



# COMPARATIVE

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

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### REGIONAL OVERVIEW

## MULTILATERALISM (STILL) MATTERS, AS NEW INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY EMERGES

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While the Biden administration has yet to produce its own definitional strategy documents—the *National Security Strategy*, *National Defense Strategy*, *Nuclear Policy Review*, or *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*—details are emerging that strongly suggest each will be generally consistent with the previous administration’s reports, but with an even heavier stress on alliances and multilateralism. Secretary of State Antony Blinken provided the most detailed description of the administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy during his swing through Southeast Asia in December, reaffirming the “cooperate, compete, confront” approach toward China that, with varying degrees of emphasis and intensity, has been consistent for at least the last three administrations. Meanwhile Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin put some meat on the bones of his “integrated deterrence” concept, underscored by the first in-person (despite COVID) summit meeting of the four Quad heads of state from Australia, India, Japan, and the United States and the emergence of AUKUS, a technology-oriented defense arrangement involving Canberra, London, and Washington.

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President Biden (virtually) attended the ASEAN-driven East Asia Summit and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting while focusing much of his attention on the broader-based Summit for Democracy. While the administration talked in general terms about its Asian economic strategy, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) continued apace, sans Washington, with Beijing knocking on the former's door and standing to be a prime beneficiary (along with Japan) of the latter. Overshadowing all of this is omicron, the latest and seemingly most contagious and pervasive COVID strain, reminding us all that the pandemic is far from over.

### FOIP Strategy Unveiled

During his visit to Jakarta in December—part of a swing through Southeast Asia cut short “out of an abundance of caution” when one of the journalists traveling with the secretary tested positive for COVID—Secretary of State Blinken unveiled the five pillars of the administration’s [Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#) strategy:

— First, “we will advance a free and open Indo-Pacific.” On an individual level, “people will be free in their daily lives and live in open societies”; on a state level, “countries will be able to choose their own path and their own partners”; and on a regional level, “problems will be dealt with openly, rules will be reached transparently and applied fairly, goods and ideas and people will flow freely across land, cyberspace, and the open seas.”

— Second, “we will forge stronger connections within and beyond the region.” This included deepening treaty alliances with Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand while fostering greater cooperation among these allies. The US will “find ways to knit our allies together with our partners, as we’ve done by reinvigorating the Quad. And we’ll strengthen our partnership with a strong and independent ASEAN” while “strengthening strategic partnerships” with Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

— Third, “we will promote broad-based prosperity” by “developing a comprehensive Indo-Pacific economic framework to pursue our shared objectives, including around trade and the

digital economy, technology, resilient supply chains, decarbonization and clean energy, infrastructure, worker standards, and other areas of shared interest.” This includes promoting “fair and resilient trade,” while helping to “close the gap on infrastructure.”

— Fourth, “we will help build a more resilient Indo-Pacific” as we battle the pandemic and climate change at home and abroad, through government efforts and by “rallying the private sector to our side.” This includes “building the health systems back better ... to prevent, detect, and respond to the next pandemic,” along with “renewable energy investments” as we “transition to a green economy.”

— Fifth, “we will bolster Indo-Pacific security” through “a strategy that more closely weaves together all our instruments of national power—diplomacy, military, intelligence—with those of our allies and our partners. Our Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, calls this ‘integrated deterrence.’” To avoid conflict, “we seek serious and sustained diplomacy with the DPRK, with the ultimate goal of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula.” Washington and Beijing together “share a profound responsibility to ensure that the competition between our countries does not veer into conflict. We take that responsibility with the greatest of seriousness, because the failure to do so would be catastrophic for all of us.”



*Figure 1 Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken delivered an address on the United States’ commitment to the security and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific in Jakarta, Indonesia on December 14, 2021. Photo: U.S. Mission to ASEAN*

Blinken opened his Jakarta speech by asserting that “what happens in the Indo-Pacific will, more than any other region, shape the trajectory of the world in the 21st century,” reaffirming that this is and remains the priority region for

Washington. He noted the need to “stand up against leaders who don’t respect their people’s rights,” in a direct reference to Burma/Myanmar, while expressing strong support for ASEAN’s Five-Point Consensus (which, we sadly note, continues to go nowhere). He also stressed that the US would “work with our allies and partners to defend the rules-based order that we’ve built together over decades to ensure the region remains open and accessible,” further explaining that “the goal of defending the rules-based order is not to keep any country down. Rather, it’s to protect the right of all countries to choose their own path, free from coercion, free from intimidation.”

In a pointed reference to Beijing’s protests that promoting the rule of law was somehow aimed at China, Blinken stressed: “It’s not about a contest between a US-centric region or a China-centric region. The Indo-Pacific is its own region. Rather, it’s about upholding the rights and agreements that are responsible for the most peaceful and prosperous period that this region and the world has ever experienced.”

Throughout his visit and throughout the trimester, Blinken and other administration have continued to cite what we call the three “C’s” of US-China policy: “the United States will cooperate with China when we can, compete when we should, and confront when we must.”

### “Integrated Deterrence” Explained

The next *National Security Strategy* and *National Defense Strategy* reports are expected to stress the concept of “integrated deterrence” identified by Secretary of Defense Austin as the “[cornerstone](#)” of the administration’s defense strategy. In his Dec. 4 [speech](#) at the Reagan National Defense Forum, Austin clearly pointed to China as the “pacing challenge” for the US Department of Defense, adding that “I chose the word ‘challenge’ carefully. We seek neither confrontation nor conflict. And as President Biden has repeatedly made clear, ‘we are not seeking a new Cold War or a world divided into rigid blocs.’” Nonetheless, he also stressed Biden’s contention that the US was in “stiff competition” with China, which stands today as “the only competitor capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”

To meet this “formidable challenge,” the United States is “developing new concepts of operations,” further noting that “what I call ‘integrated deterrence’ will be the cornerstone concept of the new *National Defense Strategy* that I will release early next year. And it means integrating our efforts across domains and across the spectrum of conflict to ensure that the US military—in close cooperation with the rest of the US government and our allies and partners—makes the folly and costs of aggression very clear.”

Austin explained the “two key elements of integrated deterrence, and those are partnership and innovation.” He reassured Asian partners that “we’re not seeking an Asian version of NATO” or “asking countries to choose between the United States and China. Instead, we’re working to advance an international system that is free, and stable, and open. And we’re strengthening our peerless network of allies and partners with a shared commitment to a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific—a region where all countries are free from coercion, and where the rules that buttress stability and expand liberty are upheld. Together.”



Figure 2 Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III delivers the keynote address during the 2021 Reagan National Defense Forum on Dec. 4, 2021. Photo: Chad McNeeley/DOD

Austin made only passing reference to China’s nuclear capabilities and gave no hints as to what the impending Nuclear Posture Review might reveal. A “[Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War](#)” released early in the new year provides a clue, however. It states, in part, “that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. As nuclear use would have far-reaching consequences, we also affirm that nuclear weapons—for as long as they continue to exist—

should serve defensive purposes, deter aggression, and prevent war.” While some in the US defense community (and virtually every specialist and government official in China) have called on the US to issue a “no first use” pledge, we are willing to predict that this administration’s nuclear pledge will, like others before it, merely stress their “defensive purposes” as a “last resort” weapon.

