the global coalition for Indo-Pacific cooperation. The UK, France, and even Germany crafted their own Indo-Pacific visions, as did the EU. Maritime cooperation grew as more navies joined in regional exercises. Taiwan featured prominently in US-Japan diplomacy, and in May the G7 echoed US-Japan concerns about rising tensions across the Taiwan Straits. Japanese political leaders also spoke out on the need for Japan to be ready to support the US in case tensions rose to the level of military conflict.

---

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: Sheila A. Smith and Charles T. McClean, "US-Japan Relations: Summer Takes an Unexpected Turn," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp 17-24.

Yet by the end of the summer, this carefully orchestrated alliance agenda had to pause as Japan's domestic politics took several unexpectedly rapid turns. With COVID-19 case numbers growing, and pressures on Japanese medical providers intensifying, public approval of Prime Minister Suga remained low. Whereas many expected the prime minister to dissolve the Diet in early September in preparation for a Lower House election, LDP leaders announced they would instead hold their party leadership election, effectively delaying the Diet election. But by early September all this had changed. After a week of high drama, Suga announced on Sept. 3 that he no longer intended to run for the presidency of his party.

Meanwhile, President Biden's decision that the [US would withdraw from Afghanistan](#) by Aug. 31 created turmoil in Kabul. The US military evacuation of US citizens and those associated with the US in Kabul was [initially chaotic](#) as the Taliban made far faster progress in taking over Afghanistan than Washington had predicted. Japan consulted closely with the US government and worked with other allies on the ground during the evacuation. Twelve Embassy staff were [evacuated](#) with US assistance and flown out to Qatar by the UK's Royal Air Force, but the Suga Cabinet also [sent its own SDF transport aircraft](#) to the region on Aug. 23-24 to help Japanese and others who wanted to leave. In the end, the Aug. 26 [terrorist attack at Kabul Airport](#) limited access to these aircraft to around 500 individuals who were planning to leave via the Japanese evacuation effort. On Aug. 31, Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo ordered the [withdrawal of the SDF](#) from Afghanistan.



Figure 1 Japanese Self-Defense Forces board a C-2 transport aircraft to help Japanese and others who want to leave Afghanistan. Photo: Kyodo

## PM Suga's Double Whammy

The combination of the Tokyo Olympics and the COVID-19 Delta variant proved too difficult for the Suga Cabinet to manage. On July 14, the Cabinet put Tokyo under a [fourth state of emergency](#) until Aug. 22, a period that would cover the duration of the Tokyo Olympics (July 23-Aug. 8). Athletes would not only be scrupulously isolated and monitored, but spectators would not be allowed to view the Games. Even before the government announced the stands would be empty, the public mood had soured on the Games. Corporate sponsors said their CEOs would not participate and Toyota, a major sponsor, announced on July 19 that it would [not advertise](#) the Olympics in Japan given the public sensitivity surrounding the Games.

Public polling revealed the lowest approval rating for Suga since he took office in September last year. Japan's major newspapers reported record-low ratings for Suga in May and June of 33% ([Asahi](#)), 37% ([Yomiuri](#)), and 40% ([Nikkei](#)). The polls also revealed serious reservations about the Tokyo Olympics and the government's decision to go ahead with the Games. In May, polling revealed over 80% of Japanese either [wanted to postpone or cancel](#) the Summer Games.

The growing worries about the spread of the Delta variant in Japan only intensified popular concern about the Suga Cabinet's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Case numbers grew with alarming speed, from just under 800,000 at the beginning of July to nearly 1.5 million by the end of August. The Tokyo metropolitan area has continued to have around a quarter of these cases, but the Delta variant spread to other parts of Japan as well. On Aug. 27, the government's [state of emergency was expanded](#) to include 21 of Japan's 47 prefectures. Beyond the number of infected, the growing pressure on Japan's hospitals and clinics drew national headlines. Many Japanese were sick at home and unable to get care. On Aug. 19, media reports of a young, pregnant woman who lost her child after she was [refused hospital access](#) and forced to give birth at home horrified the nation. By the end of the summer, some polls ([Ijji](#)) were showing support for Suga had dipped below 30%.

