
PACIFIC  FORUM

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

EDITED BY
ROB YORK
BRAD GLOSSERMAN

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2021
VOL. 23, NO. 3
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PACIFIC FORUM

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

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

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HONOLULU, HAWAII

COMPARATIVE CONNECTIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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CRS/PACIFIC FORUM

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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BY SHEILA A. SMITH, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS & CHARLES T. MCCLEAN,
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2021 demonstrated the [difficult politics](#) that have attended the COVID-19 pandemic. In the United States, the Congressional certification of the presidential election became the focus of violent protest and an attempted insurrection to stop the transfer of power from Donald Trump to Joseph Biden. In Japan, while less volatile, the post-Abe era revealed the fragile balance of power within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) that threatened to unseat unpopular prime ministers. The year began with Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide but ended with Prime Minister Kishida Fumio as Suga’s public approval ratings [plummeted](#) in response to the government’s pandemic management and the troublesome Tokyo Olympics. Japan’s two elections, one for the [leadership of the LDP](#) and the other for the [Lower House](#), revealed just how sticky conservative politics are today. Undoubtedly, the election within the party drew the most interest as four new candidates emerged to claim the mantle of leadership of Japan’s largest political party.

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BY BONNIE S. GLASER, GERMAN MARSHALL FUND OF THE US

Joe Biden and Xi Jinping held a lengthy virtual meeting to discuss the bilateral relationship and agree on the importance of managing their competition responsibly. Demonstrating that the US and China can cooperate, the two countries signed a bilateral agreement on a common climate change agenda at COP26. USTR Katherine Tai rolled out the administration's China trade policy. The US announced that it will not send an official delegation to the February 2022 Beijing Olympics. A few meetings were held between the US and Chinese militaries to discuss policy and operational matters. The US and its allies strongly condemned Hong Kong's legislative elections held under new rules imposed by China that allow only "patriots" to run for office. Taiwan remained the most serious source of US-China tensions with strong warnings by both sides against challenging the interests of the other. After almost three years, Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou was allowed to return to Canada in a deal struck between Meng's lawyers and the US Department of Justice. Beijing released two Canadians who had been detained as retaliation for Meng's arrest, and put them on a plane for Canada.

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

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BY CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

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

Beijing's extraordinary high-level attention to Southeast Asia since last year continued in the current reporting period. It culminated in President Xi Jinping presiding over a special summit he convened to commemorate the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-China dialogue on Nov. 22, which featured an array of Chinese advances. Keenly attentive to US efforts to reverse its recent decline and compete more effectively with China in Southeast Asia, Beijing has relied on ever-expanding Chinese influence in Southeast Asia to eclipse and offset US initiatives. Beijing faced a setback when Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte sharply rebuked Chinese coercion in the disputed South China Sea during the November summit. Similarly, China's role in the political turmoil in Myanmar got noticeable pushback from ASEAN leaders as the humanitarian situation in Myanmar remains unstable.

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

t the end of 2021, Taiwan and President Tsai Ing-wen stand in as strong a position as they have enjoyed in years. Taiwan has parlayed its opening of a representative office in Lithuania and Beijing's sanctions against Lithuania into public support from other European nations. For the first time Taiwan was invited to a US multilateral event, President Biden's Democracy Summit. On Dec. 18 Tsai unexpectedly defeated four opposition Kuomintang (KMT)-sponsored referendums that would have reversed a series of her executive actions as president, one of which would have obstructed her efforts to move forward on a bilateral trade agreement with the US. These victories effectively gave the Tsai administration a mid-term vote of confidence and embarrassed newly elected KMT Chairman Eric Chu Lilun. Chinese President Xi Jinping used the anniversary of the 1911 Xinhai revolution to underscore that reunification of Taiwan with the mainland would be the measure of the Communist Party's success in rejuvenating China. Repeated Chinese air sorties into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) made clear China's willingness to employ coercive tactics short of war to advance its aims. The combination of Taiwan's successes and China's determination to subjugate Taiwan may presage a contentious cross-Strait 2022.

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BY AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

Korea's leaders offered contrasting New Year addresses. While Moon Jae-in pledged to keep pursuing peace until he leaves the Blue House in May, Kim Jong Un said nothing about South Korea or the US. He sent his message soon after, however testing two hypersonic missiles. Moon kept pushing for a peace declaration, despite Washington being lukewarm and Kim Jong Un's sister Yo Jong saying explicitly that the time is not ripe. Evaluating Moon's *nordpolitik* more widely as his term winds down, his refusal to rethink policy after three years of Kim shunning him is puzzling. His successor, whoever it be, will pay Kim less heed. Voters will decide on March 9; the frontrunner is the liberal continuity candidate, Lee Jae-myung. Cocking a snook at both governments, a young gymnast who in late 2020 scaled and jumped border fences to escape from North Korea changed his mind and went back—the same way.

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BY SCOTT SNYDER, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS & SEE-WON BYUN, SAN
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During the waning months of 2021, China and South Korea worked together to stabilize and strengthen their economic relationship and the Moon administration reached out to China as part of its full-court press to achieve an end-of-war declaration prior to the end of Moon’s term in May of 2022. Through several foreign minister-level meetings between Chung Eui-young and Wang Yi, including Wang’s visit to Seoul for a meeting with President Moon, an exchange held in Tianjin between national security advisors, and regular bilateral economic consultations, the two countries improved economic cooperation and sustained close consultation on peninsula-related issues. The most significant outcomes of these discussions included the first release of a major Korean movie in Chinese theaters since 2015 and ongoing efforts to bilaterally support the digital, technological, and climate change dimensions of Sino-South Korean economic cooperation. China offered support for Moon administration efforts to end the Korean War through pursuit of phased and synchronized actions and discouraged relevant countries from taking destabilizing unilateral moves.

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BY JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

Chinese Communist Party leader Xi Jinping’s long-expected and often postponed—even before the pandemic—state visit to Japan was not even spoken of during the reporting period. In the closing days of the year, the defense ministers of the two countries met virtually but, at least according to published accounts, simply reiterated past positions and hopes for cooperation in the interests of regional stability. Japan did not receive the assurances it sought on the implications of the PRC’s new Coast Guard law. China repeatedly pressed the Japanese government for support for the Beijing Winter Olympics, expressing dissatisfaction with the lack of official representation announced by Tokyo. Although trade was brisk, economic growth in both countries remained impacted by quarantines and the uncertain investment climate in China. China complained about closer Taiwan-Japan relations even as it stepped up pressure on the island and both China and Japan continued military upgrades.

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BY JI-YOUNG LEE, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY & ANDY LIM, CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND
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The year 2021 ended with no breakthroughs in Japan-Korea relations. Bilateral ties remain stalled over South Korea's 2018 Supreme Court ruling on forced labor during Japan's occupation of the Korean Peninsula and Japan's export restrictions placed in 2019 on key materials used for South Korea's electronics industry. The inauguration of Kishida Fumio as Japan's new prime minister in September did not lead to a new momentum for addressing these bilateral issues, as both Tokyo and Seoul adhered to their positions. Prime Minister Kishida, while acknowledging that Japan's relationship with South Korea should not be left as is, largely reiterated Tokyo's official stance from the Abe and Suga governments that Seoul should first take steps on the forced labor issue. South Korean President Moon Jae-in sent a letter congratulating Kishida on his inauguration, signaling willingness to talk about bilateral challenges. Developments in the final months of 2021 are a reminder that there is no easy solution to these issues in sight.

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BY YU BIN, WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY

For Moscow and Beijing, relations with Washington steadily deteriorated toward the yearend. This was in sharp contrast from early 2021 when both had some limited expectations for relaxed tensions with the newly inaugurated Biden administration. For Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, each of their meetings (real and virtual) with Biden was frontloaded with obstacles: US sanctions, a boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics, and screw-tightening at strategic places (Taiwan and Ukraine). Biden's [diplomacy-is-back](#) approach—meaning US-led alliance-building (the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and AUKUS for China) or reinvigorating (NATO for Russia)—turned out to be far more challenging than Trump's erratic go-it-alone style. It was against this backdrop that China and Russia enhanced their strategic interactions in the last few months of 2021, particularly mil-mil relations at a time of rising tensions in the western Pacific.

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SATU LIMAYE, EAST WEST CENTER IN WASHINGTON

India's relations with East Asia during 2021 were characterized by two major developments; increasing interaction with the United States, Japan, and Australia as part of the “Quad” and painstaking efforts at border disengagement and dispute management with China. Within these preoccupations, India continued a robust if undramatic set of engagements (mostly virtually) across East Asia. India's active East Asia engagements were notable, coming as they did amid New Delhi taking up a nonpermanent seat of the United Nations Security Council, finding its footing with the new Biden administration, addressing a February coup next door in Myanmar, battling a major wave of the delta variant of the COVID-19 virus, and contending with the fallout of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer, as well as participating in the COP26 Summit and the Summit for Democracies that President Biden hosted at the end of the year.

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REGIONAL OVERVIEW

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

RALPH A. COSSA, PACIFIC FORUM
BRAD GLOSSERMAN, TAMA UNIVERSITY CRS/PACIFIC FORUM

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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 30th 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 forced 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.

PACIFIC  FORUM

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

US-JAPAN RELATIONS

A NEW PRIME MINISTER AND A GROWING ALLIANCE AGENDA

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2021 demonstrated the [difficult politics](#) that have attended the COVID-19 pandemic. In the United States, the Congressional certification of the presidential election became the focus of violent protest and an attempted insurrection to stop the transfer of power from Donald Trump to Joseph Biden. In Japan, while less volatile, the post-Abe era revealed the fragile balance of power within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) that threatened to unseat unpopular prime ministers. The year began with Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide but ended with Prime Minister Kishida Fumio as Suga's public approval ratings [plummeted](#) in response to the government's pandemic management and the troublesome Tokyo Olympics. Japan's two elections, one for the [leadership of the LDP](#) and the other for the [Lower House](#), revealed just how sticky conservative politics are today. Undoubtedly, the election within the party drew the most interest as four new candidates emerged to claim the mantle of leadership of Japan's largest political party.

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Kishida emerged victorious after a second round of voting, which privileged those in the Diet over the rank and file of the party, with a [far more assertive stance](#) on Japan's strategic outlook. He then led his party to victory in the general election, overcoming an opposition coalition that continued to struggle to put forward a cohesive identity or policy agenda.

Diplomatically, Washington and Tokyo continued to focus on their Indo-Pacific cooperation.

The two militaries have continued consultations on how to cope with China's growing presence in and around Japan's southwestern islands. A new prime minister offered opportunity to further define the scope of US-Japan cooperation, and a new Biden-Kishida agenda is in the works. COVID-19 again intervened to prevent in-person meetings, but a virtual US-Japan 2+2 meeting allowed for continued alliance problem-solving.

Japan's Elections

Political change rarely seems surprising in Japan, but in the wake of the Summer Olympics, with a vaccination rollout underway, Prime Minister Suga thought he was well-prepared for his party's leadership election. He was mistaken. After difficult conversations with former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and Deputy Prime Minister Aso Taro, Suga [announced](#) that he would not run after all. The two largest factions within the party had withdrawn their support for the embattled prime minister.

Thus began a fascinating race for LDP president scheduled for Sept. 29. Former Foreign Minister Kishida had thrown his name in even before Suga withdrew, signaling his intent to side with younger LDP members in the call for greater transparency and accountability in the party's leadership. Three others would join the race: popular vaccination czar Kono Taro; an ambitious advocate on the right, Takaichi Sanae; and, eventually, veteran Noda Seiko, who had served in both the Cabinet and LDP leadership positions. For the first time in its history, the LDP leadership race featured two men and two women.

The real tension within the LDP was generational. Younger Diet members had become increasingly uncomfortable with the closed nature of party decision-making, and the public's growing antipathy toward the money

scandals of some Diet members. By-elections leading up to the LDP leadership race suggested that even stalwart supporters were increasingly fed up with accusations of corruption. Younger Diet members were also much more interested in having policy lead in the selection of the party leader. A [series](#) of [public debates](#) highlighted the candidates' policy positions on Japan's economic, social, and defense challenges.

Surprisingly, Japan's defenses [drew considerable attention](#) in this party race. Kishida came out early in his bid for a more strategic approach to China and supported strengthening Japan's ability to deter aggression through the introduction of the capability to attack enemy bases if needed. Takaichi drew considerable support in her forthright advocacy of significantly upping Japan's defense spending to a level commensurate with US NATO allies and saying yes to the deployment of US intermediate-range missiles on Japanese territory. Kono and Noda were less willing to take a clear stand on military issues. Instead, they both highlighted changing social relationships within Japan, arguing that it was time that women should be able to retain their surname after marriage and for a more inclusive approach to LGBTQ rights.

No clear winner emerged in the first round of voting, which included rank-and-file party members as well as Diet legislators. In the second round, which [privileged](#) Nagatacho politicians, Takaichi aligned with Kishida to propel him to victory. In return, after Kishida drew 257 of the 427 votes within the party, he asked her to lead the party's powerful Policy Research Council. Takaichi thus became responsible for drafting the LDP's campaign platform, which incorporated the goal of [doubling Japan's defense budget](#) to 2% of GDP, a level closer to that of NATO countries. Few expect Japan to realize that goal, but it is notable that security issues now occupy a far more conspicuous role in LDP policy advocacy.

Little more than a week after Kishida became prime minister on Oct. 4, he [dissolved](#) the Lower House on Oct. 14 for an election on Oct. 31. Kishida needed to call an election at the latest by Nov. 28, given that the Lower House was nearing the end of its four-year term, but decided it was best not to wait. After a short campaign, just 55.9% of Japan's eligible voters participated in the election, which marked a slight increase from the last two elections in 2017 (53.7%) and 2014

(52.7%) but still represented the [third-lowest turnout rate in the postwar era](#).



Figure 1 Prime Minister Kishida Fumio in the Lower House of the Diet following his election on Oct. 4, 2021. Photo: Kimimasa Mayama/Shutterstock

Going into the election, Kishida [set a low bar for victory](#), saying he would be content if his LDP and its coalition partner, Komeito, could together hold onto a simple majority, meaning 233 of the Lower House's 465 seats. Many in the LDP similarly [expressed concern](#) about the party's electoral fortunes throughout the fall. Media companies and political pundits [predicted](#) that the LDP would lose at least 30 seats and perhaps more than 50.

Instead, the LDP [defied expectations](#) by capturing 261 seats, a decline of just 15 from its pre-election total of 276 seats. The LDP not only secured a simple majority on its own but also hit the magic number (261 seats) required to achieve what is known as a "[stable majority](#)," wherein the LDP can assign the chairs of all parliamentary committees. Together with the Komeito's 32 seats, the LDP-led ruling coalition now controls 293 seats, which is short of a two-thirds supermajority (310 seats) but still provides the Kishida Cabinet with a comfortable buffer above the stable majority threshold to [facilitate the passing of its agenda](#).

The LDP's unexpected success [exposed the continued weakness](#) of Japan's opposition parties. While the conservative, Osaka-based Ishin no Kai [performed well](#), nearly quadrupling its total from 11 to 41 seats, the liberal, multiparty coalition led by the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) did not, with the CDP decreasing its seat share from 110 to 96 seats. The worse-than-expected results for the CDP included the surprising constituency defeat of Ozawa Ichiro, one of Japan's most influential politicians and a

former president of the now-defunct DPJ, who lost his district seat for the first time in over 50 years, although he still secured a seat via the proportional representation (PR) component of Japan's hybrid electoral system. During the campaign, LDP leaders [harshly criticized](#) the CDP for coordinating with the Japan Communist Party (JCP) and even went so far as to frame the election as a choice for voters between democracy and communism. For instance, Kono Taro, director of the LDP's Public Affairs Department and runner-up in September's LDP leadership race, said, "The Communist Party's strategy is to get one foot in the door ... Then they wrench it open and take over the house." In response to the CDP's shocking electoral losses, both the party's leader, Edano Yukio, and its secretary-general, Fukuyama Tetsuro, [resigned](#).

This is not to say that the LDP did not suffer setbacks of its own in the election. Like Ozawa's shocking loss, the LDP also witnessed its share of stunning defeats of veteran lawmakers, often by much younger challengers. Perhaps the most notable of these instances came when the CDP's Hideshi Futori (44) defeated the LDP's Akira Amari (72), who became the first sitting LDP secretary-general to lose a district contest, though Amari too, like Ozawa, was rescued by the PR tier. Still, the result came as a surprise and led to Amari [resigning](#) his party post to be replaced by Foreign Minister Motegi.

In the end, the election marked a victory for the LDP, Komeito, and Prime Minister Kishida. Kishida's position within the LDP should now be [more secure](#) than it was [before the election](#), which in turn means that he should have a better chance at implementing key parts of his policy agenda such as lessening economic inequality and bolstering Japan's defenses. At the same time, Kishida will have to be [wary](#) about tackling policy issues that may be divisive within the LDP as he prepares to lead the party into next summer's Upper House election.

The Beginnings of a Kishida-Biden Agenda?

Japan's elections did not slow US-Japan strategic cooperation, however. Suga traveled to Washington, DC to attend the first in-person Quad summit on Sept. 24 as the LDP leadership race heated up. Economic security was the highlight for Quad cooperation, and the summit produced a [larger agenda](#) than the first virtual meeting. The resulting [joint statement](#) from the four leaders pledged cooperation on a wide range

of issues from the COVID-19 pandemic to climate change and critical and emerging technologies.

There was little indication that the US-Japan agenda in the Quad would suffer from Japan's leadership transition. As the LDP's new leader, and Japan's next prime minister, Kishida made it clear that he wanted Japan to contribute substantially to the coalition's effort to enhance economic security. A new position in the Cabinet was created for [economic security](#), and Kobayashi Takayuki was selected to lead the effort. At 46 years old, Kobayashi was the second youngest member of the Kishida Cabinet and [brought considerable expertise](#) to the job having worked on economic security policies as a former parliamentary vice minister of defense, in the LDP's Policy Research Council, and as a bureaucrat at the Ministry of Finance. Once the Lower House election was over, Kishida moved to initiate Cabinet discussions on an economic security agenda and announced the [creation of a task force](#) to draft legislation in time for the spring Diet session. On the task force were most of the major Cabinet ministers, and Kishida stipulated that a new law would focus on establishing secure supply chains and identifying critical technologies in need of protection.



Figure 2 Prime Minister Kishida Fumio greets US President Joe Biden during their first in-person meeting on the sidelines of the COP26 climate conference. Photo: Cabinet Public Affairs Office / Kyodo

Similarly, Kishida, like his predecessor Suga, signaled his support for cooperation with the Biden administration on climate change. On Aug. 31, Climate Envoy John Kerry [met](#) Suga in Tokyo as the first stop of his Asia tour. In a joint statement, the two governments said they would elevate the climate crisis to be a “[pillar of the Japan-US bilateral partnership](#)” and would cooperate on doing all they could to meet the international goal of limiting temperature

increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius. In November, the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow, Scotland, provided an opportunity for Kishida's first overseas trip as prime minister and his first face-to-face meeting with Biden. The two leaders only had time for a [brief conversation](#) on the sidelines of the conference but agreed to continue US-Japan cooperation on climate, security, and other regional issues, and to find time for a longer meeting soon.

At the COP26 summit, Biden [announced](#) that the US would start providing \$3 billion per year by 2024 to help developing countries combat climate change, while Kishida [pledged](#) an additional \$10 billion over five years to help Asia in working toward zero carbon emissions. Kishida's move followed Suga's promise at the G7 Summit in June to [commit](#) \$60 billion in climate finance from 2021 to 2025 and was aimed at helping developed countries [close in on their goal](#) of mobilizing \$100 billion per year. While Kerry [welcomed](#) the new commitment by Kishida, there are still some disagreements between the allies concerning climate strategies, such as Japan's [reluctance](#) thus far to aggressively phase out coal power.

The Kishida and Biden foreign policy teams even ended up in alignment on the more delicate question of how Japan would approach the Beijing Olympics. On Dec. 6, the Biden administration [announced a diplomatic boycott](#) of the 2022 Winter Olympics, a move that China's Foreign Ministry quickly [condemned](#) as violating the spirit of the games and one that would require China to respond with “resolute countermeasures.” Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa, in an early phone call with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, indicated his concern about human rights abuses in Xinjiang and the situation in Hong Kong. While the [readout](#) in *Xinhua* did not reflect these comments, the Japanese press [did](#). There had been some grumbling within LDP circles about Kishida's choice of Hayashi, grumbling that came from the [assertion](#) that Hayashi was too pro-China. One Upper House member even made a media event out of [visiting](#) the new foreign minister in his office to argue for a boycott of the Beijing Olympics. In the end, however, the decision was the prime minister's to make. While not claiming that Japan was joining the diplomatic boycott, Kishida [decided](#) to send a small delegation headed by Hashimoto Seiko, an Upper House lawmaker and president of the organizing

committee for the Tokyo Olympics, to the games to represent Japan, demonstrating Japanese affinity with the US and other democracies regarding concerns over China's human rights behavior.

The issue of trade, however, continues to challenge the US and Japan. In November, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo and US Trade Representative Katherine Tai traveled to Tokyo for the launch of two new economic initiatives alongside Foreign Minister Hayashi and METI Minister Hagiuda Koichi. On Nov. 15, Raimondo announced the creation of the Japan-US Commercial and Industrial Partnership. This agreement is intended to “[strengthen the competitiveness, resiliency, and security](#)” of the two countries through cooperation on supply chains, export controls, and addressing unfair trade practices. Two days later, on Nov. 17, Tai announced the launch of the Japan-US Partnership on Trade. Meetings under this partnership are set to begin in early 2022 and will reportedly concentrate on “[third country concerns](#)” as well as labor issues, the environment, and a new digital ecosystem for trade.

Also in November, the US and Japan [reopened talks](#) on finding a resolution to US Section 232 national security tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from Japan. These tariffs were [imposed by President Trump](#) back in 2018. The restart of these discussions followed an announcement from the US and EU in October that the two parties had [ended their own Section 232 tariff war](#), with the US agreeing to allow the duty-free import of “limited volumes” of EU steel and aluminum before reverting to the previous tariffs. On Dec. 10, the US Commerce Department and Office of the US Trade Representative [pitched a similar offer](#) to Japan, but media reports suggest that the Japanese government is [holding out for a better deal](#).

Notably absent from US-Japan economic discussions in the fall was any mention of progress on trade agreements concerning the two allies, whether bilateral or multilateral. Trade officials in Japan have [long expressed hope](#) that the US will someday rejoin the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), but Commerce Secretary Raimondo again [ruled this out](#) in mid-November during her Asia tour and visit to Japan. Instead, she said the Biden administration remains focused on creating a

[new economic framework](#) for the Indo-Pacific in 2022, an initiative that President Biden [announced](#) in October at the virtual East Asian Summit.

Pressure on the US to “[step up its game](#)” on economic engagement in Asia has increased in recent months. The 15-nation Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) free-trade agreement—which includes Japan, South Korea, China, Australia, New Zealand, and ASEAN states, but not the US—[entered into force](#) on Jan. 1 for most member countries. Five nations—the United Kingdom, China, Taiwan, South Korea, and Ecuador—have also officially [started the process](#) of joining the CPTPP. Acceding to the CPTPP is [no easy task](#), given that prospective members must meet rigorous criteria for membership and receive the approval of all 11 partner nations. Nevertheless, China's official request on Sept. 16 [attracted significant attention](#) on both sides of the Pacific, especially after Taiwan [followed suit](#) with its own membership application just a few days later.

A key topic for trade in 2022 will be how CPTPP countries weigh the risks and benefits to accepting China and/or Taiwan into the pact. Japan is likely to continue playing a leadership role in these decisions, both because it has the largest economy among CPTPP members and because it has worked closely with the UK, the first applicant for CPTPP membership, as chair of the trade commission in 2021. While many observers are [skeptical](#) about whether China is [sincere](#) in its desire to join the CPTPP, or whether its actions are merely intended to [drive a wedge](#) between the US and its allies in Asia, China's formal application still [offers a potential opportunity](#) for Japan to use its clout within the CPTPP framework to negotiate with China on regional trade rules. In doing so, leaders in Tokyo will also clearly be on the lookout for more concrete news from Washington about Biden's trade agenda for the Asia-Pacific.

Tending the Alliance

Political change in Tokyo brought in a new foreign policy team while in Washington, DC political tensions on Capitol Hill stalled US ambassadorial picks. After months of delay, however, Rahm Emanuel was [confirmed](#) as Biden's ambassador to Japan on Dec. 18. Meanwhile, Japan's new Foreign Minister Hayashi had to [postpone](#) his first official trip to Washington, a place where he spent time

working on Capitol Hill and has deep personal networks, after the spread of the omicron variant caused the 2+2 meeting in early 2022 to be moved online.

Host-nation support negotiations resulted in a [\\$9.2 billion commitment](#) by Japan to support costs associated with US forces there. The talks reached an impasse during the Trump administration over different expectations of the scale of Japanese funding, but the Biden administration took a more balanced approach to considering the contributions Japan makes to US Forces Japan. In announcing the five-year agreement on Dec. 21, Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo told reporters that the deal demonstrated the two allies' "[resolution to stand up](#) to the challenge posed by the difficult security environment together."

US and Japanese forces continued to focus attention on how to cope with China's increasing presence in and around Japan's southwestern islands. The possibility of increasing tensions across the Taiwan Strait also motivated US-Japan military discussions on how to respond. On Nov. 11, US Indo-Pacific Commander John Aquilino traveled to Tokyo to meet with Defense Minister Kishi, Foreign Minister Hayashi, and Prime Minister Kishida, who said at the outset of their meeting that they would like the US and Japan to work together to realize "[a free and open Indo-Pacific](#)." The meetings in Tokyo came just a few days after Aquilino [visited](#) the Ground Self-Defense Force's Camp Amami in Kagoshima Prefecture, the Air Self-Defense Force's Naha Base, and the Ground Self-Defense Force's Camp Yonaguni in Okinawa alongside Gen. Yamazaki Koji, chief of Staff of the Joint Staff.

US and Japanese militaries also [stepped up their exercises](#) in Asian waters and expanded them to include additional partners. In late November, a 10-day exercise showcased the range of actors willing to signal to Beijing the rising costs of its coercion against Taipei. Commanded by Vice Adm. Yuasa Hideki of Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Forces, the ANNUALEX, which took place in the Philippine Sea just south of Japan, featured over 35 ships and aircraft including those from allies such as Canada, Australia and, for the first time, Germany. Rear Adm. Karl Thomas, commander of the 7th Fleet, noted from his position aboard a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier that the exercise was designed to communicate the strong interest across the region in deterring aggression.



Figure 3 Admiral John Aquilino, Commander of the United States Indo-Pacific Command, meets with Japan's Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at Kishida's official residence in Tokyo, Japan on Nov. 11, 2021. Photo: Reuters / Issei Kato / Pool

The pandemic continued to shape Washington and Tokyo's ability to move the alliance agenda forward. In Japan, there was good news. The vaccination rate was approaching 80% by year's end, a [tremendously successful campaign](#) given that the rollout did not begin until the summer. The US, by comparison, [began vaccinations much earlier](#) but ended the year with just over 60% of its population vaccinated. Still, the pandemic's impact on Japanese politics was apparent during both the LDP leadership race as well as the general election. Moreover, the continued rise in cases of COVID-19 transmission in the US, largely fueled by the appearance of the new, highly transmissible omicron variant, prevented in-person leaders meeting and the early January 2022 US-Japan 2+2 meeting had to be moved online. Even the next Quad meeting, scheduled to be held in the spring in Tokyo, may be affected by the pandemic.

US and Japanese differences on pandemic management were a focus of alliance consultations. By November, the omicron variant began to make its way across the world, and Kishida [announced](#) on Nov. 29 that Japan would close its doors to all foreigners entering the country for 30 days starting the next day. On Dec. 18, Kishida [extended](#) this ban until at least early 2022. Those who were allowed to enter Japan went through a far more rigorous testing and quarantine regime. Japan's harsh border shutdown drew significant rebuke by non-Japanese who were separated from families as well as students and others who had planned on traveling to Japan for study and research. Nonetheless, media polling revealed that

Kishida's approach was [widely supported](#) by the Japanese public.

COVID cases remain significantly lower in Japan than in the US. As of Jan. 1, the daily average number of cases was just 344 in [Japan](#) compared to 386,923 in the [US](#). However, despite Japan's border closures, omicron has found a way into the country and case numbers are beginning to climb. On Dec. 22, several cases were [discovered](#) in Osaka. The US and Japanese governments have also clashed over the growing number of COVID cases among US military personnel in Okinawa. The [lack of US military testing](#) prior to deployment in Okinawa was conspicuously at odds with Japan's stringent restrictions on entry. Gov. Denny Tamaki was [outraged](#) and called on the Japanese government to impose far more stringent oversight of pandemic management practices by US forces in his prefecture, which now has the [highest daily rate](#) of new cases in Japan. On Jan. 9, Kishida placed Okinawa, as well as parts of Yamaguchi and Hiroshima, under a [quasi-state of emergency](#) in response to the surge in cases. The same day, the US and Japan [issued a joint statement](#) saying that US Forces Japan personnel would restrict their movements outside base facilities to only essential activities for the next two weeks.

Conclusion

As 2021 drew to a close, the US and Japan confronted important alliance decisions. Referenced in the US-Japan 2+2 [joint statement](#) in early January, the two governments identified the introduction of new Japanese military capabilities as well as the refinement of an alliance response to a possible use of force against Taiwan as their primary focus for alliance upgrades in 2022. With a new Cabinet in place, the Japanese government is preparing to present legislation for an economic security initiative to the Diet. This will enable far greater coordination between the US and Japan, as well as within the Quad and with European partners. Later in the year, a new Japanese National Security Strategy is expected as is a revised 10-year defense plan along with its accompanying procurement commitments. The Kishida Cabinet will be expected to realize the party's aim to increase Japanese defense spending, and Prime Minister Kishida seems ready to commit to the acquisition of a capability that would allow Japan to strike enemy bases if needed to defend Japan.

Elections also loom in both the US and Japan. The Biden administration will face the midterm elections for Congress. With 26 Democrats already announcing that they will [retire their seats](#), there is a high probability that Democratic majority in the House will be challenged by the Republican Party. And yet, the Republican Party is suffering from internal fissures as those on the far right, enamored of conspiracy theories and prone to calls for yet more violence, make their voices heard. The Kishida Cabinet will need to consider its own Upper House election in the summer of 2022. Difficult defense decisions, for example, are not likely until that election is past, and of course, Japan's new prime minister will have to demonstrate his ability to protect the Japanese people from the newest wave of COVID-19. The agenda for cooperation in the US-Japan alliance is full and growing regardless of the domestic political calendar. Far more intense consultations between Tokyo and Washington will be required to implement policy goals set out in 2021.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-JAPAN RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER—DECEMBER 2021

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

Sept. 14, 2021: US Special Representative for the DPRK Sung Kim, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Funakoshi Takehiro and Republic of Korea Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Noh Kyu-duk [meet](#) in Tokyo.

Sept. 22, 2021: Secretary of State Blinken and Foreign Minister Motegi [meet](#) on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York.

Sept. 22, 2021: Foreign Minister Motegi, Secretary of State Blinken, and Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Chung Eui-yong [hold](#) a trilateral foreign ministers' meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting.

Sept. 22, 2021: US Food and Drug Administration [announces](#) that it has lifted import restrictions on Japanese food products related to the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident.

Sept. 23–26, 2021: PM Suga [visits](#) the United States for the Quad summit meeting and the UN General Assembly meeting.

Sept. 24, 2021: President Biden, Prime Minister Suga, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi [meet](#) in Washington, DC for the second Quad summit meeting.

Sept. 24, 2021: President Biden and PM Suga [meet](#) in Washington, on the sidelines of the Quad summit meeting.

Sept. 27, 2021: Keichi Ichikawa, director-general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' North American Affairs Bureau, visits Washington, to [meet](#) Daniel Kritenbrink, assistant secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

Sept. 29, 2021: Kishida Fumio is [elected](#) president of the Liberal Democratic Party.

Oct. 4, 2021: Kishida is [elected](#) prime minister of Japan by members of the House of Representatives.

Oct. 5, 2021: President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [speak](#) by telephone.

Oct. 7, 2021: Foreign Minister Motegi and Secretary of State Blinken [speak](#) by telephone.

Oct. 14, 2021: Kishida [dissolves](#) the House of Representatives for a general election on Oct. 31.

Oct. 19, 2021: Special Representative for the DPRK Sung Kim, Director General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Funakoshi, and Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Noh Kyu-duk [hold](#) a trilateral meeting in Washington, DC.

Oct. 21, 2021: US and Japan [launch](#) new cooperation with the government of Indonesia under the Japan-US Clean Energy Partnership to increase clean energy investment in the Indo-Pacific.

Oct. 31, 2021: General elections are [held](#) for Japan's House of Representatives.

Nov. 1, 2021: Amari Akira [announces](#) resignation from post of LDP secretary-general following his district loss in the election.

Nov. 2, 2021: Biden and Kishida [hold](#) informal talks on the sidelines of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP26) meeting in Glasgow.

Nov. 4, 2021: Foreign Minister Motegi is [appointed](#) to post of LDP secretary-general.

Nov. 8, 2021: North American Affairs Bureau Director-General Ichikawa [meets](#) Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs Kritenbrink.

Nov. 8-9, 2021: Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command Adm, John Aquilino and Chief of Staff of the Joint Staff Gen. Koji Yamazaki [visit](#) Ground Self-Defense Force's Camp Amami in Kagoshima Prefecture and Air Self-Defense Force's Naha Base and Ground Self-Defense Force's Camp Yonaguni in Okinawa.

Nov. 9, 2021: JASDF and the US Air Force [hold](#) first-ever joint search and rescue exercises north of Ishigaki and Miyako Islands in Okinawa.

Nov. 10, 2021: Hayashi Yoshimasa is [appointed](#) Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Nov. 11, 2021: Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command Adm. Aquilino [meets](#) Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo, Foreign Minister Hayashi, and Prime Minister Kishida in Tokyo.

Nov. 11-12, 2021: Japan [hosts](#) 12th US-Japan Policy Cooperation Dialogue on the Internet Economy.

Nov. 13, 2021: Secretary Blinken and FM Hayashi [speak](#) by telephone.

Nov. 14-15, 2021: Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo visits Japan and [meets](#) FM Hayashi and Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno.

Nov. 16-18, 2021: US Trade Representative Katherine Tai visits Japan and [meets](#) with FM Hayashi and Chief Cabinet Secretary Matsuno.

Nov. 17, 2021: Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, and Office of the US Trade Representative [launch](#) the Japan-US Partnership on Trade.

Nov. 18, 2021: Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Mori [meets](#) Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman.

Nov. 26, 2021: Biden [announces](#) the US will ban travel for non-US citizens from South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique, and Malawi out of concern for the omicron variant of COVID-19.

Nov. 29, 2021: Kishida [announces](#) Japan will ban entry for all foreign visitors out of concern for the omicron variant of COVID-19.

Nov. 30, 2021: Navies from the US, Japan, Australia, Canada, and Germany [conclude](#) the nine-day ANNUELEX in the Philippine Sea.

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

Dec. 7, 2021: Japan [hosts](#) the Nutrition for Growth summit.

Dec. 11, 2021: Secretary Blinken and FM Hayashi [meet](#) on sidelines of the G7 Foreign and Development Ministers Meeting in the United Kingdom.

Dec. 12-15, 2021: Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Jose Fernandez travels to Japan and [meets](#) Senior Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Hiroshi Suzuki.

Dec. 15, 2021: Department of State and Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry [hold](#) the second Japan-US Clean Energy Partnership plenary meeting.

Dec. 18, 2021: Senate [confirms](#) Rahm Emanuel as next US ambassador to Japan.

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

Dec. 20, 2021: G7 foreign ministers [release](#) a joint statement expressing concerns about Hong Kong's Legislative Council elections, which took place on Dec. 19.

Dec. 21, 2021: Representatives of US and Japanese governments [announce](#) consensus has been reached on a new Special Measures Agreement concerning Host Nation Support.

Dec. 22, 2021: USTR Tai and FM Hayashi [speak](#) by videoconference.

Jan. 6, 2022: US and Japan [hold](#) a virtual 2+2 meeting.

Jan. 9, 2022: Kishida places Okinawa and parts of Yamaguchi and Hiroshima under a [quasi-state of emergency](#) in response to the surging number of COVID-19 cases.

Jan. 9, 2022: US and Japan [release a joint statement](#) limiting the off-base movements of US Forces Japan personnel to essential activities only for two weeks.

PACIFIC  FORUM

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

US-CHINA RELATIONS

US AND CHINESE LEADERS JAW-JAW

BONNIE S. GLASER, GERMAN MARSHALL FUND OF THE US

Joe Biden and Xi Jinping held a lengthy virtual meeting to discuss the bilateral relationship and agree on the importance of managing their competition responsibly. Demonstrating that the US and China can cooperate, the two countries signed a bilateral agreement on a common climate change agenda at COP26. USTR Katherine Tai rolled out the administration's China trade policy. The US announced that it will not send an official delegation to the February 2022 Beijing Olympics. A few meetings were held between the US and Chinese militaries to discuss policy and operational matters. The US and its allies strongly condemned Hong Kong's legislative elections held under new rules imposed by China that allow only "patriots" to run for office. Taiwan remained the most serious source of US-China tensions with strong warnings by both sides against challenging the interests of the other. After almost three years, Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou was allowed to return to Canada in a deal struck between Meng's lawyers and the US Department of Justice. Beijing released two Canadians who had been detained as retaliation for Meng's arrest, and put them on a plane for Canada.

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Biden–Xi Virtual Meeting

Following two engagements between senior US and Chinese officials in Anchorage and Tianjin that resulted in little more than exchanging talking points and failed to produce a pathway to managing growing an increasingly competitive bilateral relationship, the Biden administration concluded that it was necessary to hold a dialogue between the two countries' top leaders. A 90-minute phone call was held between Biden and Xi Jinping on Sept. 9, which US officials described as a test of whether direct, high-level engagement could end the impasse in US-China relations.

The US [readout](#) of the call said that “the two leaders discussed the responsibility of both nations to ensure competition does not veer into conflict” as well as where their interests converge, and where their interests, values, and perspectives diverge. President Biden proposed a face-to-face summit before the end of the year. Xi apparently did not reject the proposal, but said that the atmosphere in bilateral relations needed to improve before there could be progress in the relationship. In Chinese [accounts](#) of the call, Xi was quoted as saying that US policies had caused “serious difficulties” and emphasized the need to bring the bilateral relationship “back to the right track of stable development as soon as possible.”

A few subsequent positive developments helped pave the way for the leaders' meeting, which took place virtually two months later. One of those developments was the resolution of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou's case in late September and her return to China (see below). That Beijing was able to portray her homecoming as a victory for China likely helped create a more positive atmosphere for the Biden–Xi meeting. Another positive development was progress in some of the working groups that the two sides had created during Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman's visit to Tianjin last July. Although it wasn't announced until after the November leaders' meeting, discussions between the US embassy in Beijing and China's foreign ministry led to a deal on returning journalists to each other's country. Another bilateral working group made progress toward what would be the eventual release of two US siblings who had been under an exit ban in China since 2018 and the deportation of seven Chinese citizens from the United States.

Senior US and Chinese officials met twice in third countries to prepare for the Biden–Xi *tete-a-tete*. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan met Chinese Politburo member Yang Jiechi in Zurich, Switzerland on Oct. 6, and Secretary of State Tony Blinken met his counterpart Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Rome, Italy on Oct. 31. Both meetings were more congenial and constructive than those held earlier in the year.

The Biden–Xi virtual leaders' meeting took about three and half hours on Nov. 15 in the evening Washington, DC time, or the morning of Nov. 16 in Beijing. The discussion was generally positive in tone, as have been all the conversations between the two presidents; they spent many hours together before taking the reins of power in their respective countries. Biden opened the meeting with a reminder that the two men have “always communicated with one another very honestly and candidly.” Xi said he was “to see my old friend” and emphasized the need for better communication and cooperation.



Figure 1 President Biden and President Xi meet virtually on Nov. 15, 2021. Photo: Alex Wong/Getty Images via Foreign Policy

The talks covered the nature of the US-China relationship and the importance of managing competition responsibly, transnational challenges where their interests intersect, including health security and climate change; and regional challenges, including the DPRK, Afghanistan, and Iran. Importantly, the leaders also talked about ways to continue discussions on several pressing issues, and the need to maintain high-level dialogue.

In a [presentation](#) at the Brookings Institution the day after the leaders meeting, Jake Sullivan revealed that Biden and Xi had agreed to consider

holding discussions on “strategic stability,” which would likely include nuclear weapons, missile defense, and perhaps space and cyber. Sullivan said that such talks needed to be “guided by the leaders and led by senior empowered teams on both sides that cut across security, technology, and diplomacy.”

The most contentious issue in the Biden–Xi talks was unquestionably Taiwan. Xi Jinping gave lengthy [remarks](#) in which he claimed that some Americans are seeking to use Taiwan to contain China, while Taiwan is trying to get US support for its independence agenda, calling both moves “extremely dangerous.” Using a common Chinese phrase, Xi warned that those who play with fire will get burnt. In addition to delivering this tough message, Xi said that although reunification is China’s eventual goal, “We have patience and will strive for the prospect of peaceful reunification with utmost sincerity and efforts.”

The White House [readout](#) of the talks noted that, “On Taiwan, President Biden underscored that the United States remains committed to the “one China” policy, guided by the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), the three Joint Communiques, and the Six Assurances, and that the United States strongly opposes unilateral efforts to change the status quo or undermine peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.”

Biden Administration Rolls Out China Trade Policy

On Oct. 4, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai gave a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies that was billed as the launch of the long-awaited outcome of the Biden administration’s review of trade policy toward China. Tai announced that she planned to have “frank” conversations with Chinese officials about fulfilling their obligations under the “phase one” trade deal and addressing other problems between the two countries that are harming American workers. She expressed pessimism that the US and other like-minded countries would be able to persuade China to implement reforms that would create a level playing field for foreign companies.

During the Q&A, Tai commented that instead of “decoupling” from China, the two sides should consider “recoupling” their economies. It was unclear what that meant, however, or whether

“recoupling” is a goal of the Biden administration. In one concrete policy announcement, Tai said that tariffs imposed by the Trump administration would not be lifted for the time being, but that USTR would reinstate a process for US companies to seek an exclusion from paying tariffs if there is no domestic alternative to the goods they are seeking to import.

A few days later, Tai met virtually with China’s trade negotiator Vice Premier Liu He. The two-paragraph [readout](#) from USTR described their talks as “candid,” and said that they reviewed implementation of the “phase one” trade deal and agreed to consult on “certain outstanding issues. In addition, the readout noted that Tai stressed US concerns relating to “China’s state-led, non-market policies and practices that harm American workers, farmers, and businesses.” China’s brief [account](#) of the talks said that Liu conveyed Chinese concerns about US tariffs and sanctions, and set out Beijing’s position on various issues, including economic development pattern and industry policy.

At the end of October, Liu He held virtual talks with US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen. They discussed macroeconomic and financial developments in both countries, and the US short [readout](#) said that Yellen “frankly raised issues of concern.” The Chinese side again complained about US tariffs and demanded fair treatment for Chinese companies.

Data from the Peterson Institute for International Economics US–China phase one tracker [showed](#) that from January 2020 through November 2021, China’s **total imports of covered products** from the United States were \$221.9 billion, compared with a phase one target of \$356.4 billion. Over the same period, US exports to China of covered products were \$199.2 billion, compared with a phase one target of \$330.9 billion. From January 2020 through November 2021, China’s purchases of all covered products reached 62% (Chinese imports) or 60% (US exports) of the phase one target.

Climate Cooperation Exceed Expectations

In a surprise, but welcome, development, the US and China issued a bilateral climate [agreement](#) on Nov. 10 as the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) convened in Glasgow, Scotland. The deal was a testament to the indefatigable efforts by US

special climate envoy John Kerry and his Chinese counterpart, Xie Zhenhua. Two months earlier, when Kerry visited Tianjin, it seemed unlikely that progress would be made. Chinese state media had reported that Foreign Minister Wang Yi told Kerry that “China-US climate cooperation cannot be separated from the wider environment of China-US relations.”



Figure 2 China's climate envoy, Xie Zhenhua, during the joint China-US statement at COP26. Photo: Jeff J. Mitchell/Getty Images via The New York Times

In the bilateral agreement, the world's two biggest greenhouse gas emitters said they would take “enhanced climate actions” to meet the key goal of the 2015 Paris climate accord—limiting global warming to “well below” 2 degrees Celsius beyond preindustrial levels, and if possible, no greater than 1.5 degrees Celsius. Beyond that pledge, however, the accord was scant on details. It contained no specific commitments or concrete deadlines, and reiterated positions that both countries had set out in when they met earlier in the spring. One promising element was China's agreement to develop a “comprehensive and ambitious National Action Plan on methane,” with the goal of controlling and reducing methane emissions in the 2020s.” Regarding coal, China agreed to “phase down” coal consumption during the 15th Five Year Plan. The greatest significance of the bilateral agreement lay in a possible signal that the US and China could deepen cooperation on climate change despite ongoing friction in their relationship.

The UN global climate summit in Glasgow produced an agreement among nearly 200 nations to fortify the fight against the climate crisis, although several of China's positions were disappointing. A group of over 100 countries that account for nearly half of global methane emissions agreed to cut 30% of methane gas

emissions by 2030 from 2022 levels, but China along with Russia and India, which together comprise 35% of global methane emissions, did not join the coalition. In addition, due to resistance from China and India, the language was changed in the final hours to reflect an agreement to “phase down” rather than “phase out” coal use, which prevented the UK hosts from achieving their goal of setting a target for eliminating coal power.

Beijing did sign up to two important political statements: the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests, aimed at reversing forest loss and land degradation by 2030, and the Breakthrough Agenda, intended to reduce the cost of renewable energy by 2030 and encourage its use worldwide.

Xi Jinping, who hasn't traveled outside China since the onset of the pandemic, didn't attend COP 26. President Biden rebuked Xi's decision to stay home and not join the more than 120 world leaders to redouble efforts to address one of the greatest threats to humanity. “We showed up,” Biden told a press conference. “They didn't show up,” he said, referring to Xi and Russia's leader Vladimir Putin, suggesting that their absence casts doubt on whether they “have any leadership mantle.”

Meng Wanzhou and the Two Michaels are Released

Almost three years after she was detained and subsequently arrested for fraud and conspiracy to commit fraud to circumvent US sanctions against Iran, Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou was released and allowed to return to China. On Sept. 24, the US Department of Justice announced it had reached a deal with Meng to resolve the case through a deferred prosecution agreement. The deal entailed Meng's agreement to a statement of facts that included an admission that she had made untrue statements to HSBC to enable transactions in the United States, some of which were connected to Huawei's work in Iran and were in violation of US sanctions. She did not have to pay a fine or plead guilty to the charges.

Shortly after Meng's plane left Ottawa, two Canadians who had without doubt been detained as retaliation for Meng's arrest, were released from jail and put on a plane for Canada. Beijing never admitted any connection between Meng's case and the detention of the Canadians. When

the Michaels were released, Chinese state media reported that the Canadians had “confessed their guilt for crimes” and were allowed to leave China on medical grounds.

Meng returned to a hero’s welcome in China that included a red carpet and crowds of Chinese waving flags in a nationalist frenzy. The event was broadcast live by state media for six consecutive hours. Meng’s homecoming was portrayed as a diplomatic victory for Beijing and evidence that a more powerful China under Xi’s leadership can defend the nation’s interests. Chinese state media emphasized that Meng pleaded not guilty and refrained from reporting her admission of misleading HSBC about Huawei’s relationship with an Iranian subsidiary.

US Announces Diplomatic Boycott of 2022 Beijing Olympics

Since there had been rumors for months that the Biden administration was considering a boycott of the February 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, it came as no surprise when the White House announced on Dec. 6 that the US would not send an official delegation to the games. The White House said that it was sending a “clear message” that because of the human rights abuses in China, there cannot be business as usual. Since US athletes have been training hard for years, the Biden administration concluded it would not be fair to fully boycott the Olympics.

The decision marked yet another action by Washington to step up pressure on China over its treatment of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. In mid-October, speaking at the dedication ceremony of the Dodd Center for Human Rights, Biden said he had put human rights “back at the center” and condemned the “oppression and use of forced labor of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.”



Figure 3 Activists rally in front of the Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles, calling for a boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics due to concerns over China’s human rights record. Photo: Frederic J. Brown/AFP

After the US announcement, the other members of the “Five Eyes” alliance—the UK, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia—declared they too would not send government dignitaries to the Beijing Olympics. Lithuania, which was being punished by Beijing for allowing Taiwan to open an office in Vilnius with the Chinese name “Taiwan Representative Office,” also declared a diplomatic boycott. Japan subsequently said it would not send government officials, though it would allow three Olympic officials to attend.

China dismissed the diplomatic boycotts as a “farce” and said it hadn’t extended invitations to the countries that had decided to boycott the games. Beijing’s professed indifference was belied by its threats to take “resolute countermeasures,” however. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian [warned](#) that the US attempt to disrupt the Beijing Winter Olympics would “only expose its sinister intention and further erode its moral authority and credibility,” adding that “The US should understand the grave consequences of its move.”

On Dec. 23, President Biden signed 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 forced labor in the region. In a [press statement](#), Secretary of State Blinken called on the government of the PRC “to immediately end genocide and crimes against humanity against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and members of other ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang.”