Secretary Austin ended his remarks at the Reagan National Defense Forum by stressing that the United States will “meet the challenges of the 21st century. But we’ll face them with fortitude, not fear. Democracy has always been our roadmap to success and security. And I wouldn’t trade it for anyone else’s.”

### Building the “Democracy Roadmap”

If democracy is to provide the roadmap, some infrastructure repairs seem to be in order. President Biden has [called](#) the defense of democracy “the defining challenge of our time.” To promote the effort, in December he held a “Summit for Democracy” to rally world leaders against authoritarianism and produce “a vision ... and courage to once more lead the march of human progress and human freedom forward.” His concern is understandable. Freedom House, which tracks freedom, political, and civil rights around the world, [warns](#) that democracy is under siege and has been declining for 15 years. Its 2021 report noted that “less than 20% of the world’s population lives in a Free country, the smallest proportion since 1995.” It goes on to say that “democracy’s defenders sustained heavy new losses in their struggle against authoritarian foes, shifting the international balance in favor of tyranny.”

The summit was controversial, with governments that were not invited complaining that the US had no right to determine who was and wasn’t democratic. The ambassadors of China and Russia wrote a [joint essay](#) that charged the US with promoting a “Cold War mentality” that would again partition the world along ideological lines. They countered that “Democracy is not a prerogative of a certain country or a group of countries, but a universal right of all peoples.” It’s hard to argue with that—if only they practiced what they preached. The invitation list was idiosyncratic at best. Pakistan, Malaysia, and the Philippines were invited—despite allegations of government-supported death squads in Manila—but

Singapore wasn’t. Bangladesh was left out, even though it scores [higher](#) than Pakistan on the World Justice Project’s rule of law index. White House spokesperson Jen Psaki tried to explain the mix, [saying](#) that “Inclusion or an invitation is not a stamp of approval on their approach to democracy—nor is exclusion a stamp of the opposite of that, of disapproval.” Rather, the point is “to have a diverse range of voices and faces and representatives at the discussion.”

Over 100 countries were invited, and 89 showed up “to set forth an affirmative agenda for democratic renewal and to tackle the greatest threats faced by democracies today through collective action.” The summit is supposed to mark the beginning of a process, with attendees reconvening next year to show the progress that they have made.



Figure 3 President Biden and Secretary Blinken at the Summit for Democracy, held on December 9-10, 2021. Photo: U.S. Department of State

Progress is needed; to many, democracy today is in retreat. There is considerable evidence of efforts by illiberal governments to undermine their democratic rivals. There are calls for an [alliance of democracies](#). In fact, the [Alliance for Democracies Foundation](#) exists. It’s a nonprofit founded in 2017 that seeks to become the world’s leading “megaphone” for democracy. It isn’t clear, however, if there is support for much more. Democratic governments have shared concerns and needs and there may be backing for defensive efforts to protect democracy—if it doesn’t involve too great a cost. Asian governments have been lukewarm about putting values at the forefront of their diplomacy, and they instead focus on strategic interests more traditionally defined. Southeast Asia remains too variegated for a full-blown democracy agenda to get traction and the fear of fracturing the region or alienating potential allies has moderated calls for a more assertive democratic diplomacy.

Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a professor at Chulalongkorn University, [argues](#) however that

democratic nations should back the efforts of younger generations “by speaking up for persecuted dissidents and opponents of repressive regimes, providing programmatic support and channels for youth movements to rise up for a better future, including the [Milk Tea Alliance](#) across Asian societies and three-finger political symbolism in Myanmar, Thailand, and elsewhere.” A charismatic professor in Bangkok, he knows the younger generation well. Whether that generation sustains its energy and commitment is the great unknown.

### **COP-26: Another Copout?**

The severity of the anticipated impact of climate change on the Indo-Pacific region, where rising sea levels could force billions of people from their homes and submerge entire countries, extreme weather events could lead to regular natural disasters, and changing weather patterns create food and water shortages, obliges us to mention the COP26 conference held in Glasgow in November. The meeting was another in a series of events intended to force action on reluctant or resistant governments, and the outcomes were consistent with its 25 preceding sit-downs: more frustration than concrete results.

For our purposes, two items stand out. First, President Biden made an in-person appearance and Chinese President Xi Jinping did not. While there is a perfectly good explanation for Xi’s absence—he hasn’t left China since the COVID outbreak began in January 2020—Biden’s presence gives him bragging rights in the competition for global leadership on this issue. Status isn’t the same as substance, however, and any evaluation of leadership will ultimately ride on what the US does, not the appearances that senior officials make. Still, the US president is invariably criticized for skipping meetings; he should get credit when he makes a trip.

The second noteworthy development was the announcement of an [agreement](#) by the US and China to cooperate on climate issues. The 16-point agreement hits all the key concerns. Most notably, they agreed to establish a “Working Group on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s,” which will meet regularly to address the climate crisis and advance the multilateral process. Its ambit includes “continued policy and technical exchanges, identification of programs and projects in areas of mutual interest, meetings of governmental and non-governmental experts, facilitating participation by local governments,

enterprises, think tanks, academics, and other experts, exchanging updates on their respective national efforts, considering the need for additional efforts, and reviewing the implementation of the Joint Statement and this Joint Declaration.”

It’s an exhaustive list, which is especially interesting given that China had warned that all cooperation with the US was at risk because of Washington’s hostile policy. In his September meeting with visiting US Climate Envoy John Kerry, Foreign Minister Wang Yi [said](#) explained that Washington hopes “climate change cooperation can be an oasis in China-US relations. But if the oasis is surrounded by desert, sooner or later the oasis will also become desert.” In that context, the readiness to strike a deal shows a pragmatism that holds out hope in other key issues.

### **Quad Leaders First In-person Summit**

The major regional multilateral event of the trimester, at least from a US perspective, was not the normal series of fall ASEAN-led summits but the first in-person Quad summit hosted by President Biden in Washington, DC on Sept. 24, involving Prime Minister Scott Morrison of Australia, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, and then-Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide of Japan. According to the White House [Fact Sheet](#), the four leaders “put forth ambitious initiatives that deepen our ties and advance practical cooperation on 21st-century challenges: ending the COVID-19 pandemic, including by increasing production and access to safe and effective vaccines; promoting high-standards infrastructure; combating the climate crisis; partnering on emerging technologies, space, and cyber security; and cultivating next-generation talent in all of our countries.”

The leaders agreed that “the most immediate threat to lives and livelihoods in our four countries and the world is the COVID-19 pandemic,” and much of their deliberations focused on how they could jointly combat the pandemic domestically and globally, with the Quad Vaccine Experts Group remaining at “the heart of our cooperation.” The leaders pledged to help vaccinate the world, save lives now, and build back better health security (nicely incorporating Biden’s domestic “Build Back Better” campaign), while expanding their infrastructure efforts to support the G7’s announcement of Build Back Better World (and

there it is again). Their response to climate change challenges included the formation of a Green-Shipping Network and the establishment of a Clean-Hydrogen Partnership, along with enhanced climate adaptation, resilience, and preparedness. The leaders also focused on cooperation related to critical and emerging technologies.