Japan's vaccination program had been the Suga Cabinet's focus throughout the summer. On May 7, Suga announced an ambitious plan to accelerate access to COVID-19 vaccinations to [1](#)

[million doses per day](#) by mid-to-late June, and to have most Japanese who wanted a vaccination to have the opportunity to get one by late October. Minister for Administrative Reform and Regulatory Reform Kono Taro was tasked with leading this effort, and Japan's initially slow response seemed to be gaining momentum as Kono sought to get as many doses to the public as possible. The Self-Defense Forces were mobilized to operate mass vaccination sites; local governments were empowered to get vaccines to pharmacies and clinics, and Japanese companies began to sponsor their own employee vaccination programs. While the government [reached Suga's target](#) of 1 million doses per day in June, logjams continued to emerge, slowing distribution and frustrating Japanese citizens. By early September, more than 50% of the Japanese population had [received their shots](#), including more than 80% of Japan's [elderly population](#). But it was not enough to boost the prime minister's support among the public.



Figure 2 The Self-Defense Forces were mobilized to operate mass vaccination sites in Japan. Photo: Pool/Reuters via Japan Times

## Taiwan and the US-Japan Alliance

The Biden administration and Suga Cabinet [began the year](#) focused on China. The 2+2 meeting in March revealed the shared perceptions of alliance officials in Washington and Tokyo, and the [joint statement](#) provided a long list of Chinese behaviors that concerned both governments. By the time President Biden and Prime Minister Suga met in April, Chinese behavior in and around Taiwan prompted a statement of concern in the [joint communique](#) that drew considerable ire from Beijing, with China's embassy in Washington saying the country was "[resolutely opposed](#)" to the statement.

Biden and Suga linked the stability of the Taiwan Strait to the security interests of both allies. In Tokyo, this prompted a series of statements by leading Japanese politicians about what the use of force across the Taiwan Strait might mean for Japan's security. Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo had already [made his concerns clear](#) when he visited Yonaguni on April 17, the Japanese island closest to Taiwan, during Suga's visit to the US. State Minister of Defense Nakayama Yasuhide was outspoken as early as last winter about Japan's [need to understand US thinking](#) on a Taiwan contingency. Nakayama gave a fuller presentation of his views on US-Japan military coordination in his speech at the Hudson Institute on June 28, where he argued that it was necessary to "[protect Taiwan as a democratic country](#)." Even Deputy Prime Minister Aso Taro got headlines in July when he suggested to LDP lawmakers that a Taiwan contingency would be [linked to Japan's survival](#), a term used in the 2015 security legislation that would allow the SDF to deploy in a crisis beyond its territory with other national militaries. These statements were followed up on Aug. 27 when two senior members of the LDP, Sato Masahisa and Otsuka Taku, and two senior members of Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party, Lo Chih-cheng and Tsai Shih-ying, held their [first security talks](#) online.

Two issues will be [essential for the alliance to clarify](#) in advance of a serious military crisis across the Taiwan Strait. The first is the extent to which the Japanese government would be willing to allow operations from US bases on Japanese soil. To date, the US has responded to Taiwan crises by deploying maritime forces in the vicinity of Taiwan. A larger conflagration, especially one that might involve conflict on Taiwan's soil, would require a different and larger US response. Second, the proximity of Japan to Taiwan also suggests that the Self-Defense Force would be involved if only to ensure the defense of Japan. How Japan's new security legislation and the upgraded US-Japan Defense Cooperation Guidelines will shape an alliance response remains to be seen. Greater US-Japan policy coordination seems overdue as Chinese military operations around Taiwan grow.

## The Indo-Pacific Coalition Gains Momentum

Washington and Tokyo [continued to focus](#) on Indo-Pacific coalition-building over the summer. Deputy foreign ministers of the Quad nations—which includes the US, Japan,

Australia, and India—[met](#) by videoconference on Aug. 12 to continue conversations begun earlier in the year at the foreign ministers’ meeting on Feb. 18 and the Leaders’ videoconference on March 12. Maritime security in the East and South China Seas was at the [center of these discussions](#), which also touched on other security challenges such as North Korea, counterterrorism, and cyber-security.

Maritime cooperation expanded and the tempo accelerated throughout the summer. The US and Japan held multiple exercises with naval partners, including Australia, France, India, Sri Lanka, and the UK. While some of these exercises represented regular, annual events—such as the US-Japan *Orient Shield* exercises in June and July and the quadrilateral (US, Japan, Australia, India) *Malabar* exercises in August—others marked entirely new groupings of like-minded countries. For example, on June 24, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force [joined](#) the US-Sri Lanka *Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training* (CARAT) exercise series as an official participant for the first time, turning it into a multilateral exercise.