US-China Military Ties Begin to Pick Up

As the US and China continued to tussle over the protocol issue of whether US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin must meet with Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe before he can meet with Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) Gen. Xu Qiliang, senior-level military engagements remained on hold. Lower-level meetings were convened, albeit virtually due to the coronavirus. In late September, Michael Chase, deputy assistant secretary of defense for China, met virtually with Maj. Gen. Huang Xueping, deputy director of the PLA's Office for International Military Cooperation (OIMC) for the 16th US-PRC Defense Policy Coordination Talks.

The Pentagon's [readout](#) of the talks described the meeting as "an important component of the Biden-Harris Administration's ongoing effort to responsibly manage the competition between the US and the PRC by maintaining open lines of communication with the PRC." Chinese Defense Ministry spokesperson Wu Qian said the sides "exchanged in-depth views on relations between the two countries and the two militaries and issues of common concern."

In early November, the DoD released its annual [report](#) on China's military, titled "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021." The report covered a broad range of topics, including China's national strategy, military-civil fusion strategy, defense policy and military strategy, PLA defense reforms and capabilities, US-China defense exchanges, and three special topics: PRC-India border standoff, the PRC's evaluation of the 13th Five Year Plan, and the PRC's effective control concept and PLA escalation management views. Under the 2014 US-China Memorandum of Understanding on Notification of Major Military Activities Confidence Building Measure Mechanism, the report constituted a "major military activity" and therefore provided a basis for holding talks between US and Chinese defense officials. Working-level talks to discuss the report were held virtually at the end of November. Joining the discussion on the PRC side were representatives from the CMC's Office for International Military Cooperation (OIMC) and on the US side were representatives from the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff.

In mid-December the US and China held the annual three-day Military Maritime Consultative Agreement working group and flag officer session with representatives from the US Indo-Pacific Command, Pacific Fleet, and Pacific Air Forces on the US side, and People's Liberation Army naval and air force officers on the Chinese side. A year earlier, the PLA had refused to participate in the annual MMCA meeting, which is intended to review unsafe military incidents between US and Chinese forces and discuss operational approaches to improve maritime and aviation safety. The PLA claimed that the US side had tried to control the meeting agenda, and accused the US of behavior that was "unprofessional, unfriendly and unconstructive."

Further Erosion of Hong Kong's Autonomy Sparks Grave Concern

Many observers inside and outside Hong Kong were relieved when China decided in early October to indefinitely delay its plan to impose its anti-sanctions law on Hong Kong. Widespread concern about the law had been expressed by the financial and legal communities in Hong Kong as well as in mainland China. Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam told the media that the central government did not set a timetable for imposing the law. The anti-sanctions legislation passed on the mainland in June, providing the Chinese government the right to seize assets from entities that implement US sanctions. The prospect of the application of the law to Hong Kong sparked fears that foreign investment could be directed away from the city and toward Singapore.

On Sunday, Dec. 19, Legislative Council elections were held in Hong Kong under new rules imposed by Beijing that allowed only "patriots" to run for office. The turnout was a record low 30.2%, with many people refusing to cast their vote in a rebuke of the PRC's tightening control over Hong Kong and its measures to erode the city's democracy. Unsurprisingly, pro-Beijing candidates won handily.

The US rallied its allies to sign joint statements criticizing Hong Kong's LegCo elections. Statements were issued by the foreign ministers from the Five Eyes countries, and by the foreign ministers from the Group of Seven (G7) and the High Representative of the European Union. Both statements expressed grave concern about the

erosion of the democratic elements of Hong Kong's electoral system, increasing Chinese curbs on Hong Kong's autonomy, and China's new rules that disqualify elected legislators. Both statements urged China to act in accordance with its international obligations to respect fundamental rights and freedoms in Hong Kong.

On Dec. 20, the US Department of State released the Hong Kong Autonomy Act Report, as required by Congress. The [report](#) expressed concerns about Beijing'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, among other areas that are key to a stable and prosperous Hong Kong." The State Department spokesman [asserted](#) that the US would continue to speak out for the rights and freedoms of people in Hong Kong, and would persist in holding the PRC accountable when it fails to meet its obligations.

Taiwan Remains the Biggest Thorn in Bilateral Ties

During the first four days of October, which began with the PRC's National Day, 149 Chinese military aircraft, including three dozen fighter jets and a dozen bombers, flew into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone—the largest incursion ever. The State Department spokesman voiced concern and said that the "destabilizing" military activity risks miscalculations and undermines regional peace and stability." A few days later, at a press availability, Secretary Blinken repeated those concerns and urged Beijing to halt its pressure and coercion directed at Taiwan. He reiterated that the US commitment to Taiwan is "rock solid," and contributes to the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and within the region. Speaking at the virtual East Asia Summit later that month, President Biden also maintained that US support for Taiwan is "rock-solid" and called China's actions toward Taiwan a threat to peace and stability.

As Beijing celebrated the 50th anniversary of the vote on UN Resolution 2758 which marked the PRC's occupation of the "China seat" in the United Nations, Secretary Blinken issued a lengthy statement praising Taiwan for its robust participation in several UN specialist agencies. Arguing that Taiwan's exclusion undermines the important work of the UN and its related bodies,

he called for all UN member states to support Taiwan's meaningful participation throughout the UN system and in the international community.

At a public event hosted by the German Marshall Fund, Deputy Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Rick Waters criticized China for "misus[ing] UN Resolution 2758 to prevent Taiwan's meaningful participation," noting that Taiwan has been blocked not only from participating in the World Health Organization, but also from the International Civil Aviation Organization and the International Criminal Police Organization.

In an interview with *The New York Times* the day after the Biden-Xi virtual meeting in which Taiwan had figured prominently, Blinken responded to a question about US policy toward Taiwan with a strong warning against the use of force to disrupt the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and reaffirmed the US commitment to "make sure that Taiwan has the ability to defend itself."

Taiwan's Digital Minister Audrey Tang and Taiwan's Representative in the United States Bih-khim Hsiao participated in President Biden's Summit for Democracy held on Dec. 9-10. China wasn't invited, and being a country with an authoritarian government, it was, in fact among the unstated targets of the event, which was designed to strengthen democracies and counter threats from authoritarian systems. The Chinese embassy in Washington, DC, condemned Taiwan's invitation as "bolstering and emboldening" its pro-independence forces. "China firmly opposes the invitation by the US to the Taiwan authorities to the so-called 'Summit for Democracy' ... [because] Taiwan has no other status in international law than being part of China," an embassy spokesman said.



Figure 4 President Biden and Secretary Blinken at the Summit for Democracy, held on Dec. 9-10, 2021. Photo: US Department of State

In his virtual meeting with Xi Jinping, President Biden clearly reaffirmed the US “one China” policy and stated that the US does not support Taiwan independence. On other occasions, however, Biden muddied the policy waters by making confusing statements about the United States’ Taiwan policy. In October, Biden told reporters that he and Xi had agreed to “abide by the Taiwan agreement.” Since there is no such thing as a joint US-China agreement on Taiwan, Biden left everyone guessing as to what he meant. Attempting to correct the record, the White House press secretary reiterated that US policy is guided by the TRA. Later that month, Biden mistakenly told a town hall that the US has a commitment to come to Taiwan’s defense if it is attacked by China.

In the most problematic misstatement of US policy on Taiwan to date, which was made only hours after the leaders’ meeting in mid-November, Biden told reporters that Taiwan “makes its own decisions” and that the island is “independent.” Biden explained later in the day that he did not intend to encourage Taiwan independence, but instead was urging Taipei to do what the “Taiwan Act requires.” “Let them make up their mind,” the president stated. Beijing remained silent in response to Biden’s gaffes.

On Dec. 8, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee [held](#) a hearing on “The Future of US 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. Both officials delivered statements that strongly supported close US ties with Taiwan and argued that the preservation of Taiwan’s security is linked to the maintenance of peace and stability in the broader Indo-Pacific region. Ratner went even further, telling the Senators that Taiwan is “critical to the defense of vital US interests” due to its location “at a critical node within the first island chain, anchoring a network of US allies and partners.” Some observers interpreted that language as meaning that the US would not accept the unification of Taiwan with China under any circumstances, even if agreed upon peacefully by both sides. It was unclear, however, if that interpretation was correct, or if the Biden administration was intending to signal a shift in policy.

US navy warships sailed through the Taiwan Strait in September, October, and November, exercising freedom of navigation. The October transit was unusual: joining the *Arleigh Burke*-class guided-missile destroyer *USS Dewey* was the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) *Halifax*-class frigate, *HMCS Winnipeg*.

Sanctions and Restrictions

The Biden administration imposed new sanctions and extended some existing sanctions in the last four months of 2021.

On Oct. 20, rules were issued by the Department of Commerce pertaining to export controls on cyber security items related to national security and antiterrorism. The new rules are intended to control exports of items to destinations where they “could be used for surveillance, espionage or other actions that disrupt, deny or degrade the network or devices on it.”

On Nov. 9, President Biden extended for one year a ban on US investments in Chinese companies that have alleged ties with the Chinese military. The ban was imposed by Executive Order 13959 on Nov. 12, 2020 by President Trump.

On Nov. 11, Biden signed the Secure Equipment Act, which is intended to prevent equipment from Huawei, ZTE, and other untrustworthy entities from being inserted into US communications networks.

On Nov. 24, the Department of Commerce added a dozen Chinese companies involved in quantum computing and other advanced technologies to its entities list, saying they pose a risk of gaining access to critical US technologies for the People’s Liberation Army.

On Dec. 10, the Department of the Treasury imposed investment restrictions on the Chinese company SenseTime and sanctioned two Chinese individuals over alleged oppression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. It also imposed human rights-related sanctions on dozens of people and entities to China, Myanmar, North Korea, and Bangladesh. On the same day, the State Department designated four current and former senior PRC officials in Xinjiang for their involvement in arbitrary detention of Uyghurs.

On Dec. 15, the Treasury imposed sanctions on four Chinese chemical companies and one individual over their alleged involvement in illicit drug trade.

On Dec. 16, citing their role in the Chinese government's alleged oppression of ethnic Uyghurs, the Department of Commerce added China's Academy of Military Medical Sciences and its 11 research institutes to its export blacklist. On the same day, the Treasury added 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.

Prospects for US-China Relations in 2022

Competition between the United States and China will remain the dominant feature in their bilateral relationship in the coming year. That competition is increasingly multidimensional, extending across military, economic, technological, and ideological domains. The struggle to find a new equilibrium in the relationship will continue in 2022. The Biden administration's priority—managing the relationship by putting in place guardrails—is unlikely to make significant headway. Periodic meetings between Biden and Xi will serve as a pressure release valve that will help prevent tensions from spiraling out of control. Taiwan will continue to be the most dangerous flashpoint; Chinese pressure on Taiwan will increase, but the risk of military conflict will remain low.

The Biden administration's foreign policy will remain focused on strengthening alliances and building coalitions of like-minded countries to protect their shared interests and push back against objectionable Chinese policies. As US-China competition further intensifies and becomes more deeply entrenched, it will be increasingly challenging for other countries to avoid taking sides.

Beijing's top priorities in 2022 are to hold a successful Winter Olympics in February and a smooth 20th CCP Party Congress in the Fall.

Controlling the spread of COVID-19 is imperative, and Chinese quarantine requirements will mean that for all intents and purposes the country will remain closed. Maintaining a favorable international environment for those events is essential, but that doesn't mean China will be conciliatory, especially if it perceives its "core" sovereignty interests are being threatened.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-CHINA RELATIONS

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: Pentagon spokesman dismisses Beijing's [claims](#) that foreign vessels entering the South China Sea must register with Chinese maritime authorities, describing the move as a “serious threat” to freedom of navigation.

Sept. 8, 2021: *USS Benfold* (DDG 65) of the 7th Fleet [conducts](#) freedom of navigation operation within 12 nautical miles of Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands.

Sept. 8, 2021: US-China Economic and Security Review Commission [holds](#) a hearing titled “US-China Relations in 2021: Emerging Risks.”

Sept. 9, 2021: Littoral combat ship *USS Tulsa* (LCS 16) [joins](#) Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group during presence operations in the South China Sea.

Sept. 9, 2021: President Biden holds phone [call](#) with President Xi to discuss the bilateral relationship.

Sept. 13, 2021: Stanford professors [urge](#) the Department of Justice to end program looking for Chinese spies in academia.

Sept. 13, 2021: China's new ambassador to the United States Qin Gang [calls](#) for stable and constructive commercial ties between the world's two biggest economies during a virtual meeting with the US-China Business Council.

Sept. 15, 2021: Yang Jiechi, director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission, [meets](#) virtually with representatives of the US Democratic and Republican parties who attend the 12th China-US Political Party Leaders Dialogue in Beijing.

Sept. 17, 2021: US imposes [sanctions](#) on several Hong Kong-based Chinese entities over Iran.

Sept. 17, 2021: *Arleigh Burke*-class guided missile destroyer *USS Barry* (DDG 52) [conducts](#) a routine Taiwan Strait transit.

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. 24, 2021: Huawei's Chief Finance Officer Meng Wanzhou is released and returns to China after reaching a [deal](#) with the US Department of Justice in which she admits to some wrongdoing in exchange for prosecutors deferring and later dropping wire and bank fraud charges. China [frees](#) Canadian citizens Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor.

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. 25, 2021: China [allows](#) two American siblings – Victor Liu and Cynthia Liu – who were barred from leaving the country for more than three years to return to the US.

Sept. 27, 2021: Due to concerns about China's nuclear weapons buildup, the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission [suspends](#) shipment of radioactive materials and a hydrogen isotope used in reactors to China's largest state-owned nuclear company, China General Nuclear Power Group.

Sept. 28–29, 2021: Dr. Michael Chase, deputy assistant secretary of Defense for China, [conducts](#) virtual meeting of the 16th US-PRC Defense Policy Coordination Talks with Maj. Gen. Huang Xueping, deputy director of China's People's Liberation Army Office for International Military Cooperation.

Oct. 3, 2021: State Department spokesman Ned Price expresses [concerns](#) over China's provocative military activity near Taiwan after China flies record number of planes in Taiwan's air defense identification zone on the PRC's national day.

Oct. 4, 2021: US Trade Representative Katherine Tai delivers [speech](#) on US trade policy toward China.

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. 6, 2021: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [says](#) China's recent military activity around Taiwan is "provocative" and warns that it risks miscalculation.

Oct. 6, 2021: National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [meets](#) Chinese Communist Party Politburo Member and Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission Yang Jiechi in Zurich.

Oct. 7, 2021: CIA Director William J. Burns [announces](#) formation of a China Mission Center to address global challenges posed by China that cut across all of the Agency's mission areas.

Oct. 7, 2021: Harvard University [moves](#) its Chinese language program from Beijing to Taipei due to a perceived lack of friendliness from the host institution, Beijing Language and Culture University.

Oct. 8, 2021: Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian [asks](#) the US to "clarify in specific details what happened" in a collision involving a US Navy nuclear submarine in the South China Sea, expressing concerns about a nuclear incident.

Oct. 8, 2021: USTR Tai [holds](#) virtual meeting with China's Vice Premier Liu He to discuss the US-China trade relationship.

Oct. 8, 2021: Chinese Consulate General in Los Angeles [warns](#) Chinese students of security risks at US borders after a number were "interrogated repeatedly" at the city's airport.

Oct. 9, 2021: Special Representative of the Chinese Government on Korean Peninsula Affairs Liu Xiaoming [holds](#) telephone [conversation](#) with US Special Representative for the DPRK Sung Kim.

Oct. 11, 2021: China's Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng [says](#) in an [interview](#) that the US and China recently established a joint working group to discuss specific issues in bilateral relations and have made progress.

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. 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. 20, 2021: Biden's nominee for ambassador to China Nicholas Burns takes a tough line toward Beijing at a [confirmation](#) hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, citing Beijing's "genocide in Xinjiang," "bullying of Taiwan" and the need to better support Taiwan.

Oct. 20, 2021: Commerce Department announces new [rules](#) intended to curb the sale of offensive cybersecurity products to countries with "authoritarian" practices including China.

Oct. 20, 2021: US provides [details](#) about its temporary "safe haven" program that will allow Hongkongers to work in the country.

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."

Oct. 21, 2021: White House press secretary Jen Psaki 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. 22, 2021: National Counterintelligence and Security Center [lists](#) challenges and threats from China for US technology companies in five sectors—artificial intelligence, bio-economy, autonomous systems, quantum information science and technology, and semiconductors.

Oct. 26, 2021: Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen holds a virtual [meeting](#) with China's Vice Premier Liu He; they discuss macroeconomic and financial developments in US and China.

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

Oct. 26, 2021: US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) [revokes](#) China Telecom America's telecom services authority in the US, citing national security concerns.

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. 29, 2021: Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) [releases](#) a declassified Intelligence Community assessment on COVID-19 origins, saying that a natural origin and a lab leak are both plausible hypotheses for how SARS-COV-2 first infected humans.

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.

Oct. 31, 2021: EU and US [announce](#) a new metals alliance that President Biden said would "restrict access to our markets for dirty steel, from countries like China."

Nov. 2, 2021: President Biden [says](#) President Xi makes a "big mistake" and damages Beijing's international standing by not showing up to the COP26 climate summit.

Nov. 2, 2021: In [remarks](#) in Washington to US steel industry executives, USTR Tai says that she supports updating US trade laws to combat circumvention of anti-dumping and anti-subsidy duties, including tools aimed at subsidized Chinese investment in steel production elsewhere in southeast Asia.

Nov. 3, 2021: Department of Defense [announces](#) release of its annual report on "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," highlighting growing concern about Beijing's rush to build more nuclear weapons and other cutting-edge military technologies.

Nov. 3, 2021: US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley [holds](#) phone conversation with Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu to discuss the Iranian nuclear issue.

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. 9, 2021: President Biden [extends](#) order that prohibits US investments in Chinese companies that have alleged ties with the Chinese military.

Nov. 9, 2021: In a congratulatory letter to the National Committee on US-China Relations, President Xi [says](#) China "stands ready to work with the United States to enhance exchanges and cooperation across the board."

Nov. 10, 2021: US and China [sign](#) joint Glasgow Declaration on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s.

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: President Biden signs the Secure Equipment Act, which will "ensure that insecure equipment from Huawei, ZTE, and other untrustworthy entities can no longer be inserted into our communications networks," [says](#) FCC Commissioner Brendan Carr.

Nov. 12, 2021: Secretary Blinken [speaks](#) with counterpart, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in advance of President Blinken's phone call with Xi Jinping.

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: Presidents Biden and Xi [hold](#) a virtual meeting lasting 3 1/2 hours.

Nov. 16, 2021: United States and China [announce](#) an agreement to ease restrictions on foreign journalists operating in the two countries.

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...We’re not going to change our policy at all...We’re encouraging them to do exactly what the Taiwan Act requires...Let them make up their minds, period.”

Nov. 17, 2021: US-China Economic and Security Review Commission releases annual [report](#) to Congress.

Nov. 19, 2021: After Chinese Coast Guard vessels used water cannons to prevent civilian boats manned by the Philippine Navy from delivering supplies to marines aboard the *Sierra Madre* on Second Thomas Shoal, State Department spokesperson Ned Price [accuses](#) China of an escalation against the Philippines and warns that an armed attack would invite a US response.

Nov. 23, 2021: *Arleigh Burke*-class guided-missile destroyer *USS Milius* (DDG 69) [conducts](#) a Taiwan Strait transit.

Nov. 24, 2021: Department of Commerce [puts](#) a dozen Chinese companies involved in quantum computing and other advanced technologies on an export blacklist, saying they pose a risk of gaining access to critical US technologies for the PLA.

Nov. 25–26, 2021: Five members of the US House of Representatives [visit](#) Taiwan.

Nov. 30, 2021: US and PRC defense officials [hold](#) working-level virtual meeting to discuss the DoD’s recently released annual report on “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China.”

Dec. 2, 2021: Under Secretary Jose W. Fernandez [delivers](#) a keynote address at the US-China Business Council’s “Gala 2021: Way Forward.”

Dec. 3, 2021: Secretary Blinken [tells](#) the Reuters Next conference that Chinese leaders should think carefully about their actions toward Taiwan, warning of “terrible consequences” if China precipitates a crisis across the Taiwan Strait.

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

Dec. 6, 2021: White House [announces](#) that it will not send officials to the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics in protest against human rights abuses committed by the Chinese Communist Party.

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: Treasury Department [imposes](#) investment restrictions on the Chinese company SenseTime, and sanctions two Chinese individuals over alleged oppression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.

Dec. 10, 2021: State Department [designates](#) four current and former senior PRC officials in Xinjiang for their involvement in arbitrary detention of Uyghurs.

Dec. 14–16, 2021: Annual Military Maritime Consultative Agreement working group and flag officer session is [held](#) with representatives from the US Indo-Pacific Command, Pacific Fleet, and Pacific Air Forces on the US side, and PLA naval and air force officers on the Chinese side.

Dec. 15, 2021: Department of the Treasury imposes [sanctions](#) on four Chinese chemical companies and one individual over illicit drug trade.

Dec. 16, 2021: Citing their role in the Chinese government's alleged oppression of ethnic Uyghurs, the Commerce Department [adds](#) China's Academy of Military Medical Sciences and its 11 research institutes to its list of companies and institutions, restricting access to exports.

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. 20, 2021: Secretary Blinken [designates](#) designated Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya to serve concurrently as the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues.

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: One day after Legislative Council elections in Hong Kong, G7 Foreign Ministers (f Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the US) and the High Representative of the EU, [issue](#) statement expressing grave concern over the erosion of democratic elements of Hong Kong's electoral system. A similar statement was [issued](#) by the foreign ministers of the "Five Eyes" countries.

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. 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.

US-China Chronology completed by GMF research intern Ma Senqi.

PACIFIC  FORUM

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

US-KOREA RELATIONS

US-KOREA RELATIONS: PENINSULAR INERTIA

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The final four months of 2021 US-Korea relations played out largely as anticipated: the US deprioritized creative outreach to North Korea and generally subordinated the Korean Peninsula (both South and North) to the US-China rivalry. North Korea was considered likely to continue its self-imposed isolation while advancing its nuclear and missile arsenal. And it was expected that South Korea would doggedly pursue inter-Korean diplomacy while building up its military capabilities, optimizing a calibrated approach to the US and China, and bracing for a period of political opacity leading up to the March 2022 presidential election. Standard set-pieces were also evident during the September-December reporting period: US and South Korean officials did the yeoman's work of alliance management via frequent meetings and periodic performative statements of alliance cohesion. North Korea celebrated National Foundation Day and the anniversary of the Worker's Party of Korea, and held an end-of-year party plenum. South Korean President Moon Jae-in used his UN General Assembly speech to encourage international support for inter-Korean reconciliation.

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The third trimester of 2021 did have some surprises, however. The Moon administration's full-court press for a declaration of the end of Korean War was out of step with US and North Korean priorities. Announcement of the AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) strategic pact caught all off-guard, including Seoul, which has jealously eyed Washington's decision to work with Canberra on a nuclear-propelled attack submarine. US insistence on ensuring that South Korea's technology industry comports with US geostrategic aims vis-à-vis China was more strongly visible—and friction-inducing—than expected. And *Squid Game* rocketed from obscurity to global sensation, proving that BTS does not have a monopoly on South Korea's cultural exports.

US-South Korea Relations: Meetings X (Readouts/Disagreements) = Progress?

One thread consistently wended its way through US-South Korea relations during the final trimester of 2021: President Moon's advocacy for [a declaration of the end of the Korean War](#). Although this diplomatic tool has been in the South Korean progressive toolbox for years, the Moon administration promoted the end of war declaration with frequency and fervor in the last four months of 2021. The big unveiling for this effort came at the UN General Assembly meeting in September, when Moon [used his speech](#) to call on the international community to support the two Koreas, the US, and (presumably) China in signing such a declaration.



Figure 1 South Korean President Moon Jae-in speaks at the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly on Sept. 21, 2021. Photo: Reuters / Eduardo Munoz / Pool

Following this keynote, the Moon administration rarely missed a chance to use a diplomatic forum to push for the end of war declaration. South Korean Special Envoy for North Korea Noh Kyu-

duk [brought it up](#) during meetings with US counterpart Sung Kim; Seoul's National Security Advisor Suh Hoon [discussed it in China](#); First Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Choi Jong-kun [evoked it](#) multiple times during his trip to Washington, [including with counterpart](#) Wendy Sherman and [at a heavily mediatized event](#) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. On [multiple occasions](#) Unification Minister Lee In-young framed it as a [potential starting point](#) for inter-Korean peace and reconciliation. Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [evoked it](#) in his meetings with Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the sidelines of the G20, and repeatedly claimed that a final text was near completion. Moon closed the circle in December, during a speech in Australia, stating that the end of war declaration was "[agreed in principle](#)" among the US, China, South Korea, and North Korea.

It *should* go without saying, although apparently [it needs repeating](#): Moon saddled the horses before the posse was ready to ride. His claim of an end of war declaration "agreed in principle" is aspirational at best. As it is premature, it is also possibly reckless. China may be [on board](#), but the US [response](#) has been [extremely cautious](#). Even [the most positive](#) US statements—by Special Envoy for North Korea Sung Kim—have made serious efforts at an end of war declaration contingent on North Korea's return to denuclearization negotiations. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan unequivocally put the brakes on the declaration by highlighting US-South Korea differences in "[sequencing or timing or conditions](#)."

The reasons for US reticence have been [widely discussed](#): such an agreement would likely not succeed where past US-North Korea agreements failed, at least in terms of building trust between Pyongyang and Washington. It might, however, call into question US-led institutions on the peninsula, including the [UN Command](#). It could also be interpreted as a reduction in pressure on Pyongyang to reverse progress made on its nuclear program, effectively functioning as a step to [de facto recognition](#) of North Korea as a nuclear state. The US also worries a precipitous end of war declaration would increase pressure on Washington to withdraw troops from South Korea. The specter of troop withdrawal was among the reasons why 35 Republican members of the House of Representatives—including the GOP's two Korean-American members—[signed a letter](#) in early December stating their "grave concern" with the end of war discussions.

The letter acknowledged the Biden administration's "measured approach" to the discussions, one that is entirely consistent with the Biden's team approach to the Korean Peninsula in general. The administration is passive and risk-averse on North Korea diplomacy, in part because [Washington has deprioritized the issue](#) in favor of the US-China rivalry. This is also because the Biden administration sees little chance of progress—on peace and reconciliation or denuclearization—in the North Korea dossier, so spending energy and political capital on the issue is hard to justify. This is *a fortiori* true since Moon will leave office in March 2022—possibly to be replaced by conservative Yoon Seok-yeol—so neither Washington nor Pyongyang has an incentive to move on a declaration that could be quickly undone. Punting may, however, backfire for the US if progressive candidate Lee Jae-myung wins—[recent polls](#) have been inconclusive—as Lee has come out strongly [in favor](#) of the declaration and the US may have to address the matter more directly should he be the new partner in Seoul.

But for the moment the noncommittal US approach to the declaration has received adversarial support, in that Pyongyang has been demonstrably negative about the idea. The North Korean Foreign Ministry [has qualified it](#) as a "premature" and meaningless "scrap of paper" with "no binding legal force." To the extent that North Korea has [shown any interest](#) in the declaration, it came from Kim Yo Jong, who called it "a good idea" yet conditioned it on the end of undefined "hostile relations" by Seoul and Washington against Pyongyang. This was followed by [setting the lifting of sanctions](#) as a condition for North Korea to enter "talks" on the end of the war declaration, a non-starter for the US.

The obvious question is, then: why has the Moon administration so stubbornly continued this quixotic quest? In part, this is simply who the Moon administration is: true believers in peninsular reconciliation hammering away at skeptical parties until they give in to the force of progressives' sheer willpower. More proximately, the Moon administration has few other options for engaging the Kim regime. Sanctions relief—what North Korea really wants—is off the table until the Western UN P-5 members (the US, the UK, and France) decide otherwise.

Diplomacy—shuttle, summit, or otherwise—is largely ruled out due to North Korea closing its border due to COVID-19. Pyongyang is likely [not to participate](#) in the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, which means little hope for diplomacy that might lead to breakthrough in February. And Pyongyang has shown no substantive interest in humanitarian relief linked to South Korea (or in general, for that matter). A long-shot end of war declaration was about the only option that South Korea had in the waning months of Moon's presidency. And as possibilities have dimmed, the Moon administration's hope was (and still is) that the seed would find purchase and sprout with a chance for survival in a successor administration. This is not per se crazy, but there are real risks that South Korea's desperation has hurt its diplomatic reputation and strained relations with the US.

US-South Korea: A Dynamic Balancing Act

In addition to standard alliance maintenance—with US and South Korean senior officials meeting to discuss issues including North Korea [denuclearization or potential humanitarian assistance](#), [regional cooperation](#), [climate policy](#), [COVID](#), or [economic relations](#)—there were several multilateral fora in which the US and South Korea interacted at the highest levels. Most prominently, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting there were multilateral discussions involving both the US and South Korea, [including a trilateral with Japan](#). The [November G20](#) was also a high-profile multilateral diplomatic event in which Seoul and Washington exchanged views on North Korea, climate, and supply chain resilience.

Single-issue multilaterals—[COP26](#) in Glasgow and a virtual [cybersecurity meeting](#) hosted by the US—were venues for South Korea and the US to coordinate on carbon emission reductions and cyber issues, international rules-based cooperation that both Seoul and Washington prioritize. In December, Moon also participated in a US-organized [summit on the state of democracy](#), underscoring South Korea's delicate balancing act vis-à-vis the US and China, the latter of which viewed the multilateral forum negatively.



Figure 2 Sung Kim, US Special Envoy for North Korea, speaks during trilateral meeting between Japan, the US, and South Korea, to discuss North Korea, in Tokyo on Sept. 14, 2021. Source: Pool via Reuters

Much of this diplomacy met the goals of alliance maintenance, but points of friction were visible. Most obvious was the continuation of the decrepit state of South Korea-Japan relations, the improvement of which is a US foreign policy desideratum. US-South Korea-Japan three-way talks among North Korea [envoys](#), senior intelligence [officials](#), and even [foreign ministers](#) were constructive, but difficult Seoul-Tokyo bilateral relations were a drag on substantive progress and led to a public [diplomatic breakdown](#) in November, when Japanese and South Korean officials refused to appear with one another at a joint news conference due to a territorial dispute. Nonetheless, the hope is that the leadership of new Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio will open pathways to better cooperation after the March presidential election in Seoul.

Another friction point was South Korea's *sotto voce* irritation with Washington's decision to cooperate with Canberra on the development of nuclear-powered attack submarines for the Australian navy, a privilege denied to South Korea on numerous occasions. The submarine deal is part of a larger Australia-UK-US strategic pact (AUKUS), so the US decision to work with Australia on naval nuclear propulsion is not strictly speaking analogous to anything in the US-South Korea alliance, but one can expect Seoul to [reiterate](#) requests to develop nuclear-powered submarines in cooperation with the US. As the US has signaled that the Australia submarine deal is unique, this is a potential point of disappointment for future Seoul-Washington relations.

The technology matters, of course, but what also bothers Seoul about the submarine deal is the thought that it is another in a series of decisions by Washington indicating that perhaps the US-South Korea alliance is declining in importance vis-à-vis US relations with Japan and Australia. The Biden administration says all the right things about the US-ROK alliance as a “lynchpin” of stability, peace, and prosperity in East Asia, but Seoul feels AUKUS and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or “Quad”) members may be getting preferential treatment. This sentiment is underlined by the fact that Canberra and Tokyo have US ambassador nominations, while Seoul [awaits with frustration](#) even a rumor of who might be coming to South Korea.

It is increasingly hard to avoid the suspicion that the US-South Korea alliance is in a waning phase (in relation to other US Indo-Pacific partners, but not absolutely) because South Korea is simply not available for overt strategic countering of China in the way that Japan and Australia are. Japan and Australia are much farther along than South Korea in deciding to align with the US in pushing back against China's revisions to the international rules-based order. Simply put, in an era of China-US great power competition, South Korea's security alliance with the US is in tension with its economic dependence on China, which accounts for 25% of South Korea's exports, and is also a major import partner and a supplier of critical components for South Korean finished goods. Consequently, Seoul still hopes to hedge. The day when hard choices and painful tradeoffs must be made is rapidly approaching, but the Moon administration is still banking on a dynamic balancing act between Washington and Beijing.

South Korea's interest in maintaining its maneuvering space between the US and China was the context for several important Seoul-Beijing diplomatic discussions. The headline was a [senior-level strategic dialogue](#) in December, the first such meeting in four years. Discussions touched on sensitive issues such as China-US relations (including US strategy in the Indo-Pacific), North Korea, South Korea-China economic relations, and developments in and around Taiwan. The strategic dialogue was prepared in [September by Wang Yi's visit to Seoul](#), which was in part also devoted to exchange of views on North Korea's advancing missile program and the regional arms race in which the Korean peninsula is increasingly

involved. The year in South Korea-China relations also ended with another issue tangential to US-South Korea relations, as the Moon administration [refused](#) (so far) to join the Biden administration in an [official-level](#) diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in Beijing.



Figure 3 Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and South Korean Minister of Defense Suh Wook answer questions during a press conference after the 53rd US-Republic of Korea Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) at the Defense Ministry in Seoul, Republic of Korea, Dec. 2, 2021. Photo: US Indo-Pacific Command / Chad McNeeley / Public Domain

The last trimester of 2021 also featured advances in defense cooperation. The biggest headlines came from US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's visit to Seoul in December. The 53rd US-South Korea Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) included announcement of an [upcoming new Strategic Planning Guidance](#) that will [overhaul US-South Korea operational plans](#) for countering North Korea's growing capabilities. The last time the SCM made such an announcement was in 2010, before North Korea's successful development of nuclear weapons.

South Korea continued advancing its defense capabilities in the last part of 2021, including launches of a [submarine-launched ballistic missile](#) (SLBM) and a supersonic cruise missile, as well as a new [SLBM submarine](#) (making South Korea the only non-nuclear weapons power to have such a platform). [Space cooperation](#) with the US was also on the agenda for US-South Korea defense, as was the perennial issue of transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) to South Korea. During the SCM, Defense Secretary Austin and counterpart Suh Wook [discussed advancing](#) wartime OPCON assessment to a date (Fall 2022) earlier than currently envisioned.

US-South Korea economic relations also figured more prominently on the agenda during the final trimester of 2021, although South Korea may find this a mixed blessing, as increased US interest in South Korean business is shaped by the way that US-China rivalry is driving the US to pressure countries to buy into [global supply-chain diversification](#) while reducing exposure to China's economy. This is a problem for South Korea, given its dependence on China (see above) as an export market and supplier of critical manufacturing components. In September, the US Commerce Department made a [strong request](#) that global chipmakers—including Samsung—provide confidential proprietary information on sales figures, inventories, clients lists, etc. as a part of an ostensible effort to identify supply-chain bottlenecks, but which felt like a fishing expedition to find where Chinese companies were located in the semiconductor supply chain. Cooperation was officially voluntary, but companies with major US exposure—like Samsung—felt pressured given the prospect of the Biden administration invoking the Defense Production Act to compel compliance. The US also flexed its muscles in [blocking SK Hynix from upgrading](#) a factory in China with an EUV fabrication machine manufactured by Dutch tech-giant AMSL. In happier news, [Samsung announced](#) a \$17 billion investment in a chip foundry in Taylor, TX.

The September-December period of US-South Korea relations also had notable soft power elements. South Korea's first democratically elected president, [Roh Tae-woo](#), died, as did his immediate predecessor dictator [Chun Doo-hwan](#), which prompted reflection on the democratization of South Korea (and thus how that affected the alliance) and the sometimes ambiguous role played by the US in this regard, as Cold War Washington was both a democratic governance model and a military ally that sought good relations with South Korea's unsavory leaders. In a more contemporary vein, Korean pop group BTS [won major accolades](#) at the American Music Awards and [performed at the UN headquarters](#), while South Korean television series *Squid Game* became an overnight global sensation for Netflix.

All told, the US-South Korea alliance is occasionally strained but fundamentally strong, which is important as South Korea enters the 2022 presidential election. Politicians on both sides support the alliance rhetorically and in practice, and Korean and US publics are also

highly supportive. This is unlikely to change much, and one can expect the candidates—Lee Jae-myung and Yoon Seok-yeol—to continue speaking positively of the alliance in spring 2022 prior to the March presidential election. Diplomatic and defense interests and efforts remain broadly aligned and based on consultation, and economic relations are robust. Cultural influence is increasingly reciprocal, as South Korea has become a world-class popular culture content provider.

US-North Korea: Fighting Over Optics

Meanwhile, US-North Korea ties remained effectively nonexistent during the last part of 2021, even though both sides sent signals that the other is not forgotten. Washington continues to call for the North to join it in dialogue, even as it condemned the regime's arms programs and human rights abuses. The North, as in previous periods, sharply disputes those criticisms—and has used the sad fate of Afghanistan to push back against the latter. The North continued to show no interest in negotiating away its strategic weapons programs—quite the opposite, in fact, considering its testing activity.

In August and September, the United States faced a foreign policy reckoning. The withdrawals of US troops from Afghanistan ahead of the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks resulted in what many had feared: a new Taliban takeover, much more swiftly than many had anticipated, which solidified the conclusion that the two-decade effort to build a new Afghanistan had been for naught.

For North Korea, this was no occasion for taking the high road. “The international society has already come to know better through the crisis in Afghanistan that the US is the destroyer of ‘human rights’ and ‘democracy,’” its Foreign Ministry [declared](#) on Sept. 7. “The US should wake up to the reality that there is no more country which would lend an ear to its hypocritical chanting of ‘human rights,’ and put an immediate end to its act of interfering in others’ internal affairs.” On the 12th it continued, [denouncing](#) the 20-year Afghanistan effort as a “human rights crime” and accusing Washington of committing “atrocities of mass destruction,” a reminder of the emphasis on “weapons of mass destruction” following the 9/11 attacks that presaged not only the invasion of Iraq, but the collapse of Washington's Agreed Framework with Pyongyang. For good measure, the North

Korean Foreign Ministry cited international reporting on civilian casualties in Afghanistan, declaring that the world demanded US troops be “brought to justice.”

For North Korea, US foreign interventionism such as in Afghanistan is a recurring theme in state media and other public statements, not only to illustrate the danger that the US military poses for smaller nations such as itself, but also to rebut criticism of its own human rights record. On Nov. 18, the US [designated](#) North Korea as a state violator of religious freedom, along with nine other countries, which Secretary of State Blinken called part of an effort to end “structural, systematic and deeply entrenched” obstacles to religious freedom—and North Korea would certainly [fit the bill](#). On Dec. 10, Human Rights Day, the US [designated](#) North Korean Defense Minister Ri Yong Gil and the Central Public Prosecutors Office for human rights violations—Ri, in his previous role, headed the Ministry of Social Security, and as such oversaw use of its fundamentally unfair [justice system](#). On the same day, North Korea's Foreign Ministry [doubled down](#) on criticism of the US and the coalition it led, over Afghanistan, which suffered the “bombardment of ‘protection of human rights’ and ‘counter-terrorism’ by the US and the West.”

For Pyongyang, “human rights” translates, first and foremost, into [sovereignty](#) and non-interference in its affairs. It has practical and reputational interest in highlighting US actions abroad contrary to such principles. While its recent actions are seen as [mostly symbolic](#), the incumbent liberal internationalist administration in Washington has signaled that it has a deeper interest in the subject than its predecessor, which may have consequences for—but [not only for](#)—North Korean officials and institutions in the future. North Korea's barbs over US military actions will likely continue, unless a rapprochement takes place that the US wishes not to jeopardize.

The sort of rapprochement necessary to halt such recriminations—a deal capping North Korea's missile or nuclear programs in exchange for sanctions relief, for instance—appears nowhere on the horizon. On several occasions—Special Representative Sung Kim [said](#) as much in June, and other officials echoed the pessimism on [Oct. 15](#) and [Dec. 13](#)—State Department officials have declared that they would meet with North Korea without preconditions, adding that they have

offered (publicly unknown) specific proposals to the North. Sung Kim [added](#) on Oct. 24 that the US is willing to help the North address its humanitarian concerns (which are considered [dire](#)).

We have [described](#) the North Korea-US diplomatic dance as “talking about talks.” This time around things might not even have risen to that paltry level: US entreaties generally sank like an early [Hwasong-12](#), with Pyongyang not deigning them worthy of a reaction. One exception came on Sept. 30: Kim Jong Un, even as he promised restoration of inter-Korean hotlines, [dismissed](#) US calls for talks as a “petty trick.”



Figure 4 Image of a new anti-aircraft missile released by KCNA on Oct. 1, 2021. Photo: Rodong Sinmun via NK News

The North certainly had messages to send, though, even if they were not delivered in person. On Sept. 13 Pyongyang announced the successful [test-firing](#) of a new long-range cruise missile, which some analysis [said](#) may complicate US and allied air and missile defenses. Two days later it reportedly fired short-range ballistic missiles, which would have been unremarkable had they not been [launched](#) from a train, which might be aimed at making its ICBM launching systems more survivable in the event of attack. On the 28th it [fired](#) one unidentified projectile—a likely hypersonic glide vehicle—into the East Sea, which it followed with the Oct. 1 [announcement](#) that it had test-fired a new type of anti-aircraft missile. On Oct. 10 Kim Jong Un [stressed](#) the need for an increased deterrent, due to the “hostile” US, a call their UN ambassador [echoed](#) shortly after, claiming US-South Korea military activities were “growing unrestricted to a dangerous level.” Thereafter, testing largely quieted down—until early January, just before this issue went to press, when [North Korea](#)

[launched two](#) smaller projectiles (apparently carrying maneuverable re-entry vehicles with 500–700km range) into the East Sea.

Although it is continuing to [grow its nuclear program](#), Pyongyang has, since the end of 2017, eschewed tests of nuclear weapons and ICBM technology capable of targeting the US mainland. At a time when the North has been overshadowed by both US domestic issues and its broader competition with China, such tests could get Washington’s attention in a hurry, causing a much-more-than symbolic sanctions update. In addition, Pyongyang has, since 2018, grown noticeably closer to Beijing, which is also not a fan of North Korean nuclear tests. Consequently, recent activity and statements indicate that the North is focused on building its deterrent in more subtle ways: the Congressional Research Service in December [said](#) that they appear focused on degrading or outright eliminating the efficacy of US regional missile defense systems.

Conclusion: Searching for a Quantum of Solace

The US appears content to run out the clock on the Moon administration, humoring its calls for an end of war declaration even as it suggests that it does not prioritize it. In March, after South Koreans have chosen their next president the US may have a conservative administration whose view aligns more closely to its own, but it may also have a progressive team that continues Moon’s balancing act of bolstering defenses even as it sometimes contradicts Washington’s messaging on North Korea and China. Either South Korean presidential candidate could reinject energy into the stagnant situation. Yoon has voiced interest in increased coordination with the US, and even Japan, on denuclearizing the North. Lee has suggested that direct talks with Pyongyang need to continue, but has promised a more incremental approach—as well as continuing to pressure the US on extending nuclear submarine technology to South Korea.

Yoon’s election might be a wake-up call for Pyongyang, suggesting South Koreans are so disillusioned with North Korea negotiations that they will embrace Washington more closely and even turn to Tokyo. Lee’s victory could be a sharp reminder to Washington that South Koreans are not so disenchanted with the progressives as to depart from Moon’s foreign policy path. But both Lee and Yoon are, relative to their progressive and conservative predecessors, [unpopular](#), with their race looking to be close and neither with

much chance of cracking 50% of the vote. In other words, an electoral mandate may be brief, and along with it any change in the US-SK-NK diplomatic dance brought about by the election.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER—DECEMBER 2021

Sept. 1, 2021: US Department of State [announces](#) the extension of its travel ban on North Korea for one year due to serious risk to US citizens and nationals of arrest and long-term detention constituting imminent danger to their physical safety.

Sept. 2, 2021: According to the Defense Ministry's 2022-2026 defense plan, the ROK military will [begin](#) to deploy new weapons systems and significantly upgrade its technological capabilities in response to South Korea's shrinking population and the North's development of nuclear weapons.

Sept. 3, 2021: Commander of US Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) [says](#) United States stands ready to respond to any missile launch by North Korea should the North decide to stage such a provocation.

Sept. 5, 2021: US reconnaissance aircraft [monitors](#) the Korean Peninsula amid speculation that North Korea might be preparing for a military parade to mark major national anniversaries.

Sept. 6, 2021: North Korea's Foreign Ministry [criticizes](#) the US pullout from Afghanistan, calling the American government a "destroyer of human rights and democracy.

Sept. 12, 2021: ESTsecurity, a cybersecurity firm, [says](#) a hacker group believed to be linked to North Korea, has attempted to steal data from South Korean experts working as members of an advisory panel for the defense ministry.

Sept. 12, 2021: North Korea [denounces](#) the US-led war in Afghanistan as a "human rights crime," accusing Washington of committing "atrocities of mass destruction."

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. 14, 2021: South Korea's Unification Ministry [says](#) it will continue efforts to resume operations of the inter-Korean liaison office as it marked the third anniversary of the office.

Sept. 14, 2021: Ambassador Sung Kim [says](#) the US "is prepared to work with North Korea to address its humanitarian concerns regardless of progress on denuclearization" after holding three-way talks with South Korean and Japanese counterparts in Tokyo to discuss humanitarian aid and other incentives to resume dialogue with the North.

Sept. 15, 2021: North Korean state media [denounces](#) the United States for meddling in Taiwan issues and voices support for Beijing's "One-China" principle.

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: South Korea [unveils](#) development of a supersonic cruise missile to improve maritime defense capabilities just days after the North fired a new long-range cruise missile in a sign of accelerating military competition between the two Koreas.

Sept. 15, 2021: State Department [condemns](#) North Korea's ballistic missile launches, calling the act a violation of US Security Council resolutions that poses a threat to its neighbors and the international community. A department official adds that US remains committed to dialogue with the North.

Sept. 16, 2021: Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [holds](#) phone call with US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry and discusses efforts to bolster climate action, including achieving carbon neutrality.

Sept. 16, 2021: North Korea [is expanding](#) a uranium enrichment plant within the Yongbyon nuclear complex, reports the Middlebury Institute of International Studies. Activities at the plant likely reflect plans to increase nuclear weapons production, says the report.

Sept. 21, 2021: US President Joe Biden [says](#) his country seeks to completely denuclearize the Korean Peninsula through diplomacy at US General Assembly in New York.

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. 22, 2021: Top diplomats of South Korea, Japan, and the United States [meet](#) in New York to discuss North Korea and other issues.

Sept. 22, 2021: President Moon [reaffirms](#) his country's commitment to playing a leading role in the fight against COVID-19, while attending a virtual summit hosted by US President Joe Biden.

Sept. 22, 2021: Yoon Seok-yeol, leading opposition presidential contender, [says](#) he will demand the US redeploy its tactical nuclear weapons to the rok and have nuclear sharing with Seoul if national security is threatened by North Korea's nukes and missiles.

Sept. 22, 2021: US is open to discussing a possible end of war declaration with North Korea as it seeks to engage in dialogue over a number of other issues, [says](#) a Pentagon spokesman.

Sept. 24, 2021: During trip to the US, Moon [stops](#) in Hawaii to receive the remains of 68 Korean service members from US accounting agency for prisoners of war and those missing in action.

Sept. 24, 2021: North Korea [rejects](#) Moon's proposal to declare a formal end to the Korean war as something premature," arguing that such a declaration would be meaningless as long as US "hostile policy" remains unchanged. Vice Foreign Minister Ri Thae Song says an end-of-war declaration has "no legal binding force" and will "become a mere scrap of paper in a moment upon changes in situations.

Sept. 24, 2021: US military in South Korea [conducts](#) a surgical strike drill simulating attacks on major North Korean facilities, amid tensions on the Korean Peninsula over the North's missiles launches. Meanwhile, the North has shown signs of restarting a plutonium-producing reactor and expanding uranium enrichment facilities at its mainstay Yongbyon nuclear complex.

Sept. 24, 2021: Leaders of the US, Australia, Japan, and India (the "Quad") [call](#) on North Korea to engage in dialogue and abide by UNSC resolutions that prohibit its ballistic missile tests.

Sept. 25, 2021: North Korea could declare a formal end to the Korean War as suggested by South Korea and even discuss holding an inter-Korean summit if the South treats the North with "impartiality" and mutual respect, [says](#) Kim Yo Jong, sister of North Korea's leader.

Sept. 27, 2021: Department of Commerce [makes](#) a request to major chipmakers, including Samsung Electronics, Intel, and TSMC, for sales figures, inventory totals, the names of largest clients and the share of sales to these clients. Although the survey is voluntary, chipmakers perceive it to be obligatory given that the Biden administration indicated that it could leverage the Defense Production Act to penalize the companies that fail to comply.

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. 28, 2021: South Korea [launches](#) indigenously developed 3,000-ton-class submarine, *Shin Chae-ho*, equipped to fire ballistic missiles. The *Shin Chae-ho* is the third and final submarine in the *Jangbogo-III* Batch-I vessel class that the ROK has developed using domestic technology.

Sept. 30, 2021: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [says](#) he will restore inter-Korean hotlines early next month, calling Washington's outreach to Pyongyang for dialogue "a petty trick."

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. 6, 2021: According to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, South Korea [will](#) strengthen its "tailored" deterrence, along with the US, against North Korea's nuclear and missiles threats while enhancing its attack and missile defense capabilities.

Oct. 11, 2021: North Korean leader Kim [claims](#) need for boosting the country's military capabilities to counter "hostile forces" against Pyongyang but said the move is not aimed at a war against South Korea or the United States.