Figure 4 Leaders of the Quad countries meet at the White House in September 2021 for their first in-person summit. Photo: Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters

Absent from the Fact Sheet or from the [Joint Statement](#) from Quad Leaders was even a single reference to China. The leaders did “recommit to our partnership, and to a region that is a bedrock of our shared security and prosperity—a free and open Indo-Pacific, which is also inclusive and resilient.” They also recommitted to “promoting the free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law and undaunted by coercion, to bolster security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. We stand for the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity of states.” They further recognized that “our shared futures will be written in the Indo-Pacific, and we will redouble our efforts to ensure that the Quad is a force for regional peace, stability, security, and prosperity.” They also reaffirmed “our strong support for ASEAN’s unity and centrality,” although it is becoming increasingly clear that few are counting on ASEAN to play much of a leadership role in the region, given its own internal challenges and disruptions.

#### **ASEAN Summitry Persists Amid Internal Disarray**

The most significant regional gathering from ASEAN’s perspective is the annual East Asia Summit (EAS) which normally involves the leaders of the 10 ASEAN states plus Australia,

China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States. We say normally because perhaps the most significant aspect of this year’s meeting centered around who was not invited, namely, Myanmar’s ruling junta. [Disappointed](#) with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing’s failure to honor the April 24, 2021 ASEAN [Five-Point Consensus](#), the other nine members decided to invite a “non-political representative” rather than the ruling general (or the opposition National Unity Government). As a result, Myanmar boycotted the meeting.

ASEAN has a long history and sacred principle of non-interference in one another’s affairs, but as Indonesian President Joko Widodo explained at the ASEAN (minus one) Summit that preceded the EAS, “It is important for us to honor the principle of non-interference. But on the other hand, we are also obliged to uphold other principles in the ASEAN Charter such as democracy, good governance, respect for human rights and a constitutional government.” Even Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha, who himself came to power as a result of a military coup, had no sympathy for his fellow general: “ASEAN’s constructive role in addressing this situation is of paramount importance and our action on this matter shall have a bearing on ASEAN’s credibility in the eyes of the international community.”

A statement issued by Brunei, as ASEAN chair, called on the junta to fulfill its commitment to the five-point consensus, which includes giving a special envoy to Myanmar access to all political parties; the junta previously ruled out allowing the envoy to meet Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the detained leader of the ousted civilian government.

The [Chairman’s Statement](#) from the EAS underscored its role as “the premier Leaders-led forum for dialogue and cooperation on broad strategic, political and economic issues of common interest and concern with the aim of promoting peace, stability and economic prosperity in East Asia” but broke no little or no new ground. It “called on Myanmar to fulfill its commitment to the Five-Point Consensus” but, as regards the so-called sixth-point, only “heard calls by some EAS participating countries for the release of all political detainees including foreigners.”

The statement contained the usual reaffirmations regarding ASEAN centrality and

the need “to preserve Southeast Asia as a region free from nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, while supporting global efforts on disarmament, non-proliferation and peaceful uses of nuclear energy.” In this regard it also noted “views expressed by some EAS participating countries on AUKUS.” As will be discussed shortly, those views were undoubtedly mixed.



Figure 5 Leaders at the 16th East Asia Summit. Photo: ASEAN Secretariat/Kusuma Pandu Wijaya

Finally, in a pro-forma statement dripping with irony, it concluded by noting that the leaders “looked forward to the convening of the 17th East Asia Summit in the Kingdom of Cambodia in 2022.” Given the debacle the last time Cambodia held the chair, and Hun Sen’s disposition to follow Beijing’s lead, one suspects there is little to actually look forward to.

### AUKUS Emerges as a New “Alliance-like” Security Arrangement

To the surprise of many (and to the utter dismay of the French), the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia announced a new technology-sharing arrangement on Sept. 16 headlined by an Australian decision to acquire nuclear-powered submarines from the US or UK rather than follow through on an earlier agreement (which included escape clauses) to buy diesel-powered boats from France. While the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines by Australia grabbed the headlines—Canberra will be choosing between the UK-built *Astute*-class and the US-built *Los Angeles* or *Virginia*-class SSN—the agreement is about more than submarines. According to the [Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS](#) issued by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and US President Joe Biden, the “enhanced trilateral security partnership”—it is not a formal alliance—will “promote deeper information and technology sharing” and “foster deeper integration of security and

defense-related science, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains.” It will, in particular, allow the three nations to “significantly deepen cooperation on a range of security and defense capabilities.”

While the joint statement explicitly stated that “Australia is committed to adhering to the highest standards for safeguards, transparency, verification, and accountancy measures to ensure the non-proliferation, safety, and security of nuclear material and technology,” and that “Australia remains committed to fulfilling all of its obligations as a non-nuclear weapons state, including with the International Atomic Energy Agency,” some in the nuclear community have raised proliferation concerns. While we must acknowledge the presence of these concerns, we do not share them; Australia has a spotless record when it comes to nonproliferation and there is no reason to suspect its deep commitment “to upholding our leadership on global non-proliferation” will not continue.

The strategic imperative is clear. As Professor (and former Australian chief defense scientist) Richard Brabin-Smith argued in a recent *East Asia Forum* [article](#), “the capability arguments for SSNs—high speed, unlimited range, endurance set only by what the crew can tolerate, greater stealth and larger weapon loads—are well known. These characteristics will help meet the operational challenge posed by the great distances between bases in Australia’s south and the archipelagic focal areas to its north.”



Figure 6 President Joe Biden, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, and Prime Minister Boris Johnson announce AUKUS on September 15, 2021. Photo: Kent Nishimura/Getty Images

As a (continuing) [series](#) of Pacific Forum PacNet newsletters has pointed out, the agreement has

received mixed reviews in the region. The Chinese have been particularly outspoken in their criticism; so have the [Russians](#), despite having leased nuclear-powered submarines to India for years. Others, [Taiwan](#) and Japan in particular, applaud the move. [The Pacific Forum is compiling regional views and will publish them as a standalone volume in its [Issues & Insights](#) series.] Our main complaint is the long lead time required for Australia to actually acquire this capability. This has led concerned Aussies such as former Prime Minister Tony Abbott to argue that Australia should be allowed to lease LA-class subs now, or be invited to co-crew US-operated SSNs, to get the ball rolling.

### CPTPP Encounters its First Test

The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership, the successor to the TPP that was revived by former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo (with help from Australia) was supposed to set a “gold standard” for regional economic relations, a promise that would entice other countries to join and share in the rewards. That logic seemed to be working in September when China announced that it wanted to join the group. There are questions about China’s sincerity, though.

Membership is enticing. CPTPP accounts for about 13.4% of global GDP, roughly \$13.5 trillion, making it one of the world’s largest economic trade areas. Beijing could use it to force reform on its economy, which is by some [accounts](#) reaching the end of its growth potential. Moreover, CPTPP is much more than a mere trade deal. It sets the terms of engagement for the most important region of the world and the governments that set those rules will shape the region’s evolution. That must appeal to a government that has shown a preference to work within the system to advance its interests and helping make rules for a leading economic area would be a plus.

There is ample room for skepticism, however. The Beijing government remains committed to its [distinctive form of capitalism](#). Moreover, it has a spotty record of compliance with the terms of its World Trade Organization accession deal, and Canberra rightfully charges China with violating the terms of their bilateral trade agreement with its campaign of coercion against Australia. Some critics worry that China would join CPTPP to lower its standards, winning exceptions and then citing national security concerns to maintain them.