Figure 3 A PAC-3 ground-based missile defense system deployed at Camp Amami for the joint U.S.-Japan *Orient Shield* exercises. Photo: Kyodo via *Japan Times*

Perhaps most noteworthy, European nations began to increase their maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific. The UK [joined](#) the US, Japan, and Australia for the US-led *Large Scale Exercise 2021*. France [participated](#) with the US and Japan in the ARC21 exercises in Japan, and then joined the two allies plus Australia for exercises in the East China Sea. And by the end of the summer, even Germany [sent](#) a naval frigate to the Indo-Pacific, the first such deployment in nearly 20 years.

US Indo-Pacific Commander Adm. John Aquilino took command on April 30 and [visited](#) Tokyo in his first overseas trip on June 1. There he met with

Prime Minister Suga, Defense Minister Kishi, Foreign Minister Motegi, and Gen. Yamazaki Koji, chief of Staff for the Joint Staff. He visited [South Korea](#) two days later as part of the same trip, with the two visits serving as a [follow-up to the trilateral discussions](#) held between the US, Japanese, and Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff on April 30 in Hawaii. Later in the summer, Aquilino made headlines for a [speech](#) he gave at the Aspen Security Forum in which he said that the US is fully capable of defending Taiwan in the event of a military crisis, and is “[ready for any contingency should it occur](#).”

Work on the agenda for the Quad, set out in the spring, began in earnest this summer and the first face-to-face Quad Leaders’ Summit is planned for late September. Initially, Japan’s domestic politics raised questions about the diplomatic schedule for the fall, but Prime Minister Suga has said that he will [travel](#) to Washington, DC to attend in September as planned.

### Looking Ahead

Without a doubt, Prime Minister Suga’s announcement that he would [not run in the LDP leadership race](#) became the biggest news of the summer in Japan. Over the course of a little more than a week in early September, Japanese politics were plunged into uncertainty, with internal politicking in the LDP focused not only on which candidate might draw the most factional support but also on who might be the best “face of the party” in the Lower House election later this fall. Given public frustration over the government’s handling of the COVID pandemic, as well as the corruption charges against several LDP Diet members, this next Diet election will be tough for Japan’s conservative party.

Similarly, the Afghan withdrawal overshadowed the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific diplomacy in late summer. Debate over the chaotic departure of US military and citizens, as well as the fate of those Afghans who had worked closely with the US government there, extended into questioning how this would influence allies across the globe. In Washington and Tokyo, commentary on whether this would [help](#) or [hinder](#) US [credibility](#) in the Indo-Pacific proliferated.

Despite Japan’s politics and the Afghanistan withdrawal, the US and Japan have a full agenda for the fall. Politics in Tokyo will consume the

next two months. The LDP leadership race is up first on Sept. 29, and then a Lower House election must be held by the end of November, which will mean that the pace of alliance innovation may slow until a new government comes into office.

Nonetheless, Japan has put its difficult summer behind it. The Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics are over. Vaccinations are increasing, and while the medical pressures presented by the Delta variants caseload remain, public health professionals are hoping that the worst may be over. As of early September, the daily number of new cases has once again fallen under 10,000. In the United States, the Biden administration has ended the “[forever war](#)” in Afghanistan and hopes now to focus its attention fully on the future strategic challenge of China.



*Figure 4 The Tokyo 2020 Olympics closing ceremony marked the end of the games. Photo: Toby Melville/Reuters via Aljazeera*

# CHRONOLOGY OF US-JAPAN RELATIONS

## MAY – AUGUST 2021

**May 3, 2021:** Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Foreign Minister Motegi [meet](#) in London on the sidelines of the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

**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:** Secretary of State Blinken, Foreign Minister Motegi, and Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [meet](#) in London on the sidelines of the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

**May 7, 2021:** Prime Minister Suga [announces](#) plan to accelerate access to COVID-19 vaccinations to 1 million doses per day.

**May 11, 2021:** Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force [holds](#) joint exercises with the US and France for the first time.

**May 19, 2021:** Foreign Minister Motegi and US Trade Representative Katherine Tai [speak](#) by telephone.

**May 20, 2021:** Director-level intersessional of the Japan-US Cyber Dialogue is [held](#) via video conference.

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

**May 27, 2021:** G7 foreign ministers, including those from Japan and the US, [issue](#) a joint statement on Belarus.

**June 2, 2021:** G7 ministers, including those from Japan and the US, [issue](#) a joint statement on corruption.

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

**June 10, 2021:** US Forces Japan (USFJ) and Government of Japan [issue](#) a joint press release on efforts to vaccinate USFJ personnel against COVID-19.