Oct. 12, 2021: North Korea will continue to strengthen its "self-defensive: deterrent, [says](#) North Korean ambassador to the UN Kim Song, claiming military activities between South Korea and the United States are reaching a "dangerous level."

Oct. 13, 2021: South Korea and the United States [agree](#) to consider a new bilateral working-level defense dialogue aimed at promoting cooperation between their regional policy initiatives.

Oct. 13, 2021: US official [says](#) officials from more than 30 countries, including South Korea, will discuss ways to counter ransomware attacks from countries, including Russia and North Korea, in a two-day US-led virtual "counter ransomware initiative."

Oct. 14, 2021: US remains prepared to meet with North Korea without preconditions as it awaits the North's response to its "specific proposals," [says](#) State Department spokesperson Ned Price.

Oct. 16, 2021: South Korea's chief nuclear envoy [says](#) that a formal declaration of an end to the Korean War could pave the way for resuming stalled denuclearization talks with North Korea.

Oct. 18, 2021: US Defense Intelligence Agency [projects](#) that North Korea may resume underground nuclear tests if it does not agree to complete denuclearization.

Oct. 18, 2021: Gen. Jay Raymond, chief of Space Operations at the US Space Force [calls](#) for strong space cooperation with South Korea, stressing credible deterrence in the "contested" security domain comes from a robust partnership based on "mutual trust and shared values."

Oct. 19, 2021: North Korea [fires](#) what appears to be a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) toward the East Sea, as top nuclear envoys of South Korea, the US, and Japan meet in Washington to discuss efforts to bring the North back to dialogue through humanitarian aid and other incentives.

Oct. 20, 2021: North Korea's recent missile test underscores need for engaging it and sanctions relief can be considered part of incentives to bring it back to negotiations, [says](#) FM Chung.

Oct. 21, 2021: President Moon [says](#) South Korea's first domestically built space rocket completed all flight sequences as scheduled but fell short of putting a dummy satellite into orbit.

Oct. 24, 2021: US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim [says](#) he looks forward to exploring options with South Korea to resume dialogue with North Korea, including the proposed declaration of a formal end to the 1950-53 Korean War. He also mentioned US willingness to help address the North's humanitarian concerns, while urging Pyongyang to stop missile launches, which he cast as "concerning and counterproductive."

Oct. 25, 2021: President Moon and US President Joe Biden [will](#) hold a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of a G20 summit in Italy or US climate summit in Britain.

Oct. 26, 2021: South Korea and the United States decided to set up a director-level dialogue channel for regular discussions on semiconductor issues, [says](#) Seoul's industry ministry.

Oct. 26, 2021: US and South Korea are aligned on the need to engage with North Korea diplomatically, but may differ when it comes to when and what steps should be taken to bring the recalcitrant North back to the dialogue table, [says](#) US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.

Oct. 27, 2021: Senate Foreign Relations Committee [passes](#) Otto Warmbier North Korea Censorship and Surveillance Act, aimed at countering North Korea's repressive censorship and providing outside information to the people of the reclusive North.

Oct. 28, 2021: Mark Lambert, deputy assistant secretary of State for Korea and Japan, [says](#) the US is reviewing possibility of declaring a formal end to the Korean War, during a meeting with Lee Seok-hyun, vice chairman of South Korea's National Unification Advisory Council.

Oct. 29, 2021: Report from the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence [recommends](#) an expansion of the “Five Eyes” intelligence sharing alliance to include South Korea, Japan, India, Germany, and France.

Oct. 29, 2021: State Department [seeks](#) to provide up to \$12 million in grants to entities working to implement US sanctions on North Korea and prevent its weapons proliferation.

Oct. 31, 2021: North Korea [demands](#) sanctions to be lifted as a condition for negotiations to discuss a formal declaration to end the Korean War.

Nov. 1, 2021: FM Chung [pushes](#) for a formal declaration to end the Korean War during meeting with Secretary Blinken on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Rome. National Security Adviser Sullivan admits that Korea and the US “may have somewhat different perspectives on the precise sequence or timing or conditions for different steps” when it comes to Seoul’s proposal for an end-of-war declaration as a catalyst to restart nuclear talks.

Nov. 2, 2021: Senior officials from South Korea and the US [hold](#) talks in Washington on ways to restart dialogue with North Korea. They discussed the situation on the Korean Peninsula, prospects for humanitarian cooperation, and the potential for dialogue with the DPRK.

Nov. 4, 2021: US remains committed to implementing UNSC sanctions on North Korea, [says](#) State Department spokesperson. He said the US urges all other UN members to do the same to prevent North Korea from advancing nuclear and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities.

Nov. 9, 2021: Group of 23 US lawmakers [sends](#) letter to Biden urging him to “prioritize: engagement with North Korea and support a formal declaration to end the Korean War.

Nov. 8, 2021: US and South Korea fully agree on the need to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula through diplomacy, State Department spokesperson [says](#). He declined to comment on whether the US agrees with a Seoul-proposed declaration of an end to the Korean War.

Nov. 8, 2021: China has the ability to help steer North Korea toward a diplomatic solution of its nuclear standoff, [says](#) Pentagon Press Secretary. He insisted one way for China to do so would be to faithfully implement UN Security Council sanctions on the North.

Nov. 10, 2021: US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo and South Korean counterpart, Moon Sung-wook, [agree](#) to cooperate on enhancing supply chain resiliency. They also agreed to expand their commercial forum to tackle other issues, such as setting global standards for key industrial sectors.

Nov. 11, 2021: Agreement to launch of the Energy Policy Dialogue [is made](#) between South Korea’s Industry Minister Moon Sung-wook and US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm in Washington. It aims to promote collaboration across policy, technology, and commercialization, and support decarbonization efforts, by sharing experiences and strategies and conducting joint research in such fields as hydrogen storage, next generation batteries and lithium-ion battery recycling.

Nov. 17, 2021: ROK First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun and Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman [holds](#) talks to discuss ways to bring North Korea back to dialogue, including the declaration of a formal end to the Korean War. They also discussed the alliance and other issues of common interest, including COVID-19 vaccines and the global supply chain crisis.

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

Nov. 17, 2021: US plan to host a joint news conference [backfires](#) after Japanese and South Korean officials opt out of the event because of a dispute over an islet that both claim.

Nov. 18, 2021: South Korea, the US, and Japan [agree](#) during vice foreign ministerial talks to keep working together for regional peace and response to such global issues as climate change, supply chain resilience and COVID-19.

Nov. 19, 2021: Korean Trade Minister Yeo Han-koo and US Trade Representative Katherine Tai [meet](#) to discuss supply chains and steel tariffs. They agreed to strengthen the bilateral strategic partnership on rising trade issues like those regarding the supply chain, technology, digital and climate change, in light of recent changes in the global trade order.

Nov. 23, 2021: South Korean government [says](#) it will join US-led plan to release strategic crude reserves along with other major oil-consuming nations to help bring down soaring energy prices.

Nov. 24, 2021: Samsung Electronics Co. [says](#) it has selected Taylor, TX as the site of its new \$17 billion chip fabrication plant, a move to boost production amid a global chip shortage.

Nov. 29, 2021: US defense official [reiterates](#) the US steady commitment to offering “extended deterrence” to South Korea, voicing concerns over North Korea's “problematic and irresponsible” behavior.

Nov. 29, 2021: Biden's administration [commits](#) to achieving peace with North Korea through dialogue as the US and South Korea discuss an end of war declaration.

Nov. 30, 2021: Department of Defense [concludes](#) review of the global defense posture, calling for cooperation with allies and partner countries to deter North Korean threats and potential Chinese aggression.

Dec. 1, 2021: South Korean National Assembly's committee on foreign affairs in South Korea [approves](#) the bill to ratify the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Dec. 1, 2021: Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [stresses](#) the importance of unity in the South Korea-US alliance to confront the “challenges of tomorrow” amid intensifying Sino-US rivalry.

Dec. 2, 2021: South Korea and the US [agree](#) to update joint wartime contingency plans to deter North Korea's evolving nuclear and missile threats during the Security Consultative Meeting.

Dec. 3, 2021: UN [excludes](#) North Korea from its global humanitarian assistance plan for 2022. The decision comes as North Korea maintains a strict border lockdown to stave off the coronavirus, prompting international organization staff members necessary for on-site monitoring and assessment to leave the country.

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

Dec. 6, 2021: US [completes](#) construction of a new long-range radar in Alaska designed to give early warnings for incoming ballistic missiles from rogue nations, such as North Korea.

Dec. 6, 2021: US [announces](#) diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics over China's human rights abuses.

Dec. 6, 2021: US officials [have](#) started calling the end-of-war declaration, a signature diplomatic goal of the Moon Jae-in administration, an end-of-war statement.

Dec. 7, 2021: South Korean government [reiterates](#) principled support for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics following US announcement of its decision to boycott the event diplomatically, expressing hope again that it will contribute to peace and inter-Korean relations.

Dec. 7, 2021: South Korea's tightened vaccine pass regime [sparks](#) discrimination complaints by foreign residents unable to have their overseas vaccination status officially recognized here and subsequently denied access to cafes, restaurants, and other multiuse facilities.

Dec. 8, 2021: US missile defense system capabilities, including those in South Korea, are constantly reviewed and upgraded to meet evolving threats [says](#), Pentagon press secretary.

Dec. 9, 2021: South Korea and the US [launch](#) a bilateral dialogue platform to discuss ways to boost cooperation on the semiconductor sector.

Dec. 9, 2021: Thirty-five Republican House members, including the party's two Korean-American representatives, [sign](#) letter voicing "grave concern" with discussions of an end of war declaration with North Korea, stating there is "no historical precedent" for the regime abiding by such an agreement and warning of premature US troop withdrawal from the peninsula.

Dec. 10, 2021: On Human Rights Day, US [designates](#) North Korea's Defense Minister Ri Yong Gil and a number of other entities in North Korea, China, and Russia for human rights violations.

Dec. 10, 2021: North Korean state media [uses](#) Human Rights Day to lambaste the US-led mission in Afghanistan, which suffered "the bombardment of 'protection of human rights' and 'counter-terrorism' by the US and the West."

Dec. 10, 2021: 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. 13, 2021: Seoul-hosted virtual conference of Asia-Pacific parliamentarians [opens](#) to discuss inclusion and solidarity amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The forum has 27 member states, including South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, Vietnam and the United States.

Dec. 13, 2021: President Moon [says](#) that the US, China, and North Korea agree "in principle" on declaring a formal end to the Korean War and Seoul will push to make it happen.

Dec. 13, 2021: South Korea's intelligence chief [says](#) US possible proposal to provide COVID-19 vaccines to Pyongyang could create momentum to bring it back to long-stalled nuclear negotiations.

Dec. 13, 2021: US has no hostile policy toward North Korea while it continues to wait for a positive response to its outreach, [says](#) Jalina Porter, principal deputy spokesperson for the State Department. He reiterated the US remains ready to meet North Korea any time without any preconditions.

Dec. 13, 2021: North Korea [appears](#) to be aiming to counter or cripple US missile defense programs in Northeast Asia, says a US Congressional Research Service report.

Dec. 16, 2021: UNSC should address human rights issues of North Korea in an open session, [says](#) US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield, with representatives of the UK, Estonia, France, Ireland, Japan, and Norway in a joint statement following a closed-door meeting.

Dec. 16, 2021: First Vice Industry Minister Park Jin-kyu [holds](#) talks with Jose Fernandez, US undersecretary of state for economic growth, energy and the environment, to deepen the allies' economic ties.

Dec. 16, 2021: It is reported during the fifth ROK-US Joint Public-Private Economic Forum in Seoul that South Korea and the US [plan](#) to discuss cooperation on "trusted" 5G networks, global supply chains, and other key issues in upcoming talks amid intensifying US-China rivalry.

Dec. 22, 2021: President Biden [has](#) banned provision of nonhumanitarian aid to North Korea for fiscal year 2022, accusing the state of human trafficking, according to the White House.

Dec. 23, 2021: South Korea will expand "future-oriented" cooperation with the US on supply chains, technologies, and other areas next year while reinforcing "conflict prevention" efforts with China, [says](#) the foreign ministry. The ministry delineated the plans in a written policy report for 2022 to President Moon as Seoul seeks to craft an optimal diplomatic strategy amid a hardening China-US rivalry on technological primacy, security, trade, and other fronts.

Dec. 24, 2021: Seoul's Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun and Chinese counterpart, Le Yucheng, [hold](#) first "Strategic Dialogue," which touched on geopolitical issues related to China-US relations and the Taiwan Strait. China provided explanations in broad terms rather than specifically when talking about how it looks at the global situation, while South Korea hoped to play a role promoting cooperation between the two major powers.

Dec. 27, 2021: President Biden [signs](#) US defense budget bill that calls on his administration to maintain the troop level of US Forces Korea (USFK) at the current level.

Dec. 29, 2021: South Korea and the US have “effectively” agreed on draft text of the proposed declaration of a formal end to the Korean War, [says](#) Seoul's top diplomat amid their continued push to resume dialogue with North Korea. The US [declines](#) to directly comment on any progress, only stating that the US remains committed to dialogue with North Korea.

*Chronology by Pacific Forum's Korea Foundation
Fellow Su Hyun Lee.*

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COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

MYANMAR SPIRALS DOWNWARD WHILE ASEAN DRIFTS

CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

ASEAN unity wobbled in the final months of 2021, largely over the worsening conflict in Myanmar and the group's inability to advance the five-point consensus plan it had forged in April. Vaccination rates for COVID-19 picked up, but governments that had hoped to return to pre-pandemic economic growth rates worried that the omicron variant would undo progress that had been made. Political challenges were no less daunting in several countries. The nomination process for May 2022 presidential elections in the Philippines showed that political dynasties are strengthening and may even merge. In Malaysia, the success of the United Malay Organization (UMNO) in state elections raised the prospect that the party will recover some of its former strength, although not its political monopoly. Anti-government demonstrations in Thailand became more perilous for protestors in November when the Constitutional Court [ruled](#) that advocating reform of the monarchy, one of the central planks of the protest movement, was tantamount to treason.

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The region was also pressed to respond to great power dynamics, most notably to the [announcement](#) in September of the Australia/United Kingdom/United States (AUKUS) alliance and to China's bid to elevate its relations with ASEAN to a comprehensive strategic partnership. At the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue Summit, the four nations opened a window to address nontraditional security threats, which could pull the ASEAN countries closer to the Quad. The Biden administration [stepped up](#) diplomacy with ASEAN with a virtual US-ASEAN Summit on the margins of the East Asia Summit in October and Secretary of State Antony Blinken's first trip to Southeast Asia in his capacity as secretary. Although Southeast Asian leaders welcomed the attention, they are increasingly impatient for Washington to define its economic plans with the region.

Southeast Asia's Episodic Recovery

The timing of the emergence of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 in the last months of 2021 could not have been worse for Southeast Asia. Although the region is still battling the Delta variant, the World Bank had forecast modest but positive growth rates for nine of the 10 ASEAN states in 2021 (the exception being Myanmar) and brisk growth in 2022. Those predictions were made before the emergence of the Omicron variant and based on the assumption of steady progress on COVID with no significant interruptions. Singapore is forecast to achieve pre-pandemic growth rates in 2022 under these ideal conditions, but most of the region's governments will not reach that benchmark.

Although Omicron appears to be less contagious and less lethal than preceding variants, the region will still suffer some damage. Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand have imposed new travel restrictions; these will be most harmful to Thailand, which [began](#) re-opening its international tourism sector in early November. Omicron will likely worsen public views of government performance on COVID in Southeast Asia, particularly in countries where major elections are approaching or where political tensions are high. This impact will be exacerbated by uneven vaccination rates in ASEAN, which range from 88% in Singapore to (possibly) 21% in Myanmar, data on the latter being difficult to verify.

The Omicron variant also changes the "vaccine race" between the United States and China in Southeast Asia. Sinovac and Sinopharm, the two most widely-used Chinese vaccines, have thus far been shown to be ineffective against Omicron compared to the MNRA vaccines from the West (primarily Pfizer and Moderna). China will [accelerate](#) attempts to develop an Omicron-specific vaccine, but in the meantime the US will have a "soft power" advantage. In round figures, by the end of December the United States had donated over 70 million doses of COVID vaccine to Southeast Asia, bilaterally or through COVAX, the international consortium, with Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines being the largest recipients.

It isn't clear that the administration's donations will continue at their current pace, however. These are generally unused vaccines, but the call for wider vaccinations and boosters in the United States in the face of Omicron could diminish these supplies. In the meantime, the Quad continues to work toward its goal of making 1 billion doses available to poorer countries of the Indo-Pacific by the end of 2022, but it is not clear how the emergence of a new variant will affect that timing.

Myanmar Fights While ASEAN Fragments

In the waning months of 2021 the conflict in Myanmar became more lethal and more institutionalized, with both sides—the National Unity Government (NUG) and the State Administration Council (SAC)—hardening their positions. Resistance to the junta moved increasingly from non-violent protest to urban insurgency, with the NUG's loosely organized People's Defense Force (PDF) [attacking](#) military facilities with improvised explosive devices and assassinating over 700 suspected collaborators of the regime. The PDF remains a grassroots insurgency with little if any command structure, but the NUG is attempting to establish a hierarchy through which attacks can be coordinated. To finance its operations, in November the NUG announced it would sell \$1 billion in "sovereign bonds" online and [received](#) \$9.5 million in the first 24 hours. Most contributions were from overseas Burmese; it is not clear if these funds are applied to PDF insurgency operations, but the possibility has made other donors more cautious. The junta is attempting to block funding flows to the NUG, but most donations are made in the cryptocurrency Tether and are difficult to trace.

The Tatmadaw continued to arrest, detain, and often torture NUG supporters; by year's end over 1,300 protestors had been [killed](#). The military also stepped up attacks against ethnic minorities it suspected of supporting the opposition, with constant conflict in Chin State, which borders China. On Christmas Eve the Tatmadaw's attack on Mo So Village in Kayah State, in which women, children, and international aid workers were killed, drew widespread international condemnation and sparked a flow of 4,700 refugees into Thailand.

In the meantime, the regime continued its prosecutions of Aung San Suu Kyi and other National League for Democracy (NLD) leaders. In December Suu Kyi was sentenced to four years in prison on charges of violating COVID rules and obtaining a radio illegally. These are fairly minor charges and the sentence was subsequently [reduced](#) to two years. She remains on trial on 10 more charges, however, the most serious of which is for treason, and she is likely to face additional years in prison. There is little question that the regime has been successful in decapitating the NLD through the arrests and trials, and that Suu Kyi and her top lieutenants are unlikely to be released until well after the junta allows new elections. Min Aung Hlaing, the SAC's prime minister and currently Tatmadaw commander-in-chief, has [set](#) those for 2023, but few regard that promise as credible.

Economic warfare

With no end to the conflict in sight and Western sanctions against military assets tightening, the junta is attempting to renew its business ties with key regional actors. In late September SAC Minister of Investment and Foreign Economic Relations Aung Naing Oo [met](#) with foreign chambers of commerce in Yangon. China remains the military's most important economic partner, and the junta is pressing Beijing to accelerate work on its Belt and Road Initiative projects in Myanmar. China is eager in principle to do so but in practice is wary of restarting major projects unless the Tatmadaw can guarantee the security not only of those sites but also of the two Chinese energy pipelines that run through Myanmar.

On Dec. 22 the NUG [issued](#) a warning that foreign companies and chambers of commerce doing business with the regime would suffer "reputational and potential security risks." The

latter can reasonably be taken as a threat that these businesses will be targeted for attacks by the PDF. Since the Spring, anti-regime groups have torched factories, particularly Chinese, and called for consumer boycotts (both domestic and foreign) of foreign companies linked to the military. Several foreign companies that continue to operate in Myanmar have some public exposure, such as Siam Cement Group (Thailand); Adani Ports (India); Marga Property Group (Hong Kong); VDB Loi (Malaysia); and SCM Legal (Australia).

The Five-Point Plan flounders

In early October, the ASEAN Special Envoy for Myanmar Erywan Yusof attempted to make his first official visit to Naypyidaw, in line with the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus Plan on the conflict agreed in April. The timing of his visit was critical in view of the major ASEAN meetings at the end of October. On Oct. 14, Yusof [aborted](#) the visit when the junta refused him access to detained NLD leaders, however.

This broke open a simmering conflict within ASEAN on representation of Myanmar. Following Yusof's unsuccessful attempt to visit Myanmar and in view of the fact that none of the tenets of the Five-Point Plan appeared workable, Indonesia and Malaysia urged that ASEAN [exclude](#) Min Aung Hlaing or any other junta official from the ASEAN Summit and related meetings in late October. Instead, they [offered](#) representation to a "non-political" official from the Myanmar Foreign Ministry who had not been appointed by the regime. The junta refused, and Myanmar was not represented at the ASEAN meetings, including the US-ASEAN Summit.

This ASEAN drama played out against a background of growing international controversy over recognition of a legal government in Myanmar. In September Washington and Beijing [brokered](#) a resolution to a credentials fight over Myanmar which allowed Kyaw Moe Tun, appointed by the previous NLD government, to retain his accreditation as Myanmar's ambassador to the United Nations with the proviso that he be considered politically neutral. The junta pushed back and applied for accreditation with the UN Credentials Committee. On Dec. 1, the Committee [deferred](#) any decision on Myanmar, which leaves Kyaw Moe Tun in place for the time being.

But if the international community is willing to deny recognition to the State Administrative Council, it is not necessarily ready to recognize the National Unity Government as the legal government of Myanmar. No country has done so to date, but pressure is building. On Oct. 8 the European Parliament [voted](#) to recognize the NUG, although it does not commit individual EU countries to do so. The 2022 National Defense Authorization Act, which Biden [signed](#) into law on Dec. 27, provides that the United States will “support and legitimize” the NUG, but does not specify that Washington will extend diplomatic recognition to the shadow government.

In December as Cambodia prepared to assume the 2022 ASEAN Chair, Prime Minister Hun Sen foreshadowed a shift on this issue when he invited the junta’s foreign minister to Phnom Penh and announced he would visit Naypyidaw in January. Hun Sen has been candid in public statements that he does not believe ASEAN can resolve the Myanmar conflict, and that he believes the only avenue of communication at this time is through the generals. If he envisions formal recognition of the junta as the legal government of Myanmar, however, he will encounter roadblocks from some ASEAN members, most notably Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, and continued opposition from the West.



Figure 1 President Joe Biden speaks at the virtual US-ASEAN Summit meeting of on Oct. 26, 2021. Nine of the 10 ASEAN states participated, with Myanmar’s screen blank, indicating no representation from Naypyidaw. Photo: Brunei ASEAN Summit

Political Transitions and Tensions

Continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic places greater pressure on Southeast Asian governments and subjects leaders to “performance legitimacy,” in which the popularity of incumbents can swing according to caseloads. Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri

Yaakob and Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha will attempt to time elections to upswings in approval, which could mean early elections in 2022, although the formal terms for both expire in 2023.

In the Philippines, although COVID will impact elections in May 2022, voters may be more preoccupied with a presidential selection that could determine the direction of the country’s democracy. President Rodrigo Duterte is limited to a single term, but he has attempted to shape the presidential candidates list to ensure that he retains power beyond his term in office. In the fall of 2021 his initial plans failed: his daughter Sara [chose](#) to run for vice president instead of president, and his close aide and surrogate Christopher “Bong” Go dropped out of the race in December in the face of discouraging poll numbers. Duterte himself abandoned his intentions to run for the Senate in May, a plan that could have enabled him to lead a pro-Duterte coalition in Congress.

By the end of 2021, the presidential race [appears](#) to be well within the grasp of Ferdinand “Bong Bong” Marcos Jr., with Sara Duterte as his running mate. Although most successful candidates for president win by a plurality, Marcos’ percentage in the polls, which by late December ranged from the low 50s to the mid-60s, suggest he could win an absolute majority. His running mate no doubt accounts in part for the robust numbers: before she opted to run for vice president she led the field of presidential hopefuls in the polls.

However, Marcos’ promising candidacy could come to an abrupt end months before the polls. The Philippine Election Commission (COMELEC) is [considering](#) several petitions that charge him as ineligible to run because of a prior conviction for tax evasion under a law that was ironically promulgated by his father in the 1970s. COMELEC hopes to make a determination before the formal start of the election campaign on Feb. 8. If Marcos is disqualified, Sara Duterte will likely ally herself with another presidential candidate.

If Marcos survives the petition challenges, the chances of his winning in May are strong. A Marcos/Duterte administration could mean the merger of two political dynasties, neither of them democratically inclined. Bong Bong is buoyed by a wave of nostalgia for his father’s rule—the national distress brought on by the

pandemic and its economic impact have strengthened the appeal of authoritarianism—and he aims to re-legitimate his family. It is not clear whether Duterte supports his candidacy, however. If Marcos wins and Duterte acts to undermine his administration, he will have two weapons at hand: a daughter in the second chair and some continued political support, in Congress and the public.



Figure 2 In a caravan in December, Ferdinand “Bong Bong” Marcos, Jr. and Sara Duterte get an early start on the May 2022 presidential campaign. Photo: Manila Times

Elections are also likely, although not certain, in Malaysia and Thailand in 2022. State elections in Malacca and Sarawak in late 2021 [showed](#) surprising electoral support for the United Malay Organization (UMNO) of Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob. Sabri, the second appointed prime minister of Malaysia since the start of the COVID pandemic, is under pressure from King Al-Sultan Abdullah to hold polls to legitimate his administration. Sabri was initially more concerned with keeping the governing coalition together, and he signed a memo of understanding with the opposition in Parliament that would delay elections at least until August. Moreover, UMNO is roiled with internal divisions and is still recovering from the 1MDB scandal that [drove](#) then-Prime Minister Najib Razak from power. The results of the state elections, which showed that the opposition now informally led by Anwar Ibrahim was weaker than anticipated, may persuade Sabri to strike while the iron is hot and hold an early snap election in 2022.

The timing of early polls in Thailand is less predictable. The decision by the Constitutional Court that advocating reform of the monarchy [equates](#) with attempting to overthrow the king, and therefore treasonous, is a gift to the Thai conservative establishment, which is heavily

royalist. Since the decision, the Election Commission has been petitioned to dissolve Move Forward, the only political party in Parliament to advocate reform of the monarchy. However, Palang Pracharat, the political party established as a vehicle to ease Prime Minister Prayuth’s transition from junta leader to elected prime minister in 2019, suffers from increasing disorder and dissent. Prayuth is unlikely to call early elections until he has built a new political base with another party.

Washington and Beijing Step Up

In the final months of 2021 the Biden administration [intensified](#) its diplomatic campaign in Southeast Asia with a virtual US-ASEAN Summit on the margins of the year-end cluster of ASEAN meetings that included the ASEAN Summit and the East Asia Summit. Biden [pledged](#) \$100 million in new funding for Southeast Asia, including programs to counter COVID-19 and to fight climate change.

It is not clear if these funds are related to pledges that resulted from the first in-person summit of the Quad in Washington in September, however. The Quad rolled out a series of initiatives that focused on nontraditional security threats such as pandemics and environmental deterioration. This agenda cast the Quad in a more sympathetic light with some Southeast Asian leaders, but its credibility in the near-term will depend on the group’s ability to deliver on promised assistance, particularly COVID vaccines.

The [announcement](#) on Sept. 15 of the establishment of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) alliance, and its attendant deal to provide Australia with eight nuclear-powered submarines, caught Southeast Asian leaders off guard. Although ASEAN is inclined to oppose initiatives it believes will intensify US-China rivalry, member states were split on AUKUS. The announcement drew praise from the Philippines but criticism from Indonesia. In a five-point statement addressed to Australia, Jakarta warned that AUKUS could threaten Southeast Asia’s status as a “nuclear-free zone.” Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison repeatedly [emphasized](#) that the submarines would be nuclear powered but would not carry nuclear weapons. By November Jakarta had modulated its approach, and Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto said he understood that AUKUS was driven by “pragmatic” considerations on the part of the three allies.

Secretary of State Blinken finished out the Biden administration's 2021 tag team of high-profile officials traveling to the ASEAN region when he visited Indonesia and Malaysia Dec. 13-15. At the last minute Thailand had been added to his itinerary and, also at the last minute, Blinken's visit to Bangkok was [canceled](#) when a reporter traveling with his delegation tested positive for COVID-19. As a result, Thailand remains the only one of the original five ASEAN states—the ASEAN old guard—that has not yet had a visit from a Biden Cabinet-level official.

Blinken's only policy speech on the tour, in Jakarta, was largely taken up with China issues. He emphasized not only threats to security but also Chinese economic policies, criticizing Chinese subsidies to state-owned enterprises and "corrupt practices" in China's infrastructure projects. Blinken added a new note to this familiar refrain with a reference to the millions lost in income and trade for Southeast Asian states due to China's actions in the South China Sea.

Beyond this rhetorical task, Blinken laid the groundwork for a US-ASEAN Summit in Washington (or, with the Omicron variant, more likely virtual) in January or February, which he hinted would raise US-ASEAN relations to "unprecedented levels." This was interpreted in some quarters as a reference to the possibility that the United States will follow China and Australia in negotiating a comprehensive strategic partnership (CSP) with ASEAN. Blinken also previewed the release of the administration's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, which is now promised for early 2022.

Notwithstanding the fact that Bangkok was cut from the itinerary, Blinken's trip to Southeast Asia was generally viewed as a success. On Dec. 16, however, five members of the US House [chided](#) the administration with a letter complaining that Biden had not yet nominated an ambassador to ASEAN. The administration is still meeting resistance from Senate Republicans over foreign policy nominations and is staggering nominations as a result. Washington has not had a Senate-confirmed ambassador to ASEAN since 2017, and filling this position will be seen as an important sign of the administration's interest in Southeast Asia.

China's rhetorical response to these initiatives from Washington has been sharply negative, but its strategy has been to challenge the United States with steps toward greater integration into the Asia-Pacific economy. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) goes into [effect](#) in January 2022, and with India out, the new trade regime will be China-centric. More notable was Beijing's [announcement](#) in September, one day after the AUKUS announcement, that it would apply formally to enter the Regional Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the spinoff of the Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership (TPP). This announcement created little interest in Washington but had greater impact in Southeast Asia. China's accession to the CPTPP is by no means assured, but Beijing's move will embolden ASEAN states that had expressed interest in applying—notably Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand—to consider their options more seriously.

Looking Ahead

As it has for the past two years, COVID will continue to complicate US diplomacy with Southeast Asia in early 2022, beginning with Biden's US-ASEAN Summit: with the Omicron variant raging, that meeting will likely be virtual. However, the virus will not be the only snag in the summit, since the issue of representation for Myanmar will continue to pick up steam. A year past the inauguration, the administration will come under greater pressure to fill vacant ambassadorial positions in Southeast Asia and to nominate an ambassador to ASEAN.

On the economic front, Southeast Asia will wait for a critical shoe to drop when the administration releases its Indo-Pacific Economic Framework; most leaders in the region have been disabused of the hope that Washington will enter into new multilateral trade frameworks, but they expect to see signs of a more vibrant trade policy, particularly as it pertains to ASEAN. China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea will keep support high for a strong US security presence in the region in Southeast Asia, but regional leaders will have difficulty viewing Washington as a full partner without a stronger economic component. This will be underscored as RCEP comes into force.

The early months of 2022 will bring further fragmentation within ASEAN as Hun Sen's apparent willingness to accept the junta in Myanmar comes more sharply into focus and the ASEAN Five Point Plan becomes increasingly irrelevant. Indonesia and Malaysia will act as the primary counterweights to a soft approach in Phnom Penh; with Jakarta waiting in the wings to assume the ASEAN chair in 2023, discord on this issue will likely last through the year. However, neither the junta nor the NUG will give ASEAN reason to hope that the conflict will be resolved in the near-term, and ASEAN will be forced to reckon with the impact of having a failed state, not only in the region but within the group. Cambodia will likely continue its obliging approach to China, which will also exacerbate divisions within ASEAN, particularly between Phnom Penh and the claimant states.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER—DECEMBER 2021

Sept. 15, 2021: President Biden, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson [announce](#) establishment of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) “enhanced trilateral security partnership,” which draws a mixed reaction in Southeast Asia.

Sept. 16, 2021: China [announces](#) that it will seek entry into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, concurrent with a parallel announcement by Taiwan.

Sept. 24, 2021: President Biden and his counterparts in Australia, India, and Japan [hold](#) the first-ever in-person Leaders Summit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in Washington.

Oct. 4, 2021: Southeast Asian leaders express disappointment and concern after US Trade Representative Katherine Tai [says](#) that the Biden administration will retain some tariffs on China and that progress on US-China trade talks is slow, due primarily to enforcement problems.

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. 17–22, 2021: State Department Counsellor Derek Chollet [travels](#) to Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia to follow up on issues discussed during the August visit to the region by Vice President Kamala Harris and, in particular, to consult with regional leaders on the ASEAN Five Point Plan for Myanmar.

Oct. 25, 2021: United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres [appoints](#) Singaporean Noeleen Heyzer as UN Special Envoy to Myanmar, replacing Christine Schraner-Burgener.

Oct. 26, 2021: ASEAN [holds](#) its online 38th and 39th Summits back-to-back, having deferred the first summit of the year because of the COVID pandemic.

Oct. 26, 2021: President Biden co-hosts a virtual US-ASEAN Summit with Bruneian Sultan Haji Hassanai Baikiah and [pledges](#) to strengthen the US-ASEAN Strategic Partnership with \$100 million in new funding, primarily for public health and environmental projects.

Oct. 27, 2021: Brunei [hosts](#) 2021 East Asia Summit online. The group adopts joint resolutions on economic recovery and public health, particularly related to the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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. 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. 16, 2021: Philippines Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin conveys “outrage and condemnation” to Beijing after Chinese vessels use water cannons to [block](#) two Filipino supply ships from heading to Second Thomas Shoal. Locsin warned China that the vessels are covered under the US-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty.

Nov. 19, 2021: United States and Indonesia complete 19th Indonesia-US Security Dialogue at the Pentagon. The dialogue was [led](#) by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Lindsey Ford and Maj. Gen. Rodon Pedrasan, director-general of Defense Strategy for the Indonesian Ministry of Defense.

Nov. 22, 2021: President Xi Jinping and the Sultan of Brunei co-host a virtual ASEAN-China Summit and announce that China and ASEAN will [elevate](#) their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership.

Dec. 1, 2021: United Nations Credentials Committee [defers](#) a decision on representation for Afghanistan and Myanmar, meaning that the Afghan Taliban and the Myanmar junta will not be permitted in the UN unless and until the Committee rules otherwise.

Dec. 3, 2021: China and Laos officially [open](#) the China-Lao Rail Link, which runs from Kunming to Vientiane.

Dec. 6, 2021: In a military trial, Aung San Suu Kyi and former Myanmar President Win Myint are found guilty of incitement and breaking COVID regulations. Suu Kyi is sentenced to four years in prison, but the sentence is [reduced](#) to two years.

Dec. 7, 2021: Wunna Maung Lwin, Myanmar's military-appointed foreign minister, [visits](#) Cambodia for talks with Prime Minister Hun Sen, a day after the junta drew international condemnation for sentencing NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi to prison.

Dec. 9-10, 2021: Biden [hosts](#) the first-ever Summit for Democracy, to which only four Southeast Asian countries—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Timor L'este—are invited.

Dec. 11-20, 2021: Thailand's Chief of Defense Forces Gen. Chalermpol Srisawasdi visits the US and [meets](#) with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley and Assistant Secretary of Defense Ely Rather.

Dec. 13-15, 2021: Secretary of State Antony Blinken makes first trip to Southeast Asia in his capacity as secretary, visiting Indonesia and Malaysia. Just prior to his departure Blinken added Thailand to his itinerary but was forced to [cancel](#) that leg of the trip when a reporter traveling with the delegation tested positive for COVID.

Dec. 16, 2021: Bipartisan group of US House Members [send](#) a letter to President Biden urging him to name an ambassador to ASEAN; there has been no Senate-confirmed ambassador in that post since 2017.

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. 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. 28, 2021: Indonesia [invites](#) officials in charge of maritime security in five other ASEAN states—Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam—to a meeting in February to foster a coordinated approach in matters related to the South China Sea.

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C O N N E C T I O N S

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

CHINA - SOUTHEAST ASIA

CHINA'S GROWING INFLUENCE OVERSHADOWS US INITIATIVES

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Beijing's extraordinary high-level attention to Southeast Asia since last year continued in the current reporting period. It culminated in President Xi Jinping presiding over a special summit he convened to commemorate the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-China dialogue on Nov. 22, which featured an array of Chinese advances. Keenly attentive to US efforts to reverse its recent decline and compete more effectively with China in Southeast Asia, Beijing has relied on ever-expanding Chinese influence in Southeast Asia to eclipse and offset US initiatives. Beijing faced a setback when Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte sharply rebuked Chinese coercion in the disputed South China Sea during the November summit. Similarly, China's role in the political turmoil in Myanmar got noticeable pushback from ASEAN leaders as the humanitarian situation in Myanmar remains unstable.

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High-Priority Attention to Southeast Asia

In 2020, Chinese officials and media devoted more attention to Southeast Asia than to any other foreign topic apart from relations with the United States. Senior Chinese officials, with Xi in the lead, have been much more active in interactions with regional leaders than officials of the US or any other foreign power. Despite COVID-19 restrictions, Foreign Minister Wang Yi set an extraordinary record of in-person interaction with Southeast Asian counterparts in the region and in China. The positive results reinforced recent regional [perceptions](#) of China as by far the most influential foreign power in Southeast Asia. In the face of the Trump administration's episodic challenges and the more systematic Biden initiatives targeting China in Southeast Asia, Chinese authorities have not changed course. They have used a longstanding strategy employing a combination of impressive positive incentives and coercive mechanisms to generally succeed in having their way in the region, and sidelining US opposition.

Pertinent [examples](#) leading up to the recent reporting period include Beijing taking advantage of [Trump's absence](#) from the East Asian Summit and APEC leaders meetings in November 2020 to highlight agreement on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), excluding the United States, as well as to highlight Xi's initiative, further isolating the US, to join the other major regional trade agreement, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which the US rebuffed. Wang Yi visited leaders in nine Southeast Asian countries from October 2020–January 2021 and then held in-person meetings in China in April with four regional foreign ministers. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's failed video conference with ASEAN counterparts in late May contrasted sharply with Wang's successful two days of in-person [meetings](#) with ASEAN foreign ministers in China in early June.

The substance of China-ASEAN relations advanced strongly, reinforcing Chinese influence. ASEAN-China trade and Chinese investment in ASEAN [boomed](#). China was the leading [source](#) of medical supplies and vaccines for Southeast Asian countries. Its control of headwaters of rivers important to Southeast Asian development provided unique leverage against down-river countries. It sustained good relations with the Myanmar junta and ASEAN, putting Beijing in a much better position than the

United States to deal with the crisis. China's military, coast guard, and maritime militia ably controlled and defended China's enormous claim to most of the South China Sea against weak Southeast Asian claimants. ASEAN remained loathe to object; most Southeast Asian states remaining publicly silent in the face of Chinese expansionism. A broader [pattern](#) saw Southeast Asian governments avoid criticism of a wide range of Chinese policies, even though they freely criticized US policies and practices.

Beijing's less overt but common [means](#) of influence also showed no let up. These included efforts at influencing Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asia; leveraging Chinese-provided transportation, communication, and other infrastructure to compel recipients' deference to Chinese requirements; routinely accommodating corrupt regional leaders in economic agreements, winning their support; fostering Chinese state penetration of local media, gaining positive publicity; and repeatedly using the flow of Chinese tourists that dominate this regional industry as leverage to advance Chinese ambitions.

Closing Out 2021: Chinese Advances Counter the US

Mekong River Control

Premier Li Keqiang underscored China's commanding position over Mekong River waters in remarks to the Sept. 9 leaders meeting chaired by Cambodia that included representatives from the other Mekong River countries, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. He said China was taking steps to share with down-river countries hydrological data on the upper reaches of the Mekong running through China, and to pursue other measures to enhance cooperation with them. The Trump administration and other foreign critics accused China of using hydropower and other dams in their country to control the river flow to advantage China at the expense of downriver countries. Fearing retaliation, those countries generally eschewed public criticism, seeking to persuade China to agree to share with them hydrological data from Chinese-controlled upper reaches to ensure equitable use of water resources. A subsequent meeting in December of officials of the China-backed Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) group, involving China, downriver countries, and others such as representatives from the World Bank, praised China's handling of water flow that

impacted downriver countries. In an allusion to the United States and its rival regional subgroup known as the US-Mekong Partnership, which critically targets Chinese practices along the river, a Chinese [report](#) on the meeting averred that China's cooperation countered "some countries ... outside the region" criticizing China's control of river flow.

Competing in Vietnam

Beijing used unexpected Chinese vaccine donations to upstage Vice President Kamala Harris' visit and US donation of vaccines to Vietnam in August and then had Wang visit Hanoi on Sept. 10-11 for the 13th meeting of the Steering Committee for Vietnam-China Bilateral Cooperation. In what was seen by foreign [experts](#) as a response to Harris' vaccine donation, reportedly of 1 million doses, Wang pledged 3 million Chinese doses during his visit. Vietnam appeared to show deference to China over the United States—Hanoi treated Harris with proper protocol involving discussions with Vietnam's president and prime minister, while Wang, who has a much lower protocol rank than a vice president and is not a high-ranking Communist Party official, received higher-level treatment. Notably, in addition to consultations with the prime minister and other government officials, Wang held talks with Vietnam's top leader, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong. The explanation that Harris did not meet top leader Trong while Wang did was the result of Communist Party ties didn't wash. Wang has comparatively low party ranking and Trong does meet leaders who aren't members of the communist party—such as Donald Trump in 2019.

Attacking AUKUS & the Quad

Beijing's sharp reaction to the surprise announcement of the AUKUS alignment in mid-September featured criticism in Chinese media and replays of comments from some Southeast Asian governments warning of its destabilizing impact on the region. In one-on-one [meetings](#) with Beijing-based ambassadors from the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia on Sept. 17-23, Chinese Foreign Ministry Director for Asian Affairs Liu Jinsong said AUKUS was a "race-based clique"; he linked the agreement with the forthcoming in-person summit of the Quad leaders intending to target China. That summit on Sept. 24 prompted strong Chinese [criticism](#) that the Quad partnership is

transforming into "an Asian version of NATO" focused against China

Competition at the East Asia, APEC summits

Premier Li Keqiang's [presentations](#) at the annual summit with ASEAN leaders and with regional leaders at the ASEAN-hosted East Asia Summit in late October foreshadowed the strong advance in China-ASEAN relations in a China-hosted summit commemorating 30 years of dialogue in November. He hailed the implementation of the RCEP agreement, praised China and ASEAN for pursuing peace and development in the South China Sea, and called for expedited consultations to reach agreement on the proposed China-ASEAN code of conduct in the South China Sea. Li [contradicted](#) President Biden's comments at the East Asia Summit on China's use of coercion. Chinese [media](#) criticized Biden for trying to draw Southeast Asian nations away from China and toward the United States; they targeted Biden's alleged lack of trade, investment, and infrastructure plans attractive to the region and belittled the Quad's pledge to provide 1 billion COVID-19 vaccines to Southeast Asia, claiming that "little has been done to honor that pledge."

Xi's [speech](#) to the APEC leaders' meeting on Nov. 12 gave top priority to supplying vaccines and related assistance to ASEAN and other countries in need. He said China would provide 2 billion doses to foreign users by the end of 2021 and he repeated a pledge made at an APEC retreat in July that China would supply developing countries hit hard by COVID-19 with \$3 billion in international aid over the next three years.

By this time, vaccine competition with the United States increased as Washington followed through with its pledge at the March 2021 Quad meeting to step up vaccine offerings to Southeast Asia. The Chinese ambassador to ASEAN said in August that 100 million Chinese doses were delivered to ASEAN members, representing 70% of global vaccine assistance to the region. Nonetheless, US vaccines were increasing, were viewed as more effective, and—unlike the vast majority of Chinese doses—were free of charge.

Xi's special summit with ASEAN leaders

Xi hosting a summit to commemorate the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-China dialogue on Nov. 22

marked a major advance of Chinese influence while offsetting US initiatives in Southeast Asia.



Figure 1 Chinese President Xi Jinping chairs the ASEAN-China Special Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations via video link in Beijing, capital of China, Nov. 22, 2021. Photo: Xinhua/Huang Jingwen

Full of rhetoric affirming common Chinese-ASEAN interests, Xi [announced](#) that China-ASEAN relations would be elevated from “strategic partnership” to “comprehensive strategic partnership,” which he said would mean more security cooperation would now follow the deep economic and diplomatic ties between China and Southeast Asia. The China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement will be upgraded. China will donate 150 million doses of COVID vaccine to ASEAN members, contribute an additional \$5 million to the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, step up vaccine joint production and technology transfer, and collaborate on ASEAN becoming self-reliant for needed medicines. Xi pledged an additional \$1.5 billion in development assistance over the next three years and launched a China-ASEAN Science, Technology and Innovation Enhancing Program.

Supporting official commentary said China had already provided ASEAN with 360 million doses of COVID vaccine and “a great volume” of emergency medical supplies. China-ASEAN trade and investment anchored what was said to be the largest and most energetic market in the Asia-Pacific. Bilateral trade reached \$684 billion in value in 2020 and reached \$703 billion in the first 10 months of 2021, representing growth of 30%. Chinese specialists [said](#) that the United States “will never have the ability and motivation” in providing the high level of “meaningful support” in terms of finance or technologies provided by China to ASEAN countries.

Xi ignored private, and occasionally public, complaints by Duterte and other Southeast Asian officials about Chinese bullying in the South China Sea. Reflecting confidence that China has such differences under control, the Chinese leader strongly emphasized a statement—seen by foreign critics as mendacious and hypocritical—that China will “never seek hegemony, still less bully smaller countries.” In line with strong Chinese media criticism and criticism elsewhere in Southeast Asia of the AUKUS agreement as posing a threat of nuclear proliferation in the Indo-Pacific, Xi announced that China would be the first nuclear power to sign the protocol of the ASEAN agreement creating the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone.

Some Chinese media criticism came in response to visits to Southeast Asia by US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo and Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Kritenbrink in the weeks prior to Secretary of State Blinken’s first visit to the region with planned stops in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand in mid-December. [China Daily](#) anticipated that Blinken would criticize China over the South China Sea in what it forecast would be a futile effort to “drive a wedge” between China and Southeast Asian states. It later reported the delegation departing for home before visiting Thailand because of a COVID infection in the delegation. The Chinese Foreign Ministry [spokesperson](#) and Chinese media offered a measured but authoritative rebuttal that countered Blinken’s criticism of Chinese “aggressive actions” in the South China Sea and elsewhere in the region during his speech in Jakarta on US regional policy.

South China Sea Developments

Despite public avowals of peaceful intent and never bullying, hard tactics were evidenced in the South China Sea, with continued [shows](#) of force by Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia undermining Philippines control of its claimed waters. Indonesia reportedly was [warned](#) against undertaking gas and oil development in areas claimed by China and a Chinese survey vessel spent seven weeks, ending in October, conducting seabed mapping inside Indonesia’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Malaysia’s efforts to develop oil and gas in nearby South China Sea waters that are part of its EEZ but claimed by China were regularly [harassed](#) by Chinese Coast Guard ships. In October, Malaysia protested when China sent a survey vessel to

work in the Malaysian zone. Similar tactics were used against Vietnam a few years ago, causing Hanoi to halt oil and gas development contested by China even though the halt involved costly compensation for foreign firms involved.

The most serious [incident](#) in this reporting period occurred in the week prior to the special summit to commemorate the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-China dialogue on Nov. 22. Chinese Coast Guard ships blocked and used water cannons to spray powerful streams of water at two small Philippines boats carrying supplies to troops occupying a small outpost on Second Thomas Shoal in the disputed South China Sea



Figure 2 The BRP Sierra Madre, run aground on the disputed Second Thomas Shoal, part of the Spratly Islands, in the South China Sea, March 29, 2014. Photo: Radio Free Asia

The supply mission was aborted but later arrangement allowed resupply following strenuous protests by the Philippines that claimed the ships were covered by Manila's mutual defense treaty with the United States—a stance reaffirmed by the US State Department spokesman.

The public rebuke of China's actions in remarks by Duterte at the Nov. 22 summit came amid [assessments](#) that the mercurial Philippines president had ended his four-year favorable posture toward China as the Philippines developed closer security ties with the United States. Chinese officials and government media had little to say about the turn of events, which could mark a serious setback for Beijing in its competition with the United States for influence in Southeast Asia

China [objected](#) to naval exercises carried out in the South China Sea and nearby waters by US forces in conjunction with allies and partners. In addition to US forces, participants in the

reporting period included a British aircraft carrier strike group, and warships or forces from Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, and New Zealand, along with Japanese, Australian, and Indian forces. Beijing commentary focused special [criticism](#) on the collision of and damage sustained by a US nuclear-powered submarine in the South China Sea, viewing the deployment of such advanced vessels as regionally destabilizing and posing the environmental danger of a nuclear leak.

China-Myanmar Relations

China's relations with Myanmar in this reporting period saw continued involvement and intervention from Beijing, albeit with limited success in improving the political impasse and humanitarian situation in the post-coup environment. In October, ASEAN leaders took the unprecedented step of [disinviting](#) Myanmar's military leader Min Aung Hlaing to the regional summit. Citing a lack of progress on the roadmap that the junta had agreed to with ASEAN in April to restore stability in Myanmar, Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said ASEAN's decision was a "difficult, but necessary, decision to uphold ASEAN's credibility." Thus far, more than 1,000 civilians have been killed by Myanmar security forces, while thousands of other protesters have been arrested.