Equally compelling, for us at least, is a suspicion that Beijing is playing spoiler. Reportedly, Beijing’s application was ready in the summer but it waited to submit it to derail Taiwan’s membership bid, which came a few days after China’s in September. In the past, China and Taiwan joined international institutions together (when Beijing couldn’t block Taipei). Alternatively, China could be trying to claim the high ground on trade issues—reminding the world that the US isn’t applying—and then be free to complain that talk about inclusivity was a sham if Beijing isn’t given the concessions it demands. After all, it’s hard to imagine Canberra or Ottawa feeling generous about the Chinese application or being prepared to give Beijing the benefit of the doubt.

Other countries are also eager to join. The UK applied at the beginning of 2021 and formal talks [began](#) in September. Ecuador [applied](#) at the end of 2021, while South Korea [said](#) in December 2021 that it will begin the process to join as well.

The more the merrier. The CPTPP should try to extend its membership—but not at the cost of its standards. Multiple applications could encourage a bidding war of sorts, with governments explaining how and why they will meet the organization’s demands. And if one can do it, so can the others. No slippage should be encouraged or allowed.

Ultimately, it would be great to see the US return to the fold as well. There is little hope of that, as President Biden instead pursues his “economic framework agreement.” The result is, as former US diplomat and economic strategist Kurt Tong [explained](#), “the supreme irony of watching passively as its primary strategic rival becomes a beneficiary of a regional market-opening arrangement that the United States crafted for its own benefit.”

### Biden Prefers His Own Devices, Thank You Very Much

Despite playing an integral role in the negotiation of CPTPP (at least its predecessor, the TPP), the US remains uninterested. During her Asia tour in November, US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo [reiterated](#) that the trade deal “is not something that America would be part of at this time.” Instead, the Biden administration wants to develop an economic framework that goes beyond CPTPP and “could



be even more robust in some ways than the traditional free trade agreement.”

The president explained his thinking at the East Asia Summit, held virtually in late October. The White House [readout](#) of those remarks noted that Biden would work with partners to “define our shared objectives around trade facilitation, standards for the digital economy and technology, supply chain resiliency, decarbonization and clean energy, infrastructure, worker standards, and other areas of shared interest.” Much rides on the ultimate contours of that framework but at a minimum we have to ask: why bother to reinvent the wheel?

### **New Zealand Delivers at APEC**

After the finance officials meeting (Oct. 22) and the concluding senior officials meeting (Nov. 5), New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern chaired the leaders meeting of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, held virtually on Nov. 12. The leaders approved the Aotearoa Plan of Action (APOA), which addressed the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, ways to enhance economic recovery, and build inclusive growth. The plan of action is the first step in the [Putrajaya Vision 2040](#), APEC’s long-term program, adopted in 2020, that frames a work plan to create an “open, dynamic, resilient and peaceful Asia-Pacific community by 2040, for the prosperity of all our people and future generations.”

[APOA](#) identified three economic drivers: trade and investment liberalization, digital transformation, and green and inclusive growth. Much of that agenda is familiar, the stuff of leaders’ meetings. Perhaps unique in this document is the focus on empowering indigenous peoples, 270 million of whom live in the APEC region.

The Leaders Declaration had four focal points: responding to the COVID pandemic with continued emphasis (after the July emergency leaders’ meeting) on the elimination of vaccine inequalities; support for macroeconomic coordination and structural reform to support economic recovery; commitment to transition to a climate-resilient future global economy; and the promotion of digital connectivity and innovation and efforts to narrow the digital divide.

The chair now goes to Thailand, which will face challenges aplenty as the COVID crisis continues and the US-China trade war intensifies and creates new barriers to economic exchange.

### **RCEP Arrives**

Jan. 1, 2022 marked the launch of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a larger, but less demanding, trade agreement than CPTPP. RCEP encompasses 15 Asia-Pacific countries that account for about 30% of global gross domestic product and population. Initially, it took effect among the 10 members that had completed ratification: China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. South Korea will follow on Feb. 1. The remaining four signatories are Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, and the Philippines.

RCEP aims to turn the region into “a new center of gravity for global trade,” and is expected to eliminate tariffs on over 90% of goods traded within the bloc. A [study](#) by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) concluded that RCEP will have a “significant impact” on international trade, increasing exports within the region by 2% compared with 2019, about \$41.8 billion. Japan will be the biggest beneficiary, with overall effects on exports estimated at \$20.2 billion; China is second with \$11.2 billion of gains and South Korea at \$6.7 billion. Vietnam and Indonesia are anticipated to lose \$1.5 billion and \$0.3 billion, respectively, as a result of trade diversion within the region.

RCEP aims to create a unified economic zone that facilitates trade between members and gives businesses and supply chain partners preferential treatment for exports to, and investments among, members. That’s an economists dream, but it isn’t clear how this integrated trade bloc will square with increasing concern about technology transfer between China and its trade partners (with obstacles being created on both sides). At a minimum, governments will be watching how Beijing complies with RCEP requirements and use that record to assess its application to join CPTPP.

### **Omicron, the New Face of COVID**

Hopes that creation and approval of a vaccine meant that the world had turned the corner in the

struggle with the COVID-19 coronavirus were rudely and abruptly shattered with the emergence of the omicron variant in early November. Officially known as B.1.1.529, Omicron was first confirmed by the World Health Organization (WHO) in a specimen from Botswana, but it quickly spread worldwide. Many Asian governments responded quickly, shutting the door to visitors from southern Africa and countries where the virus was found, even though the WHO warned against blanket travel bans: typically they are too late and punish countries that can least afford it.

To deal with omicron, and future variants, the answer is simple: get people vaccinated. According to the [WHO](#), 44.3% of the world's population is fully vaccinated, with the overwhelming majority of shots going to the world's richest citizens: G20 countries have received more than 80% of vaccines while only 0.6% of global vaccine supply has gone to low-income countries, sparking charges of "[neo-colonialism](#)," "[imperialism](#)," and "[apartheid](#)." According to [CovidVax.live](#), at the beginning of the new year, about 3 billion people in Asia had been vaccinated, about 68% of the population, but only 58% had had two shots. Its records showed Singapore, South Korea, China, Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Mongolia, Japan, Thailand, Bhutan, and Taiwan had reached the 70% threshold.

If the moral case for reducing inequality isn't convincing, self-interest might be persuasive. Jay Powell, chair of the US Federal Reserve Bank, [warned](#) that a resurgence in COVID cases and the emergence of omicron "pose downside risks to employment and economic activity and increased uncertainty for inflation." Laurence Boone, chief economist of the OECD, [agreed](#), explaining that omicron is "adding to the already high level of uncertainty and that could be a threat to the recovery, delaying a return to normality or something even worse." The Asia Development Bank lowered its forecast for developing Asia, [projecting](#) growth of 7.0% in 2021, down from 7.1% in September, and 5.3% in 2022, down from a previous forecast of 5.4%. While economists have cautioned that the lessened virulence of omicron—along with fatigue in societies tired of lockdowns—may reduce its economic impact, scientists warn that vaccine inequality ensures that the coronavirus will remain with us—and future mutations may not be so benign. As Glenda Gray, head of the South African Medical Research Council, [warned](#)

"Until we vaccinate enough people we're going to have this happen over and over again."