**June 11, 2021:** Department of State and Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry [hold](#) first Japan-US Clean Energy Partnership meeting.

**June 12, 2021:** President Biden and Prime Minister Suga [speak](#) on the sidelines of the G7 Summit in Cornwall.

**June 22, 2021:** Media companies tracking COVID-19 vaccinations [announce](#) that Japan has reached Prime Minister Suga's target of 1 million doses per day.

**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:** Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean, signed by the US, Japan, and eight other countries, [enters](#) into force.

**June 28, 2021:** State Minister of Defense Nakayama Yasuhide [says](#) at a Hudson Institute event that democracies such as the US and Japan should stand up to China and back Taiwan.

**June 29, 2021:** Foreign Minister Motegi and Secretary Blinken [meet](#) on the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Italy.

July 6, 2021: Deputy Prime Minister Aso Taro [says](#) that Japan should join US in defending Taiwan.

July 12, 2021: Tokyo [enters](#) fourth state of emergency related to COVID-19.

July 13, 2021: Japan's Ministry of Defense [references](#) stability around Taiwan for the first time in its annual defense report.

July 14, 2021: American Chamber of Commerce in Japan President Jenifer Rogers [meets](#) State Minister for Foreign Affairs Washio Eichiro in Tokyo.

July 15, 2021: Prime Minister Suga [meets](#) with members of US Chamber of Commerce and US-Japan Business Council via videoconference.

July 19, 2021: Toyota announces that it will [not advertise](#) the Tokyo Olympics.

July 20, 2021: Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman [meets](#) Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Mori Takeo in Tokyo.

July 21, 2021: Deputy Secretary Sherman [meets](#) with Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo in Tokyo.

July 21, 2021: Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. [says](#) that it is finalizing a decision to open its first chip plant in Japan by 2023.

July 23, 2021: Secretary of State Blinken and Foreign Minister Motegi [speak](#) by telephone.

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

Aug. 3, 2021: US, Japan, Australia, and UK [begin](#) the US-led exercises known as *Large Scale Global Exercise 21*.

Aug. 6, 2021: Secretary of State Blinken and Foreign Minister Motegi [speak](#) by telephone.

Aug. 8, 2021: Closing ceremonies for the Summer Olympics are [held](#) in Tokyo.

Aug. 9, 2021: National Security Advisor Akiba Takeo [meets](#) Secretary Blinken in Washington.

Aug. 10, 2021: President Biden and Prime Minister Suga [hold](#) a summit talk by telephone.

Aug. 12, 2021: Senior officials from the US Department of State, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Indian Ministry of External Affairs [meet](#) by videoconference to follow up on the Quad Foreign Ministers' and Leaders' Meetings held earlier in 2021.

Aug. 19, 2021: Japanese media [publish](#) the story of a young woman who lost her child after she was refused hospital access and forced to give birth at home.

Aug. 23, 2021: Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press Secretary Yoshida Tomoyuki [issues](#) statement welcoming the nomination of Rahm Emanuel as the next US Ambassador to Japan.

Aug. 23-24, 2021: Minister of Defense Kishi [dispatches](#) SDF aircraft to Afghanistan to evacuate Japanese nationals and locals working for the Japanese Embassy and other organizations.

Aug. 26, 2021: Takeda Pharmaceutical [discovers](#) first case of contaminated Moderna vaccines.

Aug. 26, 2021: Suga administration [suspends](#) use of 1.63 million Moderna doses after the discovery of contaminants in some vaccines.

Aug. 26, 2021: Former Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio [announces](#) that he will run against Prime Minister Suga in the LDP leadership election set for Sept. 29.

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

**Aug. 26, 2021:** Terrorist attack at Kabul airport [kills](#) at least 60 Afghans and 13 US troops.

**Aug. 27, 2021:** Suga administration [expands](#) COVID-19 state of emergency to a total of 21 prefectures.

**Aug. 27, 2021:** Representatives from the LDP and Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party [hold](#) security talks online for the first time.

**Aug. 30-31, 2021:** Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry [visits](#) Tokyo to promote US-Japan cooperation on climate change and meet with Foreign Minister Motegi.

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

**Aug. 31, 2021:** Japan [withdraws](#) SDF from their mission to evacuate people, including Japanese citizens, in Afghanistan.

**Sept. 3, 2021:** Prime Minister Suga [announces](#) he will not run in the upcoming LDP presidential race and will resign September 30.