In November, China and ASEAN held the special summit, noted above, commemorating 30 years of dialogue relations. China had [lobbied](#) for the Myanmar general to attend, but ASEAN leaders objected and pushed back. They insisted that tangible progress must be made on the agreement to let the region's envoy, Brunei's Second Foreign Affairs Minister Erywan Yusof, into Myanmar to mediate a peaceful solution and to meet with all parties in Myanmar, including deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who was detained in the February coup. When asked to comment on Myanmar's absence at the special summit, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian emphasized China's position, explaining that Beijing continues to support "ASEAN Centrality" on the matter, as well as the five-point consensus agreement ASEAN struck with Myanmar. Following the summit, the Chinese ambassador in Myanmar briefed Myanmar officials on its outcome.

Myanmar's military regime has been keen to [restart](#) several infrastructure projects with China, including power plants, railways, and

ports that are important for Myanmar's economic recovery. The projects have been stalled since February, with continued wariness from Beijing after anti-China protests in Myanmar and multiple attacks on Chinese-owned factories in Yangon following the coup. The World Bank has [projected](#) that Myanmar's economic growth is set to shrink by 18% in 2021. With dwindling foreign direct investment and sanctions imposed by Western governments, the junta has been actively courting Chinese investment. Myanmar's Ministry of Information and Ministry of Investment and Foreign Economic Relations cited the special *paukphaw* or kinship between Myanmar and China over seven decades. To facilitate bilateral financial transactions, Myanmar officials announced that the country would launch a pilot program that accepted the renminbi as official settlement currency for border trade in 2022. Myanmar's military leader Min Aung Hlaing further assured that his government will provide necessary assistance and security to Chinese-owned factories for a safe and stable environment.

Outlook

Key regional highlights in the next reporting period include implementation of RCEP in early 2022, which would kickstart the world's largest free trade agreement, along with the prospects of an upgraded China-ASEAN free trade agreement. On the security front, negotiations on a binding set of regional norms and Code of Conduct in the South China Sea remains a priority as ASEAN and China mark the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. Beijing faces more competition for influence in Southeast Asia as the United States and its close allies and partners donate more effective vaccines, develop new openings in the Philippines, and follow through on planned investment, finance, and trade arrangements for regional development.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER—DECEMBER 2021

Sept. 12, 2021: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets Cambodian counterpart Prak Sokhonn in Phnom Penh to [discuss](#) bilateral ties. They agree to step up cooperation on COVID-19, two-way trade, investment, and setting up a free trade agreement. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, they agree to continue with progress and implementation of the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone and the Phnom Penh–Sihanoukville expressway.

Sept. 22, 2021: Myanmar’s military government [announces](#) that it will supply 40,000 doses of Chinese-made Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccines to the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed group in the western Myanmar state of Rakhine.

Oct. 5, 2021: Malaysia’s Foreign Ministry [summons](#) China’s ambassador to lodge a diplomatic protest against the presence and activities of Chinese survey ships in Malaysia’s exclusive economic zone off the coast of Labuan island, near Sabah and Sarawak.

Oct. 26, 2021: Regional leaders [meet](#) virtually to convene the 24th ASEAN-China Summit. Their joint statement focuses on deepening public health cooperation to help recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, including the training of health professionals for emergency responses, supporting the COVID-19 ASEAN response fund, and vaccine supply. Regional leaders also agree to the early implementation of the RCEP Agreement, set to launch in 2022.

Nov. 18, 2021: Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. [issues](#) a diplomatic protest to China’s ambassador to the Philippines over the presence and activities of three Chinese coast guard vessels in the Second Thomas Shoal. The Chinese ships sprayed water cannons and blocked the Philippine forces’ resupply mission to a Marine outpost stationed in the Philippine-claimed and-occupied shoal.

Nov. 22, 2021: Chinese President Xi Jinping [meets](#) regional counterparts in a virtual summit marking the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-China dialogue relations. They agree to upgrade the relationship to one of “comprehensive strategic partnership.” Xi assures Southeast Asian leaders that China stands with them and would not seek hegemony. He also pledges additional COVID-19 vaccines to the region and an additional \$5 million to ASEAN’s pandemic response fund.

Nov. 25, 2021: Chinese and Philippine officials continue to spar over the Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea. Chinese officials demand that the Philippines remove the BRP Sierra Madre, a dilapidated tank landing ship grounded in 1999 in the shoal that serves as a garrison for Philippines’ troops. Philippines’ Secretary of Defense Delfin Lorenzana [maintains](#) that there is no such commitment to remove the ship and reiterates the Philippines’ sovereignty.

Dec. 2–4, 2021: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [meets](#) Vietnamese counterpart Bui Thanh Son, and they agree to increase bilateral cooperation. China pledges to provide financial support and 500,000 doses of vaccines to help Vietnam combat COVID-19. They agree to ease border and customs procedures on agricultural goods.

Dec. 9, 2021: China-Laos high-speed railway [is inaugurated](#) and officially begins operation. Construction for the railway began in December 2016 and cost nearly \$6 billion. The railway covers about 1,000 km and connects Vientiane, Lao’s capital, to Kunming in China’s Yunnan province. Due to the pandemic, trains will not carry passengers across the Laos-China border; only freight trains will cross the border for now.

Dec. 11, 2021: Indonesia announces that it is planning on sending fishing boats on a regular basis to the Natuna Islands to report irregular activities in the waters north of the islands, near the contested South China Sea, after China’s recent demand that Indonesia stop drilling for oil and gas in the disputed area.

Dec. 27, 2021: Commemorating the 74th anniversary of Myanmar's Navy, Myanmar officially [takes](#) possession of a Chinese diesel electric submarine. Myanmar's navy plans to expand its fleet of both surface vessels and submarines.

Dec. 29, 2021: Senior Chinese and Singaporean officials meet virtually for the 17th Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation meeting. The two sides [agree](#) on a number of projects, signing 14 pacts that cover such issues as finance and digital trade, conservation, and sustainability.

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CHINA- TAIWAN RELATIONS

TAIWAN GAINS GROUND INTERNATIONALLY, BUT WILL CHINA RETALIATE?

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At the end of 2021, Taiwan and President Tsai Ing-wen stand in as strong a position as they have enjoyed in years. Taiwan has parlayed its opening of a representative office in Lithuania and Beijing's sanctions against Lithuania into public support from other European nations. For the first time Taiwan was invited to a US multilateral event, President Biden's Democracy Summit. On Dec. 18 Tsai unexpectedly defeated four opposition Kuomintang (KMT)-sponsored referendums that would have reversed a series of her executive actions as president, one of which would have obstructed her efforts to move forward on a bilateral trade agreement with the US. These victories effectively gave the Tsai administration a mid-term vote of confidence and embarrassed newly elected KMT Chairman Eric Chu Lilun. Chinese President Xi Jinping used the anniversary of the 1911 Xinhai revolution to underscore that reunification of Taiwan with the mainland would be the measure of the Communist Party's success in rejuvenating China. Repeated Chinese air sorties into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) made clear China's willingness to employ coercive tactics short of war to advance its aims. The combination of Taiwan's successes and China's determination to subjugate Taiwan may presage a contentious cross-Strait 2022.

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Agenda Setting by All Sides

China, Taiwan, and the United States all used high-profile anniversaries and meetings over the past four months to define their visions for the cross-Strait relationship in ways that advanced their domestic and cross-Strait agendas and sharpened tensions.

Reunification would fulfill China's historical mission

On Oct. 9, Xi Jinping celebrated the 110th anniversary of the Xinhai Revolution. Xi's remarks [depicted](#) the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the sole and faithful heir of the vision of Sun Yat-sen, who led the revolution and established the Republic of China (ROC). Central to Sun's vision, Xi insisted, was the unification of China. Therefore, the reunification of Taiwan with China is central to China achieving Xi's goal of rejuvenation and avoiding chaos. This statement raised reunification from being merely a policy goal of the Chinese government to the definition of China's inevitable historical greatness.

A month later, on Nov. 11, the CCP [released](#) with great fanfare its third history of the Party, highlighting the central importance of Xi Jinping. This new resolution on Party history proclaimed that "[r]esolving the Taiwan question and realizing China's complete reunification is a historic mission and an unshakable commitment of the Party." While both Xi's Xinhai anniversary remarks and the new history were dramatic in tone, neither announced changes in policy or an accelerated timeline for reunification. In both statements, discussion of Taiwan remained near the end, its standard place in major speeches and Party and government work reports, signaling that the Party sees no reason to raise the profile of this issue above other challenges it faces.

In his yearend press conference, China's Taiwan Affairs Office spokesman Ma Xiaoguang [offered](#) a sober forecast for 2022: "cross-Strait relations will be complicated and severe, and the situation in the Taiwan Strait will face a new round of tension."

Taiwan seeks to lead as a democratic beacon

In her speech celebrating the national day of the Republic of China on Oct. 10, Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen [offered](#) a very different vision. She

too warned that cross-Strait relations face "a situation that is more complex and fluid than at any other point in the past 72 years" but blamed that directly on Chinese threats. She did not mention the Xinhai revolution, which the ROC national day commemorates. Instead, she said that she is the president of the ROC as it has existed since Chiang Kai-shek arrived in Taiwan, clearly implying that this is something different from the ROC that previously existed on the mainland. She pledged to lead this ROC in accordance with the will of the Taiwanese people and without subordinating it to the People's Republic of China.

A few days before her national day speech, Tsai [authored](#) an article in *Foreign Affairs*, which described the threats facing Taiwan as important to the future of the global order, asserting that Taiwan is on the front lines of "the fight for democracy" and "a force for good in the world." She warned that "Beijing is replacing its commitment to a peaceful resolution [of cross-Strait differences] with an increasingly aggressive posture." She promised that "[d]espite being kept out in the cold" because China blocks its access to international organizations and bilateral diplomatic relations, Taiwan would strive to cooperate in international efforts to combat challenges such as climate change and the global pandemic.

The US leans toward Taiwan

Taiwan continued to be a major source of tensions in US-China relations. In anticipation of a virtual meeting between Presidents Joseph Biden and Xi Jinping, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [assured](#) Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on Nov. 12 that the US honors its commitments to cross-Strait peace and stability but is concerned about Chinese military, diplomatic, and economic pressure on Taiwan. Wang [countered](#) that "Taiwan independence" is the biggest threat to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, and that the US should stop sending "wrong signals" to Taiwan.

After Biden and Xi met on Nov. 16, both sides released the customary readouts. The US [noted](#) that Biden expressed US opposition to "any unilateral efforts to change the status quo or undermine peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait"; the Chinese side [highlighted](#) that the US said it does not support "Taiwan independence" and hopes that the Taiwan Strait region will remain peaceful and stable. During a press

briefing after the meeting, a senior US official [acknowledged](#) that Biden has expressed longstanding US opposition to Taiwan independence. This awkward balance between concern about what either side might do to change the status quo and admitting the risk of Taiwan independence suggests that the US was seeking to caution China, but it was unwilling to walk back earlier assurances to Beijing on Taiwan, perhaps hoping that repeating US formulations might enable the US and China to shelve their differences on this issue and address more soluble bilateral challenges.

US choices stall efforts to moderate tensions

US efforts to slow the apparently inexorable ratcheting up of US-China rhetorical tensions over Taiwan were hindered by an unscripted remark, a UN anniversary, and the US democracy summit.

The unscripted remark came during a town hall with President Biden on CNN on Oct. 21, when host Anderson Cooper [asked](#): “So, are you saying that the United States would come to Taiwan’s defense if China attacked?” and the president responded, “Yes, we have a commitment to do that.” The White House later insisted that the president had done no more than note the US commitment under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act to support Taiwan’s self-defense, but his response was generally understood to reflect the instinctive US reaction that it ought to back Taiwan in its confrontation with China.

Oct. 25 marked the 50th anniversary of UN resolution 2758, which in 1971 installed the People’s Republic of China as the lawful representative of China in the UN and its associated organizations in lieu of the ROC. China used the anniversary to proclaim once again that resolution 2758 means that the PRC represents Taiwan in the UN as a part of China in accordance with the “One-China principle.” The State Department [issued](#) a statement in the name of Secretary Blinken concluding that “Taiwan’s exclusion undermines the important work of the UN and its related bodies ... we encourage all UN Member States to join us in supporting Taiwan’s robust, meaningful participation throughout the UN system and in the international community, consistent with our ‘one China’ policy, which is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, the three Joint Communiques, and the Six Assurances.” Blinken’s statement provided the strongest US

official endorsement ever of Taiwan’s efforts to participate in international organizations.



Figure 1 Taiwan's Digital Minister Audrey Tang attends the Dec. 9-10, 2021 Summit for Democracy. Photo: South China Morning Post

The last of this trio of hindrances was President Biden’s virtual Democracy Summit on Dec. 9-10. In late November, the White House announced that Taiwan would be included, and Taiwan’s Foreign Ministry announced that Taiwan would be represented by Bi-khim Hsiao, the Representative heading the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO) in Washington, and Audrey Tang, Taiwan’s digital minister, who has led Taiwan’s defense against China’s cyber intrusions and social media manipulation. The US thought it had threaded the needle of showing support for Taiwan’s democracy without inviting President Tsai, which would violate its commitment to China to avoid high-level official contacts with Taiwan. China made it clear it was not persuaded, though its protests were more restrained than they would have been if Taiwan’s president, vice president, or foreign minister had participated even virtually. Tang’s presentation presented Taiwan as a completely open society, like Mongolia, Japan, and South Korea. To emphasize her point, she showed a PowerPoint map with these four democracies in green. China was shown in red, indicating it is a closed society. When this map appeared, the video feed for Tang’s presentation disappeared. The White House apologized and said that this was a technical glitch, but Taiwan supporters speculated the US was trying to honor its “one China” policy by not showing a map that could be seen as treating China and Taiwan as two different countries. Once again, Taiwan and its supporters were left to wonder whether the US was attempting a half-hearted gesture to China at Taiwan’s expense.

Taiwan Wins Support in Asia ...

The PRC's increasing military intimidation of Taiwan has compelled a slew of nations to publicly express concern about possible Chinese military action against Taiwan. Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, dovish toward China as foreign minister (2012-17), [said](#) in September that Washington and Tokyo should conduct joint military simulations for a Taiwan scenario. Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, still an influential voice in the ruling party, suggested that an attack on a US naval vessel responding to a Taiwan scenario "could be a situation posing a threat to Japan's survival, which would allow the exercise of collective self-defense." The PRC Foreign Ministry summoned the Japanese ambassador in Beijing to protest Abe's "dangerous" remarks that "interfere in China's internal affairs." Likewise, Australian Defense Minister Peter Dutton [said](#) that the "price of inaction" on Taiwan would be greater than the alternative.

... While Making Inroads in Europe

At the December meeting of the regular US European Union Dialogue, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and European External Action Service Secretary General Stefano Sannino "[expressed strong concern](#)" over "China's problematic and unilateral actions" in the Taiwan Strait that "have a direct impact on the security and prosperity of both the United States and European Union." In October, the EU Parliament issued its first-ever report on EU-Taiwan relations, which calls for an across-the-board upgrade in ties and a bilateral investment agreement. Europe's appetite for an investment agreement is likely driven by Europe's need for advanced semiconductor chips amid the global shortage and the dominant position of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) in that market. The new German governing coalition in late November issued its policy blueprint, endorsing Taiwan's inclusion in international organizations, a notable departure from Merkelian caution concerning Taiwan.

Taipei has sought to press the advantage this favorable environment presents. On Oct. 29, Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu made an unprecedented visit to Brussels to confer with European parliamentarians from nine member states. A week later, President Tsai welcomed the European Parliament's first official delegation to Taipei, where delegation head Raphael

Glucksmann declared "it is high time for the European Union to step up its cooperation with Taiwan."



Figure 1 Appointed Representative Eric Huang and colleagues in front of the plaque of the newly established Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania. Source: MOFA Taiwan

On Nov. 18, Lithuania allowed a *Taiwanese* Representative Office to open in its capital. Beijing declared that substituting "Taiwanese" for "Taipei," which had been used for unofficial representative offices elsewhere, was indicative of official relations. Beijing reacted harshly and downgraded relations with Vilnius to the *chargé d'affaires* level and ordered all Lithuanian diplomats in China to turn in their diplomatic identification. Vilnius evacuated its diplomatic staff from China in mid-December as it sought clarity over Beijing's intentions. EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen declared that neither Taiwan's office in Lithuania nor its name constitute a "breach" of the EU's "one China" policy. Josep Borrell, the Commission's foreign and security policy chief, issued a [statement](#) in December that said the EU is monitoring coercive economic measures against Lithuania by China and may launch WTO proceedings. Because Beijing has limited economic ties with Lithuania, it [pressured](#) German auto parts giant Continental to remove Lithuanian inputs from its supply chain, and the German business federation in the Baltics [expressed worries](#) that its members may be compelled to close factories in Lithuania. The EU Commission has supported Lithuania during its spat with China, but its rhetorical support has not proved fully reassuring to Vilnius as China ramps up the pressure. Since late October, the PRC's coercive behavior against Lithuania has stoked a backlash within the EU, and this could redound to Taiwan's benefit.

China Retaliates

A month after staging a rigged presidential election, the Nicaraguan government switched diplomatic ties to Beijing in December, which reduced Taiwan's number of diplomatic allies to 14. Probably not coincidentally, the PRC announced the change while Taiwan was participating in the US Summit for Democracy. Before flipping Nicaragua, Chinese efforts appeared to focus on neighboring Honduras where leading presidential candidate Xiomara Castro pledged to recognize Beijing if elected. However, a week prior to the November election, US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian Nichols traveled to Tegucigalpa where he met with Castro and made clear Washington's desire for Honduras to maintain official ties with Taipei. Following Castro's decisive electoral victory, a top aide said the new government would maintain relations with Taiwan, acknowledging "nobody in the party wants to enter government distancing ourselves from the United States," but a China vs US/Taiwan bidding war over Honduras appears inevitable.

Beijing and Taipei Apply to Join CPTPP

Taiwan had been laying the groundwork for entry into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) over the past several years, but China submitted its own application first, on Sept. 16. Taken by surprise, Taipei expedited its own application and sent it in just six days later, hoping to diversify its economic relations away from China and deepen its integration into regional trade. Japan, by far the largest CPTPP economy, has already expressed strong support for Taiwan's bid, but China [has made clear](#) its opposition. Since CPTPP rules require an application to be approved by consensus, and China may lean on one of China's diplomatic and trade partners in the region to stall Taiwan's bid. Alternately, Japan or another current member could negotiate a paired entry as happened with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the World Trade Organization.

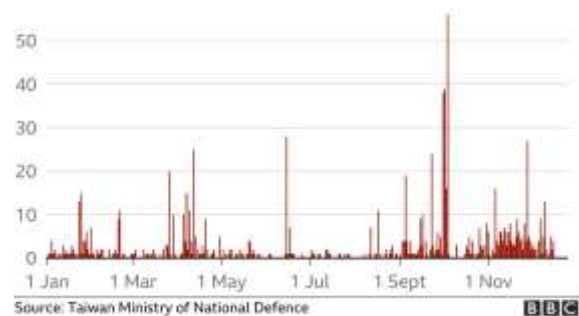
Military Confrontation Grows

Throughout the last four months of 2021, the pace of Chinese military air incursions into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) on the east side of the Taiwan Strait midline

became a near-daily occurrence. Taiwan's Minister of National Defense Chiu Kuo-cheng estimated on Dec. 22 that the Chinese had launched nearly 1,000 air incursions in 2021. The most intensive series of incursions [occurred](#) in early October around China's national day on Oct. 1, with 150 incursions reported over the first five days of the month. Although Defense Minister Chiu insisted to Taiwan's Legislative Yuan (LY) that Taiwan's military was capable of responding to China's incursions, the increasing numbers of sorties and the increasing proportion of combat aircraft suggest that China continues to use the flights both to intimidate Taiwan and to train for military action against the island.

Reported incursions into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone

Chinese military aircraft sorties reported by Taiwan in 2021



Source: Taiwan Ministry of National Defence
Figure 3 PLA incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ between January 2021 and November 2021. Photo: Taiwan Ministry of National Defence

US naval ships continued to conduct Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in the Taiwan Strait, and Taiwan's Defense Ministry reported that US and allied aircraft carriers had [conducted exercises](#) near Taiwan in early October.

On Nov. 23, Taiwan's Legislative Yuan [approved](#) a \$8.66 billion special appropriation to purchase weapons produced domestically over the next five years. In the course of presenting this budget proposal to the LY, Defense Minister Chiu [offered his estimate](#) that China's military was already capable of invading Taiwan and would likely have the ability to blockade the Taiwan Strait by 2025. Taiwan also [announced](#) that it would establish a new command to manage expanded training for its reserve forces.

Both Taiwan and the US issued major military reports warning of China's growing capability to conduct military actions against Taiwan. Taiwan's report laid out plans to increase the capacity of Taiwan's reserve forces, often

identified as a key weakness since Taiwan ended conscription and went to an all-volunteer military. While Minister of Defense Chiu [insisted](#) in a letter to *The Wall Street Journal* that Taiwan was developing an effective asymmetric defense capability, many US analysts [expressed](#) concerns that Taiwan is still spending scarce resources to acquire large platforms that could easily be knocked out in the early stages of a conflict.

The US Defense Department report on PRC Military and Security Developments [warns](#) that the ongoing modernization and reform of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is designed to "provide Beijing with more credible military options in a Taiwan contingency ... develop[e] the capabilities to counter the US military in the Indo-Pacific region, and compel Taiwan's leadership to the negotiation table on Beijing's terms" (p. 36). Assistant Secretary of Defense Ely Ratner [gave](#) the US Senate a strategic rationale for US concerns, noting that "Taiwan is located at a critical node within the first island chain ... critical to the defense of vital US interests," seeming to suggest that Taiwan might be too important to see it become part of China, even if that were part of the "peaceful resolution" the US has long endorsed.

Rumors continued to surface in the Taiwan and US press that US military personnel were stationed in Taiwan. Beijing has insisted that such a presence, together with US provision of equipment and training in support for Taiwan's defense efforts proves that the US is violating its own "one China" policy and the commitment it made in recognizing the PRC in 1979 that it would withdraw its military from Taiwan. Minister of Defense Chiu [said](#) that the Taiwan and US military cooperate closely, but that does not constitute the stationing of US military forces on the island. In an interview with *CNN* on Oct. 28, Tsai [acknowledged](#) that US forces were in Taiwan training with Taiwanese military. Although many called Tsai's words an unforced policy misstep, it is also possible that it was a calculated move to reassure Taiwanese that the US and Taiwan governments were actively cooperating to secure Taiwan.

Cross-Strait Relations Become Partisan

On Sept. 25, Eric Chu Lilun was elected chairman of the opposition Nationalist (KMT) party, a post he held before losing the 2016 presidential election, which saw President Tsai elected to her first term. He succeeds Johnny Chiang Chi-chen,

who proposed to the 2020 KMT party congress that the party move away from its adherence to the "1992 Consensus," widely disliked by younger voters because the PRC has conflated the 1992 Consensus with its "One-China principle," which asserts that Beijing is the central government of all China and that Taiwan is merely a local authority. Chiang's initiative was defeated, largely due to the opposition of older party members, and Chu won election as KMT chairman promising that the party would continue to support the 1992 Consensus.

In the immediate aftermath of his election, Chu [received](#) a letter of congratulations from Xi Jinping, writing as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. Xi recalled that the CCP and the KMT have worked together in the past on the basis of the 1992 Consensus and opposed Taiwan independence. He called the current cross-Strait situation complex and perilous and urged that the two parties work together for national reunification and rejuvenation. Chu then sent a response to Xi criticizing President Tsai and her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as anti-China and expressing the hope that the KMT and CCP can cooperate on the basis of the 1992 Consensus to secure cross-Strait peace and stability. Reactions to the exchange fell out along predictable partisan lines. Was Chu fawning before a leader who is Taiwan's greatest threat, or was he showing statesmanship and restraint to deal with Taiwan's greatest challenge? The Chu/Xi exchange may have laid out the central issue the KMT and the DPP will dispute in the 2024 presidential elections.

Lost in the furor over the letter exchange was another major announcement by Eric Chu, that the KMT [will open](#) a representative office in Washington, DC to explain the party's policies and introduce its leaders. The KMT briefly opened such an office after Chen Shui-bian became president but closed it after Ma Ying-jeou became president in 2008.

Was It All about Pork?

The first challenge facing Eric Chu upon his election was whether and how fully to support four referendums that had been either orchestrated or supported by the KMT under his predecessor. Chu chose to fight aggressively for all four as a vote of no confidence in President Tsai and her DPP government. The referendums sought to require Tsai's government to reverse

four signature policies. They would have required her: to restart the mothballed fourth nuclear power plant, halt construction of a natural gas import pier near environmentally sensitive reefs, hold future referendums in conjunction with otherwise scheduled elections, and close Taiwan's markets to US pork imports containing ractopamine. This last referendum, thought the most likely to pass, would have undermined her effort to secure a US bilateral trade agreement and Japanese support for Taiwan's application to join the CPTPP. When the polls closed on Dec. 18, all four referendum measures had failed. Chu apologized to party supporters, and Tsai quietly thanked voters for their vote of confidence in her government's efforts.

At the end of 2021, Tsai found herself riding a string of successes. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused less suffering in Taiwan than almost any place in the world, and Tsai's government has been lauded for its success. Taiwan is receiving more widespread and vocal international support than perhaps at any time since 1979. Taiwan's efforts over many years to expand its network of unofficial diplomatic relationships has had one of its most prominent victories in Lithuania, aided in no small part by China's harsh and overweening retaliation against Lithuania and its supporters in the EU. Even China's military intimidation and diplomatic intimidation have played to Taiwan's advantage, at least for the moment, justifying military budget increases and reform efforts as well as more overt security support from the US. Finally, in a referendum vote Tsai would clearly have preferred to avoid, she won a vote of confidence and stands stronger midway through her second term than any Taiwan president at this point in their tenure. None of this can be welcome news for leaders in Beijing.

Looking Ahead

As 2022 opens, Beijing will seek to counter Tsai and Taiwan's successes by increasing the coercive pressures and intimidation against Taiwan. Chinese military activities across the Strait will likely increase in tempo and scale. China will continue to try to persuade additional countries to break formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Now that Nicaragua has flipped, many expect Honduras, the Vatican, and perhaps others to follow. China will increase pressure on companies to distance themselves from Taiwan and from Lithuania. Will this Chinese intimidation damage popular morale in Taiwan

or increase popular antipathy toward the mainland?

Finally, as the Chinese Communist Party Congress prepares to anoint Xi Jinping for his third term as Chinese president and Communist Party general secretary in late 2022, Xi may choose to increase pressure on Taiwan to prove his power, or he may moderate confrontation to provide the stability so often prized in the year leading up to a Party Congress. How will this conjunction of political events affect Taiwan as the DPP and KMT head toward local elections next November and position themselves for the presidential election campaign that will begin immediately afterwards?

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER—DECEMBER 2021

Sept. 1, 2021: Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) annual report to the Legislative Yuan on the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) warns that China's combat effectiveness is a growing threat to Taiwan's air defense, sea control, and counter-warfare systems and poses a huge threat to the country's military.

Sept. 6, 2021: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson says that backing US leadership is “the only way forward” to address Taiwan Strait challenges.

Sept. 7, 2021: Japanese Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo tells *Mainichi Shimbun* that, since Taiwan is an important ally and is geographically close by, Japan cannot stand aside when events occur in Taiwan.

Sept. 10, 2021: Taiwan's National Security Council Secretary General Wellington Koo and Foreign Minister Joseph Wu attend the regular US-Taiwan Monterey Talks, which discuss military plans and acquisitions.

Sept. 16, 2021: China formally [applies](#) to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) the day after the groundbreaking Australia-United Kingdom-United States defense alliance (AUKUS) was announced.

Sept. 16, 2021: Taiwan's Executive Yuan approves a special budget of NT\$240 billion (about \$8.6 billion) to procure domestically produced missile systems, air defense systems, and high-efficiency ships over the next five years. The procurement is expected to include the Hsiung Sheng cruise missile system, which has a range of about 600 km and can reach military targets in mainland China.

Sept. 16, 2021: In a joint statement at the conclusion of their annual AUSMIN meeting, foreign and defense ministers of the US and Australia [emphasize](#) that Taiwan plays an important role in the Indo-Pacific region and that they will strengthen relations with Taiwan and support its international participation. They also call for peaceful resolution of cross-strait disputes.

Sept. 16, 2021: European Parliament adopts a resolution urging the EU to negotiate a bilateral investment agreement (BIA) with Taiwan. The Parliament also calls for “concrete proposals and action” by the European Commission to facilitate Taiwan's full participation as an observer in United Nations agencies, such as the World Health Organization and the International Civil Aviation Organization.

Sept. 16, 2021: Czech Republic hosts a meeting under the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF), a Taiwan-US-Japan platform for like-minded partners. The event takes place at the Czech Senate and is opened by Senate President Milos Vystrcil, who led an 89-member delegation to Taiwan in 2020.

Sept. 17, 2021: US Navy missile destroyer USS *Barry* conducts a “routine” transit through the Taiwan Strait on the same day. It is the ninth time a US military vessel transited the strait since President Biden took office in January.

Sept. 22, 2021: Taiwan formally [applies](#) to join the CPTPP as “the Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu,” the same name it uses in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Sept. 26, 2021: Xi Jinping congratulates Eric Chu on his election as KMT chairman and welcoming the KMT's commitment to the 1992 Consensus. Chu responds, attacking President Tsai Ing-wen's Democratic Progressive Party for destabilizing cross-strait relations and assuring Xi of the KMT's commitment to the 1992 Consensus. Chu also [announces](#) plans to reopen a representative office in Washington D.C.

Oct. 1, 2021: Council of Agriculture (COA) Minister Chen Chi-chung [announces](#) that Taiwan plans to appeal China's ban on the import of wax apples and custard apples from Taiwan to the WTO Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures. China claimed it repeatedly detected *Planococcus minor*—an insect pest—on sugar-apple and java apple from Taiwan since the beginning of 2021.

Oct. 4, 2021: Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense [states](#) that from Oct. 1-4, PLA aircraft intruded Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) 149 times. The incursion of 56 military aircraft on Oct. 4 was the highest number ever in a single day.

Oct. 6, 2021: AIT Taipei Director Sandra Oudkirk [assures](#) Taiwan's Minister of Economic Affairs Wang Mei-hua that the US government request for chipmakers, including Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), to submit data on chip inventory and sales records is not targeting Taiwan but is intended to understand the root causes of the global chip shortage.

Oct. 7, 2021: *Wall Street Journal* [quotes](#) an unnamed US official on Oct. 7 saying that more than 20 US special operations and marine contingent personnel have been secretly stationed in Taiwan for at least a year to assist in training Taiwan's land and sea forces to strengthen Taiwan's defense capabilities.

Oct. 9, 2021: At a ceremony honoring the 110th anniversary of the Xinhai Revolution, CCP General Secretary Xi emphasizes that Beijing will adhere to the basic principles of peaceful unification and “one country, two systems,” as well as the “One-China” principle and “1992 Consensus,” to promote the peaceful development of cross-strait relations.

Oct. 10, 2021: In her National Day address, President Tsai [proposes](#) cross-strait dialogue be based on four commitments, including that the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China are not subordinate to each other.

Oct. 12, 2021: *Harvard Crimson* student newspaper [reports](#) that the school will move its summer Chinese learning program from Beijing to Taipei starting 2022.

Oct. 22, 2021: Rick Waters, deputy assistant secretary of state for China, Taiwan, and Mongolia, [tells](#) a seminar hosted by the German Marshall Foundation that China is “misusing” UN Resolution No. 2758 of the United Nations to block Taiwan's participation in the International Civil Aviation Organization and the World Health Assembly.

Oct. 24, 2021: Italy's *Corriere della Sera* [reports](#) that China is putting pressure on the Vatican to sever diplomatic relations with Taiwan and establish diplomatic ties with the PRC.

Oct. 25, 2021: Taiwanese delegation visiting Europe signs five memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with Czech officials to bolster ties in the cyber security, space, catalyst technology, green energy, and smart machinery fields.

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

Oct. 27, 2021: EU officials [acknowledge](#) that Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu will meet EU officials during a visit to Brussels.

Nov. 2, 2021: Taiwanese-American Michelle Wu [is elected](#) mayor of Boston, the first mayor of that city who is not a white male.

Nov. 2, 2021: Taiwan's MoD [announces](#) that starting in 2022, educational mobilization of reserved military men will increase to 14 days per year and that shooting training and combat training will both be increased.

Nov. 3, 2021: Delegation representing the EU Parliament Committee on Foreign Interference in Democratic Processes [arrives](#) in Taiwan, the first time that the European Parliament has sent an official delegation to Taiwan.

Nov. 3, 2021: US Department of Defense releases 2021 China Military Power Report assessing that the mainland is rapidly promoting military modernization with a goal of being able to compete with the US military in the Indo-Pacific region by 2027 and forcing Taiwan's leaders to negotiate on terms set by Beijing.

Nov. 8, 2021: Six-member Congressional delegation led by Sen. John Cornyn arrives in Taipei on a US Navy C-40 plane.

Nov. 10, 2021: Dalai Lama [says](#) that he wants to avoid getting involved in the “complicated politics” between Taiwan and mainland China, implying he is not planning to visit Taiwan.

Nov. 12, 2021: EU [postpones](#) a confidential plan to upgrade its trade ties with Taiwan, in a sign of internal uncertainty over how to balance ties with Taipei and Beijing.

Nov. 15, 2021: Taiwan Economic Minister Wang Mei-hua announces that Taiwan investments in “New Southbound” countries reached US\$5.35 billion in the first eight months of 2021, an increase of nearly 200% compared to the same period last year

Nov. 16, 2021: President Biden tells President Xi during their virtual summit that the US opposes any unilateral change in the cross-Straits status quo, according to a White House readout. White House officials subsequently confirm a Chinese readout that Biden said the US opposes Taiwan independence, noting that is a longstanding US position.

Nov. 16, 2021: President Biden [says](#) of Taiwan: “It’s independent. It makes its own decisions.” White House officials later insist that the president was not changing US policy.

Nov. 17, 2021: Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman meets Korean and Japanese deputy foreign ministers. Among other topics, they [express](#) shared concern about peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Nov. 18, 2021: Taiwan’s Air Force inaugurates the first squadron of 141 F-16A/B aircraft that had been converted to F-16V BLK20.

Nov. 18, 2021: “Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania” officially opens. This is the first representative office in Europe that uses the name “Taiwanese.”

Nov. 22, 2021: Subsidiaries of Taiwan’s Far Eastern Group in Shanghai and four provinces [are punished](#) over violations ranging from environmental protection to staff and fire safety rules. Analysts infer that the conglomerate is being sanctioned for election contributions to Taiwan officials on Beijing’s “separatist” blacklist.

Nov. 23, 2021: Legislative Yuan passes a special budget for procuring naval and air combat capabilities, set for a total of NT\$237.3 billion (about US\$8. billion). The most expensive item is the shore-based anti-submarine missile system project, which costs NT\$79.7 billion (about US\$2.8 billion).

Nov. 23, 2021: US Pacific Fleet announces that the *Arleigh Burke*-class guided-missile destroyer USS *Milius* (DDG 69) passed through the Taiwan Strait.

Nov. 26, 2021: Tsai meets with US Congressional delegation led by Rep. Mark Takano (D-California), chair of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, and announces that starting from January next year, Taiwan’s Veterans Affairs Council will open an office in Washington.

Dec. 1, 2021: Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo states that Japan cannot tolerate a military invasion of Taiwan.

Dec. 1, 2021: Shanghai-Taipei City Forum debuts. Mayor Ko Wen-je of Taipei calls for both sides to promote meaningful dialogue.

Dec. 7, 2021: China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) [confirms](#) that it will repatriate the suspect in a deadly Nov. 22 shooting in New Taipei back to Taiwan from Xiamen. This comes less than a week after international nongovernmental organization Safeguard Defenders reported that about 610 Taiwanese nationals accused of crimes in other countries were extradited to China from 2016 to 2019.

Dec. 7, 2021: Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo and Taiwan's Economic Affairs Minister Wang Mei-hua [announce](#) the

Technology Trade and Investment Collaboration (TTIC) dialogue framework.

Dec. 8, 2021: In Congressional [testimony](#) Assistant Secretary of Defense Ely Ratner positions Taiwan within the US Indo-Pacific defense posture in new and direct ways, calling the island a “critical node... anchoring a network of US allies and partners.”

Dec. 9, 2021: Nicaragua and the PRC [announce](#) they have established diplomatic relations and that Nicaragua has severed ties with Taiwan.

Dec. 10, 2021: Taiwan’s Digital Minister Audrey Tang briefs the US Summit for Democracy on Taiwan’s digital democracy. Her video is cut off momentarily while Tang is showing a map that marks Taiwan and China in different colors, contravening the US “one China” policy. The Department of State stated that the interruption of Tang’s video was unintentional.

Dec. 18, 2021: All four referendums supported by the Nationalist (KMT) party fail, including one that would have blocked President Tsai’s initiative to open Taiwan’s market to US pork with the additive ractopamine in an effort to jumpstart negotiations for a bilateral trade agreement.

PACIFIC  FORUM

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

WANING MOON, SUPERSONIC KIM

AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

Korea's leaders offered contrasting New Year addresses. While Moon Jae-in pledged to keep pursuing peace until he leaves the Blue House in May, Kim Jong Un said nothing about South Korea or the US. He sent his message soon after, however testing two hypersonic missiles. Moon kept pushing for a peace declaration, despite Washington being lukewarm and Kim Jong Un's sister Yo Jong saying explicitly that the time is not ripe. Evaluating Moon's *nordpolitik* more widely as his term winds down, his refusal to rethink policy after three years of Kim shunning him is puzzling. His successor, whoever it be, will pay Kim less heed. Voters will decide on March 9; the frontrunner is the liberal continuity candidate, Lee Jae-myung. Cocking a snook at both governments, a young gymnast who in late 2020 scaled and jumped border fences to escape from North Korea changed his mind and went back—the same way.

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Ring Out the Old, Ring In the New

The start of a fresh year is often a time to stop and reflect, looking forward and back. In both North and South Korea, a New Year address by the nation's leader has become a tradition. The South is more consistent here, while the North's practice has varied. The late Kim Jong Il, averse to public speaking, preferred a more indirect method. For most of his 17-year reign (1994–2011) on Jan. 1 the DPRK's three main daily papers carried a joint editorial, which performed much the same function: reviewing the year just ended, and setting priorities for the one ahead.

In this as much else, after inheriting power on his father's death in late 2011, Kim Jong Un reverted to the style of his grandfather, the DPRK's founding leader Kim Il Sung. The latest Kim has no qualms about speechifying, and does a great deal of it. The habit of a New Year address was thus restored. The past three years have seen a variation on this. Kim still speaks, often at great length, but within the context of a wider meeting of the ruling Workers' Party (WPK). In [2020](#) this was a plenary meeting of the WPK Central Committee (CC). The start of 2021 saw a full Party [Congress](#): another institution which had lapsed under Kim Jong Il. And this time, it was a [Plenary](#) again—formally, the Fourth Plenary of the Eighth WPK CC—held on the last five days of 2021. One loss—for analysts, if no one else—is that the full text of Kim Jong Un's orations is no longer published, but only summaries. Those are immensely long and detailed; but as with all third-person accounts, one misses the [personal](#) touch.

South Korea, by contrast, has stuck with a freestanding presidential New Year address. This year's was Moon Jae-in's last. Elected in May 2017 after Park Geun-hye was impeached (she was later jailed for corruption; Moon pardoned her on Dec. 24), his five-year term of office must end in May 2022. On March 9 ROK voters will elect his successor, who in turn will serve five years in the Blue House through May 2027.

It is worth pondering the utterly different [time horizons](#) the leaders of the two Koreas face, a factor that affects their interactions, or absence thereof. The ROK's brisk electoral timetable allows each president little time to make their mark. Just five years, and then they are gone.

In Pyongyang, by contrast, communism has given way to de facto hereditary monarchy. Now

entering his second decade as supreme leader, Kim Jong Un has seen off three South Korean presidents and will soon face a fourth. Having turned 38 on Jan. 8, the latest Kim—who in 2021 finally took his personal health in hand, [visibly](#) shedding the pounds—might yet rule for another half-century. Even if he only lives as long as his father, who died aged 69 (officially, but in fact probably 70), Kim Jong Un will see—or maybe choose not to see—no fewer than seven future ROK presidents as yet unknown. Should he emulate his grandfather's longevity and reach 82, that number rises to nine.

A dismal prospect for North Korea's foes, and indeed most of its citizens, such continuity permits a consistency of policy and long-term planning which South Korea lacks. With no bipartisan consensus on how to handle the North, every five years each new leader in Seoul in effect starts over afresh. While a few seek to build on their predecessors' achievements, such as Roh Moo-hyun after Kim Dae-jung during the "sunshine" decade (1998–2007), more often they change tack. Some even repudiate past policy: notably the conservative Lee Myung-bak (2008–13), who deliberately failed to implement the many concrete inter-Korean economic projects agreed by the liberal Roh at the second North–South summit in Pyongyang in 2007.

Now 80 and serving a 17-year [sentence](#) for corruption, Lee could die in jail unless pardoned like his successor Park—a fellow conservative, but bitter rival. One wonders whether, with much time to reflect, Lee might now judge this de facto abrogation a [mistake](#). His [memoirs](#), undiplomatically frank, reveal that having walked away from Roh's 2007 commitments, he then spent much effort secretly trying to mend fences with Pyongyang. Next, it was Park's turn: [veering](#) wildly from *trustpolitik* to hailing unification as a likely bonanza. (For more granular detail on all these ups and downs, the past 20 years of *Comparative Connections*—including as they do a chronology—are a valuable cumulative resource, if also depressing to re-read, given the persistent failure to make any lasting progress in inter-Korean relations.)

Evaluating Moon's 'Nordpolitik'

With Moon soon to leave office, the fear is—depending who succeeds him, more on which later—of another Year Zero, as yet another president starts once more from scratch. At all events, it is timely not only to review the past fourth months—in truth, not a lot happened—

but also to look back on Moon's presidency and his inter-Korean policy overall.

Let us borrow a term coined by another Roh -- the recently deceased Roh Tae-woo, president during 1988-93, who pioneered outreach to North Korea and beyond. On his watch the ROK forged relations with almost the entire communist and post-communist world, except Cuba: first Hungary, then the USSR (soon to be Russia), all of eastern Europe, and in Asia the still communist-ruled but now market-oriented China and Vietnam, against which 300,000 ROK troops—including Lt. Col. Roh—fought fiercely for the then South Vietnam in the 1960s. Adapting German Chancellor Willy Brandt's term for his outreach to East Germany and its allies, *Ostpolitik* Roh dubbed his own ambitious and hugely successful diplomatic blitzkrieg *Nordpolitik*. Pyongyang seethed, impotently. As wags put it: Despite talk of more balanced cross-recognition, Seoul got all the recognition—while Pyongyang just got cross.

All that was achieved 30 years ago. Since then *nordpolitik* has reverted to a more literal and narrower usage in Seoul, simply meaning South Korea's policy toward North Korea.

How to evaluate Moon Jae-in's *nordpolitik*? Unlike his immediate predecessors Park and Lee, he at least had the virtue of consistency, and to some degree transparency. Both at home and abroad, not least in Pyongyang, Moon was a known quantity. A former chief of staff to Roh Moo-hyun, whom he accompanied to North Korea in 2007, Moon shares his mentor's engagement approach. Already in 2012 when he first ran for the presidency, losing narrowly to Park, he [proposed](#) an ambitious "Inter-Korean Economic Union" for mutual prosperity. His victory second time around in 2017 gave him the chance to put his ideas into practice.

Early on, during the *annus mirabilis* of 2018, Moon's dream seemed to be coming true. Three inter-Korean summits in six months—more than during the previous 73 years of division—plus three substantial-seeming agreements (one of them military), raised hopes that Kim Jong Un was serious and "sunshine" might resume. Not so, it turned out. Ever since the debacle of Donald Trump's second summit with Kim in Hanoi in February 2019, North Korea (and Kim personally) have largely ignored Moon, and sometimes insulted him. All various forms of cooperation that began so hopefully in 2018 stopped dead in

2019, and have remained stalled for almost three years now. Nothing is happening. There is no peace process. It is dead.



Figure 1 A South Korean soldier works to recover the remains of a fallen soldier from the 1950-53 Korean War inside the Demilitarized Zone. Photo: Yonhap

The question is why. The puzzle is that Moon seems not to ask this or consider any reset of policy, but instead carries on as if all were well and the hiatus is just a blip. To most neutral observers, it looks as if Kim was merely using Moon in 2018 to access Trump. That goal achieved, and after Trump walked out instead of granting the expected and much-needed sanctions relief, the Northern leader had no further need of or interest in his Southern counterpart. Kim may also have blamed Moon for leading him into this humiliating fiasco.

Elsewhere, meanwhile, the sole lasting fruit of Kim's busy summitry in 2018 is that the DPRK's ties with China have blossomed. Overall, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Kim has given up on any hope of progress with his enemies, and chosen instead to nestle under Beijing's wing (not that either side would put it thus). No other interpretation seems plausible.

Dismaying as this turn of events must be to Moon, it demands explanation, evaluation, and policy adjustment. Eschewing any of that, Moon carries blithely on as if there were still an inter-Korean peace process, albeit in abeyance pro tem. All the bad-mouthing, the gratuitous violence, like petulantly blowing up the inter-Korean liaison office which the South built and paid for, Kim's explicit rejection of cooperation by Kim (as with the former Mt. Kumgang tourist zone, where ROK-owned property costing over \$400 million is also under threat of demolition) ... None of this seems to give Moon pause for thought or cause to reconsider.

‘Peace Declaration’: Quixotic Quest?

Instead, his main energies recently have been devoted to the idea of securing a Korean peace declaration, sometimes known as an end-of-war declaration (EOWD). In a journal organized around bilateral relationships, it is hard to know where to file this amorphous idea. As Jeff Beck sang, “You’re everywhere and nowhere, baby.” Only here, critics see no silver lining.

The 1950–53 Korean War famously ended with an Armistice, but no peace treaty. This fact prompts some to indulge in tiresome and unhelpful tropes about “the world’s longest war.” Enough already. Anyone who has ever faced real gunfire knows that, though tensions persist, since 1953 the Korean Peninsula has thankfully been at peace for almost 70 years. Windy rhetoric misleads and muddies the waters. It also begs the key question: to tackle today’s security concerns effectively—rather than yesterday’s unfinished business symbolically—what should be done, who should do it, and which side must move first?

The EOWD falls short of an official peace treaty, which would need intricate diplomacy. Moon seems to think that if all concerned—the two Koreas, the US, and China—formally declare that yesterday’s war is over, this will somehow unlock progress on today’s pressing issues, notably North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs. Yet there are many grounds for skepticism. Given acute mutual mistrust and the DPRK’s record of tearing up accords it has grown tired of—e.g., its unique withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003—it is hard to see how a mere form of words and a fresh piece of paper can make much difference. Who would sleep easier, or act differently, with an EOWD in place?



Figure 2 Image of an artillery competition conducted with the aim of “inspecting and evaluating how the mechanized troops of the KPA have conducted drills in order to increase their mobile artillery combat capabilities” released by KCNA. Photo: Yonhap

At the very least, as a recent sympathetic [critique](#) argues, any EOWD should not be merely symbolic, but “attached to practical steps for peace and denuclearization.” It should be part of a negotiating process, not seen as a separate precondition or catalyst. Sterner critics reject the whole concept as premature, rewarding Pyongyang before it has done anything to earn that. *The Korea Herald* headlined a survey of US specialists’ views [thus](#): “Risky gambit, with little chance of payoff.” While rehearsing arguments on both sides, author Ji Da-gyum found that:

“The majority sees more risk than opportunity, with adverse ramifications for the security of the Korean Peninsula, the South Korea-US alliance, American deterrence and the status of the United Nations Command. There is also concern that a symbolic and nonbinding end-of-war declaration would legitimize North Korea’s possession of nuclear weapons.”

Reflecting such doubts, the Biden administration is distinctly lukewarm. China, by contrast, supports the idea. But the clincher, you would have thought, is that even North Korea regards this as untimely. That was made clear by Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong, who in recent years has emerged as a spokesperson especially on relations with South Korea and the US. Her style is interestingly different—more readable, sometimes quirkier—than most DPRK boilerplate (see Appendix). But given who she is, and how North Korean media for external audiences highlight her remarks, her utterances are undoubtedly authoritative.

On Sept. 24, in one of several published comments by her that month, Kim Yo Jong

directly [addressed](#) “the issue of the declaration of the termination of the war on the Korean [P]eninsula.” The context was “President Moon Jae In”—she has not always been so respectful—raising this proposal at the UN General Assembly. The good news for Moon is that she called this “an interesting and an admirable idea,” which North and South had discussed “on several occasions in the past.” However, “it is necessary to look into whether it is right time now [sic] and whether there are conditions ripe for discussing this issue.” On that, she is negative:

“Now double-dealing standards, prejudice and hostile policies toward the DPRK and speeches and acts antagonizing us persist. Under such situation it does not make any sense to declare the end of the war with all the things, which may become a seed of a war between parties that had been at odds for more than half a century, left intact.”