The next report will show how prescient that warning is. We will also be watching how the Biden administration engages an increasingly restive region as it struggles with its domestic political agenda, the Chinese leadership's management of COVID, the 2022 Winter Olympic Games and its own faltering economy, and the impact of elections in South Korea—and, as always, whatever else happens that isn't on the calendar.

# REGIONAL CHRONOLOGY

## SEPTEMBER—DECEMBER 2021

**Sept. 1-3, 2021:** Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry [meets](#) in Tianjin with PRC Special Envoy for Climate Change Xie Zhenhua and has virtual talks with Vice Premier Han Zheng, director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission Yang Jiechi and State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

**Sept. 1, 2021:** Japan's total number of COVID-19 cases [tops](#) 1.5 million due to a surge in new cases during the current fifth wave of infections.

**Sept. 2, 2021:** Seoul Central District Court [orders](#) Japan to disclose all assets in South Korea by March 21, 2022 in connection with asset seizure ruling for “comfort women” compensation.

**Sept. 3, 2021:** Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide [announces](#) that he will not seek re-election, meaning his one-year tenure as PM will end after the next general election in October.

**Sept. 3, 2021:** Vietnam's COVID-19 epicenter Ho Chi Minh City [considers](#) reopening economic activity, shifting from a “zero COVID-19” strategy to a policy of living with the virus.

**Sept. 4, 2021:** Signaling increased [concern](#) with Chinese assertiveness in the waters around Japan, British aircraft carrier *HMS Queen Elizabeth* makes its first port call in Japan.

**Sept. 5, 2021:** Thai protesters [return](#) to the streets, demonstrating against authorities due to its fumbles on COVID-19 containment and policies.

**Sept. 6, 2021:** Myanmar's military leaders [agree](#) to an ASEAN call for a ceasefire until the end of the year to ensure safe distribution of humanitarian aid.

**Sept. 8, 2021:** Hong Kong police [arrest](#) four members of a pro-democracy group known for its yearly vigil commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown.

**Sept. 8, 2021:** Seoul Central District Court [issues](#) ruling in lawsuit stating that Nippon Steel is not required to pay compensation to children of a World War II-era forced laborer.

**Sept. 8, 2021:** In a statement issued on its website, the International Olympic Committee [announces](#) suspension of North Korea Olympic Committee until the end of 2022 due to non-participation in the Tokyo Olympic Games.

**Sept. 9, 2021:** Three members of the Hong Kong Alliance, a pro-democracy group in Hong Kong, are [charged](#) with subversion under the national security law and the group is hit with financial penalties.

**Sept. 9, 2021:** China [pledges](#) 200 million yuan (\$31 million) worth of aid to Afghanistan, including food supplies and COVID-19 vaccines.

**Sept. 10, 2021:** President Biden [speaks](#) with President Xi Jinping of China, expressing concern over China's cyber activities while arguing that the two leaders could set aside their differences to work together on climate change.

**Sept. 11, 2021:** Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [tells](#) a top Vietnamese official the two countries should refrain from unilateral actions regarding the South China Sea.

**Sept. 12, 2021:** China [gifts](#) Cambodia a \$150 million stadium in Phnom Penh as a part of Beijing's biggest infrastructure grant to the country.

**Sept. 12, 2021:** Japan's Defense Ministry [says](#) a suspected Chinese submarine has been seen near its southern islands.

**Sept. 13, 2021:** North Korea successfully [test-fires](#) a new type of long-range cruise missile, a low-level provocation amid stalled talks with the United States.

**Sept. 15, 2021:** North Korea [fires](#) two short-range ballistic missiles into the East Sea, says South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS).

**Sept. 15, 2021:** Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom (AUKUS) [announce](#) a new trilateral security arrangement.

**Sept. 16, 2021:** China formally [applies](#) to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

**Sept. 17, 2021:** Taiwan's Economy Minister [expresses](#) concern about China's "sudden" decision to apply to join the CPTPP. Taiwan would ultimately [submit](#) its application on Sept. 22.

**Sept. 17, 2021:** North Korean state media [accuses](#) the United States of double standards over military activities and pursuing a hostile policy towards Pyongyang.

**Sept. 18, 2021:** Recent satellite images [show](#) North Korea is expanding a uranium enrichment plant at its main Yongbyon nuclear complex.

**Sept. 20, 2021:** North Korea [criticizes](#) a US decision to provide nuclear-powered submarines to Australia and threatens unspecified countermeasures if it finds the deal affects its security.

**Sept. 20, 2021:** Key US senators overseeing trade [say](#) that Washington needs to step up efforts to assert itself in the Indo-Pacific region after Beijing applies to join the CPTPP.

**Sept. 21, 2021:** South Korean President Moon Jae-in [suggests](#) in his UN speech that the two Koreas and the US, probably joined by China, declare a formal end to the 1950-53 Korean War.

**Sept. 21, 2021:** President Biden [speaks](#) to the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly. Xi Jinping [delivers](#) speech to UNGA on the same day.

**Sept. 21, 2021:** Russia [says](#), in reaction to AUKUS, that the US is ready to jeopardize the entire security architecture of Asia in a bid to strengthen its control over the region.

**Sept. 21, 2021:** Xi Jinping [reiterates](#) his nation's longtime policy of multilateralism, telling world leaders at the United Nations that disputes among countries "need to be handled through dialogue and cooperation."

**Sept. 22, 2021:** Taiwan formally [applies](#) to join the CPTPP.

**Sept. 23, 2021:** Taiwan's air force [scrambles](#) to warn off 19 Chinese aircraft that entered its air defense zone.

**Sept. 23, 2021:** US Vice President Kamala Harris [meets](#) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and stresses the importance of a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

**Sept. 23, 2021:** US prosecutors [announce](#) that they are dropping their extradition request against Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou and that she will be released, almost three years after Canadian authorities arrested her on bank and wire fraud charges at the US' behest. Meng is officially released the following day.

**Sept. 24, 2021:** Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs [releases](#) a fact sheet on US interference in Hong Kong affairs and support for anti-China, destabilizing forces.

**Sept. 24, 2021:** China [releases](#) Canadians Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig after nearly three years of detention, lending weight to suspicions that their arrests were retaliation for Meng's arrest.

**Sept. 24, 2021:** Leaders of the Quad [release](#) a statement outlining their cooperation in areas including pandemic response, climate change, and critical and emerging technologies.

**Sept. 25, 2021:** North Korea [says](#) it will consider a summit with South Korea if mutual respect between the neighbors can be assured

**Sept. 26, 2021:** Xi Jinping congratulates Eric Chu on his election as KMT chairman and welcoming the KMT's commitment to the 1992 Consensus.

**Sept. 26, 2021:** Taiwan Strait situation is "complex and grim," Chinese President Xi Jinping [writes](#) in a congratulatory letter to the newly elected leader of the KMT.

**Sept. 27, 2021:** White House [says](#) a near-simultaneous release of top Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou and two Canadians, detained shortly after her arrest, is not a prisoner swap.