Kim is very clear. Like the US, if for different reasons, North Korea’s view is that an EOWD now would be premature. Yet Moon refuses to hear the message. In December, on a state visit to Australia—itself an interesting and increasingly important bilateral relationship—he caused a stir by declaring that all the parties have agreed on an EOWD “in principle.” That generated [headlines](#) around the world, as if this were hard news or new news when in fact it was neither. If not exactly fake news, this was highly misleading. I was surely not alone in finding myself fending off media enquiries, from excited broadcasters who assumed Moon must be saying something substantial. It was sad to tell them there was no story: nothing to see here. An EOWD is not happening nor about to happen, however dearly Moon wishes it.

The Year Turns: Food, Silence, Fences—and Missiles

Various facets of the current state of play between the two Koreas were highlighted in a series of largely unrelated recent events, as the old year ended and a new one began.

Speculation that in December North Korea would officially mark Kim Jong Un’s first decade in power proved unfounded. Despite [suggestions](#) that Kim is increasingly bigging up his own status, anniversary events instead focused on respectfully mourning his late father Kim Jong Il. Similarly, predictions that Kim’s birthday (Jan. 8) would this year be added to those of his father

(Feb. 16) and grandfather (April 15) as official red-letter days turned out to be wrong. The date came and went, unmarked and unremarked.

What Kim did do, as often and as noted above, was to hold a big meeting: the Party plenary. Though he spoke at great length, for our purposes the striking thing is what he did not say. Unusually the Plenary’s focus was almost wholly domestic, with attention focused on agriculture: yet more evidence that food supply is a growing problem (no pun intended).

Conversely, and perhaps unprecedentedly, Kim had no message whatsoever for the outside world. South Korea, accustomed to being annually admonished or attacked in these New Year orations or editorials by Kim and his predecessors, was not expecting to be simply ignored.

Indeed, the silence was broader. As the ROK daily *Hankyoreh* [noted](#), the rest of the world was dispatched in a single vague sentence: “The conclusion set forth principled issues and a series of tactical orientations, all of which should be maintained by the sectors of the north-south relations and external affairs to cope with the rapidly changing international political situation and the circumstances in the surroundings.”

That was all. No railing against hostile forces; no rants about double-dealing. Nor, equally unusually, was there any reference to the nuclear and missile programs, strategic weapons et al. These striking lacunae prompted some prematurely optimistic instant commentary. Not a few analysts inferred that North Korea has turned inward, preoccupied by internal problems such as food shortages, and hence will not be bothering the rest of us for a while. The two hypersonic missiles launched in early January scotched that sanguine interpretation.

A better reading of the Plenary and its silences is twofold. One is hedging. Kim is waiting to see who will succeed Moon Jae-in, and whether Joe Biden will come up with any concrete proposals. So he has nothing particular to say to foes at this time. Second, why bother with words when you have the option of deeds? This time, the missiles are the message.

Days after the Pyongyang plenary, but just before that brace of missiles, Moon Jae-in sent his own swansong message. In a wide-ranging final New Year [address](#) as ROK president on Jan. 3, among

much else Moon summed up his take on inter-Korean peace issues thus:

“Amid the touch-and-go crisis on the brink of escalating into a full-scale war at the start of my Administration, we opened the door for inter-Korean dialogue and worked to lay a path toward peace. Even though complete peace has not come yet and tensions simmer at times, the situation on the Korean Peninsula is being managed more stably than ever. Because we have suffered war and remained a divided nation, peace is more valuable than anything else. Peace is an essential prerequisite for prosperity. However, peace is prone to disruptions unless it is institutionalized. I will do everything possible until my last day in office. We must not forget the fact that the current hard-earned peace has been built and sustained through inter-Korean dialogue and North Korea-US talks at our initiative.” And later: “We will not cease the efforts to institutionalize a peace, which is as yet incomplete, through the end of my term to make it sustainable.”

After Moon, Who?

That is a fair and balanced summary, not unduly self-serving. The question, for Moon and generally, is whether his successor will continue those efforts in the same way: in particular the quest to “institutionalize” peace in the form of an EOWD. One suspects not, even if his Democratic Party (DPK) retains power for the next five years.

When the next issue of *Comparative Connections* comes out, in mid-May, Moon’s successor will just have started work. A few words now on who that might be, and what they may do, are thus in order. Currently leading in the polls is the continuity candidate: the DPK’s Lee Jae-myung, a former provincial governor. The initial front-runner Yoon Seok-yeol, a former prosecutor-general standing for the conservative opposition People Power Party (PPP), has seen his lead erode amid a series of gaffes, scandals, and intra-party rows. In a new twist, recent opinion polls suggest that a third candidate, the centrist ex-entrepreneur and educator Ahn Cheol-soo, could beat Lee were he to ally with the PPP, a ploy both sides reject, for now. But winning is sweet, so who knows what may happen before election day on March 9.

What difference will the outcome make to inter-Korean relations? Perhaps [less](#) than might be

supposed. The presumption that conservatives are more hawkish toward North Korea while liberals tend to be doves is not wrong, but too simple. Lee Jae-myung, while he shares Moon’s broad approach and attitudes (although personally they are not close), is very much focused on domestic issues of social and economic justice. Yoon, a political newbie (and oh boy, it shows), has sounded open to inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation, but recently caused a stir by seeming to [advocate](#) a pre-emptive strike on the North’s hypersonic missiles. If elected, hopefully professional advisers would head off any such recklessness.

Whoever wins, on past precedent it will take time for the two sides to size each other up. And maybe nothing much will happen, for both have bigger fish to fry. Kim Jong Un does indeed confront pressing domestic economic issues. Externally, as the latest missile launches show, the attention he seeks is in Washington rather than Seoul. The fond idea of South Korea as a go-between, like in 2018, has had its day. For North Korea, the US is the only foe that matters, and China is the only friend it needs. This leaves no obvious role for Seoul.

But in any case the next ROK president will also have much on his plate: COVID-19 and the economy at home, while abroad US-Chinese tensions and their impact will loom larger than anything Kim is likely to do. (I hope that statement does not prove a hostage to fortune.)

Double Defection: Jumping Gymnast Heads Home

Meanwhile, far from weighty affairs of state, on Jan. 1 a single obscure, diminutive individual made his own choice between the two Koreas—for the second time. Attentive readers may [recall](#) (see Nov. 24 in the Chronology) a DPRK defector who in November 2020 turned up on the southern side of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), having made the perilous crossing unscathed and (to the embarrassment of the ROK military) undetected. A former gymnast, he had to demonstrate his jumping prowess to Southern authorities to convince them he could have scaled border fences as he claimed. Their skepticism was understandable. “Jumping gymnast” might suggest a lithe six-footer, but Kim Woo-joo (unnamed officially, but identified by fellow-defectors) stood under five feet tall and weighed barely 110 pounds.

Having briefly made headlines, no more was heard of Kim—until now. On New Year’s Day, after barely a year in South Korea, he did it again in reverse, heading back North, by the same route. This startling tale, well [told](#) by Choe Sang-hun in *The New York Times*, raises several issues. Yet again, like when he arrived as well as several other cases recounted in previous issues of this journal, ROK border security proved woefully inadequate. Despite being caught on surveillance cameras five times and warned once, Kim was not apprehended. Not for the first time, the Joint Chiefs of Staff apologized and promised an inquiry.

Such double defections are very rare, but not unique. The Ministry of Unification (MOU) tallies 31 cases, or fewer than 0.1% of the 33,800 former North Koreans living in the South. But according to one [survey](#), as many as 18% of defectors said they would be willing in principle to return to where they came from.

Why on earth would anyone who had fled the DPRK flee back? Reasons vary. The regime keeps tabs on defectors by sundry means, including data cybertheft. It exerts pressure on some, e.g., by threatening family still in the North. By whatever means, some are persuaded not just to return, but to recant publicly for the cameras, tearfully telling of their hellish life in the South—not the paradise they were led to expect—while thanking the Leader and Party for showing undeserved grace and mercy in embracing them despite their treasonous sins. (The ultimate fate of such returnees after these performances is unknown.)



Figure 3 An image provided by ESTsecurity, a South Korean cybersecurity firm that claims hackers thought to be linked to Pyongyang have sent fake phishing emails to members of an expert panel advising the ROK Ministry of National Defense. Photo: Yonhap

Propaganda this may be, but it reflects a sad truth. For many defectors, going South is no easy leap into freedom. After often long and perilous journeys to reach Seoul, they then face a society which, language and a few customs aside, is utterly alien: competitive, fast-paced, demanding skills they lack, and unforgiving. The government offers some initial training, help with housing and financial aid, but thereafter you’re on your own. Marked by their accent and appearance (they are smaller, due to poor diet), possessing few qualifications and no connections, for many ex-North Koreans life in the South is a struggle.

That applied, it seems, to the 29-year-old (or maybe [30](#)-something) Kim. Strikingly, nobody seemed to know him—no friends came forward—or much about him. Renting a cheap flat, he worked nights as a cleaner. On Jan. 1 a neighbor saw him put out bedding for recycling, and was surprised as it looked quite new. The ROK government has discounted suggestions that he was a spy.

The “leap into freedom” cliché is always simplistic. Defecting is an extreme step, and motives are complex. Kim told the agents who debrief all new Northern arrivals that he was escaping from an abusive stepfather. What fate he has now gone back to, or even whether he is still alive, we do not know. At a time when the peninsula’s two mighty governments are signally failing to get it together, thereby denying citizens any prospect of doing the same, you have to admire the “matchless grit and pluck”—to use a favorite DPRK [phrase](#)—of a young man who boldly vaulted the barriers, twice over. For Kim Woo-joo, at least, Korea is one.

Appendix: Two Statements by Kim Yo Jong, September 2021

I. Pyongyang, September [24](#) (*Korean Central News Agency*)

- Kim Yo Jong, vice department director of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, made public the following press statement on Friday:

President Moon Jae In again proposed the issue of the declaration of the termination of the war on the Korean peninsula at the 76th UN General Assembly.

The declaration of the termination of the war is an interesting and an admirable idea in that it itself is meant to put a physical end to the instable state of ceasefire that has remained on the Korean [P]eninsula for a long time and to withdraw hostility toward the opposite party.

We discussed the declaration of the termination of the war on several occasions in the past as we acknowledged the necessity and significance of the declaration of the termination of the war, an initial step for establishing a peace-keeping mechanism on the Korean peninsula.

There is nothing wrong in the declaration of the termination of the war itself.

But it is necessary to look into whether it is right time now and whether there are conditions ripe for discussing this issue.

Now double-dealing standards, prejudice and hostile policies toward the DPRK and speeches and acts antagonizing us persist. Under such situation it does not make any sense to declare the end of the war with all the things, which may become a seed of a war between parties that had been at odds for more than half a century, left intact.

Smiling a forced smile, reading the declaration of the termination of the war and having photos taken could be essential for somebody but I think that they would hold no water and would change nothing, given the existing inequality, serious contradiction there-from and hostilities.

For the termination of the war to be declared, respect for each other should be maintained and prejudiced viewpoint, inveterate hostile policy

and unequal double standards must be removed first.

What needs to be dropped is the double-dealing attitudes, illogical prejudice, bad habits and hostile stand of justifying their own acts while faulting our just exercise of the right to self-[defense].

Only when such a precondition is met, would it be possible to sit face to face and declare the significant termination of war and discuss the issue of the north-south relations and the future of the Korean [P]eninsula.

South Korea had better pay attention to fulfilling such a condition in order to make durable and complete peace truly take its firm roots on the Korean [P]eninsula, as always touted by it.

We have willingness to keep our close contacts with the south again and have constructive discussion with it about the restoration and development of the bilateral relations if it is careful about its future language and not hostile toward us after breaking with the past when it often provoked us and made far-fetched assertions to find fault with anything done by us out of double-dealing standards.

II. Pyongyang, September [25](#) (*Korean Central News Agency*)

- Kim Yo Jong, vice department director of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, made public the following press statement on Saturday:

I have carefully watched the moves of the south Korean political circle yesterday and today after the release of a press statement reflecting our transparent view and due demands.

I felt that the atmosphere of the south Korean public desiring to recover the inter-Korean relations from a deadlock and achieve peaceful stability as soon as possible is irresistibly strong.

We, too, have the same desire.

There is no need for the north and the south to waste time faulting each other and engaging in a war of words at present, I think.

If south Korea sincerely wants the inter-Korean relations to be recovered and to make sound

development, it should think twice to make a right choice before saying anything.

For instance, it had better stop spouting an imprudent remark of "provocation" against us that may trigger a war of words.

Explicitly speaking once again, we can never tolerate double standards.

The US and south Korean-style double standards towards the DPRK by which the DPRK's actions of self-defensive dimension to cope with the military circumstances and possible military threats existing on the Korean peninsula are dismissed as threatening "provocations" and their arms buildup are described as the "securing of a deterrent to north Korea" are illogical and childish and are a blunt disregard of and challenge to the sovereignty of the DPRK.

South Korea must not try to upset the balance of military force on the Korean Peninsula with such illogical and childish absurd assertion just as the U.S. does.

I only hope that the south Korean authorities' moves to remove the tinderbox holding double standards bereft of impartiality, the hostile policy toward the DPRK, all the prejudices and hostile remarks undermining trust are shown in visible practice.

I think that only when impartiality and the attitude of respecting each other are maintained, can there be smooth understanding between the north and the south and, furthermore, can several issues for improving the relations - the reestablishment of the north-south joint liaison office and the north-south summit, to say nothing of the timely declaration of the significant termination of the war - see meaningful and successful solution one by one at an early date through constructive discussions.

Here, I would like to emphasize that this is just my personal view.

I made my advisory opinion for south Korea to make a correct choice known in August.

I won't predict here what there will come—a balmy breeze or a storm.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER—DECEMBER 2021

Sept. 2, 2021: Speaking by videolink, South Korea's Minister of Unification (MOU), Lee In-young [puzzles](#) a high-level Russian business conference in Vladivostok with lofty [vistas](#) of a special tourist zone on the east coast of both Koreas which could be expanded to Russia. None of this is in any official ROK plan, much less the DPRK's.

Sept. 2, 2021: ROK government sources [say](#) that almost 10,000 troops have been observed gathering at Pyongyang's Mirim Parade Training Ground, suggesting rehearsals for a major parade. This is [held](#), initially unannounced, in the small hours of Sept. 9: 73rd anniversary of the DPRK's founding. No new [weapons](#) are displayed.

Sept. 2, 2021: Despite an almost three-year freeze in North-South relations, the ROK Ministry of Unification (MOU) [requests](#) 1.27 trillion won (\$1.1 billion) for the Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund in 2022, up 1.9% from this year's figure. 51% is earmarked for humanitarian aid, 46% for economic projects, and 3% for social and cultural exchanges. Notwithstanding the lack of activity currently, the ministry says it needs this budget "to brace for a possible change on the Korean Peninsula."

Sept. 2, 2021: ROK President Moon Jae-in invites local governments to adopt the seven puppies born in June to Gomi, one of two Pungsan breed hunting dogs given to him in 2018 by Kim Jong Un, and sired by another Pungsan belonging to Moon.

Sept. 7, 2021: MOU Lee In-young [tells](#) the National Assembly foreign affairs and unification committee that in January-July North Korea's trade with China, its sole significant partner, fell 82% from the same period last year. It had been 15 times higher before COVID-19.

Sept. 9, 2021: A day after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) suspends the DPRK from the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics as punishment for its refusal to participate in this year's Tokyo games, the Blue House [insists](#) the ROK will continue to pursue inter-Korean sports diplomacy. There had been speculation that Moon Jae-in would try to use the Beijing games to reach out to Pyongyang.

Sept. 12, 2021: ESTsecurity, a South Korean cybersecurity firm, [claims](#) that hackers thought to be linked to Pyongyang have sent fake phishing emails to try to steal data from members of an expert panel advising the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND).

Sept. 14, 2021: MOU [says](#) that henceforth all 243 ROK municipalities will be allowed to operate aid projects with the DPRK independently of central government. Hitherto only a dozen had permission, and before 2019 they had to have an NGO as a partner. All this is notional, as North Korea currently refuses any cooperation with the South.

Sept. 15, 2021: ROK successfully [tests](#) its own submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), becoming the seventh nation to have this capacity. President Moon, who watched, [says](#) the timing is unconnected to Pyongyang's firing two BMs hours earlier. "However, our enhanced missile power can be a sure-fire deterrent to North Korea's provocation."

Sept. 15, 2021: In a rapid response, Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, [calls](#) Moon Jae-in's use of the term "provocation from the north" earlier that day "an improper remark ... slip of tongue ... too stupid to be fit for the 'president of a state'" and a "thoughtless utterance ... which might be fitting for hack journalists." The Blue House [says](#) it will not react.

Sept. 20, 2021: Pyongyang media [publish](#) a longish (1,200 words) semi-technical article by Jang Chang Ha, president of the DPRK Academy of National Defense. As per the headline “Clumsy SLBM Launch of South Korea,” this pooh-pooh’s Seoul’s Sept. 15 missile test as “just in the stage of elementary step” (sic) and “clearly not SLBM.”

Sept. 20, 2021: South Korean police [say](#) that on Sept. 17 they caught an unnamed defector, a man in his 30s who arrived in 2018, trying to return to the DPRK near Chorwon in the central sector of the DMZ. He had four mobile phones and “a cutting machine” (presumably wire-cutters).

Sept. 23, 2021: Belatedly, ROK police [reveal](#) they are also holding another regretful DPRK defector, a woman in her 60s. At 0340 on Sept. 13 she approached a soldier at the heavily guarded Tongil Bridge in Paju, gateway to Dorasan Station (the border crossing to Kaesong), and said she wanted to go home.

Sept. 24, 2021: In more honeyed tones than on Sept. 15, Kim Yo Jong [calls](#) “President Moon Jae In’s” (she uses his official title) proposal of a “declaration of the termination of the war on the Korean Peninsula at the 76th UN General Assembly” “an interesting and an admirable idea.” However, the timing is not right as long as “double-dealing standards, prejudice and hostile policies toward the DPRK and speeches and acts antagonizing us persist.”

Sept. 24, 2021: MOU [says](#) it will provide 10 billion won (\$8.5 million) to help civilian NGOs offer nutrition and health aid to North Korea, with up to 500 million won for each project. It admits this is hypothetical as long as Pyongyang remains unresponsive.

Sept. 25, 2021: In her second “press statement” in as many days, and her third this month, Kim Yo Jong [reiterates](#) that in order to end the “deadlock” in inter-Korean relations, as both sides desire, the South “had better stop spouting an imprudent remark of ‘provocation’ against us.” She concludes: “I won’t predict here what there will come – a balmy breeze or a storm.”

Sept. 26, 2021: MOU [calls](#) Kim Yo Jong’s recent remarks “meaningful,” but insists that so as to resume dialogue, “inter-Korean communication lines should first be swiftly restored.”

Sept. 28, 2021: Following another DPRK missile launch, after being briefed at an emergency session of the National Security Council (NSC) President Moon [orders](#) a “comprehensive and close analysis” of North Korea’s recent words and deeds to ascertain Pyongyang’s intentions.

Oct. 1, 2021: Aboard an ROK navy ship to mark Armed Forces Day, Moon Jae-in [declares](#): “I have pride in our solid security posture.” Hours earlier, the DPRK carried out its third missile launch in two weeks.

Oct. 1, 2021: Despite Kim Jong Un telling the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) on Sept. 29 that inter-Korean hotlines will be restored in early October, MOU [reports](#) that North Korea is still not answering the South’s twice-daily calls.

Oct. 11, 2021: Opening an unprecedented Defence Development Exhibition (DDE), Kim Jong Un [waxes](#) Freudian about the missiles on display: “The more we stroke them ... the greater dignity and pride we feel ... they are ours.” Accusing Seoul of a “hypocritical and brigandish double-dealing attitude” for its own military build-up, Kim insists: “I want to reiterate that south Korea is not the target of our armed forces ... Our arch-enemy is the war itself, not south Korea, the United States or any other specific state or forces.”

Oct. 12, 2021: Responding to Kim’s critique, Seoul [calls](#) for resumed dialogue to narrow differences. MOU comments that inter-Korean relations cannot be resolved just by one side issuing unilateral demands.

Oct. 14, 2021: Following a regular NSC meeting, the Blue House says, as *Yonhap* [headlines](#) it, that “S. Korea aims to swiftly reopen talks with N. Korea.” Three months later, that aim remains unachieved.

Oct. 19, 2021: North Korea fires a suspected SLBM. South Korea’s NSC [expresses](#) “deep regret.” The timing may be no accident:

Oct. 19-23, 2021: South Korea [holds](#) its largest ever arms fair, the biennial International Aerospace and Defence Exhibition (ADEX). Unlike the North’s internally oriented DDE, this is internationally focused with attendees from 45 countries, including Russia but not China. President Moon arrives in style, in an air force jet fighter jet.

Oct. 20, 2021: Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [tells](#) the ROK National Assembly: “We should take some actions to prevent North Korea from further developing its nuclear and missile capabilities ... Sanctions relief can be considered as part of efforts (sic), on condition that the North accepts the dialogue proposal.”

Oct. 22, 2021: After North Korea [tests](#) a new type of SLBM, South Korea’s NSC [reaffirms](#) that stability is paramount, tensions must not be raised, and dialogue should resume.

Oct. 28, 2021: Yonhap [notes](#) that Pyongyang has yet to comment on the death on Oct. 26 of former ROK President Roh Tae-woo (in office 1988–93), a pioneer in improving North–South relations. Their silence is not broken subsequently. DPRK media [references](#) to Roh have been consistently hostile, focusing on his earlier role as a coup-maker in 1979–80.

Oct. 28, 2021: Not for the first time, nor the last, South Korea [claims](#) to detect signs that the North is preparing to reopen its border with China. The National Intelligence Service (NIS) tells lawmakers that the main Sinuiju–Dandong railway crossing could be running again by November. As of mid-January this has yet to happen.

Oct. 28, 2021: NIS chief Park Jie-won [says](#) it is “possible” North Korea may agree to talks on a peace declaration without preconditions. That seems unlikely, since his agency also reports that Pyongyang’s demands before even discussing this include lifting sanctions and an end to joint US–ROK war games.

Oct. 28, 2021: In further comments, the NIS [says](#) Kim Jong Un has lost 20 kilos (44 pounds) in weight, but has no health issues. The DPRK is using the term “Kimjongunism” internally, while portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il no longer hang over official meetings.

Nov. 1, 2021: MOU [urges](#) the DPRK to respond to the Pope’s willingness to visit Pyongyang.

Nov. 1, 2021: In Glasgow, Scotland for the annual UN climate conference, Moon Jae-in [says](#) South Korea will seek to cut greenhouse gas emissions on the peninsula by jointly planting trees with the North. *The Korea Herald* [questions](#) the feasibility of this, since inter-Korean talks on forestry have been stalled (like everything else) since [2018](#).

Nov. 2, 2021: MOU [reports](#) that Unification Minister Lee In-young, who accompanied Moon to Europe, had meetings in Geneva to discuss DPRK humanitarian issues with the World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, and with representatives of the Red Cross. The impact of these endeavors is unclear, as North Korea continues to refuse aid—especially from South Korea.

Nov. 8, 2021: One day after KCNA [reports](#) an “artillery fire competition” involving “artillery sub-units under mechanized troops at all levels,” with top KPA generals present, MOU [notes](#) that the DPRK conducts various military drills. Seoul will monitor such moves “rather than prejudging North Korea’s intentions.”

Nov. 10, 2021: MOU Lee [opines](#) that inter-Korean medical co-operation is “inevitable.” North Korea appears to take a different view.

Nov. 10, 2021: Citing “legal sources,” Yonhap [reports](#) that prosecutors in Suwon indicted a defector, a woman in her 40s, as an DPRK agent tasked with persuading other defectors to return home. On Nov. 23, now identified as Song Chun-son, aka “Agent [Chrysanthemum](#),” she is jailed for three years, despite insisting she acted under duress. (This *New York Times* [report](#) well portrays the dilemmas involved.)

Nov. 11, 2021: MOU Lee [says](#) the ROK will “comprehensively review” whether or not to co-sponsor the annual UN resolution on North Korean human rights, drafted by the European Union. Predictably, the Moon administration once again declines to do this.

Nov. 12, 2021: MOU [anticipates](#), wrongly, that in December North Korea will hold events to celebrate Kim Jong Un’s first decade in power, saying this is needed “to strengthen internal unity.” Instead, the DPRK solemnly marks the 10th anniversary of Kim Jong Il’s death.

Nov. 18, 2021: MOU Lee tells a forum in Seoul: “23 years ago today, the historic Mount Kungang tourism project ... got under way. As soon as the circumstances are met, we will have serious consultations with the North on creating a joint special tourism zone on the east coast.” In reality, Kim Jong Un has explicitly [repudiated](#) any such cooperation.

Nov. 19, 2021: MOU [announces](#) plans to construct a new database center on unification at Goyang, on Seoul's northwestern outskirts. This will replace the Information Center on North Korea, founded in 1989 and currently housed in the National Library of Korea in southern Seoul (which is short of space). Costing an estimated 44.5 billion won (\$37.6 million), the new building is due to be completed by end-2025.

Nov. 23, 2021: Do Hee-youn, head of the Citizens' Coalition for Human Rights of Abductees and North Korean Refugees, [says](#) he has submitted a formal application to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on behalf of the family of Lee Han-young, asking that his death be investigated. Lee, a nephew of Kim Jong Il's former wife Song Hye-rim, defected in 1982. In 1997 he was shot dead in Seoul by suspected North Korean agents.

Nov. 24, 2021: MND [says](#) the ROK military has completed excavations at White Horse Ridge, a Korean War battle site inside the DMZ. 37 bone fragments from 22 soldiers were recovered, plus 8,262 items including combat gear. Though meant to be a joint inter-Korean project, the South proceeded alone as the North pulled out before work started.

Nov. 26, 2021: A poll of 1,000 South Koreans by the Peaceful Unification Advisory Council [finds](#) that over half (53.9%) reckon an inter-Korean summit at the Beijing Winter Olympics is impossible. Surprisingly, 40.1% think this is possible.

Nov. 30, 2021: Seoul Central District Court [orders](#) the ROK state to pay 26 million won (\$22,000) to a defector couple—later divorced, and one now deceased—who on arrival in 2013 were detained at an NIS facility for almost twice the maximum legal limit of 90 days. They had sued for 210 million won, but the court rejected their allegations of harsh treatment.

Nov. 30, 2021: MOU [says](#) it has approved three applications by NGOs to send healthcare aid to North Korea. No further details are provided.

Dec. 3, 2021: Despite frozen North-South ties, the National Assembly [approves](#) a 2% rise over 2021 in MOU's budget next year, to 1.5 trillion won (\$1.3 billion). The 1.27 trillion won for inter-Korean cooperation includes a new 31.1 billion heading for local governments' cooperation with the North, and 200 million won to counter fake news. Support for defectors is cut by 2.7% to 95.2 billion won, as the numbers arriving have fallen sharply.

Dec. 6, 2021: MOU [elaborates](#) on the need “for a more systematic monitoring due to the frequent spread of false, fabricated information on North Korea on new media platforms which led to various negative consequences, including the distortion of policy environment.” Its website already has a section to scotch false media reports. Whether purveyors of untruth will be [penalized](#) is unclear.

Dec. 9, 2021: *Joongang Ilbo*, Seoul's leading center-right daily, [says](#) it has been told by “a high-ranking Blue House official” that “we have continued to communicate with North Korea” about an end-of-war declaration. This is the first confirmation that a top-level channel to Pyongyang exists. Its precise nature is not disclosed.

Dec. 9, 2021: MOU survey of 5,354 members of separated families—among a total of 47,004 persons registered as such—[finds](#) that the great majority (82%) have no data on the fate of their Northern kin. Of the lucky 18%, half said they obtained the information through private sources or NGOs: twice as many as the few who got this via the government. On background, MOU notes that this elderly cohort are dying at a rate of about ten per day, so time is running out for any more family reunions; the last was in 2018.

Dec. 12, 2021: In Canberra, President Moon says that both Koreas, China, and the US have agreed “in principle” to declare a formal end to the Korean War. This makes [headlines](#), even though Moon admits no talks are yet possible because Pyongyang objects to US “hostility.”

Dec. 15, 2021: NIS [warns](#) that, ahead of next March's presidential election, hackers may (in Yonhap's summary) “beef up attempts to steal information on Seoul's North Korea policy and other security issues.” It points no finger at who in particular might seek to do this.

Dec. 16, 2021: MOU [claims](#) that North Korea's private sector has steadily grown during Kim Jong Un's decade in power. Based on surveying successive cohorts of defectors, with a cut-off point in 2020, this contradicts or misses what most analysts [regard](#) as a significant and ongoing rollback of reform during the past two years.

Dec. 21, 2021: Heartbreaking data from MOU [reveal](#) that of 24,007 video letters produced by separated family members since 2005, only 20 have actually been sent to North Korea (in 2008).

Dec. 22, 2021: MOU Lee In-young [warns](#) that the peninsula's geopolitics in 2022 will reach an "extremely critical juncture," with uncertainties including the ROK presidential election. For the umpteenth time, Lee urges Pyongyang to talk: "We have finished preparations to start inter-Korean dialogue at any time, anywhere, regardless of agenda and form."

Dec. 22, 2021: Two ROK experts [claim](#) the DPRK economy does not face imminent crisis, as imports of crude oil and fertilizer have continued despite sanctions and COVID-19 curbs.

Dec. 27, 2021: MOU [says](#): "We hope North Korea will start the new year by opening the door for dialogue ... and take a step forward for engagement and cooperation."

Dec. 27-31, 2021: North Korea [holds](#) the 4th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee at WPK headquarters in Pyongyang. This turns out to be heavily domestic-focused, especially on agriculture. At least as reported, nothing whatever is said about South Korea—nor the US, nor the DPRK's nuclear and missile programs.

Dec. 29, 2021: Family of Lee Dae-jun, the ROK fisheries official [killed](#) by DPRK forces in Northern waters in September 2020 (see our earlier report [here](#)), [apply](#) for an injunction to stop whatever information the Blue House holds on this incident being designated as presidential records, meaning access would be restricted. They fear this is why the Blue House National Security Office (NSO) and the Coast Guard are appealing a court ruling last month, ordering them to share all data they have with the family.

Jan. 2, 2022: First reports [come in](#) that a man has entered North Korea from the South by crossing the DMZ.

Jan. 3, 2022: In his final New Year's [speech](#) as ROK President, Moon Jae-in [says](#) he will pursue an "irreversible path to peace" on the peninsula until his term ends in May: "I will not stop efforts to institutionalize sustainable peace ... If we [the two Koreas] resume dialogue and cooperation, the international community will respond ... I hope efforts for dialogue will continue in the next administration too."

Jan. 3, 2022: South Korea's Ministry of National Defense (MND) [says](#) it has had no response from North Korea to a message it sent on Jan. 2 via the western military communication line, urging the North to protect the border-crosser. Another report [clarifies](#) that while Pyongyang did acknowledge receipt of the message, sent twice, it made no comment on the protection request. MND also confirms the man's identity as being the same person who had arrived by a similar route across the DMZ in November 2020.

Jan. 4, 2022: Amid reports that last week's presumed returnee defector was suffering financial problems in South Korea, MOU [insists](#) the man—who worked as a cleaner—had received due resettlement support from the ROK government.

Jan. 5, 2022: After investigating Jan. 1's redefector border crossing, the ROK JCS [report](#) that the man crossed into North Korea despite being caught five times on military surveillance cameras. General Won In-choul, the JCS chairman, admits: "We failed to carry out given duties properly ... I apologize for causing concerns to the people."

Jan. 5, 2022: President Moon [urges](#) the ROK military to "have a special sense of alert and responsibility." Calling the "failure of security operations ... a grave problem that should not have happened," he demands a special inspection of front-line units to ensure no repetition.

Jan. 5, 2022: ROK JCS [reports](#) that North Korea fired an apparent ballistic missile over the East Sea (Sea of Japan). South Korea's presidential National Security Council convenes, is briefed, and expresses concern. This is Pyongyang's first such launch in 2022; its last was an SLBM in October. Two more missile tests (so far) follow, on Jan. 12 and 14.

Jan. 5, 2022: Reacting to Pyongyang's missile launch, President Moon [voices](#) "concerns that tensions could rise and a stalemate of inter-Korean relations could further deepen." Yet South Korea should not give up on dialogue, and "North Korea also should make efforts in a more earnest manner."

Jan. 6, 2022: ROK government [says](#) that next month it will launch a new inter-agency team, including MOU and the police, to support vulnerable defectors from the North. Last year MOU's biannual survey found that 1,582 defectors needed help additional to the basic support package that all ex-DPRK arrivals receive. Almost half (47%) spoke of having psychological problems.

Jan. 6, 2022: *Korea Times* [profiles](#) Tim Peters, a Seoul-based US activist whose NGO, Helping Hands Korea, has since 1996 helped over 1,000 North Koreans in China to safety in third countries. Despite the pandemic, in 2020 HHK enabled more such evacuations than ever before as hitherto hidden sub-groups, such as the elderly or disabled, came to light.

Jan. 10, 2022: MOU [says](#) it is monitoring any potential changes in how North Korea handles COVID-19, such as easing its current strict border controls, after *Rodong Sinmun*—the main DPRK daily, organ of the ruling Workers' Party (WPK)—avers that "we need to move to a better advanced, people-oriented epidemic work from one that focused on control measures."

Jan. 10, 2022: Refuting recently [publicized](#) research [claiming](#) that as many as 771 of the 33,800 North Korean defectors in the South have moved on to third countries as of 2019, MOU [insists](#) the true figure for the five years 2016-20 is only 20 (which seems implausibly low.) It [confirms](#), however, that 31 have redeffected to the North.

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C O N N E C T I O N S

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

CHINA - KOREA RELATIONS

ECONOMIC STABILIZATION, END-OF-WAR DECLARATION, AND THE ONGOING “JOINT STRUGGLE”

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During the waning months of 2021, China and South Korea worked together to stabilize and strengthen their economic relationship and the Moon administration reached out to China as part of its full-court press to achieve an end-of-war declaration prior to the end of Moon’s term in May of 2022. Through several foreign minister-level meetings between Chung Eui-young and Wang Yi, including Wang’s visit to Seoul for a meeting with President Moon, an exchange held in Tianjin between national security advisors, and regular bilateral economic consultations, the two countries improved economic cooperation and sustained close consultation on peninsula-related issues. The most significant outcomes of these discussions included the first release of a major Korean movie in Chinese theaters since 2015 and ongoing efforts to bilaterally support the digital, technological, and climate change dimensions of Sino-South Korean economic cooperation. China offered support for Moon administration efforts to end the Korean War through pursuit of phased and synchronized actions and discouraged relevant countries from taking destabilizing unilateral moves.

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Meanwhile, North Korea's missile tests in September–October frustrated hope for regional diplomacy as Beijing and Pyongyang jointly commemorated their 72-year-old “joint struggle to defend and glorify socialism” by marking national and bilateral anniversaries. Their official statements, however, lacked substantive outcomes in China–DPRK diplomatic exchanges. Post-pandemic trade remained stalled as both leaderships turned to self-reliance in their national development strategy.

South Korea's End-of-War Declaration Push and Diplomacy with China

President Moon's push at the UN General Assembly for an end-of-war declaration with North Korea is his administration's last major diplomatic initiative, with implications not only for inter-Korean relations but also for both US–South Korea and Sino–South Korean relations. The end-of-war initiative has provided an opportunity for Moon to make a push for restoration of China–South Korea military and economic relations to the pre-THAAD status quo ante. The first step in Moon's diplomatic push with China involved the return of 109 Chinese remains from the Korean War to China and the restoration of normal military exchanges between South Korea and China. This gesture, alongside efforts to stabilize the relationship in the run-up to the 30th anniversary of diplomatic normalization next August, has provided momentum for dialogue on the end-of-war declaration between respective foreign ministers and national security advisors.

During Wang's Sept. 14–15 visit to Seoul, Chung and Wang held an [in-depth discussion](#) of the Korean Peninsula and “agreed to maintain close cooperation for early reinvigoration of the Korean Peninsula Peace Process.” Both foreign ministers supported humanitarian aid for North Korea and the prompt resumption of inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation. Minister Wang pledged that China would play a “constructive role in peace and stability on the Korean [P]eninsula and in the region,” and affirmed that North Korean missile launches are not conducive to the improvement of inter-Korean relations.

Foreign Minister Chung may have taken the opportunity to request that China exert influence on North Korea to resume inter-Korean and US–North Korean diplomacy, given that China and North Korea have enhanced the alignment of their respective positions in public exchanges

between Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping, even in the absence of direct diplomatic interactions. Foreign Minister Chung emphasized regional cooperation “based on openness, inclusiveness, and transparency ... while expecting a stable development of US–China relations through cooperation between the US and China.” The two foreign ministers held a [follow-up meeting](#) on Oct. 29 on the sidelines of the G20 in Rome, at which they “had a frank and in-depth exchange of views on ways of cooperation to advance the peace process on the Korean Peninsula, including end-of-war declaration.” ROK Director of the Korean Peninsula Peace Negotiation Headquarters Roh Gyu-deok held [follow-up video consultations](#) on Sept. 29 and Nov. 1 with PRC Special Representative for the Korean Peninsula Liu Xiaoming.



Figure 1 Yang Jiechi and ROK national security advisor Suh Hoon meet in Tianjin. Photo: Yonhap

South Korean National Security Advisor Suh Hoon traveled to Tianjin on Dec. 2 [for consultations with](#) CPC Central Committee Politburo member and former Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi. Yang [affirmed](#) that “China always supports the improvement of South–North relations on the Korean Peninsula and advocates the settlement of the Korean Peninsula issue through dialogue and consultation following the ‘dual-track approach’ and the principle of phased and synchronized actions” and noted that “China is willing to work with other stakeholders to play a constructive role in maintaining peace and stability, as well as realizing lasting peace of the Peninsula.” Suh expressed the importance of the relationship with China and the need for practical cooperation in economic, trade, culture, pandemic response, and other fields, and sought cooperation with China to “build lasting peace on the peninsula, keep advancing regional cooperation and uphold

multilateralism.” These statements suggest that Suh has won qualified support from China for the goal of ending the Korean War in tandem with North Korean steps toward denuclearization.

Following the US announcement of a “diplomatic boycott” for the Beijing Olympics, President Moon made clear that South Korea is not considering such a boycott and had not been asked by any other country to join such a boycott in a [joint press conference](#) with Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison during a state visit to Canberra, Australia. South Korean Vice President Choi Jong-gun and his counterpart Le Yucheng held [virtual consultations](#) on Dec. 23 at which they discussed preparations for the Beijing Olympics and addressed issues such as supply chain issues, cultural exchanges, and environmental issues “so that the peoples of the two countries could feel improvements.” They also discussed cooperation on the end-of-war declaration and on ways to resume dialogue with North Korea. In the run-up to those consultations, South Korea [disinvited](#) a Taiwanese minister from speaking at a December conference on the technology revolution hosted by South Korea’s Presidential Committee on the Fourth Industrial Revolution scheduled for the eve of high-level strategic consultations between Beijing and Seoul.

North Korea Tests Regional Diplomacy

Despite South Korean efforts to jumpstart talks with North Korea, North Korean missile tests in September-October frustrated hope for advancing regional diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula by the end of 2021. The reported tests included new long-range cruise missiles on Sept. 11-12, two short-range ballistic missiles on Sept. 15, a “hypersonic missile” on Sept. 28, an “advanced anti-aircraft missile” on Sept. 30, and a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) on Oct. 19. Pyongyang’s latest provocations appeared to amplify demands for sanctions relief amid COVID-19’s ongoing economic impact. They coincided with PRC foreign minister Wang Yi’s visit to Seoul on Sept. 15-16, and US-ROK-Japan nuclear talks on Sept. 15 and Oct. 19. They also challenged Moon Jae-in’s renewed [calls](#) to the UN General Assembly on Sept. 21 for an end-of-war declaration. DPRK representative Kim Song [claimed](#) to UN counterparts a week later, “inter-Korean relations have never come out of the shadow of the US interference and obstruction.” North Korea’s foreign ministry official Jo Chol Su similarly [criticized](#) the UN

Security Council’s Oct. 1 meeting on the missile tests as a violation of sovereignty.



Figure 2 PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi visits Seoul and meets with Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong. Photo: Yonhap

According to the South Korean media, North Korea’s Oct. 19 test was its “[eighth known projectile launch](#)” in 2021. China’s foreign ministry responded by reiterating its support for a “dual-track” approach to peace and denuclearization, pointing to a “[critical juncture](#)” on the peninsula. The UN Security Council meeting on Oct. 1 did not produce a joint statement condemning Pyongyang’s actions, reinforcing disappointment over Chinese and Russian opposition. In early November, China and Russia reportedly extended their proposals for easing DPRK sanctions through a draft resolution shared with Security Council partners.

Beijing’s reactions reignited US calls for stronger Chinese influence over North Korea. As the defense department’s annual [report](#) to Congress on Military and Security Developments indicated in November, “The PRC’s objectives for the Korean Peninsula include stability, denuclearization, and the absence of US forces near China’s border.” The DoD’s 2021 [Global Posture Review](#), released later that month, supports further cooperation with Indo-Pacific allies to “deter potential Chinese military aggression and threats from North Korea.” In a series of sanctions announced on Human Rights Day on Dec. 10, the US Department of Treasury [designated](#) new entities in China as violators of UN resolutions banning employment of DPRK workers.

The Inauguration of the Future Development Committee in Preparation for the 30th Anniversary of the Normalization of China-South Korea Relations

China and South Korea marked the 29th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations on Aug. 24 by inaugurating the [Korea-China Relations Future Development Committee](#). The purpose of this committee is to build on existing forms of cooperation to build a stronger relationship in anticipation of the 30th anniversary of China-South Korea ties next year. A virtual [Comprehensive Review of Economic Cooperation meeting](#) held between South Korean Foreign Ministry Director-General for Bilateral Economic Affairs Lee Miyon and Chinese Ministry of Commerce Director General Yang Weiqun on Sept. 2 acknowledged efforts to maintain close economic cooperation by establishing a fast track procedure for business travelers, drafting the Korea-China Joint Plan for Economic Cooperation (2021-2025), and strengthening multilateral cooperation through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and ASEAN+3. South Korea sought the expansion of regular flights from South Korea to China and cultural exchanges for Korean games and movies, and greater cooperation in the food and agricultural sector. Chinese representatives sought new industrial cooperation opportunities and strengthened cooperation between regional governments. Both sides sought to address private sector difficulties firms faced in their overseas operations.

Foreign Ministers Chung and Wang in their [Sept. 15 meeting](#) welcomed the launch of the Committee for the Future-Oriented Development of Korea-China Relations as well as the Korea-China Joint Plan for Economic Cooperation. The two agreed to strengthen bilateral relations and mutual understanding through the Year of Korea-China Cultural Exchanges (2021-2022) and related efforts to promote people-to-people exchanges on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of normalization of China-South Korea relations. The foreign ministers acknowledged the need to accelerate efforts to address air pollution and fine dust issues and prioritized the objective of establishing a "Post-Yellow Sea Large Marine Ecosystem (YSLME)" to preserve marine environmental resources.

A [vice-minister level meeting](#) between Choi Jong-moon and Ren Hongbin on Nov. 30 adopted the joint plan for economic cooperation and agreed to foster collaboration between South Korea's New Southern and New Northern Policies and China's Belt and Road Initiative. The Korean side sought expanded access to the Chinese market for cultural content such as Korean games, movies, and TV programs in the context of efforts to expand cultural exchanges and expressed appreciation for Chinese efforts to restore an unexpected cutoff of Korean access to Chinese urea water used in diesel engines. The Chinese side sought closer South Korean cooperation in the digital and low-carbon sectors and in the management of provincial Korea-China Industrial Complexes.

The Chinese government took a significant step forward in easing restrictions on Korean cultural products by allowing the [first limited release](#) on 257 screens of a Korean movie in China in six years on Dec. 3 with the release of the 2020 Korean comedy *Oh! My Gran*. In addition, the Chinese edition of GQ magazine has featured Korean actor Lee Dong-wook on the cover of its December 2021.

China-DPRK Friendship and "Joint Struggle"

China and North Korea celebrated 72 years of diplomatic relations in October. The DPRK foreign ministry [pledged](#) to advance the friendship under Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un, who have held five summits since 2018, and supported common interests in regional security and socialism. Xi and Kim exchanged messages on Sept. 9 and Sept. 25 commemorating North Korea's 73rd founding anniversary. President Xi [praised](#) the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK)'s "great achievements in building a socialist country," noting "a new dimension to our traditional friendship" since his meetings with Kim. Kim Jong Un [supported](#) steady growth of China-DPRK friendship "in the joint struggle to defend and glorify socialism" against "hostile forces." The two leaders renewed these messages on Oct. 1 and Oct. 19 for the PRC's 72nd founding anniversary. Days after opposing US "new Cold War" policy, Kim [voiced](#) solidarity with China in its efforts to "defend the sovereignty, right to development and territorial integrity of the country." Xi [promised](#) to "propel the relations to a new stage" amid what current Chinese narratives identify as historic structural shifts "in 100 years" compounded by COVID-19. Later in October, Kim Jong Un [marked](#) the 71st

anniversary of China's participation in the Korean War by affirming the bilateral friendship "sealed in blood."

Despite unprecedented contact between Xi and Kim in recent years, their declaratory statements lack substantive progress. Current China-DPRK diplomatic exchanges remain limited to vice minister-level courtesy calls through their Embassies. On Nov. 5, parallel meetings were [held](#) between PRC Ambassador Li Jinjun and North Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Pak Myong Ho, and DPRK Ambassador Ri Ryong Nam and China's Assistant Foreign Minister Wu Jianghao. Ri Ryong Nam also met China's top diplomat Yang Jiechi in Beijing in late October. China's longest-serving envoy to Pyongyang, Li Jinjun met DPRK Premier Kim Tok Hun on Dec. 22 before ending his term as ambassador.

In addition to lower-level exchanges with China, North Korea supported Beijing through sharpened criticism of US policy, accusing the Biden administration of interfering in internal affairs and threatening Chinese core interests. *Korean Central News Agency* released a [commentary](#) on Sept. 15, when PRC and ROK foreign ministers held talks in Seoul, attacking Washington for challenging Beijing's "One-China" principle. North Korean analyst Kim Myong Chol argued, "China is strongly standing against the US moves designed at the permanent division of the country," referring to US military buildup in the region as "persistent moves to perpetuate the division of the Korean nation and territory." A day after Biden's Town Hall [remarks](#) reaffirming US defense commitments to Taiwan, Vice Foreign Minister Pak Myong-ho on Oct. 22 similarly [linked](#) US policies on Taiwan and Korea, pointing to US intentions to "stifle our country and China, both socialist countries, in order to hold its supremacy."

Meeting Between the Chinese Ambassador to Seoul and South Korea's Presidential Candidates

Chinese Ambassador Xing Haiming made a courtesy call on ruling Democratic Party Candidate Lee Jae-myung at the ruling Democratic Party headquarters on Nov. 11 and made a similar call on opposition People's Power Party Candidate Yoon Seok-yeol at the opposition People's Power Party headquarters on Nov. 19. Both candidates acknowledged the importance of good relations with China and the upcoming 30th anniversary of diplomatic ties in 2022. On his [Naver blog](#) following the meeting,

Candidate Lee pledged a relationship of cooperation, rational problem solving, and the development of a strategic cooperative partnership. Lee acknowledged China's efforts to assist South Korea in dealing with a crisis involving the import from China of a supply of a urea water mix used in South Korean diesel engines. Candidate Yoon posted a [video](#) from the meeting that expressed his expectation that relations with China will be upgraded in the future.



Figure 3 ROK presidential candidate Yoon Seok-yeol of main opposition People Power Party meets PRC Ambassador Xing Haiming in Seoul. Photo: Yonhap

China appeared set to be a part of South Korea's presidential election campaign as the opposition party sought to exploit a growing gap between the ruling party's approach to China and deteriorating public views. But recent public opinion polls confirm both a serious downturn in Korean attitudes toward China among both Korean conservatives and progressives surveyed. A [Korea Institute of National Unification poll](#) released on Dec. 28 revealed that 71.8% of those polled identified China as South Korea's biggest national security threat, with 52.5% of respondents favoring a strategy of balanced diplomacy between China and the United States and 31.1% favoring strengthening of the US-South Korea alliance. Other polls have revealed that South Korea's younger generation in particular holds negative attitudes toward China. Thus, the issue has become challenging for politicians to navigate. Candidate Lee has [advocated for](#) balanced diplomacy between the United States and China and called upon the government to send a special envoy to China early during the urea water crisis but has been cautious in his handling of China issues. Candidate Yoon has advocated for greater South Korean alignment with the United States and for stronger alignment with the Quad while

continuing to advocate for upgrading of relations with China.

South Korea's Urea Water Shortage and Concerns About Dependency on China

As noted above, South Korea in mid-November experienced an unexpected shortage of urea water, or diesel exhaust fluid (DEF), used to mitigate carbon emissions for diesel engines. This shortage highlighted South Korea's dependency on imports of the fluid from China. The shortage came about as a by-product of China's reduced production of fertilizer-related products resulting from a Chinese ban on imports of Australian coal. The urea water shortage ballooned into a major issue for the South Korean government and underscored South Korean economic dependency on China and the need for diversification of supply of critical supply chain components. South Korea reportedly [relies](#) on China for the import of over 80% of 1850 materials and products, including critical manganese and graphite supplies.

The urea water supply crisis led the Moon administration to release military reserves of urea water, impose emergency controls on the supply and use of urea water solution, and negotiate alternative urea water supply arrangements with Vietnam and Australia in addition to negotiating supply arrangements with the Chinese government to solve the immediate urea water supply crisis. The urea water supply crisis also drew public attention to the declining sales, declining market share, and increasingly difficult regulatory environment faced by Korean firms in China. These factors have led conglomerates such as Samsung, LG, SK, Lotte, and Hyundai to face difficulties and to shift focus from the Chinese market. [FKI reports](#) that total sales of Korean companies in China have decreased by 21.1% from \$187 billion in 2017 to \$147.5 billion in 2019 and that profit margins have decreased from 4.6% in 2016 to 2.1% in 2019. As a result, South Korean conglomerates such as Hyundai Motor, LG Display, and SKC have shifted major investments from China to Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia.

China-DPRK Trade Hiatus and Self-Reliance

Chinese customs data showed a 40% [decline](#) in China-DPRK trade in September-October, countering previous indications of gradual

recovery. External sources suspected higher unofficial figures for Chinese imports like coal from North Korea. According to DPRK state media reports, Kim Jong Un is placing growing emphasis on state leadership and trade reorientation to promote self-reliance. Kim's Nov. 18 [letter](#) to a national conference on "Three Revolutions" (ideological, technological, and cultural), delivered by Supreme People's Assembly head and First Vice President of the State Affairs Commission [Choe Ryong Hae](#), projected "a new era of self-reliance and prosperity, an era of our state-first principle." In his address on "new development of socialist construction" to the Supreme People's Assembly on Sept. 29, Kim also [raised](#) the need to enhance state guidance and reduce import reliance.

South Korean sources have interpreted North Korea's recent policy discourse as an effort to strengthen [internal discipline](#) amid ongoing sanctions and post-pandemic restrictions. Self-reliance also [emerged](#) as a central theme in China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) marking a new stage of "socialist modernization," suggesting an inward turn in Beijing's development strategy. South Korea's unification ministry in November [reported](#) no indications of North Korea's border reopening with China after almost two years of lockdown due to COVID-19. Earlier, South Korean authorities had speculated that North Korea was finalizing plans to resume cross-border train operations with China and Russia after reopening sea routes for international medical aid. Despite media reports of train activity between Sinuiju and Dandong, the resumption of China-DPRK trade remains uncertain.

Conclusion: Prospects for Post-Moon China-Korea Relations

Despite pressures from both the Biden administration and South Korea's own domestic public opinion in favor of greater alignment with the United States at the expense of China, South Korea has not yet abandoned its strategy of choice avoidance or taken actions that Beijing has judged as irretrievably detrimental to South Korea-China relations. Conservative [Munhwa Ilbo](#) columnist [Lee Mi-sook](#) viewed the urea crisis as an important lesson on the need to lessen dependence on the Chinese supply chain for raw materials, advocating for South Korea to look to the alliance and freedom-loving countries for its future. The progressive [Hankyoreh newspaper](#) editorialized that Korea's long-term strategy

should encompass both the future of Korea-China relations and Sino-US rivalry.

A [Global Times editorial](#) noted the Moon administration's commitment to "balance between Beijing and Washington" and praised it as different from Australia and Japan, arguing that "such a policy has expanded, rather than compressed South Korea's strategic space." This assessment came as part of a defense of South Korea's foreign minister for taking a "pro-SK interest" rather than "pro-China" stances in statements on China to the international media that had generated criticism in South Korea and the United States. In this respect, though China has avoided statements directly aimed at influencing South Korea's presidential election, it is clear that China hopes the next South Korean president will maintain the status quo on policy toward China that the Moon administration has embraced. Regardless of South Korea's electoral outcome, Pyongyang's post-pandemic isolation continues to constrain not just China-DPRK diplomacy and trade but also broader external engagement including inter-Korean dialogue and humanitarian aid.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER—DECEMBER 2021

Sept. 1-2, 2021: China and South Korea [hold](#) ceremonies for repatriating the remains of Chinese soldiers killed in the Korean War.

Sept. 2, 2021: Yang Weiqun, the PRC Commerce Ministry's director general for Asian affairs, and Lee Miyon, the ROK Foreign Ministry's director general for bilateral economic affairs, [hold](#) video talks.

Sept. 8, 2021: PRC Embassy in Seoul [denies](#) that Beijing's campaign restricting celebrity fans targets South Korean cultural industries.

Sept. 9, 2021: Culture Minister Hwang Hee [confirms](#) a South Korean film distributor's cancellation of the planned release of Chinese Korean War movie "The Sacrifice" amid domestic protest.

Sept. 9, 2021: Xi Jinping [sends](#) a letter to Kim Jong Un celebrating the DPRK's 73rd founding anniversary.

Sept. 11-12, 2021: North Korea [tests](#) long-range cruise missiles.

Sept. 14-15, 2021: PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi [visits](#) Seoul and meets President Moon Jae-in and Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong.

Sept. 15, 2021: China and South Korea launch the 2021-2022 year of cultural exchange.

Sept. 15, 2021: North Korea [fires](#) two short-range ballistic missiles. South Korea test launches a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM).

Sept. 25, 2021: Kim Jong Un [sends](#) a reply letter to Xi Jinping marking the DPRK's National Day.

Sept. 28, 2021: China and South Korea hold fisheries talks via video.

Sept. 28, 2021: PRC and ROK nuclear envoys [hold](#) video talks.

Oct. 1, 2021: Kim Jong Un [sends](#) a message to Xi Jinping marking the PRC's 72nd founding anniversary.

Oct. 7, 2021: ROK foreign ministry [sends](#) a complaint to Beijing on the illicit distribution of Korean cultural content.

Oct. 19, 2021: North Korea [launches](#) a short-range ballistic missile.

Oct. 19, 2021: Xi Jinping sends a reply to Kim Jong Un marking China's National Day.

Oct. 20, 2021: A Chinese fishing boat [sinks](#) in waters off South Korea's west coast, leaving at least one crew member dead.

Oct. 22, 2021: ROK Coast Guard [seizes](#) a Chinese boat for illegal fishing in the Yellow Sea.

Oct. 23, 2021: DPRK Vice Foreign Minister Pak Myong-ho [criticizes](#) US policies toward China and Korea.

Oct. 24, 2021: ROK Coast Guard [seizes](#) a Chinese fishing boat in South Korea's exclusive economic zone near Jeju.

Oct. 25, 2021: Kim Jong Un [commemorates](#) the 71st anniversary of China's participation in the Korean War.

Oct. 27, 2021: President Moon Jae-in, Premier Li Keqiang, and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida [attend](#) the virtual ASEAN Plus Three summit.

Oct. 28, 2021: PRC Ambassador Xing Haiming in Seoul [pays](#) condolences on the death of former ROK President Roh Tae-woo.

Oct. 29, 2021: PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi and ROK Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [meet](#) on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Rome.

Nov. 1, 2021: PRC and ROK nuclear envoys [hold](#) video talks.

Nov. 2, 2021: ROK Education Ministry [announces](#) that the China-ROK-Japan CAMPUS Asia cooperation program will expand to Laos, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Nov. 5, 2021: PRC Assistant Foreign Minister Wu Jianghao and DPRK Ambassador Ri Ryong-nam [meet](#) in Beijing.

Nov. 11, 2021: PRC Ambassador Xing Haiming and ruling Democratic Party presidential nominee Lee Jae-myung [meet](#) in Seoul.

Nov. 17, 2021: PRC-ROK-Japan Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat [holds](#) talks in Seoul.

Nov. 19, 2021: ROK presidential candidate Yoon Seok-youl of main opposition People Power Party [meets](#) PRC Ambassador Xing Haiming in Seoul.

Nov. 20, 2021: First shipment of Chinese urea exports [leaves](#) Tianjin for arrival in Ulsan on Nov. 23.

Nov. 29, 2021: Seo Ga-ram, head of the ROK Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy's trade cooperation bureau, holds online [talks](#) with the Jiangsu provincial government.

Nov. 30, 2021: PRC Vice Commerce Minister Ren Hongbin and South Korea's 2nd Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-moon [hold](#) the virtual joint economic committee session.

Dec. 1, 2021: Second shipment of Chinese urea [arrives](#) in Ulsan from Shandong.

Dec. 2-3, 2021: Yang Jiechi and ROK national security advisor Suh Hoon [meet](#) in Tianjin.

Dec. 3, 2021: *Oh! My Gran* [premieres](#) in mainland Chinese theatres after a ban on Korean movie releases since 2015.

Dec. 3, 2021: Twenty-two Chinese sailors [are rescued](#) from their fishing boat in South Korea's southern waters after a rock collision.

Dec. 13, 2021: At press conference with Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, President Moon Jae-in [confirms](#) that South Korea is not considering a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics.

Dec. 13-15, 2021: South Korea [hosts](#) the online 29th annual meeting of the Asia-Pacific Parliamentary Forum.

Dec. 15, 2021: Senior presidential secretary for public communication Park Soo-hyun [tells](#) *Yonhap*, "As the host nation of the previous Olympics, taking a special interest in next year's Beijing Winter Olympics is our duty and obligation."

Dec. 22, 2021: DPRK Premier Kim Tok-hun and PRC Ambassador to North Korea Li Jinjun [meet](#) in Pyongyang.

Dec. 23, 2021: Ninth China-ROK strategic dialogue [is held](#) online.

Dec. 24, 2021: ROK Coast Guard [seizes](#) a Chinese fishing boat accused for falsifying ship logs.

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

RED LINES ARE TESTED

JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

Chinese Communist Party leader Xi Jinping's long-expected and often postponed—even before the pandemic—state visit to Japan was not even spoken of during the reporting period. In the closing days of the year, the defense ministers of the two countries met virtually but, at least according to published accounts, simply reiterated past positions and hopes for cooperation in the interests of regional stability. Japan did not receive the assurances it sought on the implications of the PRC's new Coast Guard law. China repeatedly pressed the Japanese government for support for the Beijing Winter Olympics, expressing dissatisfaction with the lack of official representation announced by Tokyo. Although trade was brisk, economic growth in both countries remained impacted by quarantines and the uncertain investment climate in China. China complained about closer Taiwan-Japan relations even as it stepped up pressure on the island and both China and Japan continued military upgrades.

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Politics

The reporting period began amid speculation about who would succeed Prime Minister Suga. *Global Times* [editorialized](#) on Sept. 5 against taking too seriously Kishida Fumio's vow to make dealing with China a top priority if elected. For China, too much anti-Japanese sentiment would be too flattering: citizens should just ignore Japan and concentrate on making the country stronger and more powerful.

Rivalries continued in relations with foreign countries. Reacting to increased Chinese influence in the South Pacific, Japan announced near the end of the year that it would [open](#) an embassy in Kiribati and a consular office in Noumea, New Caledonia. A representative office is to be opened in the Mediterranean island of Malta and a consular office in Siem Reap upgraded to consulate general level. Even as it alarmed Japan with a barrage of intrusions into Taiwan airspace, China reminded Japan that it had supported the Tokyo Olympics, none-too-diplomatically [asking](#) for reciprocal support. Rivalries existed in other areas, with Japan pleased to announce in November that its Fugaku supercomputer had captured its fourth consecutive [title](#) as world's fastest amid speculation that a Chinese or US rival could soon surpass it.

In October, then foreign minister Motegi Toshimitsu [described](#) ties with China as remaining in a difficult situation as the two prepare for the 50th anniversary of the normalization of bilateral diplomatic ties next year. A bilateral poll showed 90.9% of respondents with a negative view of China, with two-thirds of Chinese respondents viewing Japan negatively. Speaking at the 17th Beijing-Tokyo Forum that month, Foreign Minister Wang Yi [offered](#) five anodyne suggestions on improving China-Japan ties such as managing differences and upgrading cooperation in sundry spheres. [Responding](#) to public opinion polls in both China and Japan showing negative feelings for each other, *Asahi* in November editorialized that Xi Jinping and Kishida must make efforts to stop the cycle of mutual mistrust, without recommending specific measures. One such concession might have been Kishida's [appointment](#) in early November of reportedly pro-China former Defense Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa as foreign minister. With the appointment immediately drawing fire from conservatives, Hayashi [announced](#) his intention

to resign as chair of the Japan-China Friendship Association "to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings in performing [his] duties as foreign minister." In his first telephone [call](#) to counterpart Wang Yi, Hayashi emphasized the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, while Wang urged Japan to avoid crossing the line on history issues and the Taiwan question, [pointing](#) out that, although the US and Japan are allies, China and Japan are neighbors. Former Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi invited Hayashi to [visit](#) the PRC, without suggesting a date. The last foreign ministerial visit was in December 2019.

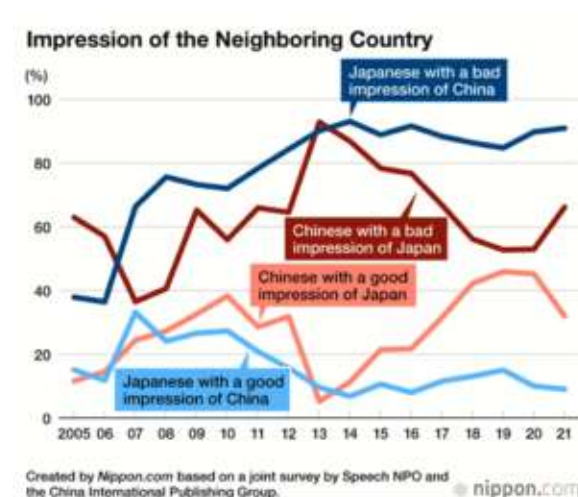


Figure 1 Recent opinion polls show that the proportion of Chinese with a good impression of Japan decreased by 13.2 points to 32%, while the proportion of Japanese with a good impression of China decreased by 1 point to 9%. Photo: Nippon.com

In an unusual rebuke, the typically China-friendly *Asahi* editorialized in November that the Chinese Communist Party's [effort](#) to rewrite history so that the public will embrace the official version of its past could only serve to push China away from the rest of the world. A joint bilateral opinion poll in August and September [found](#) that 66.1% of Chinese have a bad impression of Japan, an increase of 13.2 points over the previous year and the worst since 2013, which was a time of difficulty due to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute. Major reasons given were Japan's failure to apologize for and reflect on its history of aggression, the islands dispute, and seeking to encircle China in alliance with the US. Japanese negative views of China were virtually unchanged at 58.7%, with major reasons being frequent violations of Japanese territorial water around the Diaoyu/Senkakus, aggressive actions

in the South China Sea and elsewhere, and actions that violate international rules. *Yomiuri* announced that Japan is to [establish](#) an embassy in Kiribati and a consular office in Noumea, New Caledonia, a special collectivity under French rule, to better compete with China. In recent years, the Japanese and French governments have enhanced defense cooperation efforts.

Although *Asahi* did not mention specific instances of CCP attempts to rewrite history, Beijing continued to use the anniversaries of clashes between the two to berate Japan and elicit concessions. Chinese media, for example, described the commemoration of the 1937 Nanjing Massacre as a “[barometer](#)” of Japan’s support for the Beijing Olympics without which the relationship would “veer into a downward spiral.” A *Global Times* opinion piece [criticized](#) China-born director Chloe Zhao for having an American film character apologize for dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Rather than glorify the Japanese invaders, the character should have apologized for the Nanjing Massacre. The paper did not explain why an American should apologize for the Nanjing Massacre, since the US was not involved in it and was in fact backing the Chinese side.

Reacting to a media report that Tokyo Electric Power applied to release water from the Fukushima Daiichi plant into the sea, the Chinese foreign ministry in December expressed serious [concern](#) about its purity. [Observing](#) that 99 members of Japan’s House of Representatives, including nine deputy ministerial-level government officials visited the Yasukuni Shrine on the 80th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the *PLA Daily*, China’s leading military newspaper criticized the action as “a slap in the face of the United States” and part of the long-term acquiescence of the US in the revival of Japanese militarism.

Following former Prime Minister Abe’s expression of concern about China’s actions against Taiwan and in the East China and South China seas, *PLA Daily* [characterized](#) his remarks as driven by rightwing adventurism, citing a Japanese academic’s opinion that Abe is obsessed with realizing what his Class-A war criminal (indicted but not convicted, which the paper failed to mention) grandfather Kishi Nobusuke could not.

As the report period drew to a close, Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno, citing human

rights concerns, though avoiding use of the term [boycott](#), announced that Japan would not send Cabinet members or high-level officials to the Beijing Winter Olympics. Two sports officials will attend. As expected, China reacted angrily. Analysts described Japan’s [decision](#) as a failed balancing act unlikely to satisfy either China or the US while netizens accused Japan as deceit since China supported the Tokyo Olympics. A specialist in Japanese politics opined that rightwing forces had pushed Kishida into his decision. Japan, he continued, is intensifying ties with Taiwan secessionists and challenging China’s red line. Speculating on Beijing’s concern with any post-Suga shift in Japan’s Taiwan policy, Kyodo [cited](#) unnamed Beijing diplomats’ opinion that China would avoid taking a hardline approach to Japan until after the Beijing Winter Olympics and Paralympics in February and March, since it wants Japanese participation.

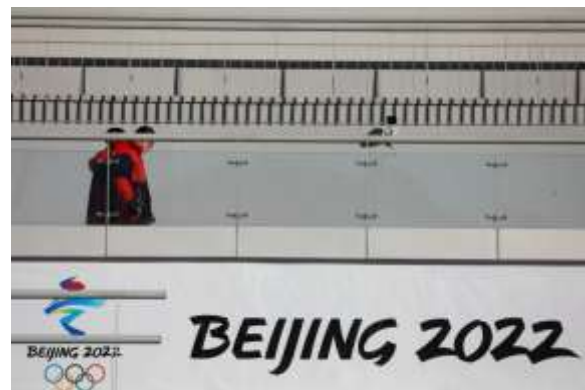


Figure 2 A Beijing Olympics venue in Zhangjiakou, China. Japan is not planning to send Cabinet ministers or other senior officials to the Games. Photo: Reuters/Carlos Garcia Rawlins

Economics

China’s National Bureau of Statistics [announced](#) that industrial production was up 3.8% in November, year on year while Japanese government data [showed](#) a trade deficit for the fourth straight month as exports hit a record high but failed to offset import growth mostly due to higher oil prices.

While trade relations were good in general, in September a Kyoto-themed shopping complex in Dalian was [forced](#) to suspend operations after internet criticism that the Japanese government is engaged in a cultural invasion. In 2020, a shopping street in Guangdong modeled on

Tokyo's Kabuki-cho had to be "reformed" after similar charges. *Global Times* in December [depicted](#) Japan struggling under the burden of hosting US troops.

Responding to China's surprising bid to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), former dean of Beijing University's School of International Studies [Jia Qingguo](#) opined in September that it was designed to split the US and Japan, since Japan's refusal of the request would mean confrontation with China, but Japan cannot easily accept it either since the US would never agree to that.

Bloomberg [reported](#) at the end of September that Japanese utilities are stepping in to help ease China's fuel crisis by selling excess liquefied natural gas at sky-high prices. In bad news for Sony, its Chinese subsidiary was [fined](#) \$156,000 in October for violating China's advertising laws over its plan to hold a new product launch event on the anniversary of the Marco Polo bridge that Beijing marks as the beginning of the war with Japan. On the positive side, in the same month Sony began eventually successful [discussions](#) with the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), world's largest contract chip manufacturer, to jointly build a new semiconductor plant in Kumamoto. Since there are no factories in Japan capable of producing cutting-edge semiconductors, and a worldwide shortage thereof, the Japanese government has also urged private and public sectors to conduct joint research and develop a production system. [Concerned](#) about the impact of a shortage of computer chips to Japanese security, it was announced in November that the Japanese government is establishing the legal groundwork for subsidizing domestic plants for advanced semiconductors, with Taiwan's TSMC, the leader in the field, the first beneficiary. The new plant will not produce cutting-edge chips, which will continue to be made in Taiwan, but those used for such items as cars and appliances.

Mutual China-Japan partnerships continued. It was announced in October that Chinese internet conglomerate Tencent will [acquire](#) a 6.86% stake in Japanese publishing giant Kadokawa, making Tencent Kadokawa's third-largest shareholder. According to Kadokawa, it has qualified for an exemption from Japan's foreign investment law that requires pre-screening for strategic industries. Japanese retailing giant Uniqlo in November opened a global flagship [store](#) in

Beijing's Sanlitun area, with plans to open a hundred in other areas of China. It already has more than 850 stores in 180 Chinese cities, more than in Japan. In what *Nikkei* referred to as one of the most aggressive international expansions by a Japanese restaurant brand, sushi chain Sushiro [plans](#) to open between 42 to 46 locations in China adding to the one it opened in Guangzhou in September. In December, a bilateral forum backed a [partnership](#) between Hitachi Zosen and Yulin Chemical to develop a renewable alternative to natural gas for industrial and household use, though cost remains a major hurdle.

Not all news was positive: Japan's Government Pension Investment Fund (GPIF), blaming poor liquidity, futures trading options, lack of international settlement, and the different settlement systems between international bonds and those of the Chinese government, [decided](#) in November to exclude renminbi-denominated Chinese sovereign bonds from its portfolio. And Tokyo tax authorities uncovered a China-based scheme that invested about \$237 million in Japanese real estate by using cryptocurrency to avoid PRC government restrictions on the transfer of more than \$50,000 out of the country.

Two notes of concern for the Japanese government were, first, that Chinese state-owned FAW group, [targeting](#) the Japanese market for electric cars, will offer a hybrid version of its SUV next summer. Second, in what unnamed experts [cited](#) by *Global Times* call an "aircraft carrier" of the rare earth industry, China's state assets administration approved a major merger that will make it one of the world's largest and serve as "a stern warning" against bullying attempts. The behemoth, to be controlled by the Chinese State Council's Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), will control 70% of the PRC's heavy rare-earth minerals.

As for Japanese investment by Japan, according to an Oxford Economics note, in 2020 Japan [spent](#) a greater percentage of its foreign direct investment in the ASEAN-5 economies (Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines) and the Asian Tigers—Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan—than it did in China. However, by country, China still has the biggest slice of Japanese FDI among Asian countries and the

return on its investments in China still far outweighs any of its other foreign investments.

Defense

Increased urgency about Japan's concerns with Chinese military intentions was evident from the beginning of the reporting period, with Japan's defense ministry requesting a 2.6% increase to ¥5.48 trillion (\$49.86 billion) in its budget for fiscal year 2022 to [strengthen](#) Japan's defenses. Big-ticket items included F-35 stealth fighters, research and development for game-changing technologies such as unmanned aircraft operated by artificial intelligence, and purchases of lasers and satellites to track targets in space. The ministry in October announced plans to [enlist](#) YouTube stars and other opinion leaders to help it lobby for a bigger defense budget since the gap between Chinese military spending and that of Japan continued to widen. As the reporting period ended in December, the ministry got less than half of what it requested. Though making clear that it understood the [implications](#) for Japan of a Chinese threat to Taiwan and elsewhere, the Cabinet approved a 1% increase in the FY 2022 defense budget to \$291 billion. Much of the increase is to be for research and development and, in particular, for the successor to the F2 fighter. Though dwarfed by US and Chinese expenditures, this is the 10th straight year of defense budget increases. Japan's defense industry, however, continues to [struggle](#) despite the arms buildup. Chinese media [criticized](#) Japanese plans to double the defense budget, seeing it as connected with attempts to revise the country's constitution by clarifying the role of the military.

The defense ministry in September notified Okinawa prefectural authorities that it planned to [install](#) an SSM battery at the GSDF's Katsuren sub-camp so that, together with other installations, the Miyako Strait would have full protection. The intent is to prevent landings by an unspecified enemy on outlying islands, including the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu group. Also in September, the Japan Coast Guard [confirmed](#) that a submarine believed to be Chinese was cruising underwater within Japan's contiguous zone east of Amami Oshima. Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Isozaki Yoshihiko [stated](#) in October that the government was watching with great interest the passage of a joint Chinese-Russian flotilla traversing Japanese chokepoints. The Japanese government protested the apparently intentional [entry](#) of a

Chinese navy survey ship into Japanese coastal waters on Nov. 17 for the first time since July 2017.

Concern was [expressed](#) at the end of October that the China Coast Guard's new rules on criminal procedures could be applied to Japanese fishermen in the contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. To date, the Chinese government has given [no assurances](#) on this. According to a November report, the traditional silos among the three components of Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) are eroding, fueled by Chinese expansionism and recent moves toward Taiwan.

The SDF in September conducted their largest exercises since 1993, which Chinese observers [described as](#) designed to challenge the PRC's sovereignty and demonstrate loyalty to the US Indo-Pacific strategy. *Yomiuri* editorialized that Japan should steadily enhance its defense capabilities in response to China's military buildup, with particular attention to detecting hypersonic glide vehicles. A subsequent editorial in the same paper urged the Japan Coast Guard to strengthen its ability to protect the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands against Chinese encroachment. And a September opinion piece in *Japan Forward* advocated that Japan found a "[territorial army](#)" to counter China's maritime militia, with special reference to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

Interviewed by CNN in September, Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo [stated](#) that the Diaoyu/Senkaku are "unquestionably Japanese territory and would be defended as such, with Tokyo matching any Chinese threat to the islands ship for ship and beyond if necessary." In a separate interview with the UK's *Guardian* almost immediately afterward, he [urged](#) European states to speak out against China's military expansion. Signaling increased international [concern](#) with Chinese assertiveness in the waters around Japan, British aircraft carrier *HMS Queen Elizabeth* made its first port call in Japan. The carrier's commander [revealed](#) that the ship had been escorted and shadowed by Chinese units, but in a safe and professional manner. Kishi also [welcomed](#) the first port call by a German warship to Tokyo in 20 years, saying that the two countries would step up their military cooperation in defense of a free and open Indo-Pacific. The frigate *Bayern* participated in two days of exercises with MSDF destroyer *Samidare*. In response to a [request](#) from the Australian side and demonstrating Tokyo and Canberra's

commitment to cooperation with allies against Chinese assertiveness, the Japanese destroyer *Inazuma* escorted Australian frigate *Warramunga* during a joint exercise, marking the first time a Japanese vessel has protected warships other than those of the US. In November, referencing China's activities in the South China Sea, *Yomiuri* [reported](#) that the United States and Japan had conducted their first joint drills, citing MSDF Chief of Staff Admiral Yamamura Hiroshi saying that the drills showed the high level of interoperability between the forces of the two countries. While support from other countries was welcome, *Nikkei* struck a note of caution when it [observed](#) that US Space Force head Gen. John Raymond did not give a direct answer when asked if the US would consider applying the mutual defense provision of the US-Japan security treaty to the space domain.

In the run-up to Japan's fall election, contenders to succeed Suga as prime minister took a uniformly hard line on China. Kono Taro [described](#) a best-case scenario for Japan as aligning with the Five Eyes intelligence alliance of Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and the US with Japan ultimately becoming the sixth eye. China has denounced the Five Eyes as a Cold War relic. *Jiefangjun Bao*, China's leading military newspaper, took [issue](#) with Suga's presence at the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue just before leaving office as "sacrificing Japan's dignity while rooting for America's clique." A Chinese expert on Japan [opined](#) that contender, and later prime minister, Kishida's allegedly strong message of support from Biden on the US commitment to the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands could just have been Kishida's personal interpretation of their telephone exchange.

In recognition that not all threats to its defense are kinetic, Japan will [require](#) permits for security-related technology transfers to international students in Japanese universities. Currently, only 62.5% of universities carry out required pre-screening identity checks and other requirements. The Japanese government is to exercise tighter [scrutiny](#) on supply chains for missiles, ships, and other equipment, which will restrict the use of Chinese-made equipment with Huawei among suppliers likely to face barriers on economic security grounds. *Global Times*, however, [cited](#) a Japanese professor at Shenzhen University as disputing Japanese concerns about the outflow of technology to China: the truth, he said, is that more research in China is brought back to Japan than vice-versa.

Chinese [military analysts](#) played down the significance of the joint US-Japan exercises, with expert Song Zhongping terming any attempt to hunt PLA submarines a daydream since, even were Australia's forces to be included, the South China Sea is too big for so few countries to police, and pointing out that China possesses increasingly advanced submarine forces. Song advocated that China prepare for war, and that the PRC's submarines should not only be in the South China Sea but in other countries' waters to break the strategic encirclement of countries such as the US and Japan.

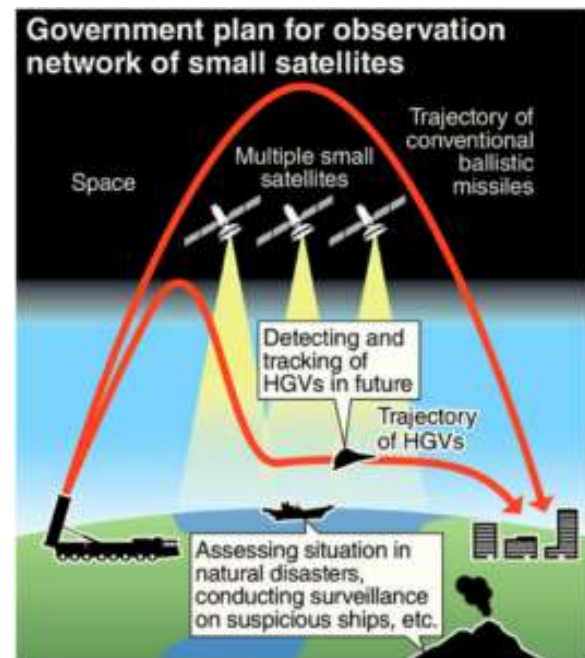


Figure 3 The Japanese government plans to construct a network of small satellites capable of detecting hypersonic glide vehicles from outer space. Photo: *Yomiuri*

In the wake of China's November hypersonic glide vehicle test, the Japanese government announced plans to [construct](#) an observation network of small satellites that could track the movement of HGVs from outer space. However, in light of the high cost, the government is considering joining a US-developed network, or linking with satellites operated by the private sector.

In late November, Japan and Vietnam signed a [cybersecurity agreement](#) amid concerns over China's growing assertiveness, with Defense Minister Kishi noting a "strong sense of urgency" over activities in the Indo-Pacific that challenge the international order. The agreement

came two months after the two countries concluded an agreement allowing Japan to provide defense equipment to Vietnam. In the following month, the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department issued a [warrant](#) for the arrest of a Chinese citizen in connection with cyberattacks on Japan's Aerospace Exploration Agency. As part of Tokyo's plan to establish multilateral [defense cooperation](#) in response to China's military buildup, Japan and Australia are to sign a pact enabling each country's forces to enter the other for joint exercises. This follows the trilateral security pact among Australia, the US, and the UK.

A November *Yomiuri* [report](#) on the conversion of two destroyers into de facto aircraft carriers stressed the importance of their role in case of a Chinese attack on Japan's remote islands. Currently, because the SDF's planes must fly from Naha or Kyushu, they would be at a disadvantage since China could launch its planes from an aircraft carrier. In late November, in response to Chinese maritime activity, the Japanese government approved a supplementary budget that increased [defense spending](#) for FY 2021 to \$52.8 billion, or 1.09% of GDP, the highest percentage in a decade and the eighth time since fiscal 2012 to exceed 1%. And, citing [threats](#) from North Korea and China, Kishida said that he does not rule out options such as striking at enemy bases.



Figure 4 Vietnam's Defense Minister General Phan Van Giang and Deputy Defense Minister Sr. Lt. General Hoang Xuan Chien attend a signing ceremony for the bilateral memorandums with Japan's Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi, right, and Vice Minister of Defense for International Affairs Akihiro Tsuchimichi at the Defense Ministry in Tokyo on Nov. 23, 2021. Photo: Associated Press

Writing in *Japan Forward* in December and referencing the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission's proposal for partners to

consider willingness to host US intermediate-range ballistic missiles, a retired Japanese admiral [advocated](#) that Japan consider doing so. He accompanied his presentation with a chart showing the discrepancy between the reach of Chinese vs Japanese naval missiles. A less ominous view was taken by Sugiura Yasuyuki, senior researcher at the National Institute for Defense Studies, when he [told](#) *Yomiuri*, that Japan must have the "correct" amount of fear about China, whose military is coming closer to becoming the world's top military force but lacks actual battle experience.

Jiefangjun Bao noted Tokyo's [concern](#) that if the US were to adopt a no-first-use nuclear policy, its function as an umbrella for Japan would be lost. If so, Japan could decide to adopt nuclear weapons, using the same security excuse it now uses to discuss strengthening its ability for preventive attacks against enemy bases.

In late December, the Japan Coast Guard and Maritime Self-Defense Force conducted a [joint exercise](#) to simulate responses to a Chinese military vessel approaching waters near the contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. The SDF is permitted to use force under certain conditions in such situations. [Mindful](#) that China possesses multiple ballistic missiles capable of reaching Japan, the Japanese government is considering deploying submarine-based long-range standoff cruise missiles which could strike ground-based targets. According to informed US navy sources, however, these will be useless since they are subsonic and hence unable to get through PLAN and PLA point defenses: China's S-400 would destroy a subsonic missile, even one with a 10,000-km range.

As the year closed, Chinese and Japanese defense ministers held [video talks](#). *Jiefangjun Bao* quoted Gen. Wei Fenghe as stressing China's determination to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea, and urging Japan to learn from history. The paper cited Kishi Nobuo as expressing willingness to work with China on measures to combat the pandemic, strengthen crisis management, and establish a direct undersea telephone line and air liaison mechanism. The Chinese paper did not mention, but Japanese news agency *Kyodo* [reported](#), that Kishi had "strongly demanded" an explanation for China's new coast guard law, which gives it the right to search and seize other countries vessels in islands contested between the two

countries, and that he had requested talks immediately after it was enacted on Feb. 1. Chief Cabinet Secretary Natsuno Hirokazu [announced](#) that China and Japan agreed to launch a military hotline next year.

Taiwan

As the reporting period opened, *Japan Forward* praised outgoing Prime Minister Suga's [stance](#) that a Taiwan crisis could have ripple effects on Japan and the need to "focus on Taiwan," saying it sends a message to China on the possibility of a joint US-Japanese military intervention on behalf of an attack on Taiwan. All candidates to succeed Suga were similarly supportive. The winner, former foreign minister Kishida Fumio, said that Japan should seek to [cooperate](#) with Taiwan and countries that share its values of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law, and expressed his support for Taiwan to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership if the country "can meet the necessary high standards." Candidate Takaichi Sanae [conferred](#) directly, though virtually, with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen, with *The Japan Times* noting that it is extremely rare for a Japanese politician, much less a possible prime minister, to hold a meeting with any senior Taiwanese officials, much less its president.



Figure 5 Current Prime Minister and former Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio raises the importance of cooperation with Taiwan at a press conference on Sept. 3, 2021. Photo: Bloomberg

Similar expressions of support came from other influential officials past and present. In a surprise remote call to a conference on Japan-Taiwan relations, also in September, Deputy Defense Minister Nakayama Yasuhide [declared](#) that Japan and China were not friends but family members. Nakayama's father Masaaki was one of five Diet members who stood resolutely against

Japan formalizing relations with the PRC in 1972; his son asked whether this half-century-old diplomatic arrangement really served the nation's interests in light of China's aggressive behavior. In a December speech in Vietnam on his first overseas trip as defense minister, Kishi criticized China for trying to change the status quo through strength and [highlighted](#) the key role Taiwan can play in the world.

The PRC responded in kind to all of these. Official media [criticized](#) the Takaichi-Tsai meeting, taking particular umbrage at video footage of Takaichi hanging the Taiwan and Japanese flags side by side, stating that such actions undermine the foundations of China-Japan relations. Responding to Kishi's remarks, the PRC's embassy in Vietnam [accused](#) Japan of interference in China's affairs through the Taiwan question. *Global Times* [described](#) the passage of a Chinese destroyer flotilla in the waters between Taiwan and Japan as sending a warning to Japanese rightwing forces and Taiwan secessionists at a time when the two have been colluding to sabotage the peace and stability of the region. In a separate article responding to Deputy Defense Minister Nakayama's comments that Japan considered Taiwan's peace and security as its own business, the paper [editorialized](#) that Japan is in its worst geopolitical environment since the Meiji Restoration and termed its hatred toward China "morally dirty."

Japanese concerns with the implications for Japan of a PRC attack on Taiwan were magnified when China, beginning on its national day of Oct. 1, sent scores of planes into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone. *The Japan Times* editorialized that Beijing is building a military to [rewrite](#) the rules of the Indo-Pacific region, and advocated that Tokyo increase its defense budget while integrating more deeply with the US and other security partners. US analysis [urged](#) US and Japanese officials to think through the many potential scenarios in a Taiwan contingency and clarify to each other privately their potential responses, since a Taiwan contingency is likely to require quick thinking and a decisive response. According to a Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation [poll](#), released in November, 58% of respondents think it possible that Japan would send troops to defend Taiwan, and that 65% believe that the US would come to Taiwan's aid militarily.

Speculating on Beijing's concern with any post-Suga shift in Japan's Taiwan policy, *Kyodo* [cited](#) unnamed Beijing diplomats' opinion that China would avoid taking a hardline approach to Japan until after the Beijing Winter Olympics and Paralympics in February and March, since it wants Japanese participation.

Informal contacts continued to grow. A Taiwan Japan Academy [launched](#) at Taipei's National Chengchi University, with ambassador-equivalent Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association head Izumi Hiroyasu saying that the passing of the old generation of Japanese-speaking Taiwanese such as former president Lee Teng-hui makes the academy's work more important than ever.

A US analyst [opined](#) in November that internationalization of the Taiwan issue has given Japan cover for more active support for Taiwan's sovereignty as has its growing role in the liberal economic order as exemplified by its leadership in the CPTPP. Japanese politicians celebrated Taiwan's national day and were photographed eating Taiwanese pineapples after China announced a boycott of them. Taiwan's president actively [courts](#) pro-Japanese youth, even tweeting to them in Japanese. Separately, an Indian analyst [wrote](#) in the same month that closer cooperation between Japan and Taiwan was needed to mitigate Beijing's increasing use of gray-zone tactics, pointing out that although the current Taiwan leadership is favorably disposed toward Japan, the next one might not be.

In December, former Prime Minister Abe, speaking to a Taipei [video conference](#), warned that a Chinese attack on Taiwan would be an emergency for Japan and could meet the conditions for Tokyo to use military force. Two weeks later, in a video [address](#) to the Taiwan-US-Japan Trilateral Indo-Pacific Security Dialogue, Abe warned Beijing that it would be "suicidal" to invade Taiwan and advised that Taiwan, the US, and Japan work together to strengthen their deterrent capabilities. *Global Times*, [referencing](#) former Abe's "repeated provocations over the Taiwan question," described him as Japan's chief anti-China politician.

Almost simultaneously, and despite [objections](#) from members of the Chinese consulate-general in Osaka, the ninth annual meeting of the Japan-Taiwan Cultural Exchange Summit was held in

Kobe, with organizers reporting that attendance was greater than expected due to resistance to the coercive tactics. Also in December the Japan-Taiwan Co-Prosperity Chiefs [Alliance](#), comprising 127 Japanese city and local officials, held its first meeting and called on Tokyo to draw up a Japanese version of the US Taiwan Relations Act. As the year ended, in an address to the Taipei Christmas fair sure to irk Beijing, ambassador-equivalent Izumi, in what was likely an allusion to China's claim to have created a superior form of democracy, [described](#) 2021 as the year of Taiwan since more countries have stood up to support its free and democratic way of life.

Amid these cheerful celebrations, *Kyodo* [reported](#) that the Japanese and US armed forces have a draft plan for a Taiwan contingency under which the US Marine Corps would at the initial stage of the emergency set up temporary bases and deploy troops on the Nansei island chain that stretches from Kyushu to Taiwan. The plan is to be formalized at a 2+2 meeting of foreign and defense ministers early in 2022.

The Future

It is possible but by no means assured that a softer China-Japan line may occur. Both Beijing and Tokyo have expressed their desire to have a cordial atmosphere for the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic ties at the end of September. Some analysts believe that Beijing's willingness to consider a hotline between the two capitals portends a less strident posture. Others disagree, saying that the agreement in itself means little and may simply be motivated by a desire to bolster the pro-China faction inside the LDP and its Komeito coalition partner. On the Japanese side, appointment of Hayashi Yoshimasa as foreign minister could indicate a desire for rapprochement. Factional political differences may however constrain the implementation thereof. Prime Minister Kishida belongs to the Kochikai faction of the LDP, begun by accommodationist ex-Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato and included former Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi, former speaker of the House of Representatives Kono Yohei and former Chief Cabinet Secretary Kato Koichi. But they are apt to meet powerful resistance from former Prime Minister Abe, Defense Minister Kishi, and Deputy Defense Minister Nakazawa. Moreover, with China remaining adamant about its claims to Taiwan and in the East China and South China seas, the question remains as to what conditions

the Japanese side would agree to effect rapprochement. In the end there may be little change in the status quo.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER—DECEMBER 2021

Sept. 1, 2021: Seeking to [strengthen](#) Japan's defenses against China's growing assertiveness, the defense ministry requested a 2.6% increase to ¥ 5.48 trillion (\$49.86 billion) in its budget for fiscal year 2022.

Sept. 2, 2021: Japan's Defense Ministry notified Okinawa prefectural authorities that it plans to [install](#) an SSM battery at the GSDF's Katsuren sub-camp so that, together with other installations, the Miyako Strait will have full protection. The intent is to prevent enemy landings on outlying islands, including the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu group.

Sept. 2, 2021: Noting Suga's [stance](#) that a Taiwan crisis could have ripple effects on Japan and the need to "focus on Taiwan," *Japan Forward* says it sends a message to China that the possibility of a joint US-Japanese possibility of military intervention on behalf of an attack on Taiwan.

Sept. 3, 2021: Former Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio, a candidate to succeed Prime Minister Suga, says that Japan should seek to [cooperate](#) with Taiwan and countries that shares its values of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. He would encourage Taiwan to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership if it "can meet the necessary high standards."

Sept. 4, 2021: Speculating on Beijing's concern with any post-Suga shift in Japan's Taiwan policy, *Kyodo* [cites](#) unnamed Beijing diplomats' opinion that China would avoid taking a hardline approach to Japan until after the Beijing Winter Olympics and Paralympics in February and March, since it wants Japanese participation.

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: *Global Times* [editorializes](#) against taking too seriously Kishida's vow to make dealing with China a top priority if elected.

Sept. 6, 2021: An opinion piece in *Japan Forward* advocates that Japan establish a "[territorial army](#)" to counter China's maritime militia, with special reference to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

Sept. 7, 2021: A Kyoto-themed shopping complex in Dalian is [forced](#) to suspend operations after internet criticism that the Japanese government is engaged in a cultural invasion.

Sept. 7, 2021: *Yomiuri* editorializes that should Japan steadily enhance its defense capabilities in response to China's military buildup, with particular attention to detecting hypersonic glide vehicles.

Sept. 8, 2021: Commander of British aircraft carrier visiting Japan [reveals](#) that the carrier had been escorted and shadowed by Chinese units, but in a safe and professional manner.

Sept. 8, 2021: In a surprise remote call to a conference on Japan-Taiwan relations, Deputy Defense Minister Nakayama Yasuhide [declares](#) that Japan and Taiwan are not friends but family members.

Sept. 9, 2021: *Nikkei* [observes](#) that US Space Force head Gen. John Raymond didn't give a direct answer when asked if the US would consider applying the mutual defense provision of the US-Japan security treaty to the space domain.

Sept. 9, 2021: *Global Times* [describes](#) the passage of a Chinese destroyer flotilla in the waters between Taiwan and Japan as sending a warning to Japanese right-wing forces and Taiwan secessionists at a time when the two have been colluding to sabotage the peace and stability of the region.

Sept. 9, 2021: *Global Times* [editorializes](#) that Japan is in its worst geopolitical environment since the Meiji Restoration and terms its hatred toward China as "morally dirty."

Sept. 11, 2021: Taiwan Japan Academy is [launched](#) at Taipei's National Chengchi University, with ambassador-equivalent head of the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association Izumi Hiroyasu saying that the passing of the old generation of Japanese-speaking Taiwanese such as former president Lee Teng-hui makes the academy's work more important than ever.

Sept. 12, 2021: Japan Coast Guard [confirms](#) a submarine believed to be Chinese is cruising underwater within Japan's contiguous zone east of Amami Oshima.

Sept. 13, 2021: In a speech in Vietnam on his first overseas trip as defense minister, Kishi Nobuo criticizes China and [highlights](#) the key role Taiwan can play in the world.

Sept. 14, 2021: Responding to Kishi, the PRC embassy in Vietnam [accuses](#) Japan of interference in China's affairs through the Taiwan question.

Sept. 15, 2021: Chinese observers of Japan's largest Self-Defense Forces exercises since 1993 [describe](#) them as designed to challenge the PRC's sovereignty and demonstrate loyalty to the US Indo-Pacific strategy.

Sept. 15, 2021: *Yomiuri* editorializes that the Japan Coast Guard must strengthen its ability to protect the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands against Chinese encroachment.

Sept. 16, 2021: Kishi [states](#) that the Diaoyu/Senkaku are "unquestionably Japanese territory" and will be defended as such.

Sept. 18, 2021: According to former dean of Beijing University's School of International Studies [Jia Qingguo](#), China's bid to join the CPTPP is designed to split the US and Japan.

Sept. 20, 2021: Kishi [urges](#) European states to speak out against China's military expansion.

Sept. 21, 2021: Prime Minister candidate Kono Taro [describes](#) a best-case scenario for defense as aligning with the "Five Eyes"—Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States—with Japan as the sixth eye.

Sept. 21, 2021: Takaichi Sanae, another contender in the LDP leadership race, [confers](#) with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen, with *The Japan Times* noting that it is extremely rare for a Japanese politician to hold a meeting with any senior Taiwanese officials.

Sept. 22, 2021: Chinese media [criticize](#) the Takaichi-Tsai meeting, particularly video footage of Takaichi hanging the Taiwan and Japanese flags side by side.

Sept. 28, 2021: China's leading military newspaper takes [issue](#) with Suga's presence at the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue just before leaving office.

Oct. 1, 2021: *Bloomberg* [reports](#) that Japanese utilities are stepping in to help ease China's fuel crisis by selling excess liquefied natural gas at sky-high prices.

Oct. 5, 2021: Japan's defense ministry plans to [enlist](#) YouTube stars and other opinion leaders to help it lobby for a bigger defense budget, due to the gap between Chinese military spending and that of Japan.

Oct. 6, 2021: US analysis [urges](#) US and Japanese officials to think through many potential scenarios in a Taiwan contingency and clarify to each other privately their potential responses, since a Taiwan contingency is likely to require quick thinking and a decisive response.

Oct. 9, 2021: Sony [discusses](#) with the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) the possibility of jointly building a new semiconductor plant.

Oct. 12, 2021: Chinese media [criticize](#) Japanese plans to double the defense budget, seeing them as connected with attempts to revise the country's constitution by clarifying the role of the military.

Oct. 16, 2021: Kishida expresses [willingness](#) to specify the possession of capabilities to destroy enemy missile bases in the new National Security Strategy.

Oct. 19, 2021: Sony's Chinese subsidiary is [fined](#) \$156,000 for violating China's advertising laws over its plan to hold a new product launch event on the anniversary of the Marco Polo bridge Beijing commemorates as the beginning of the war with Japan.

Oct. 25, 2021: Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu [describes](#) ties with China as remaining in a difficult situation as the two prepare for the 50th anniversary of the normalization of bilateral diplomatic ties.

Oct. 25, 2021: Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Isozaki Yoshihiko [states](#) that the government is watching with great interest the passage of a joint Chinese-Russian flotilla traversing Japanese chokepoints.

Oct. 25, 2021: Foreign Minister Wang Yi [offers](#) five suggestions on improving China-Japan ties such as managing their differences and upgrading cooperation in sundry spheres.

Oct. 30, 2021: Chinese internet conglomerate Tencent is to [acquire](#) a 6.86% stake in Japanese publishing giant Kadokawa, making Tencent Kadokawa's third largest shareholder.

Nov. 3, 2021: According to a Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation [poll](#), 58% of respondents think it possible that Japan would send troops to defend Taiwan.

Nov. 4, 2021: Japan's Government Pension Investment Fund (GPIF) [decides](#) to exclude renminbi-denominated Chinese sovereign bonds from its portfolio.

Nov. 5, 2021: *Japan Times* editorializes that Beijing is building a military to [rewrite](#) rules of the Indo-Pacific region, and urges Tokyo to increase its defense budget while integrating more deeply with the US and other security partners.

Nov. 5, 2021: *Asahi* [editorializes](#) that Xi Jinping and Kishida must make efforts to stop the cycle of mutual mistrust.

Nov. 6, 2021: Defense Minister Kishi, [welcoming](#) the first port call by a German warship to Tokyo in 20 years, says that the two countries will step up their military cooperation in defense of a free and open Indo-Pacific. The frigate Bayern participated in two days of exercises with MSDF destroyer Samidare.

Nov. 10, 2021: Kishida [appoints](#) pro-China former Defense Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa as foreign minister.

Nov. 11, 2021: Hayashi [announces](#) his intention to resign as chair of the Japan-China Friendship Association "to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings in performing [his] duties as foreign minister."

Nov. 12, 2021: *Asahi* editorializes that the Chinese Communist Party's [effort](#) to rewrite history so that the public will embrace the official version of its past will only push China further away from the rest of the world.