**Sept. 27, 2021:** North Korea [fires](#) unidentified projectile into the East Sea, days after Pyongyang held out the prospect of an inter-Korean summit if the South drops "double standards."

**Sept. 27, 2021:** South Korea Daejeon District Court [orders](#) sale of patents and copyrights of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries for compensation of two wartime forced laborers. The next day, Japanese FM Motegi [says](#) ruling ordering sale of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries assets is “a clear violation of international law.”

**Sept. 28, 2021:** World Bank [downgrades](#) growth forecasts for most countries in East Asia and the Pacific region as economies slowed on the back of COVID-19.

**Sept. 29, 2021:** North Korea [test-fires](#) a newly developed hypersonic missile, joining a race headed by major military powers to deploy the advanced weapons system.

**Sept. 29, 2021:** Kishida Fumio is [elected](#) president of Japan’s majority Liberal Democratic Party, and by extension its new prime minister.

**Sept. 30, 2021:** Report from the Lowy Institute [shows](#) China’s aid to the Pacific Island countries has declined in recent years.

**Oct. 1, 2021:** North Korea [announces](#) it testfired a new type of anti-aircraft missile. The latest launch marks North Korea's seventh major weapons test this year.

**Oct. 1, 2021:** Taiwan [says](#) 25 Chinese fighter jets, including nuclear-capable bombers, entered its defense zone on a day Beijing marked its national day.

**Oct. 2, 2021:** President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines [says](#) that he would retire rather than pursue the vice presidency next year.

**Oct. 3, 2021:** Taiwanese Foreign Minister [warns](#) his country is preparing for war with China and asks Australia for help.

**Oct. 3, 2021:** US [voices](#) concern regarding China's increasing military activity near Taiwan and adds that China's military pressure against Taiwan undermines regional peace and stability.

**Oct. 4, 2021:** Japan’s new Prime Minister Fumio Kishida [says](#) he will call a general election on Oct 31.

**Oct. 4, 2021:** Southeast Asian countries [voice](#) disappointment about army-ruled Myanmar’s commitment to an agreed peace plan.

**Oct. 5, 2021:** President Biden [says](#) that he has spoken to President Xi about Taiwan and they agreed to abide by the Taiwan agreement.

**Oct. 5-7, 2021:** US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman [visits](#) India to exchange views on regional issues pertaining to the Indo-Pacific region.

**Oct. 5, 2021:** Biden [announces](#) that he has spoken to President Xi about Taiwan and they agreed to abide by the “Taiwan agreement.”

**Oct. 6, 2021:** Asian Development Bank [announces](#) plans to create funds to facilitate early closures of coal-fired power plants in Southeast Asia.

**Oct. 8, 2021:** Senior French senator says Taiwan should be called a [country](#), doubling down on earlier comments that have angered Beijing.

**Oct. 9, 2021:** Japan's Prime Minister Kishida [agrees](#) in his first talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping since taking office on the need to work together on issues of shared concern.

**Oct. 10, 2021:** China and Taiwan [trade](#) barbed comments over the future of the island territory.

**Oct. 11, 2021:** Britain [reaffirms](#) an Asia “tilt” as a new warship makes a stop at Singapore.

**Oct. 11, 2021:** Spokespersons for the two militaries [say](#) talks between Indian and Chinese army commanders to disengage troops from key friction areas along their border have failed.

**Oct. 13, 2021:** Myanmar's ruling military [allows](#) a special Southeast Asian envoy to visit the country but does not allow him to meet detained former leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

**Oct. 14-15, 2021:** *Arleigh Burke*-class guided missile destroyer *USS Dewey* (DDG 105) [conducts](#) Taiwan Strait transit in cooperation with Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) *Halifax*-class frigate, *HMCS Winnipeg*.

**Oct. 14, 2021:** ASEAN Special Envoy for Myanmar Erywan Yusof cancels his planned trip to Myanmar after the junta refuses access to Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders of the National League for Democracy under detention.

**Oct. 15, 2021:** Southeast Asia's foreign ministers [decide](#) not to invite Myanmar's military leader to an ASEAN annual summit.

**Oct. 15, 2021:** Biden [condemns](#) the "oppression and use of forced labor of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang" in a speech at the dedication ceremony for the University of Connecticut's new Dodd Center for Human Rights.

**Oct. 15, 2021:** Satellite pictures [surface](#) showing China upgrading military air sites near Taiwan.

**Oct. 16, 2021:** Myanmar's junta [says](#) it is "extremely disappointed" with ASEAN's decision to exclude its leader Min Aung Hlaing from an upcoming summit.

**Oct. 17, 2021:** Prime Minister Kishida [sends](#) ritual offering to the Yasukuni Shrine.

**Oct. 17, 2021:** China's military [condemns](#) the United States and Canada for each sending a warship through the Taiwan Strait.

**Oct. 18, 2021:** Myanmar will [release](#) a total of 5,636 prisoners jailed for protesting the coup that ousted the civilian government.

**Oct. 18, 2021:** Malaysia and Indonesia share strong [reservations](#) over Australia's decision to acquire nuclear-powered submarines, even though nuclear weapons were not part of the plan.

**Oct. 19, 2021:** North Korea [fires](#) a suspected submarine-launched missile into waters off Japan.

**Oct. 20, 2021:** United States [offers](#) to meet North Korea without preconditions and says Washington has no hostile intent toward Pyongyang.

**Oct. 20, 2021:** Philippines [issues](#) a diplomatic protest over Chinese vessels challenging its ships patrolling the South China Sea with sirens, horns, and radio communications.

**Oct. 21, 2021:** Speaking at a CNN town hall event, Biden [answers](#) the question if the US "would come to Taiwan's defense if China attacked" with "Yes, we have a commitment to do that." White House press secretary Jen Psaki later walks back Biden's statement that the US is committed to defending Taiwan should it come under Chinese attack, [saying](#) US policy "has not changed."

**Oct. 21, 2021:** South Korea [launches](#) first homemade rocket, which officials call an important step toward placing domestically made satellites in orbit to better monitor growing threats from North Korea.

**Oct. 22, 2021:** President Biden says the United States will come to Taiwan's defense and has a commitment to [defend](#) the island China claims as its own.

**Oct. 22, 2021:** Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) finance ministers [agree](#) to step up efforts to expand COVID-19 vaccine manufacture and supply and work together to ensure a sustainable and inclusive recovery.

**Oct. 23, 2021:** Russian and Chinese warships [conduct](#) the first ever joint patrol in the western part of the Pacific Ocean.

**Oct. 24, 2021:** Leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will continue to [push](#) Myanmar's military junta to allow the group's special envoy to visit the country.

**Oct. 25, 2021:** Japan and China [extend](#) a currency swap arrangement, signed in 2018, for three years to October 2024.

**Oct. 26, 2021:** Secretary of State Blinken [urges](#) United Nations member states to support Taiwan's "robust, meaningful participation throughout the UN system."

**Oct. 27, 2021:** Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen [confirms](#) the presence of US military trainers in Taiwan during a CNN interview.

**Oct. 27, 2021:** Speaking at a virtual East Asia Summit, President Biden [calls](#) China's actions toward Taiwan a threat to peace and stability and reiterates that US support for Taiwan is "rock-solid." He reaffirms US support for human rights in Xinjiang and Tibet, and for the rights of the people of Hong Kong.