Nov. 13, 2021: Japanese destroyer *Inazuma* [escorts](#) Australian frigate *Warramunga* during a joint exercise, the first time a Japanese vessel has protected warships other than those of the US.

Nov. 13, 2021: In what *Nikkei* calls one of the most aggressive international expansions by a Japanese restaurant brand, sushi chain Sushiro [plans](#) to open between 42 to 46 locations in China in addition to the one it opened in Guangzhou in September.

Nov. 14, 2021: *Global Times* [cites](#) a Japanese professor at Shenzhen University as disputing Japanese concerns about the outflow of technology to China, 2021: truth is that more research in China is brought back to Japan than vice-versa.

Nov. 17, 2021: A joint bilateral opinion poll in August and September [finds](#) that 66.1% of Chinese have a bad impression of Japan, up 13.2 points over the previous year and the first time that impressions had worsened since 2013.

Nov. 17, 2021: *Yomiuri* [reports](#) that the United States and Japan have conducted their first joint drills, citing MSDF Chief of Staff Admiral Yamamura Hiroshi as saying that the drills show the high level of interoperability between the forces of the two countries.

Nov. 17, 2021: Chinese [military analysts](#) play down the significance of the joint US-Japan exercises, with expert Song Zhongping terming any attempt to hunt PLA submarines a "daydream."

Nov. 18, 2021: In his first telephone [call](#) to counterpart Wang Yi, newly appointed Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi emphasizes the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Nov. 20, 2021: Japanese government [protests](#) the apparently intentional entry of a Chinese navy survey ship into Japanese coastal waters on Nov. 17.

Nov. 21, 2021: Nikkei [reports](#) that the Japanese government will exercise tighter scrutiny on supply chains for missiles, ships, and other equipment, restricting the use of Chinese-made equipment.

Nov. 22, 2021: Former Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi [invites](#) counterpart Hayashi to visit the PRC, but without setting a date. The last such visit was in December 2019.

Nov. 24, 2021: Japan and Vietnam [sign](#) a cybersecurity agreement as they step up military ties amid concerns over China's growing assertiveness.

Nov. 24, 2021: Nikkei [reports](#) that Japan and Australia will sign a pact enabling each country's forces to enter the other for joint exercises.

Nov. 25, 2021: Yomiuri [points out](#) the importance of the conversion of two destroyers into de facto aircraft carriers given their role in case of a Chinese attack on Japan's remote islands.

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. 27, 2021: Citing threats stemming from North Korea and China, Kishida [says](#) that he does not rule out options such as striking at enemy bases.

Dec. 1, 2021: Former Prime Minister Abe [warns](#) that a Chinese attack on Taiwan would be an emergency for Japan and could meet the conditions for Tokyo to use military force.

Dec. 2, 2021: Chinese foreign ministry [summons](#) Japan's ambassador in Beijing to an emergency meeting to refute Abe's remarks, calling them "erroneous" and a violation of the basic norms of relations.

Dec. 3, 2021: Retired Japanese admiral [advocates](#) that Japan consider hosting US intermediate-range ballistic missiles. An accompanying chart shows the discrepancy between the reach of Chinese vs Japanese naval missiles.

Dec. 9, 2021: Oxford Economics note [says](#) that in 2020 Japan spent a greater percentage of its foreign direct investment in the ASEAN 5 economies (Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines) and the Asian Tigers (Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan) than it did in China.

Dec. 10, 2021: Observing that 99 members of Japan's House of Representatives including nine deputy ministerial-level government officials visited the Yasukuni Shrine on the 80th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, China's leading military newspaper [criticizes](#) the action as "a slap in the face of the United States."

Dec. 10, 2021: Sugiura Yasuyuki, senior researcher at the National Institute for Defense Studies, [tells](#) Yomiuri that Japan must have the "correct" amount of fear about China.

Dec. 13, 2021: Beijing [uses](#) commemoration of the 1937 Nanjing Massacre as a "barometer" of Japan's support for the Beijing Olympics warning that if Japan does not participate, the bilateral relationship will veer into a downward spiral.

Dec. 14, 2021: Former defense minister and current head of the LDP's public relations division Kono Taro [backs](#) a visit to China by current Foreign Minister Hayashi.

Dec. 14, 2021: Former PM Abe [warns](#) Beijing that it would be "suicidal" to invade Taiwan and advises that Taiwan, the US, and Japan to work together to strengthen their deterrent capabilities.

Dec. 14, 2021: Ninth annual meeting of the Japan-Taiwan Cultural Exchange Summit [is held](#) in Kobe, with the organizers reporting that attendance was greater than expected due to resistance to China's coercive tactics.

Dec. 15, 2021: *Global Times*, referencing Abe's "repeated provocations over the Taiwan question" [describes](#) him as Japan's chief anti-China politician.

Dec. 16, 2021: China's leading military newspaper [describes](#) Abe's remarks as driven by rightwing adventurism, citing a Japanese academic's opinion that Abe is obsessed with realizing what his Class-A war criminal grandfather Kishi Nobusuke could not.

Dec. 17, 2021: Chinese state-owned FAW group, [targeting](#) the Japanese market for electric cars, will offer a hybrid version of its SUV next summer.

Dec. 20, 2021: China's leading military newspaper [notes](#) Tokyo's concern that if the US were to adopt a no-first-use nuclear policy, its function as an umbrella for Japan would be lost.

Dec. 22, 2021: *Global Times* [depicts](#) Japan as struggling under the burden of hosting US troops.

Dec. 23, 2021: *Kyodo* [reports](#) that the Japanese and US armed forces have a draft plan for a Taiwan emergency under which the US marine corps would set up temporary bases and deploy troops on the Nansei at the initial stage of a Taiwan emergency.

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

Dec. 24, 2021: Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno [announces](#) that Japan will not send Cabinet members or high-level officials to the Beijing Winter Olympics.

Dec. 24, 2021: Japan Coast Guard and Maritime Self-Defense Forces [conduct](#) a joint exercise to simulate responses to a Chinese military vessel approaching waters near the contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

Dec. 25, 2021: Japan-Taiwan Co-Prosperity Chiefs Alliance, comprising 127 Japanese city and local officials, [holds](#) its first meeting and calls on Tokyo to draw up a Japanese version of the US Taiwan Relations Act.

Dec. 26, 2021: Japan's Taipei ambassador-equivalent Hiroyasu Izumi [describes](#) 2021 as the year of Taiwan since more countries have stood up to support its free and democratic way of life.

Dec. 26, 2021: Bilateral forum backs a [partnership](#) between Hitachi Zosen and Yulin Chemical to develop a renewable alternative to natural gas for industrial and household use, though cost remains a major hurdle.

Dec. 27, 2021: Center-left *Asahi* editorializes that the absence of Japanese officials at the Beijing Winter Olympics notwithstanding, continued [dialogue](#) with China is essential.

Dec. 27, 2021: Chinese and Japanese defense ministers [hold](#) video talks. China's leading military paper quotes Gen. Wei Fenghe as stressing China's determination to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea, and urging Japan to learn from history. It does not mention, but *Kyodo* [reports](#), that Kishi "strongly demanded" an [explanation](#) for China's new coast guard law, which gives it the right to search and seize other countries vessels in the islands contested between the two countries.

Dec. 28, 2021: Chief Cabinet Secretary Natsuno Hirkazu [announces](#) that China and Japan agreed to launch a military hotline next year.

Dec. 28, 2021: LDP policy chief Takaichi Sanae [criticizes](#) the lateness of the government's decision on not sending government officials to the Beijing Winter Olympics.

Dec. 29, 2021: *Yomiuri* [reports](#) that Japan is to establish an embassy in Kiribati and a consular office in Noumea, New Caledonia, to better compete with China.

Dec. 30, 2021: Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department [issues](#) a warrant for the arrest of a Chinese citizen in connection with cyberattacks on Japan's Aerospace Exploration Agency.

PACIFIC  FORUM

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

AWAITING A BREAKTHROUGH? PM KISHIDA AND SOUTH KOREA'S PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

JI-YOUNG LEE, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
ANDY LIM, CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

The year 2021 ended with no breakthroughs in Japan-Korea relations. Bilateral ties remain stalled over South Korea's 2018 Supreme Court ruling on forced labor during Japan's occupation of the Korean Peninsula and Japan's export restrictions placed in 2019 on key materials used for South Korea's electronics industry. The inauguration of Kishida Fumio as Japan's new prime minister in September did not lead to a new momentum for addressing these bilateral issues, as both Tokyo and Seoul adhered to their positions. Prime Minister Kishida, while acknowledging that Japan's relationship with South Korea should not be left as is, largely reiterated Tokyo's official stance from the Abe and Suga governments that Seoul should first take steps on the forced labor issue. South Korean President Moon Jae-in sent a letter congratulating Kishida on his inauguration, signaling willingness to talk about bilateral challenges. Developments in the final months of 2021 are a reminder that there is no easy solution to these issues in sight.

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Looking at the year ahead, a window of opportunity for a possible breakthrough may arrive immediately after South Korea's presidential election in early March 2022 as experts like Sohn Yul and Nishino Junya [have pointed out](#). The three leading presidential candidates—Lee Jae-myung of the incumbent Democratic Party, Yoon Seok-yeol of the main opposition People Power Party, and Ahn Cheol-soo of the minor opposition People's Party—have proposed that South Korea mend ties with Japan and they all referred to the [1998 Kim-Obuchi joint declaration](#) as a point to which the two countries should return.

Whoever becomes South Korea's next president, working with Japan on the forced labor issue will be the key to whether there are positive changes in bilateral relations. In September, the Daejeon District Court ordered the sale of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries' assets (the patents and trademarks) in South Korea to compensate forced laborers. This marked the first time that a South Korean court ordered the liquidation of Japanese companies' assets over the issue. Japan strongly protested the order. Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu said that the decision was "truly regrettable" and a "clear violation of international law." The South Korean Foreign Ministry refuted his remark as "not based on fact." Following this September decision, in December, the Daegu District Court ordered the sale of confiscated assets of Nippon Steel Corp to compensate forced laborers.

PM Kishida and Japan's Policy Toward the Two Koreas

Kishida's inauguration as Japan's leader did not give rise to a promise between leaders of the two countries to meet as soon as possible, which is typical when relations are going well. South Korean President Moon Jae-in's October letter to Kishida [stated](#) that he "looks forward to seeing the two countries communicate and cooperate to share the basic values of democracy and a market economy, setting an example of cooperation as neighboring countries that are closest geographically and culturally." During their first phone conversation, which took place after his conversations with the United States, Australia, Britain, India, China, and Russia, Kishida [reiterated](#) that South Korea should take appropriate action while noting that bilateral relations are in an "extremely difficult situation." Moon suggested that the two sides

accelerate consultations and communications in search for a diplomatic solution.



Figure 1 Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida speaks during a news conference at the prime minister's official residence on Oct. 14, 2021. Photo: Eugene Hoshiko/Pool via Reuters

The two leaders discussed North Korea during this phone call, but unsurprisingly, their emphasis differed. Kishida, since the campaign, had said that he would be willing to meet with the North Korean leader without preconditions. Moon said that he "highly appreciate[s] Prime Minister Kishida's willingness to meet with Chairman Kim [Jong Un] directly without conditions." Kishida asked for South Korea's support on the issue of North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. While Moon's goal is to gain international support for his efforts to declare an end of the Korean War as a way to create a new momentum with North Korea, Kishida has his eyes on resolving the abduction issue.

At a deeper level, the Moon and Kishida governments' approaches to North Korea reflect different policy priorities. Kishida's North Korea policy is a continuation of Japan's position on Pyongyang for over a decade, which has sought to use pressure and sanctions over dialogue to comprehensively resolve the abduction and nuclear and missile issues. Former Prime Ministers Abe Shinzo and Suga Yoshihide's willingness to meet Kim Jong Un without condition should be understood in the context that the Japanese government would "consider all possible measures including a summit with Kim," a position that Kishida [advocates](#). In South Korea, for the progressive Moon government, support for the Japanese leader's summit meeting with Kim rests on a strong desire for a breakthrough in North Korea's engagement with the outside world and in inter-Korean

reconciliation. Moon's primary methods are to use dialogue with North Korea while seeking to find ways to engage with Pyongyang economically and culturally.

Since Kishida was Japan's longest-serving foreign minister in the postwar era (2012–2017), it is perhaps unsurprising that his foreign policy would continue trends of the Abe government. Importantly, while serving as foreign minister Kishida played a key role in reaching a 2015 bilateral agreement with South Korea on the so-called "comfort women" (wartime victims of sexual slavery) issue. In December, he [urged](#) the South Korean government to uphold the agreement and said, "at least the promise between states must be kept, or any discussion from now on will be meaningless." More broadly, Japan under his leadership is expected to continue policies promoting defense capability enhancement and stronger ties with the United States while keeping an eye on China's growing military power and economic influences in the region. In this picture, South Korea and Japan currently do not share a lot of overlap in terms of their respective policies toward dealing with shifting power balances in the region and the US-China strategic rivalry. But they may be able to develop partnerships in the area of economic security, especially trilaterally with the United States, while buttressed by Japan and South Korea's membership in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and possibly the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

It is important to remember that Kishida described himself as a "dovish liberal," when comparing himself with Abe, who he called "hawkish." In his 2017 TV *Asahi* interview, he [said](#) that his beliefs and philosophies are different from those of Abe. The appointment of Hayashi Yoshimasa, viewed as pro-China and from the same Kochikai faction, as a foreign minister may signal that Kishida's leadership may create more room for diplomacy with South Korea. Kishida has been the head of this faction since 2012.

North Korea, Dokdo/Takeshima, and Seoul-Tokyo-Washington Relations

The Biden administration continues to strengthen trilateral cooperation with Seoul and Tokyo, part of its broader strategy to improve coordination with allies after years of neglect by

the previous administration. But any progress made over the past few months of close coordination and calibrated messaging was at risk because of a diplomatic faux pas in mid-November over the South Korean police chief's visit to the Dokdo/Takeshima islets and Japan's protests. What was meant to be a public show of improving trilateral cooperation became instead a public reminder that deep distrust between Seoul and Tokyo is a hindrance to tighter tripartite cooperation with Washington.

At the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in September, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong, and Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu [met to](#) continue coordination on North Korea, regional situations, and global challenges such as supply chains and climate change (see [Japanese](#) and [Korean](#) readouts). This was their first meeting since the G7 in London in May. A day after, the [South Korean](#) and [Japanese](#) foreign ministers met separately but failed to make any progress, with both sides reiterating their respective positions on forced labor, comfort women, and export controls.

The nuclear envoys continued their efforts toward the goal of complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, with meetings in Tokyo in [mid-September](#) and Washington in [late October](#). Both meetings came in the wake of North Korean provocations. The Sept. 14 meeting came a day after North Korea [tested](#) a new long-range cruise missile. According to the South Korean Foreign Ministry, the US and South Korea [had](#) "extensive consultations" on efforts to engage North Korea, including on joint humanitarian cooperation. The three sides reaffirmed their commitment to denuclearization. US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim also publicly [urged](#) North Korea to "respond positively to our multiple offers to meet without preconditions" and reiterated that the US "has no hostile intent towards the DPRK." This [echoed](#) remarks he made in Seoul in August.

When the nuclear envoys met again on Oct. 19 in Washington, Sung Kim repeated the US offer to restart talks. His comments were [reaffirmed](#) the same night by US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, who revealed that the US had reached out directly to Pyongyang. According to a high-ranking South Korean official, the US and South Korea [completed](#) working-level discussions on humanitarian aid for North Korea and discussed "creative ways" to bring the North

back to dialogue. The official explained confidence-building measures such as President Moon's end of war declaration and humanitarian projects are important to their efforts. According to *Kyodo News*, Funakoshi Takehiro, director-general of the Japanese Foreign Ministry's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, [responded](#) by saying that it is "premature" to discuss the South Korean proposal given North Korea's provocative behavior of test-firing missiles. Just hours after talks concluded in Washington, North Korea responded by [testing](#) a new type of SLBM, its first SLBM test in two years, which violated multiple UN Security Council resolutions.

On the same day, the intelligence chiefs of the US, South Korea, and Japan met in Seoul to discuss the North Korean situation and global supply chain issues. This was their first trilateral meeting since Tokyo in May, and the first meeting for Japan's Cabinet Intelligence Director Takizawa Hiroaki under Kishida. According to South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS), NIS Director Park Jie-won, US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, and Takizawa "[agreed](#) to further strengthen their information cooperation" during their meeting.

Despite North Korea's continued provocations and a lack of response to the offer of dialogue, Sung Kim still made the trip to Seoul a week later for his scheduled meeting with his South Korean counterpart, Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Noh Kyu-duk. While in Seoul, he [repeated](#) the US offer for restarting dialogue, and called on North Korea to cease provocations.

An awkward moment for the US hosts happened after a trilateral meeting between US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, South Korean Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun, and Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Mori Takeo in Washington. For context, the South Korean Police Chief Kim Chang-yong [made](#) an undisclosed visit [earlier in the week](#) to the Dokdo/Takeshima islets. According to a source from South Korean police, the visit was [intended](#) to offer encouragement to police officers on duty as there has been a change from Dokdo Coast Guard to general police officers. The visit, while not unprecedented—the last such visit by a South Korean police chief happened in 2009—was publicized by mistake by the media and prompted a strong response by the Japanese government.



Figure 2 US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman gives a news conference alone in Washington after talks with her counterparts from Japan and South Korea. Photo: Kyodo via The Japan Times

According to Korean press reports, Vice Foreign Minister Mori's visit was almost [canceled](#) as a result. At the end of the trilateral meeting, they were supposed to host a joint press conference to discuss the results—which they did during their last meeting in Tokyo in July. But because of the islet visit, the Japanese and the South Koreans pulled out at the last minute, leaving Sherman to host the press conference alone, where she acknowledged that "there are some bilateral differences" between South Korea and Japan that "are continuing to be resolved." Mori reportedly informed the host prior to the meeting that the Japanese side would not take part. Hours later, a spokesperson at the Japanese embassy in Washington [explained](#) Japan had "lodged a strong protest" over the islet visit, and therefore a joint press conference was inappropriate under these circumstances. During a separate press conference with South Korean reporters that afternoon, Vice Foreign Minister Choi, when asked, [answered](#) that the Japanese side had said that they were not participating in the joint press conference because of the Dokdo/Takeshima visit. Choi admitted that "the issues between Korea and Japan are unlikely to be resolved all at once," but they will continue to meet as "regularly and frequently as possible" towards "more specific forms of functional cooperation."

South Korea's Next President and Relations with Japan

The presidential race in South Korea entered the final stage in the final months of the year, with both parties selecting the front-runners to be their official candidate for next March's election. The incumbent Democratic Party [selected](#)

Gyeonggi Gov. Lee Jae-myung as candidate with 50.29% of the vote. The opposition People Power Party [chose](#) former Prosecutor General Yoon Seok-yeol with 47.85% of the vote. Now that the stage is set for the presidential election next March, what do we know of the leading candidates' views on relations with Japan? Below is what we can glean so far from the candidates' various speeches and interviews, as well as remarks from their foreign policy advisors.

Lee Jae-myung, [distancing](#) himself from an earlier characterization of having a hawkish stance toward Japan, sought to emphasize his willingness to take a future-oriented approach to relations with Japan, embracing the spirit of the 1998 Kim-Obuchi joint declaration. On his official campaign page, his foreign policy on Japan is [remaining](#) “committed to repairing the tenuous relationship between Korea and Japan.” His overall foreign policy is underpinned by “pragmatic diplomacy” and “national interest first.” He has [promised](#) to be firm on historical and territorial issues. Yoon Suk-yeol has also [vowed](#) to improve relations with Japan as soon as he takes office, saying that while “the issues between the two countries are not easy ... they are not impossible to solve.” While [speaking](#) in a forum with Lee in November, Yoon blamed the current state of relations on the Moon government, stating that they “did not prioritize the national interest and used diplomacy for domestic politics.” Yoon has promised he will reaffirm the [1998 Kim-Obuchi joint declaration](#), bring forth a Kim-Obuchi 2.0 era, and seek a “comprehensive solution” for contentious historical, economic, and security issues between the two countries. Ahn Cheol-soo of the minor opposition People's Party has similarly embraced this joint declaration.

What about their views on contentious issues between the two countries? On Dokdo/Takeshima, Lee responded to the South Korean police chief's visit to the islet by doubling down and [saying](#) that “Dokdo is definitely under effective control of South Korea,” and criticizing Japan for “meddling in another country's policy.” Yoon has not publicly responded to this visit, but expectations are that he will maintain that Dokdo is undisputed South Korean territory.



Figure 3 Candidates running in the upcoming presidential election pose for a photo at a forum in Seoul on Nov. 25, 2021. Pictured from left to right are Ahn Cheol-soo of the People's Party, Yoon Suk-yeol of the People Power Party, Lee Jae-myung of the Democratic Party of Korea and Sim Sang-jeung of the Justice Party. Photo: Korea Times

On forced labor, Lee [believes](#) that Japan should offer a sincere apology, and that he accepts the Supreme Court's decision on the seizure of Japanese companies' assets because of the separation of powers in Korea. He has also [called on](#) Japan to carry out the compensation quickly and respect the court's decision. For Yoon, the forced labor issue is part of the “comprehensive solution” he has discussed. On the comfort women issue, Lee has demanded that Japan apologize to the victims, a stance shared by Yoon.

On trilateral cooperation, Lee [believes](#) that while a “truly permanent relationship of interchange and coexistence based on a complete resolution of territorial and historical issues” will be ideal, he cautioned that Japan's “vague attitude on territorial issues and imperialist aggressions” will make “a trilateral military alliance among South Korea, the US and Japan ... very dangerous.” One of his close aides, Wi Sung-lac [took](#) a more conciliatory tone during an interview with Japanese press in December, where he stressed the usefulness of trilateral cooperation, including the Korea-Japan military-intelligence sharing agreement known as GSOMIA. Yoon has [emphasized](#) the importance of trilateral security cooperation for peace and security in the region.

Economic Relations and Public Opinions

How have the export controls Japan put in place in 2019 affected the South Korean economy? According to data from the Federation of Korean Industries, imports of hydrogen fluoride, photoresists, and fluorinated polyimide—three materials used for computer chips and displays but restricted for export by Japan to Korea—did not record a significant drop. Export of those

materials only declined 1% from \$729.5 million between the second half of 2017 and the first half of 2019 (before the export controls) to \$724.6 million between the second half of 2019 and the first half of 2021 (after the export controls). However, *JoongAng Ilbo* [reported](#) that overall bilateral trade fell 9.8% between the second half of 2017 and the first half of 2019, compared with the second half of 2019 and the first half of 2021. During this same period, Japan's direct investment in South Korea dropped from \$2.2 billion to \$1.6 billion (about a 30% decrease), while South Korea's investment in Japan went up by 25% largely due to SK Hynix's investment in Toshiba's memory business in late 2017.

South Korean National Assembly ratified the RCEP in Dec. and it will take effect on Feb. 1, 2022. This will bring South Korea and Japan together in a free trade agreement. With the pact, the share of goods traded tariff-free between South Korea and Japan will [go](#) from 19% to 92%. In Dec., South Korea announced that it plans to apply for the CPTPP. Japan's response did not appear very welcoming, emphasizing the high requirements "in terms of market access, e-commerce, intellectual property rights, government procurement, and so on." Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Matsuno Hirokazu [said](#), "as for South Korea's membership in the partnership, we have never discussed with it, and we are not planning to do so, either." To join the CPTPP, current member countries—Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam—have to approve South Korea's application.

Public polls [conducted](#) by Genron NPO in September 2021 revealed that the public perceptions of bilateral and regional relations have improved but remain largely negative. 63.2% of South Korean respondents said they have a "poor" impression of Japan, which is down from 71.6% last year. 48.8% of Japanese respondents said that their impression of South Korea is "poor," which is slightly higher than the 46.3% last year. Interestingly, only 4.6% of Japanese respondents said that the presidential election and a new South Korean president will have a positive impact on bilateral relations. Genron polls found that about 46.6% of Japanese respondents believe Japan-South Korea relations are important, which is a significant drop from 74% in 2013. As for the reason why the bilateral relationship is not important, the most popular response (67%) was "the current government cannot be trusted to negotiate in good faith, as it

has overturned previous intergovernmental agreements regarding historical awareness." The second most popular response (44.8%) was that "the current South Korean government is actively provoking Japan."

Looking Ahead

With just three months left on the campaign trail, we expect to learn more of the South Korean presidential candidates' views on Korea-Japan relations. Considering that the progressive Democratic Party and the conservative People Power Party tend to show clear differences in their overall approach toward North Korea, and this is an area in which Japan is interested in cooperating with South Korea, the next South Korean president in March will likely have an impact on bilateral relations. It also remains to be seen how the two leaders will work to resolve the "comfort women" and forced labor issues, which have remained obstacles in the relationship. On their campaign trail, the two leading South Korean presidential candidates have promised to improve the historic low relationship with Japan, and a willingness to hold a bilateral leader summit may signal a thaw. Regardless of the outcome of the March presidential election, it is certain that many difficult to disentangle issues await the new leader in Tokyo and the next leader in Seoul.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER—DECEMBER 2021

Sept. 2, 2021: South Korea Ministry of National Defense [publishes](#) 2022–2026 Midterm Defense Plan.

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. 6, 2021: International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) mission [arrives](#) in Japan to help with preparations for release of treated water from Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

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. 10, 2021: South Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs comments on publication of Japanese textbooks and [states](#), “It is very regrettable that the Japanese government decided to dilute the extent of the coercion faced by comfort women and forced laborers in April, that textbook publishers applied for changes or the deletion of related expressions, and that the ministry recently approved the publication of the textbooks.”

Sept. 13, 2021: North Korea’s *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA) [reports](#) launch of missiles on Sept. 11 and Sept. 12.

Sept. 14, 2021: US Special Envoy for North Korea Sung Kim [meets](#) South Korean counterpart Noh Kyu-duk and Japanese counterpart Funakoshi Takehiro in Tokyo.

Sept. 15, 2021: According to South Korea Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), North Korea [fires](#) two ballistic missiles. Three hours later, South Korea Agency for Defense Development conducts successful launch of domestic submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) in the presence of President Moon Jae-in at Anheung Test Center.

Sept. 21, 2021: During speech at the UN General Assembly, President Moon [says](#), “I once again urge the community of nations to mobilize its strengths for the end-of-war declaration on the Korean Peninsula and propose that the three parties—the two Koreas and the US—or the four parties —the two Koreas, the US and China — come together and declare that the war on the Korean Peninsula is over.”

Sept. 22, 2021: South Korea Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [meets](#) Japanese counterpart Motegi Toshimitsu and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during visit to the UN General Assembly.

Sept. 23, 2021: Japanese FM Motegi [meets](#) South Korea counterpart Chung during the UN General Assembly.

Sept. 24, 2021: KCNA [releases](#) statement from Kim Yo-Jong regarding end-of-war declaration, stating North Korea’s “willingness to keep our close contacts with the south again and have constructive discussion with it about the restoration and development of the bilateral relations if it is careful about its future language and not hostile toward us.”

Sept. 27, 2021: During meeting in Vienna, IAEA Board of Governors [elects](#) South Korea as IAEA chair.

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.

Sept. 28, 2021: During a press conference, Japanese FM Motegi [says](#) ruling ordering sale of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries assets is “a clear violation of international law.”

Sept. 29, 2021: Kishida Fumio [is elected](#) leader of Japans Liberal Democratic Party, becoming the new prime minister of Japan.

Oct. 4, 2021: Blue House presidential spokesperson Park Kyung-mee reports that in a letter congratulating Prime Minister Kishida on his win, President Moon [says](#) he “looks forward to seeing the two countries communicate and cooperate to share the basic values of democracy and a market economy, setting an example of cooperation as neighboring countries that are closest geographically and culturally.”

Oct. 4, 2021: During a press conference, Prime Minister Kishida [indicates](#) willingness to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un “without preconditions.”

Oct. 5, 2021: Federation of Korean Industries (FKI) [reports](#) that increased restrictions on sale of photoresists, hydrogen fluoride, and fluorinated polyimide sales from Japan to Korea had minimal impact on imports, however, overall trade between Japan and Korea has decreased.

Oct. 8, 2021: In remarks aired by Japanese broadcasting company NHK, Prime Minister Kishida [comments](#) on his first phone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping and says “Xi and I agreed to work together on various shared issues, including North Korea.”

Oct. 10, 2021: South Korean Democratic Party [chooses](#) former governor of Gyeonggi Province Lee Jae-myung as its candidate for 2022 presidential election.

Oct. 15, 2021: Blue House presidential spokesperson Park states that during their first phone call, President Moon and Prime Minister Kishida [discussed](#) diplomatic solutions to forced labor, “comfort women,” and denuclearization of North Korea. Speaking to reporters, Kishida [says](#), “Relations between Japan and South Korea continue to be in severe conditions.”

Oct. 17, 2021: During a tour of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, Kishida [tells](#) reporters, “I felt strongly that the water issue is a crucial one that should not be pushed back.”

Oct. 18, 2021: US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines [meets](#) with South Korean counterpart Park Jie-won and Japanese counterpart Takizawa Hiroaki in Seoul.

Oct. 19, 2021: South Korea Special Representative for Korean Peace and Security Affairs Noh Kyu-duk [meets](#) US counterpart Sung Kim and Japanese counterpart Funakoshi Takehiro in Washington, DC.

Oct. 21, 2021: Fishing boat [capsizes](#) after an accident near Dokdo/Takeshima islands.

Oct. 25, 2021: South Korea Forest Service [registers](#) six plants native to the Takeshima/Dokdo islands on Dokdo Day. Korea Forest Service Director Choi Young-tae states, “By registering the endemic plant species of the Dokdo islets and Ulleung Island under an international organization on Dokdo Day, we hope to display strong sovereignty over Dokdo.”

Oct. 27, 2021: Japanese Prime Minister Kishida, South Korean President Moon, and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang [attend](#) the 24th ASEAN Plus Three summit.

Nov. 2, 2021: “Comfort woman” survivor Lee Yong-soo [advocates](#) for pursuit of comfort women issue resolution through UN Committee Against Torture during discussion with South Korea’s Democratic Party Chairman Song Yuong-gil at the National Assembly.

Nov. 6, 2021: A monument for Koreans who died during World War II atomic bombing [is erected](#) at the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum. Japan notes that Koreans were mobilized as soldiers and laborers against their will. During unveiling ceremony, South Korean Ambassador Kang Chang-il says, “Today’s small step will go down in history as a model of joint efforts by South Korea and Japan and serve as a big step to contribute to founding the bastion of global peace.”

Nov. 11, 2021: US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink [meets](#) South Korea Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Yeo Seung-bae to discuss supply chain issues at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Seoul.

Nov. 15, 2021: Six officials from the IAEA [arrive](#) in Japan to discuss plan for release of Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant treated water with Japanese officials.

Nov. 16, 2021: During a visit to Washington, South Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun [meets](#) with US counterpart, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman.

Nov. 16, 2021: Commissioner-General of South Korea National Policy Agency Kim Chang-yong [visits](#) Dokdo/Takeshima island.

Nov. 17, 2021: During a press conference, Japan Chief Cabinet Secretary Matsuno Hirokazu [remarks](#) on visit to Takeshima/Dokdo island by South Korea police chief and says, “We cannot accept this at all and regard it as extremely unfortunate, considering that they are clearly an inherent part of Japan’s territory in view of historical facts and international laws.”

Nov. 19, 2021: South Korea Minister of Trade Yeo Han-koo [discusses](#) supply chain resilience and Korean steel exports to the US during meeting with US Trade Representative Katherine Tai in Seoul.

Nov. 19, 2021: During an interview in Tokyo, Prime Minister Kishida [says](#), “International agreements and promises must be fulfilled. I hope South Korea will take a positive approach.”

Nov. 25, 2021: During talks at the Seoul Foreign Correspondent’s Club, South Korea Democratic Party presidential candidate Lee Jae-myung [says](#), “Japan has been provocative, claiming the territorial rights of Dokdo, and has not apologized for historical issues.”

Dec. 2, 2021: During a press conference following the 53rd annual Security Consultative meeting in Seoul, South Korea Defense Minister Suh Wook and US counterpart Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [announce](#) update to joint strategic planning guidance for wartime operations.

Dec. 6, 2021: Japan’s Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry [announces](#) that IAEA will delay plans to visit Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant until 2022 due to the omicron variant.

Dec. 7, 2021: Around 100 Japanese politicians, vice ministers, and political aides [visit](#) Yasukuni Shrine. South Korea Ministry for Foreign Affairs issues statement expressing “deep regret and concern for the visit to Yasukuni Shrine, which beautifies the colonial invasion and war of aggression.”

Dec. 11, 2021: In talks with South Korea Foreign Minister Chung, Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa [requests](#) “appropriate response” from South Korea for forced labor and “comfort women” issues during informal dinner at G7 gathering in Liverpool, England.

Dec. 13, 2021: South Korea Minister of Finance Nam Hong-ki [announces](#) South Korea’s intent to pursue membership in the CPTPP.

Dec. 17, 2021: US Undersecretary for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Jose Fernandez [meets](#) South Korean Second Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-moon at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Seoul.

Dec. 26, 2021: *Yomiuri Shimbun* [reports](#) 203 cases of Japanese fishery products sold in South Korea without identification of place of origin.

Dec. 28 2021: During a *Kyodo News* interview, Prime Minister Kishida discusses 2015 bilateral “comfort women” agreement and [says](#), “At least the promise between states must be kept, or any discussion from now on will be meaningless.”

Dec. 29, 2021: *Yonhap* [reports](#) South Korea conducted military drills near Dokdo/Takeshima a week earlier. In a phone call with a South Korean ministry official, Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General of Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Funakoshi Takehiro comments on the drills and [says](#), “As Takeshima is clearly Japan’s inherent territory in light of historical facts and under international law, we cannot accept it.”

Chronology prepared by Patrice Francis, MA Student, American University’s School of International Service.

PACIFIC  FORUM

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

CHINA- RUSSIA RELATIONS

NOT SO QUIET IN THE WESTERN PACIFIC

YU BIN, WITTENBURG UNIVERSITY

For Moscow and Beijing, relations with Washington steadily deteriorated toward the yearend. This was in sharp contrast from early 2021 when both had some limited expectations for relaxed tensions with the newly inaugurated Biden administration. For Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, each of their meetings (real and virtual) with Biden was frontloaded with obstacles: US sanctions, a boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics, and screw-tightening at strategic places (Taiwan and Ukraine). Biden's [diplomacy-is-back](#) approach—meaning US-led alliance-building (the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and AUKUS for China) or reinvigorating (NATO for Russia)—turned out to be far more challenging than Trump's erratic go-it-alone style. It was against this backdrop that China and Russia enhanced their strategic interactions in the last few months of 2021, particularly mil-mil relations at a time of rising tensions in the western Pacific.

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In the Democratic Crosshairs

In their virtual summit on Dec. 15, described as “the [highest level](#) of mutual trust, coordination, and strategic value between major countries,” Putin and Xi vowed to take coordinated actions in political, economic, and strategic areas at all levels. The 90-minute video summit also covered [plans](#) to establish a new independent financial framework outside the US-controlled SWIFT transaction system and joint development of “certain [high-tech types of weapons](#)” in aerospace.

Referring to relations with China as “a shining example of interstate cooperation in the 21st century,” Putin [spoke](#) highly of the official extension for another five years of the “Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China.” Xi echoed Putin’s positive assessment of bilateral ties, adding that China “highly appreciated” Putin’s “strong support” for China’s effort to safeguard its “core interests” as well as Putin’s opposition to “attempts to [divide](#) (隔离) Russia from China.”

This was the third video conference in 2021 for the two leaders, the other two being [May 19](#), for launching Russian nuclear power units in China, and [June 28](#), when they officially extended their treaty another five years. Xi and Putin [talked over the phone](#) on Aug. 25 about the situation in Afghanistan.

The Dec. 15 video conference devoted a considerable amount of attention to domestic issues. Referring to China’s “ambitious yet modest goal” as “allowing the Chinese people to have a good life,” Xi pledged China’s “resolute support” for Russia’s effort to safeguard its security and stability.” “As large powers with global influence, both China and Russia have found their paths suitable for their national characteristics,” said Xi, adding that he was for more frequent exchanges with Putin regarding the “[philosophy of governance](#) (治国理念)” for national rejuvenation of the two countries. For Putin, this “[new model of cooperation](#),” an “[absolutely](#) comprehensive partnership of strategic nature,” was based on “the principles of non-interference in each other’s affairs and a mutual resolve to turn our common border into a belt of eternal peace and good-neighborliness.”



Figure 1 Chinese President Xi Jinping holds a virtual meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Beijing, capital of China, Dec. 15, 2021. Photo: Xinhua

The emphasis on domestic stability in Putin-Xi talks took place shortly after a US-sponsored [democracy summit](#) on Dec. 9-10 with over 100 world leaders and activists, not including China or Russia. They were certainly among the targets of the [\\$424 million](#) earmarked for democracy promotion around the world by the US government. Shortly before the democracy summit, Washington declared a [political boycott](#) of the February 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.

“(It is) only up to the people of a nation to decide whether it is a democracy and how to better achieve democracy,” [said](#) Xi to Putin during the December video conference. The summit meant Washington’s right to impose its view of democracy on others and its unwillingness to accept the sovereign equality of all countries, [remarked](#) Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. “We invariably support each other in every aspect of international sports cooperation, including in condemning any attempts to politicize sports and the Olympic movement. I have no doubt that the upcoming Winter Games will be held at the highest level,” Putin informed Xi.

In late November, Russian and Chinese ambassadors to the US (Anatoly Antonov and Qin Gang) [took](#) an unusual step and jointly wrote an article in the influential *National Interest*, warning that the democracy summit would lead to ideological confrontation when countries needed to strengthen cooperation to deal with global challenges. “No country has the right to judge the world’s vast and varied political landscape by a single yardstick, and having other countries copy one’s political system through color revolution, regime change and even use of force,” argued the ambassadors. “A truly

democratic government will support democracy in international relations.”

“Unlimited” Strategic Coordination?

A key issue area for China–Russia diplomatic and strategic coordination was the arrival on Sept. 15 of the [AUKUS](#) triad (Australia, the UK, and the US). The multi-billion dollar deal for [eight nuclear submarines](#) for Australia in the next decade or two represents a typical case of asymmetrical threats for China and Russia. It was a significant step toward militarization of the US-led Indo-Pacific concept against China’s core interests. Meanwhile, Russia remains either neutral (the South China Sea, Diaoyu/Senkaku, etc.) or noncommittal (such as Taiwan) on issues due to a lack of an alliance arrangement with China.

In the military–technology domain, the Russian–China asymmetry regarding AUKUS is more striking. The future Australian nuclear sub fleet may not add too much to the US’ own powerful underwater capability. For the PLA Navy, however, nuclear subs—either nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed—remain an area of underdevelopment relative to its US and Russian counterparts.



Figure 2 The current number of nuclear-powered submarine by country, soon to include Australia. Photo: *The Military Balance 2021*, IISS, Sept. 21, 2021. Reprinted from *Al Jazeera*

Given these asymmetries, Russia’s reaction and response to AUKUS were swift and steady. Six days after its debut, Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev [defined](#) AUKUS as both anti-China and anti-Russia. Referring to the US move as “reckless,” Patrushev slammed

AUKUS as “another military bloc in the region” in addition to the Quad, which jeopardized “the entire security architecture of Asia in a bid to strengthen its control over the promising Asia-Pacific region.”

In early October, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, too, [voiced](#) strong criticism of AUKUS: “The so-called Indo-Pacific strategies (including the Quad and AUKUS) that are invented by the United States are eroding the universal formats in the Asia-Pacific Region which existed for the past decades under the auspices of ASEAN.” President Putin himself weighed in on Oct. 14, [saying](#) that the initiative undermined regional stability.

By late October, when Lavrov met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Rome, the two diplomats “expressed serious concerns on the nuclear submarine deal and that AUKUS is a “[typical military group](#).” To oppose such a “narrow-bloc organization,” Lavrov and Wang [proposed](#) a summit of permanent members of the UN Security Council “at the soonest possible time in order to seek an effective response to current global challenges and threats.”

The UN Security Council was perhaps a bridge too far for the budding AUKUS threat. For Russia and China, closer strategic coordination was a more viable approach to the volatile situation. “In the age of global instability and turbulence, China and Russia resolutely support each other for the dignity and interests of both sides,” [remarked](#) Xi in his teleconference with Putin in mid-December. For the Russian president, the “responsible joint approach to current global problems” [has become](#) “a significant factor of stability in international relations.”

In early December, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov [made](#) it more explicit that Russia can’t “sit on its hands” and do nothing to deepen strategic ties with China under “conditions when both countries have come under identical and increasingly heavy pressure from the collective West.” For this, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng [reiterated](#) a relatively novel definition for Sino-Russian strategic interaction of “three nos”: “no end lines, no forbidden areas, and no upper limits” (没有止境, 没有禁区, 没有上限). It was first [articulated](#) in early January 2021 by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, meaning an open-

ended, flexible, and convenient way to transcend the rigid and restrictive alliance format for the two large independent powers.

Russia and China in Hypersonic Drive

The [defense issue](#) was part of the Xi-Putin videoconference on Dec. 15, according to Russian media. In his annual press conference on Dec. 23, Putin [revealed](#) a bit more: “We are cooperating in the field of security. The Chinese (a)rmy is equipped to a significant extent with the world’s most advanced weapons systems. We are even developing certain high-tech weapons together,” the Russian leader went on.

While annual land and naval exercises between the two militaries have become routine, joint missile defense simulation is relatively new (starting from [2016](#)). In Dec. 2019, Putin [announced](#) that Russia was helping China to develop its national missile attack warning system. By August 2020, “certain successes” [were achieved](#) including “space control,” according to Sergei Boyeve, CEO of Vimpel Company, chief designer of Russia’s missile attack warning system. It is unclear if COVID has slowed the process. By late September 2021, Russian media [noted](#) that some of China’s DF-41 ICBMs (mobile, MIRV-capable, 12,000–15,000 km range) were deployed close to the Russian border, which meant being protected by the joint missile defense system both on the ground and presumably in their early flight path over Siberia.

It was unclear if Putin’s reference to China’s “world’s most advanced weapons systems” included China’s reusable hypersonic glide missile successfully tested in August 2021, which was reported by [Chinese](#) and [Russian](#) media. Despite [China’s dismissal](#) of the test as a reusable space vehicle for peaceful purposes, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said on Oct. 27 that the test was close to a “[Sputnik moment](#).” According to one [US estimate](#), the US did nine hypersonic tests in 2016–2021 while “the Chinese have done hundreds.”

Hypersonic weapons are normally defined as fast, low-flying, and highly maneuverable weapons designed to be too quick and agile for traditional missile defense systems. In 2019, China deployed DF-17s, a hypersonic medium-range ballistic missile (1800–2,500 km range, Mach 5–10) that mounts the DF-ZF hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV). Russia claimed to deploy in

2018 the [Tsirkon](#) (Циркон) anti-ship hypersonic cruise missiles (Mach 9, 1,000 km range).



Figure 3 DF-17 on parade in Beijing, Oct. 1, 2019. Photo: PLA via CSIS



Figure 4 Russia's Tsirkon hypersonic missile. Photo: The National Interest

Both Russia and China are [ahead of the US](#) in R&D for and deployment of their own hypersonic devices. There are no signs of any joint effort in this area. The goal, however, is similar: to evade the US missile defense systems. Putin, who [spoke](#) highly of Russia’s Tsirkon systems in the last few months of 2021, seemed well-informed about China’s parallel progress in HGV.

Beyond this, Sino-Russian mil-mil interactions were uninterrupted in the last few months of 2021. On Nov. 23, Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe held a [videoconference](#) with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. A statement released after the talks said that the two militaries had in 2021 deepened cooperation in various fields, with “new breakthroughs” in the field of joint exercises and training in particular.

On Sept. 20–24, the SCO conducted “[Peace Mission 2021](#),” a counter-terrorism military exercise, at the Donguz training range in the Orenburg Region in Russia’s southern Urals. The annual drill involved about 5,500 servicemen and

over 1,200 pieces of weaponry, military, and special vehicles. In addition to SCO member states, Belarusian units took part for the first time. China sent 550 troops and 130 pieces of equipment. The four-day drill practiced anti-drone warfare and methods of preventing terror attacks involving the use of chemical and biological weapons. It was conducted shortly after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. A key element of this drill was to test and improve [coordination and rapid reaction capability](#) of SCO anti-terror units.



Figure 5 Chinese troops participate in the closing ceremony of the "Peace Mission 2021" counter-terrorism military drill of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states on Sept. 24, 2021. Photo: Xinhua

Red October?

On Oct. 1, Putin [sent](#) a telegram to Xi on the 72nd anniversary of the PRC's founding. Russia-China cooperation "contributes to greater security and stability at the regional and global levels," noted Putin. The month of October, however, turned to be hectic if not hazardous, particularly in the western Pacific.

Between Oct. 14 and 17, Russian and Chinese navies conducted the annual [Maritime Interaction 2021](#) near Russia's Peter the Great Gulf in the Sea of Japan. Five Chinese naval vessels, including the Type 055, 10,000 ton-class [Nanchang destroyer](#), joined this 10th naval exercise with Russia with a [declared goal](#) of "security maintenance of strategic maritime corridor" (维护海上战略通道安全). The two navies practiced more than [20 different combat exercises](#) including communications, sea mine countermeasures, air defense, live-fire shooting at maritime targets, joint maneuvering, and joint anti-submarine missions, according to Russia's Defense Ministry.

Joint drills between China and Russia have become routine and are completely normal, [commented](#) Li Shuyin of PLA Academy of Military Sciences. What happened after the annual naval exercises, however, was quite unusual. Immediately after the drill, the 10 participating warships of the two navies passed the narrow (20-km-wide) Tsugaru Strait (津轻海峡) for a first-ever joint sail around the Japanese archipelago. During what the Russian media [called](#) "patrol in the western Pacific" between Oct. 17 and 23, the Russian-Chinese naval formation jointly practiced tactical maneuvering and drills. On Oct. 22, the ships entered the East China Sea through the 40 km-side Osumi Strait (大隅海峡) after covering 1,700 nautical miles.

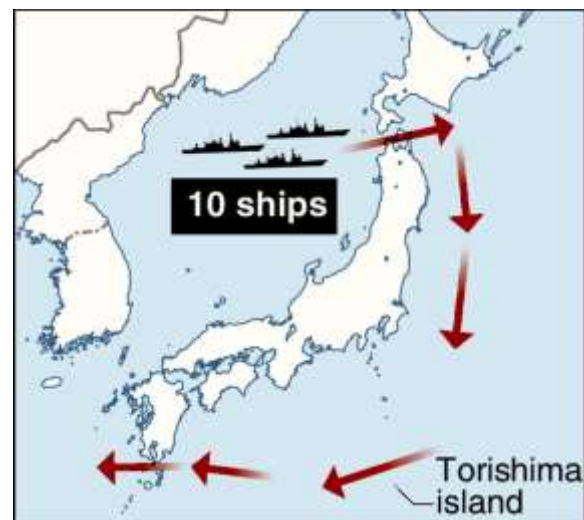


Figure 6 An overview of the passage taken by ten Russian and Chinese warships through the Tsugaru Strait and Osumi Strait following joint naval exercises. Photo: Kantie.org

The joint naval patrol complemented the joint aerial patrol by Russian and Chinese bombers over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea that started in [2019](#). On Nov. 19, Russian and Chinese bombers conducted their third patrol.

The annual naval drill and the joint naval and aerial patrols came as the Quad (the US, India, Australia, and Japan) were holding the [Malabar naval drill](#) in the Bay of Bengal, as well as the [Maritime Partnership Exercise \(MPX\) 2021](#) with the US, the UK, Australia, and Japan in the South China Sea. In both cases, Japan was an active participant. Under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida who assumed office on Oct. 2, the ruling LDP has discussed doubling defense spending to [2% of GDP](#), or about \$100 billion, citing China's threat.

Meanwhile, top Japanese officials increasingly expressed a [willingness](#) to fight for Taiwan, which was taken from China by Japan after the 1894–95 Sino-Japanese War and returned after Japan’s surrender to allied forces in 1945. The unexpected joint patrol around the Japanese main islands may be a convenient reminder to Japan of its strategic location in northeast Asia. It was possible that China and Russia would do it again, [said](#) Song Zhongping, a Chinese military expert.

October wouldn’t be truly eventful without the US. On Oct. 2, the [USS Connecticut](#), perhaps the most sophisticated and most expensive nuclear attack submarine in the world, struck an underwater seamount in the South China Sea, resulting in serious damage to its sonar dome. It is still unclear how it happened. The incident underscored the highly intensive, and dangerous, underwater operations in the western Pacific, given the growing rivalry between major powers.

China’s Foreign Ministry repeatedly [complained](#) about Washington’s failure to provide detailed information on the collision. Russia, however, got what it did not want from the US. At the height of the Russia-China naval exercise off the Peter the Great Gulf on Oct. 15, the Russian Navy reportedly thwarted an attempt to intrude into Russian territorial waters by the missile destroyer [Chafee](#). The real task of the US destroyer was to monitor the China-Russia naval gunnery drills near Russian waters that were declared off-limits to shipping. The Russian Defense Ministry summoned the US Naval attaché in Moscow to [protest](#) the “unprofessional actions of the American crew.”



Figure 7 Chinese and Russian warships transit simulated mined sea area during October 2021 naval exercises. Photo: Xinhua

Putin’s “Taiwan Moment”

The Cold War-style “Tom-and-Jerry” game between the US and Russian navies was risky but largely regulated. The growing naval activities in the western Pacific, however, occur as the Taiwan issue is becoming increasingly contentious, to the extent that even Russian President Putin weighed in. On Oct. 13, a day before the China-Russia naval exercise, Putin told [CNBC’s Hadley Gamble](#) in Moscow that China “does not need to use force” to achieve its desired “reunification” with Taiwan. “China is a huge powerful economy, and in terms of purchasing parity, China is ... number one in the world ahead of the United States now ... By increasing this economic potential, China is capable of implementing its national objectives. I do not see any threats,” [said](#) Putin, who also cited China’s “philosophy of statehood and management that do not include the use of force.”

Rarely did Putin comment on the Taiwan issue in such an unconventional and philosophical manner. It came just four days after a conciliatory tone by President Xi at a rally in Beijing commemorating the 110th anniversary of the 1911 Republican Revolution. “National reunification by peaceful means best serves the interests of the Chinese nation as a whole, including compatriots in Taiwan,” [declared](#) Xi.

It was unclear if Putin and Xi coordinated their positions regarding Taiwan. The combined effect of their remarks, however, applied something of a brake to the accelerating momentum toward the Taiwan “trap” in 2021, that started from the Trump administration’s decision in its last week, to [lift all the restrictions](#) between US and Taiwan officials. This situation appeared so dangerous that JCS Chairman Gen. Mark Milley—who [was afraid](#) that Trump “might order the launch of some sort of military strike that would set off a chain reaction and lead to war”—called Gen. Li Zuoqiang of China on Jan. 8, 2021, two days after the Capitol Hill riot, to defuse the crisis. To China’s dismay, Biden not only did not reverse Trump’s decree but proceeded to [operationalize](#) it with more frequent official interactions with Taiwan officials. In early August, Biden approved his first arms sale to Taiwan ([\\$750 billion](#)). In the first eight months of the Biden administration, the US sent warships through the Taiwan Strait [eight times](#).

The [fall of Afghanistan](#) in late August was felt more intensely in Taiwan than anywhere else in the world. Chinese media quickly pointed to the “[Afghan lesson](#)” for Taiwan as a US “strategic pawn.” The 21st century “[Saigon moment](#),” no matter how chaotic, actually allowed the US to refocus on major power (China) competition. Russian media, however, argued that [repercussions](#) from the disastrous Afghan exit would make Washington’s refocus on China impossible.

The post-Afghan months witnessed a new round of posturing between Washington, Beijing, and Taipei, plus Moscow’s newfound interest. On Oct. 6, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and his Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi met in Zurich. Sullivan reportedly “[expressed](#) its adherence to the one-China policy” (the White House [readout](#), however, does not have this statement). Xi’s reiteration of the peaceful means for reunification three days later was followed by Putin’s Taiwan remarks to CNBC. On Oct. 22, the White House spokesperson went so far as to “[clarify](#)” Biden’s vows to defend Taiwan in a live CNN town hall meeting that Biden “was not announcing any change in our policy.”

The triangular efforts by all three large powers to manage the Taiwan impasse may not go far, given the growing indigenous movement in Taiwan for separation. On Oct. 28, Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen [revealed](#) that a small number of US military personnel were already in Taiwan for some time to train with local forces.

China was [furious](#). There were no Russian official comments on Tsai’s remarks. RT, however, quickly [pointed out](#) that no such provision (defending Taiwan) in the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which governs US relations with the island. Oddly enough, Putin’s Taiwan remarks to CNBC were not part of the [Kremlin official transcript](#). Putin’s creative take-up of the Taiwan issue highlighted Moscow’s deep concerns regarding Taiwan’s future in Russia’s strategic matrix in the western Pacific.

Whatever the case, the Taiwan issue was back in uncharted waters.

Soviet Collapse 30 Years After:

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 “was a tragedy for the vast majority of the country’s citizens,” [lamented](#) Putin as part of a TV

documentary on modern Russian history aired shortly before the 30th anniversary of that event. This was not the first time that Putin lamented the Soviet fall. In 2005, he [called](#) the event “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” (крупнейшей геополитической катастрофой века). Putin’s nostalgia led to the [assertion](#) by US Undersecretary of State Victoria Nuland that the Kremlin wanted to recreate the Soviet Union. “Mrs. Nuland understands perfectly well that the restoration of the Soviet Union is impossible,” Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov [responded](#).

For Zhao Huasheng, a leading Russologist in Shanghai, the Soviet fall [meant](#) a structural change of the international system, not necessarily along a linear trajectory but like a pendulum after its peak (unipolarity and liberal international order), to another round of the Cold War primarily with China.

Russia, however, was never outside this new round of the Cold War, or hot peace. On Dec. 17, Russia officially presented to NATO [draft documents](#) on comprehensive security guarantees, including the principles of equal security and no further eastward expansion by NATO, which, according to Peskov, “[a matter of life and death for us](#).”

“The boot is on the other foot every 30 years” (三十年河东三十年河西), goes a popular Chinese saying. The new Cold War, however, “won’t be a simple repetition of the old one,” argued Zhao Huasheng at the 30th anniversary of the Soviet collapse on Christmas Day 1991. “It [will be colder](#) in some aspects,” added Zhao.

Both China and Russia had in three decades departed significantly from their political extremes and returned, to different degrees, to their cultural/religious heritages: Confucianism for China (CCP as the “[Chinese Civilization Party](#),” according to Mahbubani) and “moderate conservatism” for Russia with a hefty dose of Eastern Orthodoxy. Meanwhile, de-ideologization in foreign policy meant a historical return to Westphalianism of noninterference in each other’s domestic affairs, the foundation of the modern world system of sovereign states, allowing a steady improvement of their bilateral ties.

The 30th anniversary of the Soviet implosion, however, played out very differently for Washington, which found itself battling China

and Russia abroad and politico-ideological polarization at home. This was ironic in that both Moscow and Beijing were friends of Washington 30 years ago.

For China and Russia, the [weakening](#) of the international system meant uncertainty and insecurity, fueled by a toxic mix of the pandemic, populism, and the proliferation of WMD of all kinds, and the inclusion of AI. In early November, Henry Kissinger, architect of the Cold War strategic triangle between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing, [warned](#) against the catastrophic prospect of a US-China conflict due to miscalculation, AI, and nuclear weapons.

It is unlikely that the three large powers will return to the good old days of the Cold War “[long peace](#).” At the onset of 2022, however, a glimpse of hope appeared when five permanent members of the UNSC signed [a joint statement](#) pledging that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” It remains to be seen if this unusual joint action by the world’s most powerful nations will reduce the stress in a highly stressful world in the new year.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER—DECEMBER 2021

Sept. 3, 2021: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov [send](#) their statements to the Fort Dong Ning Museum in China's northeastern Heilongjiang Province to commemorate the last battle of the Soviet Red Army in World War II.

Sept. 3, 2021: Shanghai Cooperation Organization finance ministers [hold](#) fourth meeting via videoconferencing chaired by SCO's rotating chair Tajikistan.

Sept. 9, 2021: BRICS leaders [hold](#) 13th summit via video, with a joint statement issued after the meeting. Russia, Brazil, South Africa and India supported the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. China took over the chair of the 14th BRICS summit in 2022.

Sept. 15, 2021: Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng [meets](#) Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Denisov in Beijing. They discussed Afghanistan and other bilateral and global issues.

Sept. 16–17, 2021: SCO [holds](#) the 21st session of its heads of state, via videoconference, in Dushanbe under the chairmanship of President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon. Russian President Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping participated via videoconference. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov on the sidelines of the summit. An informal meeting on Afghanistan [was held](#) by Chinese, Russian, Pakistani and Iranian foreign ministers on the sidelines of the SCO summit.

Sept. 16–17, 2021: SCO and CSTO [hold](#) a first-ever joint meeting of the heads of state in Dushanbe. Putin and Xi Jinping joined the meeting via video. The goal was to join forces to ensure security and stability in Eurasia, particularly regarding the uncertainties in the post-US Afghanistan.

Sept. 20–24, 2021: SCO [conducts](#) "Peace Mission 2021," a counter-terrorism military exercise, at the training range in the Orenburg Region in Russia's southern Urals. 5,500 troops, including 550 Chinese servicemen and, for the first time, Belarusian units, participated. Anti-drone warfare was part of the annual drill.

Sept. 21–22, 2021: Chinese, Russian and Pakistani special envoys [visit](#) Kabul and met the acting head of Afghanistan's Taliban-led government, Mullah Muhammad Hassan Akhund.

Sept. 21–Oct. 4, 2021: SCO law enforcement forces [hold](#) second stage of "Pabbi Antiterror-2021" Joint Anti-Terrorism Exercise (JATE) in the Pakistani city of Pabbi. The first stage of the drill was conducted by simulated exchanging, sharing, collection, and evaluation of anti-terrorism intelligence within SCO members' borders. India [did not join](#) the exercise.

Oct. 1, 2021: Putin [sends](#) telegram to Xi on the 72nd anniversary of the establishment of the PRC.

Oct. 7, 2021: Chinese and Russian foreign ministers [release](#) a joint statement to the UN calling for the US to abide by a UN convention on biological weapons.

Oct. 11, 2021: President Xi [sends](#) a message of condolence to President Putin over the crash of a Russian plane.

Oct. 12, 2021: Russian FM Lavrov [says](#) that "Russia, like the overwhelming majority of other countries, considers Taiwan to be part of the People's Republic of China. We have proceeded and will proceed from this premise in our foreign policy."

Oct. 13, 2021: Putin [tells](#) CNBC's Hadley Gamble that China "does not need to use force" to achieve its desired "reunification" with Taiwan. Regarding the South China Sea, Putin said that "we need to provide an opportunity for all countries in the region, without interference from the non-regional powers, to have a proper conversation based on the fundamental norms of international law..." Putin's Taiwan remarks [were not](#) part of the Kremlin official transcript.

Oct. 14, 2021: At the initiative of India, the SCO [holds](#) its first seminar, via video conference, on the role of women in the armed forces.

Oct. 14-17, 2021: Russian and Chinese navies [conduct](#) Maritime Interaction 2021 off the Peter the Great Gulf in the Sea of Japan.

Oct. 17-23, 2021: Ten Russian and Chinese warships, which just concluded the Maritime Interaction 2021 naval drill in the Sea of Japan, [conduct](#) first-ever joint patrol around the Japanese archipelago.

Oct. 26, 2021: State Duma [ratifies](#) a protocol extending, until Dec. 16, 2030, a Russia-China deal on notifying each other of ballistic missile and carrier rocket launches.

Oct. 30, 2021: Lavrov and Wang [meet](#) in Rome on the sidelines of the G20 summit. Putin and Xi decline to join the meeting. The two diplomats praised the state of the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership and proposed convening a UNSC permanent members' summit.

Nov. 3, 2021: Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu [speaks](#) with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov on the phone about the Iran nuclear issue.

Nov. 8, 2021: Russia and China [sign](#) contract for the joint development of a heavy helicopter, Andrey Boginsky, head of the Russian Helicopters holding, says at a meeting with Putin.

Nov. 10, 2021: Cheng Guoping, external security commissioner of China's Foreign Ministry, [meets](#) in Beijing with Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Denisov. They had an in-depth exchange on issues such as China-Russia relations and global counter-terrorism cooperation.

Nov. 11, 2021: Envoys of the Troika Plus meeting (Russia, Pakistan, China, and the US) [meet](#) in Islamabad, urging the Taliban to cut ties with terrorist groups and deprive them of the opportunity to act on Afghan territory.

Nov. 16, 2021: China-Russia Consortium Global Space Weather Center [is](#) operational. It monitors space weather events including solar activities and releases advisories for aviation operators, and provides services for aviation operators around the world. This is the fourth such center approved by the UN International Civil Aviation Organization to coordinate platforms in civil aviation. The other three are run by an Australian, Canadian, French, and Japanese consortium; a European consortium; and the United States.

Nov. 19, 2021: Two Russian Tu-95MC and two Chinese H-6K strategic bombers [conduct](#) their third joint air patrol over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea in the Asia-Pacific region.

Nov. 19, 2021: Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, and US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley [exchange](#) views on the Iranian nuclear issue via a videoconference.

Nov. 23, 2021: Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe [holds](#) videoconference with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, who reportedly [tells](#) Wei that US bombers approaching Russia's Far East also threaten China.

Nov. 25, 2021: SCO [holds](#) its 20th prime ministerial meeting via videoconference. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang joined the meeting.

Nov. 26, 2021: Russian, Indian, and Chinese foreign ministers [hold](#) their 18th meeting via videoconference. A joint statement was issued after the meeting.

Nov. 26, 2021: Putin and Xi [send](#) congratulations in the closing of the Sino-Russian Year of Scientific and Technological Innovation.

Nov. 26, 2021: Xi [sends](#) condolences to Putin after a coal mine explosion in Russia that caused heavy casualties.

Nov. 26, 2021: Russian and Chinese ambassadors to the US (Anatoly Antonov and Qin Gang) jointly [publish](#) an article in *National Interest* regarding the US-sponsored democracy summit.

Nov. 29, 2021: Xi and Putin [send](#) congratulatory messages to the 3rd Sino-Russian energy forum.

Nov. 29, 2021: Li Zhanshu, head of China's parliament, delivers a speech at CSTO's Parliamentary Assembly via video link at the invitation of Vyacheslav Volodin, chairman of the CSTO Parliamentary Assembly and the Russian State Duma. Li called for flexible, diverse cooperation with CSTO.

Nov. 30, 2021: Putin [discusses](#) China during an investment forum in Russia. Speaking highly of China's development and Russian-China relations, Putin also strongly criticized US-led alliances and sanctions against China.

Nov. 30, 2021: Chinese Premier Li Keqiang [holds](#) the 26th Regular Meeting with Russian Prime Minister Mishustin via videoconference, where they focused on economic and other bilateral issues. A joint statement [was issued](#) after the meeting.

Dec. 2, 2021: Chinese Vice FM Le Yucheng and Russian Deputy FM Morgulov Igor Vladimirovich [hold](#) video conference. Both criticized the US-sponsored Democracy Summit.

Dec. 8, 2021: Vice FM Ma Zhaoxu, Russian Deputy FM Sergei Ryabkov and US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley [hold](#) a teleconference on the Iranian nuclear issue.

Dec. 15, 2021: Putin [holds](#) talks, via videoconference, with Xi Jinping.

Dec. 28, 2021: Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Chernyshenko [says](#) that countries staging a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics should have their flags and anthems removed while taking part in the spectacle.

Dec. 30, 2021: Chinese FM Wang Yi [pens](#) article in *People's Daily* opposing "color revolutions" in central Asia.

Dec. 31, 2021: Xi and Putin [exchange](#) New Year's messages.

PACIFIC  FORUM

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

INDIA-EAST ASIA RELATIONS

FOCUSED ON THE “QUAD” AND BORDER DISPUTES WITH CHINA

SATU LIMAYE, EAST WEST CENTER IN WASHINGTON

India's relations with East Asia during 2021 were characterized by two major developments; increasing interaction with the United States, Japan, and Australia as part of the “Quad” and painstaking efforts at border disengagement and dispute management with China. Within these preoccupations, India continued a robust if undramatic set of engagements (mostly virtually) across East Asia. India's active East Asia engagements were notable, coming as they did amid New Delhi taking up a nonpermanent seat of the United Nations Security Council, finding its footing with the new Biden administration, addressing a February coup next door in Myanmar, battling a major wave of the delta variant of the COVID-19 virus, and contending with the fallout of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer, as well as participating in the COP26 Summit and the Summit for Democracies that President Biden hosted at the end of the year.

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India & the Quad and AUKUS

Numerous interactions of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“Quad”) involving senior officials, foreign ministers, and leaders occurred during 2021, picking up on the activity in 2020 but kicking it up a notch with a virtual meeting of leaders in March followed by an in-person meeting of the four leaders in September in Washington, DC. In February, US Secretary of State Blinken and his three counterparts from Australia, Japan, and India held a 90-minute call resulting in the release of four separate statements focusing on Myanmar and the coup there two weeks prior. According to the [US statement](#), the ministers expressed “the urgent need to restore the democratically elected government in Burma ...” and reiterated commitment to ASEAN centrality. The Australian [statement](#) said that “... we reiterated our serious concerns about the military coup in Myanmar and affirmed our commitment to its democratic transition” while the Indian statement stated that “[i]n the discussion pertaining to recent developments in Myanmar, the upholding of rule of law and the democratic transition was reiterated by India.” The Japan Foreign Ministry [statement](#) on Myanmar was most specific and was the only Quad statement to mention China, expressing serious concern with regard to the new China Coast Guard Law.”

In March a landmark virtual summit of the four Quad leaders was held, resulting in the five-paragraph “[Spirit of the Quad](#)” joint statement and a fact sheet. The Spirit of the Quad began by acknowledging “diverse perspectives” but a “commitment to quadrilateral cooperation” and a “shared vision for the free and open Indo-Pacific ... anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion.” The statement also announced plans to “establish a vaccine expert working group to implement our path-breaking commitment to safe and effective vaccine distribution; ... a critical- and emerging-technology working group to facilitate cooperation on international standards and innovative technologies of the future; and ... a climate working group to strengthen climate actions globally on mitigation, adaptation, resilience, technology, capacity-building, and climate finance.” The meaning and substance of the effort was clear, notwithstanding carefully worded diplomatic language: the quadrilateral was emerging as the leading grouping for the four countries’ cooperative engagement as an alternative to China and superseding their

continuing respective engagement in ASEAN-led organizations.

In September, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Japanese and Australian counterparts traveled to the United States for the first in-person meeting of Quad leaders. The joint statement of the meeting reviewed progress on announcements made in March, and a [fact sheet](#) addressed “ending the COVID-19 pandemic, including by increasing production and access to safe and effective vaccines; promoting high-standards infrastructure; combatting the climate crisis; partnering on emerging technologies, space, and cybersecurity; and cultivating next-generation talent in all of our countries.”

The September Quad Leaders’ Summit took place just a week after the announcement of AUKUS. Inevitably, India was asked to address both Quad and the recently announced Australia-UK-US trilateral security partnership (AUKUS) and what, if any, relationship existed between the two. India’s Foreign Secretary explained that “the Quad and the AUKUS are not groupings of a similar nature” with the Quad being focused on a “positive proactive agenda ... designed to cater to the requirements of the Indo-Pacific region.” He continued that “AUKUS is a security alliance between three countries. We are not party to this alliance. From our perspective, this is neither relevant to the Quad, nor will it have any impact on its functioning.” Regarding AUKUS’ impact on nuclear proliferation, Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla carefully noted that “I saw that the Australians have clarified that they are working on a nuclear-propelled submarine that means propulsion is based on nuclear technology, but it would not have any nuclear weapons and as such will not be in contravention with any of Australia’s or international commitments with regard to the issue of nuclear proliferation. But this as I’m saying is what I’ve seen, and I’m not saying it from any other perspective.” India’s External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar also “de-hyphenated” the Quad and AUKUS, telling an Indian interviewer “[w]ell, look, I’m not part of AUKUS. So, what AUKUS says, doesn’t say [is] for them to, to decide ... But very frankly, I don’t see a particular connection between any of that and the Quad ... it’s not that there’s any understanding that the four Quad countries, only deal among themselves. Everybody deals with everybody else.”

Both in the context of the Quad and bilaterally, India's relations with Australia and Japan were active during the year.

India-Australia

Though Prime Minister Modi and his Australian counterpart Scott Morrison had their first and only in-person meeting in the US on the sidelines of the United Nations meeting and first Quad leaders' summit, the first-ever India-Australia foreign and defense ministers' dialogue, or "2+2 Dialogue" was an important development during 2021. Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne and Defense Minister Peter Dutton traveled to New Delhi in September to participate. For now, the declared intention is to "[realize the full potential](#)" of the [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership \(CSP\)](#) that was agreed to during a June 2020 Leaders' Virtual Summit. In September 2021 New Delhi and Canberra stated that "the intention to expand cooperation under the 2+2 framework and to meet at least once in every two years to maintain the momentum." On defense and security issues, there were no major new initiatives announced though Australia "invited India to participate in future *Talisman Sabre* exercises, to empower operational compatibility between their [defense] services." For now, *Exercise Malabar* is the key bilateral defense interaction and both sides welcomed "the continued participation of Australia ..." The two countries did agree to "explor[e] longer-term reciprocal arrangements [for operational logistics support]" and "reinforce each other's maritime domain awareness through information sharing and practical cooperation." In this spirit, the ministers "welcomed the presence of a Liaison Officer from Australia at the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region near New Delhi." While both countries flagged "growing maritime challenges" and specifically cited their June 2020 Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, specific reference in the "2+2" was made only to "build on existing commitments to combat challenges such as marine litter and single-use plastic waste, and target Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing." The aspirational tone was evident in the agreement to "*endeavor to increase* [emphasis added] cooperation in various [defense] technologies and continue the dialogue between the Defence Research & Development Organization of India and Defence Science & Technology Group of Australia." In terms of advancing together cooperation in the region, India's External

Affairs minister specifically referred to "our trilaterals with Japan, France and Indonesia and will hold these dialogues soon." However, in the wake of AUKUS, it is not clear if the latter two trilaterals might be further delayed (one meeting scheduled for September 2021 was not held).



Figure 2 Leaders at the India-Australia 2 + 2 Ministers Meeting. Photo: Twitter/@DrSJaishankar

On AUKUS, there was little in the public domain about India-Australia discussions on the agreement. Indian Foreign Secretary Shringla, [briefing the press](#) following the Modi-Morrison in-person meeting in the US, simply said that "... Prime Minister Morrison did briefly mention, you know, the rationale from the Australian side, in seeking to initiate the AUKUS alliance. He felt that the technology that they received was appropriate and you know, there was a brief discussion in that regard."

India-Japan

Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister of Japan Suga Yoshihide also met in person on the sidelines of the Quad meeting in Washington in September—though they had held a number of telephone calls and officials of the two governments had numerous topic-specific exchanges. Despite both high- and working-level meetings, however, India and Japan did not announce any major new initiatives, but reiterated mutual interest in enhancing "bilateral security and defense cooperation including the areas of defense equipment and technologies." Much of the [briefing](#) from Indian officials on the summit covered economic and development issues including the "Supply Chain Resilience Initiative" between India, Japan, and

Australia, skills development, a “Specified Skilled Workers Agreement,” and the India-Japan Digital Partnership.

In October, Modi and new Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio had a telephone call in which they expressed “satisfaction at the rapid progress in the Special Strategic and Global Partnership between India and Japan” and “agreed on the potential to further enhance cooperation in a variety of areas, including in high-technology and futuristic sectors” and “discussed the increasing alignment of perspectives, and robust cooperation, between India and Japan in the Indo-Pacific region. They reviewed the progress of cooperation under the Quad framework in this regard.” Prime Minister Modi “invited Japanese companies to benefit from India’s economic reforms through greater investment” and for Kishida to visit India at his “earliest convenience for a bilateral Summit meeting.”

India & China

As discussed in [last year’s assessment](#), 2020, the 70th year of official ties, was the worst year in bilateral India-China relations since the Border War of October 1962. While 2020 closed with a September foreign ministers-level joint statement agreeing to begin disengagement along their disputed border, the process during 2021 was painstaking, and press releases by the two governments of a range of meetings appear to reveal distinctly different degrees of satisfaction and interpretation both specifically on the border issue, and overall bilateral relations.

On the disputed border, three rounds of negotiation, the 21st, 22nd, and 23rd of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on border affairs, were held via videolink in March, June, and November respectively. In March, an [official Chinese statement](#) said the two sides “appraised the disengagement of the front-line troops of both countries in the Bangong Lake area ...” While [India’s MEA press release for the March 2021](#) meeting noted the disengagement on the north and south sides of the lake, it also highlighted discussions on the Western sector, which the Chinese statement did not. In June, the Chinese [statement](#) said the two countries “... agreed to consolidate the disengagement progress of the border troops of the two countries and properly settle the remaining issues in the western sector of the

China-India boundary ...” [India’s statement](#) appeared to be less satisfied, saying the “two sides had a *frank exchange of views* [emphasis added] on the situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Western Sector of the India-China Border areas” and went on to say that “[b]oth sides agreed on the *need to find an early resolution* [emphasis added] to the remaining issues along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh ...” In November, a [readout](#) on the Chinese embassy website noted that India and China had “agreed to consolidate the existing outcomes of the disengagement, strictly abide by the agreements and protocols and the consensus reached between the two sides, prevent the situation on the ground from relapsing.” The 23rd meeting in November appeared to highlight even greater differences. While the Chinese spoke of an agreement “to consolidate existing outcomes of the disengagement,” India’s press release said the “two sides should continue their discussions to resolve the remaining issues along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh” and that “the two sides had candid and in-depth discussions on the situation along the LAC in Western Sector.” Other engagements regarding border disputes included the 12th and 13th meetings of the India-China Corps Commanders in August and October, respectively. A 14th round of the India-China Corps Commanders meetings is pending.

A readout of an hour-long meeting between India’s External Affairs Minister Dr. S Jaishankar and PRC State Councilor Wang Yi on the sidelines of the Sept. 16 SCO Summit in Dushanbe highlighted discussion on border disengagement as well as the overall state of bilateral relations. The Chinese official [readout](#) stated that “the frontier troops of both countries disengaged in the Galwan Valley and the Pangong Lake areas, and the overall situation in the border area was de-escalated.” However, it was noted that “China-India relations still stay at a low level, which is not in the interest of either side.” In Beijing’s view, “the rights and wrongs of what happened in the China-India border area last year are very clear and the responsibility does not lie with the Chinese side.” According to the [Chinese readout](#), “[India’s EAM] Subrahmanyam Jaishankar agreed with Wang Yi’s general assessment of China-India relations ... India has not changed and does not want to change the strategic assessment of India-China relations. India is willing to work with China to push bilateral relations out of a slump.”

An Indian [readout](#) offered starkly different perspectives. India's MEA statement noted that "two sides had made some progress in the resolution of the remaining issues along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh and had completed disengagement in the Gogra area. However, there were still some outstanding issues that needed to be resolved." India's External Affairs minister continued to press for an "early resolution of the remaining issues along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh ..." in order to address the "low ebb" of relations and stated that "a prolongation of the existing situation was not in the interest of ... either side as it was impacting the relationship in a negative manner." He also "underlined that it was necessary to ensure progress in resolution of remaining issues so as to restore peace and tranquility along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh noting that *peace and tranquility in the border areas has been an essential basis for progress in the bilateral relations* [emphasis added]." In framing overall bilateral relations, Jaishankar "conveyed that India had never subscribed to any clash of [civilizations] theory. He said that India and China had to deal with each other on merits and establish a relationship based on mutual respect. For this, it was necessary that China avoid viewing our bilateral relations from the perspective of its relations with third countries."

The bottom line is that during 2021 India-China relations inched along the path of disengagement and de-escalation along their disputed borders. The two sides have fundamental differences not only relating to the border, but the role and sequencing of border issues in the overall relationship, with China seeking to make border issues one element of overall relations and India emphasizing border progress as key to overall relations. This is not a new pattern and remains the framework of what has become an increasingly troubled, and yet ongoing and interactive relationship.

It is worth noting, however, that despite deeply troubled bilateral relations, India and China continued exchanges together in the Russia, India, and China or RIC format, and in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Specifically, for example, the [18th round](#) of the Foreign Ministers of the Russian Federation, the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China (RIC) conference via videolink in late November included a 35-paragraph communique on issues ranging from the global pandemic to Syria. In late April, India's External Affairs minister called Wang Yi to thank him "for

his sentiments and apprised him of the ongoing efforts to meet the challenge posed by the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic in India." External Affairs Minister Jaishankar "highlighted ... that Indian entities were already in the process of commercially procuring required products and raw materials from suppliers in China [and] this process would be facilitated if various transport corridors and cargo flights remained open and the necessary logistics support ensured expeditiously." Foreign Minister Wang Yi reportedly said China "would ensure that all the required materials flow to Indian entities without any delay ... Chinese companies would be encouraged and supported to deliver requisite materials ... [a]irports, customs and airlines would also be instructed to smoothly facilitate movement of goods ... [c]hartered flights from India would be welcome and specific problems raised by the Indian side sorted out quickly."

India-Southeast Asia/ASEAN Relations

India-ASEAN relations in 2021 were almost entirely virtual and devoid of any major developments. India's engagements with specific with ASEAN member countries were notable; especially those with Vietnam and Myanmar.



Figure 2 The 18th India ASEAN Virtual Summit Photo: ASEAN

In August, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar attended virtually the ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting and East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting. India's Minister of State for Commerce and Industry, Anupriya Patel, attended the "ASEAN Economic Ministers + India Consultations" held virtually in September 2021. The main high-level interaction was the 18th India-ASEAN Summit, held virtually, on Oct. 28. An [official Indian account](#) of the interaction highlighted the upcoming 30th anniversary of the India-ASEAN partnership in 2022 and declared it the India-ASEAN Friendship Year and mentioned "the synergies between the

ASEAN Outlook for the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)." On the cusp of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership coming into effect, Prime Minister Modi "underlined the importance of diversification and resilience of supply chains for post-COVID economic recovery and in this regard, the need to revamp the India-ASEAN FTA." Earlier in the year, India's Minister of Commerce & Industry, Consumer Affairs & Food & Public Distribution and Textiles, Piyush Goyal, complained strongly about India-ASEAN trade and called for a series of actions.

India-Myanmar Relations

India's immediate response to the military coup in Myanmar on Feb. 1 expressed "deep concern," reiterated India's "always steadfast support for the process of democratic transition" and said that India believes "the rule of law and democratic process must be upheld."

Throughout the year, India addressed the Myanmar situation in the course of relations with third parties, including Quad members and others. For example, at the June meeting of the East Asia Summit (EAS) Senior Officials Meeting, an Indian official "expressed India's support for the ASEAN process and conveyed that as a friend and close [neighbor] of Myanmar, India will continue to play a constructive and meaningful role in resolving the current situation there."

Perhaps the most important event in India-Myanmar relations during the year took place in late December. India's Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla paid a two-day working visit to Myanmar for discussions on humanitarian support, security and India-Myanmar border concerns, and the political situation in Myanmar with the State Administration Council, political parties, and members of civil society. In the midst of the visit, an Indian MEA [briefing](#) highlighted the expected issues of democracy, Indian adherence to the ASEAN approach based on the five-point consensus, shared development projects, and importantly raised the issue of a recent ambush in southern Manipur state. Given the long-running issue of northeastern rebel groups allegedly using Myanmar to launch attacks within India, the MEA statement pointed out that both countries "reiterated their commitment to ensure that their respective territories would not be allowed to be used for any activities inimical to the other."

India-Vietnam

India and Vietnam relations were also active during the year. In January, the 13th India-Vietnam Defense Security Dialogue was held virtually. Reportedly, "new areas of [defense] cooperation were also discussed" but not specified or announced. In March, New Delhi and Hanoi held consultations on UNSC issues given their overlap as nonpermanent members of the UNSC during the year. A 2nd India-Vietnam Maritime Security Dialogue was held in April. And Modi and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh spoke by phone in July after the latter's appointment and highlighted that 2022 would mark the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations.

India-Republic of Korea

India and Korea continued to maintain engagement in the midst of the pandemic. On Jan. 8, the two held their first high-level consultation on global issues. This was especially useful given India's role starting in 2021 as a nonpermanent member of the UN Security Council during 2021 and 2022. A statement on the consultations noted that the "Korean side asked for continued attention and support of India, a new non-permanent member of the Security Council, regarding the Korean Peninsula peace process" including "preparations for the 2021 UN Peacekeeping Ministerial to be held in Korea in December 2021." Another area of discussion was UN peacekeeping in which the "Korean side went on to ask India, a significant contributor in the area of peacekeeping, to participate and cooperate actively for the success of the '2021 UN Peacekeeping Ministerial' to be hosted by Korea in early December 2021." India, for its part, explained that its priorities in its role at the UN were "a focus on counter-terrorism, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, and maritime security." Both sides agreed to hold such consultations on a "regular" basis without providing a specific date.

In March, ROK's new Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong had his [first telephone call](#) with India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar. They "took note that the two countries have maintained their special strategic partnership at the highest level based on the deep friendship and trust between President Moon Jae-in and Prime Minister Narendra Modi ..." and agreed to "actively seek ways to resume high-level exchanges, including the foreign ministerial

joint committee meeting and the foreign and defense (2+2) vice-ministerial meeting, as soon as the COVID-19 situation improves.” Also in March, India and Korea together participated in the [15th round of consultations](#) among the US, Japan, Australia, India, Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam on COVID-19 response issues. While not defense or strategic related per se, such a grouping of allies and close partners creates an additional web of linkages among key Indo-Pacific countries.

The highest-level in-person meeting between India and the ROK occurred on March 26-27 when Minister of Defense Suh Wook traveled to New Delhi for meetings with his counterpart Rajnath Singh. According to a [statement](#) issued by Korea after the meeting, “[b]oth Ministers noted that the ‘Roadmap for Defence Industries Cooperation between the Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea’ signed last year created a mutually beneficial framework for bilateral cooperation” and “Minister Suh also asked Minister Singh and the Indian government’s special attention on the Biho anti-aircraft defense system where Korean companies are invested as well as export of minesweepers, etc.”

India and the ROK continued defense and security discussions between their respective national security secretariats as well, with an in-person visit by Second Deputy Director of National Security, Kim Hyoungh-zhin to New Delhi in early December for the 3rd India-Republic of Korea Strategic Dialogue. A statement affirmed that “[b]oth sides agreed to further strengthen and deepen mutually beneficial strategic cooperation” including emphasis on “[indigenization], joint development and joint production in the [defense] sector” and “[p]artnership in critical and high technologies and supply chain resilience...”

India & The Pacific Islands Region

India continued to remain engaged in the Pacific Islands region as well. In April, India and New Zealand held the 3rd Round of Foreign Office Consultations. In June, India’s Minister of State for External Affairs and the Vice President & Minister of State of the Republic of Palau held a virtual interaction to review bilateral relations and cooperation through the Forum for India Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC). Another important Pacific Islands region meeting was the signing of India-Fiji MoU for cooperation in the

field of agriculture and allied sectors. It was announced that under the MoU, a Joint Working Group would be established. And in November India and the Federated States of Micronesia reviewed bilateral relations.

Conclusion

Given all of India’s other preoccupations during the year (the Delta variant COVID-19 crisis and the Afghanistan end game), India managed fairly robust engagement with and regarding East Asia during 2021. Much of this was proactively driven by new Biden administration’s initiative to advance the Quad. The other major element was essentially defensively driven: handling the India-China border forces’ disengagement and dispute management resulting from the previous year’s clashes. As politics and policies unfold in the Quad member countries, much official effort will have to be expended to sustain and further advance the baselines established for Quad cooperation, and so, too, for AUKUS. How this effort proceeds will be an important variable shaping India’s engagement with East Asia both via the Quad but also bilaterally. Similarly, the trajectory of India-China relations seems to point toward an unshakeable “strategic distrust” and “strategic competition” but perhaps it can be handled as intense but managed competition without another kinetic flare up. There are few bright spots for India’s economic engagement with East Asia via RCEP or CPTPP. Whether arrangements with the US and other Quad countries can compensate for India’s lack of membership in other trade and commercial arrangements (e.g., APEC) remains to be seen.

CHRONOLOGY OF INDIA-EAST ASIA RELATIONS

JANUARY—DECEMBER 2021

Jan. 8, 2021: First Korea-India High-level Policy Consultation on Global Issues [is held](#).

Jan. 12, 2021: 13th India-Vietnam Defense Security Dialogue is co-chaired by Indian Defense Secretary Dr. Ajay Kumar and his Vietnamese counterpart Sr. Lt. Gen. Nguyen Chi Vinh, deputy Defense minister.

Jan. 20, 2021: India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and Singapore's Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen, hold 5th India-Singapore Defense Ministers' Dialogue. A [statement](#) issued after the meeting highlights "the Signing of the Implementing Agreement on Submarine Rescue Support and Cooperation ... between the Indian Navy and Republic of Singapore Navy."

Jan. 28, 2021: India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar [outlines](#) stabilization of Sino-Indian relation's three determinants (mutual respect, mutual sensitivity, and mutual interest) and eight principles (adherence to past agreements in their entirety; strict observance and respect for the LAC; maintenance of peace and tranquility in border areas; recognition that a multi-polar Asia is an essential constituent of a multi-polar world; reciprocity in relationships; pursuit of aspirations by both with sensitivity; management of divergences and disputes; and taking the long view) in a keynote speech at the 13th All India Conference of China Studies.

Jan. 28, 2021: India and Japan [hold](#) 5th round of "Act East Forum," which focuses on cooperation in India's northeast states.

Feb. 1, 2021: India [issues](#) three-sentence statement on the military coup in Myanmar, noting "developments ... with deep concern" and expressing the belief that "the rule of law and democratic process must be upheld."

Feb. 17, 2021: Ninth Round of India-Japan Consultations on Disarmament, Non-Proliferation and Export Control are [held](#) virtually.

Feb. 18, 2021: India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Brunei Second Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohd. Yusof [hold](#) a telephone consultation "to take stock of bilateral relations."

Feb. 18, 2021: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and foreign ministers of Australia, India, and Japan (the "Quad") [speak](#) together for the first time since the Biden administration began.

Feb. 21, 2021: 10th Round of the India-China Corps Commanders Level meeting [is held](#) online.

Feb. 24, 2021: India, Australia, and France Trilateral Senior Officials Meeting [reviews](#) and discusses cooperation on Maritime Security, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Blue Economy, Protection of Marine Global Commons, Combating Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) Fishing, and Cooperation in Multilateral forums.

Feb. 26, 2021: India's External Minister S. Jaishankar and China's State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi [hold](#) a 75-minute telephone call in which they discuss border disputes, dis-engagement after clashes in 2020, and agree to establish a hotline.

March 9, 2021: India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, and ROK's new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chung Eui-yong, hold their first telephone consultation.

March 9, 2021: India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi [holds](#) telephone call with Japan's Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide.

March 12, 2021: India and China [hold](#) the 21st meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Cooperation on Border Affairs via video.

March 12, 2021: First Quad Virtual Leaders' Summit [releases](#) a Joint Statement "The Spirit of the Quad" and the [publication](#) of a more detailed fact sheet.

March 26–27, 2021: ROK Minister of Defense Suh Wook [visits](#) India for talks with India's Defense Minister, Rajnath Singh.

April 6, 2021: India and Vietnam [hold](#) second maritime security dialogue in a virtual format.

April 9, 2021: Government of India [issues](#) a statement regarding the passage of United States navy ship, the *USS John Paul Jones*, through India's exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

April 10, 2021: 11th Round of the India-China Corps Commanders conference [held](#) online.

April 26, 2021: Prime Minister Modi and US President Biden [have](#) phone conversation on bilateral and international issues.

April 26, 2021: Modi and Japan's Prime Minister Suga [speak](#) by phone on a range of topics.

April 28, 2021: 23rd India-ASEAN Senior Officials meeting is [held](#) online.

April 30, 2021: India's EAM S. Jaishankar and China's FM Wang Yi [spoke](#) by phone to discuss cooperation on the second wave of COVID-19 emergency in India, as well as border disputes.

May 4, 2021: India, Australia, and France [hold](#) their first-ever trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the G7 foreign ministers meeting in London. A Joint Statement is released but not available on the Australia DFAT website as of Dec. 21, 2021.

May 6, 2021: India issues statement noting US support for the initiative of India and South Africa at the World Trade Organization (WTO) for relaxation in norms of the agreement on TRIPS.

May 7, 2021: PM Modi and Australian PM Scott Morrison [have](#) a telephone call in which Modi "sought Australia's support for the initiative taken at the WTO by India and South Africa to seek a temporary waiver under TRIPS in [the] context [of the second wave of COVID-19]."

May 24–28, 2021: Jaishankar [visits](#) the US for discussions with Secretary of State Blinken, other Cabinet members and senior officials of the Biden administration dealing with bilateral relations. He has interactions with business forums on economic and COVID-related cooperation between India and the US.

May 25, 2021: India and New Zealand [hold](#) the third round of foreign office consultations.

June 10, 2021: India's Minister of State (MoS) for External Affairs and Parliamentary Affairs Shri V. Muraleedharan [holds](#) virtual meeting with Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia H.E. Mahendra Siregar. MoS thanked the Indonesian government for relief materials sent to India for fighting COVID19. Both leaders expressed commitment to further strengthen India-Indonesia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

June 17, 2021: MoS V. Muraleedharan and Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of Singapore Sim Ann [hold](#) a virtual interaction. MoS "thanked the Singaporean government for facilitating supply of relief material, especially oxygen tanks, which were sent to India for fighting the COVID19 pandemic." They also "expressed commitment to further strengthen India-Singapore Strategic Partnership."

June 22, 2021: India and Fiji [sign](#) an MoU for cooperation in agriculture and allied sectors.

June 25, 2021: India and Indonesia [hold](#) sixth round of foreign office-level consultations following a gap of almost two years. They review the state of their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and strengthen their Shared Vision of Maritime Co-operation in the Indo-Pacific.

June 28, 2021: MoS V. Muraleedharan, [holds](#) virtual interaction with Vice President and Minister of State, J. Uduch Sengebau Senior, of the Republic of Palau. The Ministers reviewed bilateral relations including through the Forum for India Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC).

July 10, 2021: PM Modi [has](#) phone call with Pham Minh Chinh, prime minister of Vietnam. Modi congratulated Pham Minh Chinh on his appointment as prime minister, expressed confidence that the India-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership will continue to become stronger, that the India-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership can contribute to promoting regional stability, prosperity, and development, as well as their similar vision of an open, inclusive, peaceful, and rules-based Indian Ocean Region, thanking him for assistance during the second wave of COVID-19 in India, and noting that 2022 will mark 50 years of bilateral relations and invites the Vietnamese prime minister for a visit.

July 14–16, 2021: India's foreign secretary travels to New York for meetings at the United Nations, including a meeting with the US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas Greenfield.

July 14, 2021: India's Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar [holds](#) meetings with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

July 27–28, 2021: Blinken makes first trip to India as secretary of State. He [meets](#) External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, national security advisor and holds a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Modi. Jaishankar [said](#) at a post-meeting media briefing that “On the other side of India, the Indo Pacific presents a different set of challenges to stability, growth and prosperity. Under the aegis of the quad framework, we are engaged on maritime security, HADR counterterrorism, connectivity and infrastructure, cyber and digital concerns, COVID-19 response, climate action, education, and resilient and reliable supply chains. The secretary and I discussed not only opportunities for further collaboration on all these issues, but also the importance of observing international law, rules and norms, including UNCLOS. Our ability to work more closely, bilaterally, in the Quad and elsewhere, benefits the international community as a whole.”

July 31, 2021: India and China [conduct](#) the 12th round of talks between their corps commanders at Chushul Moldo Meeting Point in Eastern Ladakh.

Aug. 2–6, 2021: Former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott [visits](#) India in capacity of Australian prime minister's special trade envoy for India. On Aug. 5, he meets Modi to discuss ways to strengthen bilateral trade, investment and economic cooperation to realize the full potential of the India-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

Aug. 6, 2021: India [issues](#) statement on India-China “Disengagement at Patrolling Point 17A” in the wake of the 12th round of Corps Commanders talks. It says “both sides agreed on disengagement in the area of Gogra” where troops have been in a face-off situation since May 2020 and that both sides have ceased forward deployments in this area in a phased, coordinated and verified manner.

Aug. 6, 2021: India's Minister of State for External Affairs Rajkumar Ranjan Singh [leads](#) India's delegation to the 28th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Foreign Ministers Meeting held virtually.

Aug. 11, 2021: India and Singapore [conduct](#) 15th round of Foreign Office Consultations. In addition to discussing bilateral issues, the consultations [took](#) place in the context of Singapore taking over as country coordinator for India at ASEAN for a three-year period from 2021–2024.

Aug. 12, 2021: Quad Senior Officials Meeting [is held](#) by video conference. Each participant country—India, Australia, Japan, and the United States—[issues](#) a statement about the meeting.

Sept. 9, 2021: India and Japan [hold](#) their 6th Maritime Dialogue.

Sept. 11, 2021: India-Australia first 2+2 Dialogue held in-person in New Delhi with Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne and Defense Minister Peter Dutton. A joint statement is [released](#), focusing on three broad topics: cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic; shared vision for the Indo-Pacific, regional, and multilateral cooperation; and strengthening bilateral cooperation. Following the dialogue, the two Australian ministers [called](#) on Prime Minister Modi during which bilateral relations were discussed and Modi “renewed his invitation to Prime Minister Morrison to visit India at his earliest convenience.”

Sept. 16, 2021: India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar [meets](#) Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of the 21st SCO Meeting of the Heads of State in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

Sept. 22–25, 2021: Prime Minister Modi [travels](#) to the United States to address the UN, [participate](#) in the first in-person leaders-level Quad Summit, and [hold](#) bilateral talks with the US, Japan, and Australia.

Sept. 23, 2021: Modi [has](#) first in-person meeting with Australia's PM Morrison while they both visit the United States.

Sept. 23, 2021: Modi [has](#) first in-person meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Suga.

Sept. 24, 2021: Modi [meets](#) President Biden, during which they “exchanged views about the Indo-Pacific region, and reaffirmed their shared vision for a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.”

Sept. 24, 2021: Modi participates in the first in-person Quad Leaders’ Summit for which India’s Ministry of External Affairs [provides](#) a [readout](#). In addition to [issuing](#) a Quad Joint Statement, a [Fact Sheet](#) is also [issued](#). The White House also [provides](#) a video of the opening session.

Oct. 8, 2021: Modi and Japan’s new Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [hold](#) a brief telephone call following the latter taking office. The two leaders reportedly “expressed satisfaction at the rapid progress in the Special Strategic and Global Partnership between India and Japan,” “agreed on the potential to further enhance cooperation in a variety of areas, including in high-technology and futuristic sectors,” and “discussed the increasing alignment of perspectives, and robust cooperation, between India and Japan in the Indo-Pacific region. They reviewed the progress of cooperation under the Quad framework in this regard.” Modi invited “Japanese companies to benefit from India’s economic reforms through greater investment” and Kishida to visit India at his earliest convenience for a bilateral Summit meeting.”

Oct. 27, 2021: Modi [attends](#) the 16th East Asia Summit held virtually and makes brief remarks.

Oct. 28, 2021: Along with the United States, India co-hosts the 4th Indo-Pacific Business Forum (IPBF) and India’s External Affairs Minister [provides](#) brief opening remarks.

Oct. 28, 2021: Modi virtually attends the 18th ASEAN-India Summit, hosted by ASEAN Chair Brunei Darussalam, marking his ninth “attendance” at the annual event. The two sides [issue](#) a final statement entitled “ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region.”

Oct. 30, 2021: Modi and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong [meet](#) on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Rome, for their first in-person meeting in the post-pandemic period. Topics of discussion reportedly included “global efforts to combat climate change and the forthcoming COP26,” “efforts to contain the COVID-19 pandemic through expedited vaccination efforts and ensuring supply of critical medicines”, and “ways to enhance people to people ties, including early normalization of movement between both countries.”

Oct. 31, 2021: Modi [meets](#) President of Indonesia Joko Widodo on the sidelines of G20 Summit. The tone of bilateral relations was lukewarm, with a statement saying simply that the “leaders held discussions on the recent course of India-Indonesia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” and “emphasized the importance of Indo-Pacific cooperation.” India and Indonesia, along with Italy, will form the “troika” of the G20 during 2022-2023 when India will host the G20 Summit.

Nov. 12, 2021: India and Vietnam [hold](#) the 11th round of Political Consultations and the eighth round of strategic dialogue between their foreign ministries. Both sides expressed “satisfaction over the sustained momentum in their multifaceted bilateral relations, despite the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, with frequent high-level engagements through virtual platform.”

Nov. 26, 2021: 18th Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Russian Federation, the Republic of India, and the People’s Republic of China (RIC) [is held](#) via video-conference. A 35-paragraph communique was issued on issues ranging from the global pandemic to Syria.

Nov. 30, 2021: Minister of State for External Affairs Rajkumar Ranjan Singh [holds](#) virtual interaction with Hon. Kandhi A. Elieisar, Secretary (Minister), Department of Foreign Affairs of the Federated States of Micronesia to review bilateral relations, development cooperation between India and FSM, including through the Forum for India-Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC), and climate action.

Dec. 1, 2021: Mongolian parliamentary delegation led by Gombojav Zandanshatar, chairman of the State Great Hural, visits India and [meets](#) India's President Ram Nath Kovind who reportedly told the delegation that "As Mongolia's 'third [neighbor]' and 'spiritual [neighbor],' India looks forward to continued cooperation to further deepen its strategic partnership with Mongolia."

Dec. 3, 2021: Second Deputy Director of National Security of the Republic of Korea Kim Hyounghin [visits](#) New Delhi for the Third India-Republic of Korea Strategic Dialogue between the National Security Council Secretariats of India and the ROK.

Dec. 17, 2021: Vuong Dinh Hue, president of the National Assembly of Vietnam [leads](#) a parliamentary delegation to India to mark the fifth anniversary of their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and to look forward to the 50th anniversary of bilateral relations to be celebrated in 2022. India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar addressed the delegation during their stay.

Dec. 22-23, 2021: India's Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla [pays](#) a two-day working visit to Myanmar for discussions on humanitarian support, security and India-Myanmar border concerns, and the political situation in Myanmar with the State Administration Council, political parties and members of civil society.

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