**Oct. 28, 2021:** China [submits](#) renewed emissions cutting plan that promises to peak carbon pollution before 2030.

**Oct. 28, 2021:** Australia [rejects](#) a push by the US and the European Union to join a global pact to cut methane emissions, expected to be announced at the crucial COP26 summit.

**Oct. 31, 2021:** Secretary Blinken and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [meet](#) in Rome, on the margins of the G20, where Blinken reaffirms US' one-China stand on Taiwan and both sides reaffirm the need to keep communication lines open.

**Nov. 1, 2021:** Japanese Prime Minister Kishida [signals](#) that he will pursue policies aimed at deterring China, addressing climate change, and accelerating recovery from the pandemic.

**Nov. 1, 2021:** US [expresses](#) concern about increased military operations in parts of Myanmar, including Chin state, where it said more than 100 homes and churches had been destroyed.

**Nov. 2, 2021:** ADB [wins](#) commitments of \$665 million to support climate-related projects in Southeast Asia.

**Nov. 3-4, 2021:** Bill Richardson, former US ambassador to the United Nations, visits Myanmar on a private humanitarian mission to encourage the regime to allow the distribution of aid and to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, he secures the release from prison of Aye Moe, a former employee of the Richardson Center for Human Rights.

**Nov. 3, 2021:** ADB [launches](#) a plan to speed the closure of coal-fired power plants in Indonesia and the Philippines to lower the biggest source of carbon emissions.

**Nov. 4, 2021:** ASEAN Secretariat [announced](#) that the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement will enter into force on Jan. 1, 2022.

**Nov. 5, 2021:** China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) [says](#) it will continue to finance developing countries to acquire COVID-19 vaccines.

**Nov. 6, 2021:** North Korean mechanized troops [hold](#) artillery fire competition as part of efforts to boost defense capabilities.

**Nov. 7, 2021:** In an interview with CNN, US national security adviser Jake Sullivan [says](#) that US is seeking coexistence with China rather than containment or a new cold war.

**Nov. 8, 2021:** Australia [pledges](#) more than 3 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to Cambodia.

**Nov. 8, 2021:** Leaders of APEC [focus](#) on economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, emphasizing supply chain support and decarbonizing economies, at virtual talks this week.

**Nov. 9, 2021:** Pacific Rim senior officials [agree](#) to make coronavirus vaccines more accessible and reduce carbon emissions at the APEC forum.

**Nov. 10, 2021:** UN Security Council [expresses](#) deep concern over increased violence across Myanmar and calls for an immediate end to fighting and for the military to exercise utmost restraint.

**Nov. 10, 2021:** Secretary Blinken [says](#) the US and its allies would "take action" if China uses force to alter the status quo over Taiwan.

**Nov. 11, 2021:** Senior US and South Korean diplomats [discuss](#) how to restart stalled talks with North Korea, days after the North conducted artillery firing drills in its latest weapons tests.

**Nov. 11, 2021:** US national security advisor Jake Sullivan [says](#) the "stiff competition" between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific does not have to turn into a new Cold War, describing the United States as "doubling down" on its presence in the region.

**Nov. 12, 2021:** Biden, Xi, and leaders of APEC member economies [conclude](#) their virtual APEC Leaders' Meeting, agreeing on a series of commitments regarding the coronavirus pandemic, economic recovery, and climate change mitigation.

**Nov. 12, 2021:** South Korea's main opposition presidential candidate [says](#) he will strengthen military cooperation with the United States and Japan if elected to better cope with North Korea's nuclear threat and strive to make the North a leading foreign policy priority for the U.S.

**Nov. 14, 2021:** Thousands of Thais [take](#) to the streets of Bangkok demanding reform of the monarchy, defying a court ruling that such demands are a veiled attempt to overthrow the institution.

**Nov. 15, 2021:** Richardson returns to Myanmar to meet with Gen. Min Aung Hlaing and to negotiate the release of Danny Fenster, a US journalist who had been detained following the February coup.

**Nov. 15, 2021:** US and China simultaneously [release](#) detained citizens from each country. Daniel Hsu is allowed to leave China and seven Chinese nationals convicted of crimes in the US are sent back to China.

**Nov. 15, 2021:** North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [visits](#) a new city being built near the border with China and a sacred mountain revered by his family in his first public appearance in more than a month.

**Nov. 16, 2021:** Speaking to reporters in New Hampshire, Biden [says](#) Taiwan "makes its own decisions," and is "independent." Hours later Biden amends his statement, saying "we are not encouraging independence."

**Nov. 17, 2021:** US [designates](#) North Korea as a state violator of religious freedom.

**Nov. 17, 2021:** Thailand's legislature [shoots down](#) a draft bill aimed at strengthening democracy and at weakening military's political role.

**Nov. 18, 2021:** "Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania" officially [opens](#). This is the first representative office in Europe that uses the name "Taiwanese."

**Nov. 18, 2021:** Chinese envoy [lobbies](#) Southeast Asian nations to let Myanmar's military ruler attend a regional summit being hosted by China's president next week.

**Nov. 18, 2021:** Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa [stresses](#) the importance of peace and stability between China and Taiwan and expresses "serious concern" about the situation in Hong Kong and China's Xinjiang region.

**Nov. 21, 2021:** Chinese leader Xi Jinping [says](#) his country will not seek dominance over Southeast Asia or bully its smaller neighbors amid ongoing friction over the South China Sea.

**Nov. 22, 2021:** Chinese President Xi Jinping [meets](#) regional counterparts in a virtual summit marking the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ASEAN-China dialogue relations.

**Nov. 23, 2021:** China's birthrate [plummets](#) to lowest level seen in official annual data going back to 1978, as the government struggles to stave off a looming demographic crisis.

**Nov. 23, 2021:** During the fifth edition of the East Asia Summit (EAS) on Maritime Security Cooperation, India [expresses](#) its commitment toward the vision of a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI).

**Nov. 24, 2021:** Biden administration [invites](#) Taiwan to its "Summit for Democracy" in December, infuriating China.

**Nov. 25, 2021:** Five members of US House of Representatives [arrive](#) in Taiwan for a short trip expected to focus on security matters, the second time in a month US lawmakers have visited.

**Nov. 25, 2021:** India and China [win](#) two posts as delegates for Asia to the Executive Committee of the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL).

**Nov. 27, 2021:** Japanese government [approves](#) a supplementary budget increase defense spending for FY 2021 to \$52,8 billion, or 1.09% of GDP, the highest percentage in a decade.

**Nov. 28, 2021:** Taiwan's air force [scrambles](#) to warn away 27 Chinese aircraft that entered its air defense zone.

**Nov. 29, 2021:** Myanmar's navy [seizes](#) a boat carrying 228 Rohingya and arrests all on board, after members of the persecuted Muslim minority group try to leave the country.



**Nov. 30, 2021:** Myanmar's military government [files](#) a new corruption charge against deposed civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi and former President Win Myint.

**Dec. 1, 2021:** Top diplomats of South Korea and five Central Asian nations [gather](#) at a regional forum in Tajikistan to explore ways to expand cooperation and promote economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Dec. 1, 2021:** China [tells](#) Indonesia to stop drilling for oil and natural gas in maritime territory that both countries regard as their own during a months-long standoff in the South China Sea.

**Dec. 2, 2021:** India-Russia ties [deepen](#) amid mutual concerns including Afghanistan.

**Dec. 2, 2021:** Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen [offers](#) support for his eldest son as his potential successor.

**Dec. 3, 2021:** US [says](#) it is keeping South Korea on its list of countries to be monitored for currency practices.

**Dec. 4, 2021:** Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin delivers a [speech](#) titled “The China Challenge” at the 2021 Reagan National Defense Forum.

**Dec. 4, 2021:** Russia and ASEAN [conclude](#) their first joint naval exercise as the region faces rising tensions with China.

**Dec. 5, 2021:** Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index [projects](#) that the next century will be dominated by the US and China.

**Dec. 6, 2021:** Biden administration [announces](#) US diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in Beijing.

**Dec. 6, 2021:** A court in military-ruled Myanmar [finds](#) deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi guilty of charges of incitement and breaching coronavirus restrictions.

**Dec. 6, 2021:** Russia and India [sign](#) a flurry of trade and arms deals during President Putin's visit to New Delhi for talks with Prime Minister Modi.

**Dec. 7, 2021:** Nearly 100 Japanese lawmakers from several political parties [visit](#) Yasukuni Shrine, prompting the South Korean government to express “deep concern and regret.”

**Dec. 8, 2021:** US [imposes](#) an arms embargo and new export restrictions on Cambodia over the growing influence of China's military in the country.

**Dec. 8, 2021:** New Zealand's Defence Force [warns](#) of the increasing security threat posed by China to the country and its neighbors.

**Dec. 8, 2021:** Senate Foreign Relations Committee [holds](#) hearing on “The Future of U.S. Policy on Taiwan,” with witnesses Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner.

**Dec. 9, 2021:** Department of State issues a [statement](#) on the announcement by Nicaragua that it is breaking ties with Taiwan and establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC.

**Dec. 10, 2021:** On Human Rights Day, the US Treasury Department [imposes](#) investment restrictions on the Chinese company SenseTime, and sanctions two Chinese individuals over alleged oppression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. State Department [designates](#) four current and former senior PRC officials in Xinjiang for their involvement in arbitrary detention of Uyghurs. The US [designates](#) a number of entities in China and Russia for violating UNSC resolutions that prohibit UN member states from employing or hosting North Korean workers.

**Dec. 10, 2021:** Thirteen Chinese air force planes [enter](#) Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ).

**Dec. 12, 2021:** At the G7 meeting, the UK Foreign Secretary [stresses](#) the importance of working with ASEAN countries and aims to forge closer tech, economic and security ties.

**Dec. 13, 2021:** Indonesia [cites](#) strong US commitment as Secretary of State Blinken starts ASEAN tour.

**Dec. 13, 2021:** South Korean Finance Minister Hong Nam-ki [says](#) his government will begin the process to join the CPTPP, joining a growing list of applicants that includes China and Taiwan.

**Dec. 15, 2021:** Secretary Blinken [cuts short](#) his trip to Southeast Asia due to a COVID-19 case among his traveling party.

**Dec. 16, 2021:** Hundreds of Myanmar villagers [fled](#) to Thailand after junta troops clashed with an ethnic rebel group.

**Dec. 16, 2021:** US Commerce Department [hits](#) several Chinese companies with export restrictions due to national security reasons.

**Dec. 16, 2021:** Treasury Department [adds](#) eight Chinese companies—including DJI, the world's largest commercial drone manufacturer—to an investment blacklist for actively supporting the "surveillance and tracking" of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in China.

**Dec. 17, 2021:** China [vows](#) to take all necessary measures to safeguard its institutions and enterprises after the US Senate passed a new law barring imports from the Xinjiang region.

**Dec. 18, 2021:** Japanese PM Kishida [announces](#) that he is extending the ban on foreign visitors to Japan until at least early 2022.

**Dec. 20, 2021:** A Myanmar junta court [postpones](#) its verdict in Aung San Suu Kyi's trial for illegally importing and possessing walkie talkies.

**Dec. 20, 2021:** State Department [releases](#) the Hong Kong Autonomy Act Report to Congress, which underscores US concerns about the PRC's continued efforts to undermine the democratic institutions in Hong Kong and erode Hong Kong's autonomy in its judiciary, civil service, press, and academic institutions.

**Dec. 20, 2021:** China [blocks](#) a US draft resolution in the UN Security Council that provides a system for humanitarian exceptions to economic sanctions imposed on Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

**Dec. 21, 2021:** Beijing [announces](#) sanctions against four members of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom in response to Washington's latest sanctions targeting China's Xinjiang policies on Dec. 10.

**Dec. 21, 2021:** Taiwan [lodged](#) a protest with South Korea after a conference invitation to one of its ministers was rescinded over "cross-Strait issues."

**Dec. 23, 2021:** Germany [dispatches](#) warship to the South China Sea in an attempt to expand military deployments in Asia.

**Dec. 23, 2021:** President Biden [signs](#) into law the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which bans all imports from China's Xinjiang region and imposes sanctions on foreign individuals responsible for force labor in the region.

**Dec. 23, 2021:** Senior South Korean diplomats [hold](#) talks with Chinese counterparts after a diplomatic spat with Taiwan.

**Dec. 24, 2021:** Myanmar military attacks village of Mo So in Kayah State, killing 25 civilians. Among the burned bodies were several women and children and two international aid workers.

**Dec. 24, 2021:** Japanese Cabinet approves a 1% increase in the FY 2022 defense budget to \$291 billion.

**Dec. 24, 2021:** Solomon Islands [says](#) China will send police officers to help train its police force.

**Dec. 25, 2021:** More than 10,000 Russian troops [return](#) to permanent bases after month-long drills near Ukraine.

**Dec. 25, 2021:** China's regulatory body [unveils](#) a draft of new rules for domestic firms to raise funds overseas, allowing them to do so after registering with the regulator.

**Dec. 26, 2021:** Taiwan [looks](#) to create a semiconductor task force for Lithuania as the two broaden ties in the face of China's economic and political coercion.

**Dec. 27, 2021:** President Biden signs 2022 National Defense Authorization Bill into law, which stipulates that the US will "support and legitimize" the National Unity Government in Myanmar.

**Dec. 27, 2021:** New UN special envoy on Myanmar Dr Noeleen Heyzer, [expresses](#) concern about escalating violence in Myanmar and calls for a new year's ceasefire to facilitate humanitarian aid.

**Dec. 27, 2021:** Xinjiang's newly appointed leader [pledges](#) to maintain focus on social stability in the far western region, where human rights practices have fed international criticism and boycotts.

**Dec. 28, 2021:** Philippines [orders](#) two new warships from South Korea's Hyundai Heavy Industries.

**Dec. 28, 2021:** North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [opens](#) the 4th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea.

**Dec. 30, 2021:** Chinese defense spokesman [urges](#) the United States to cease hostile naval and air force maneuvers against China.

**Dec. 30, 2021:** Taiwanese President Tsai-Ing-wen [condemns](#) China for police raids on the Hong Kong offices of pro-democracy media outlet.

*Regional chronology by Pacific Forum's research intern Owen Ou.*

