
PACIFIC  FORUM

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

EDITED BY
ROB YORK
BRAD GLOSSERMAN

MAY – AUGUST 2023
VOL. 25, NO. 2
SEPTEMBER 2023



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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C O N N E C T I O N S

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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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Major power competition was the primary topic du jour at virtually all of this trimester's major multilateral gatherings, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine continuing to serve as a litmus test—a test many participants struggled to avoid taking. It was clear which side of the fence the G7 leaders stood on; Putin's invasion was soundly condemned and Sino-centric warning bells were again gently sounded. At the BRICS Summit and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (sans the US), those alarms were clearly muted, as they were at the ASEAN Regional Forum, at which foreign ministers from all three were present. Headlines from the IISS Shangri-la Dialogue focused on the meeting that did not occur, as China's defense minister pointedly refused to meet with his US counterpart. At the ASEAN-ISIS' Asia-Pacific Roundtable, participants lamented the impact of major power tensions on ASEAN unity, even though ASEAN's main challenges are internal ones that predate the downturn in China-US relations. Meanwhile, Beijing and Washington both expended considerable effort at these and other events throughout the reporting period fortifying and expanding their partnerships, even as many neighbors struggled not to choose sides or to keep a foot in both camps.

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BY SHEILA A. SMITH, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS & CHARLES T. MCCLEAN, YALE MACMILLAN CENTER

2023 brings a renewed focus on the US-Japan partnership as a fulcrum of global and regional diplomacy. With an eye to the [G7 Summit in Hiroshima](#) in mid-May, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio began the year with visits to G7 counterparts in Europe and North America. Later in the spring, he toured Africa in an effort to gain understanding from countries of the Global South. The Joe Biden administration looks ahead to a lively economic agenda, as it [hosts](#) the APEC Summit in November on the heels of the G20 Summit in New Delhi in September. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [laid out in detail](#) the economic ambitions of the Biden national strategy on April 27, giving further clarity to how the administration's foreign policy will meet the needs of the American middle class. Regional collaboration continues to expand. Both leaders will gather in Australia on May 24 as Prime Minister Anthony Albanese [hosts](#) the third in-person meeting of the leaders of the Quad. Also noteworthy in this first quarter of 2023 is the progress in ties between Japan and South Korea.

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BY SOURABH GUPTA, INSTITUTE FOR CHINA-AMERICA STUDIES

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MASON RICHEY, HANKUK UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES

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The US and India expanded cooperation across various domains in the second reporting period of 2023. The two moved to materialize projects and initiatives that were conceived in the first quarter, in wide-ranging domains with significant geopolitical and geoeconomic scope including defense cooperation, critical and emerging technologies, and infrastructure development. While New Delhi continued to straddle groupings such as BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the US-India partnership broke ground on more initiatives than any of India's other bilateral relationships. Modi and Biden visited each other's capitals and reaffirmed their commitment to a rules-based international order. The rousing reception Modi received in Washington and the continued US preeminence in most major trade and technology initiatives conceived by India highlighted the growing partnership between the two democracies. And the two leaders, while facing elections next year, seem willing to work together on common global priorities—sometimes at domestic political costs.

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Over the summer three Southeast Asian nations—Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia—conducted political contests or prepared for them, with Washington and Beijing watching closely for shifts in alignments or opportunities to make inroads with new leaders. Despite this, and possibly because of it, China made bold moves in the South China Sea and caused outcry in the region with the [release](#) of a map supporting its claims to the “Nine-Dash Line.” Beijing also showed signs of worry about Russian inroads into Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. The high-profile [visit](#) to Washington of Philippine President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr. enabled both countries to reconfirm the US-Philippines alliance publicly, although it gave little indication of where the broader relationship may be headed. ASEAN continued to make little headway in helping to resolve the conflict in Myanmar; and the 2023 chair, Jakarta attempted to redirect the group toward economic goals and a common approach to looming food insecurity in the region.

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

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

Taiwan’s presidential election campaign has begun. Lai Ching-te, Taiwan’s vice president and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate, Hou Yu-ih from the Nationalist (Kuomintang, or KMT) Party, Ko Wen-je of Taiwan People’s Party (TPP), and independent Terry Gou offer Taiwan voters four different visions of Taiwan’s future relationship with China. As senior US and Chinese officials resumed long-stalled face-to-face meetings, China warned once again that it has no room for compromise or concession on Taiwan. Yet, when Lai completed almost invisible transits through the US en route to Paraguay and back, China’s military response seemed almost pro-forma. When US, Japanese, and South Korean leaders reiterated at the trilateral Camp David summit their staunch opposition to China’s intimidation, China chose to interpret their words as one more promise to support Taiwan. The US accelerated weapons deliveries to Taiwan and expanded training for Taiwan’s military, and Taiwan announced that its defense budget will increase by 7.5% in 2024. Taiwan’s TSMC moved forward on constructing its Arizona factory despite some hiccups, and the US and Taiwan signed a long-awaited trade deal—the first part of their 21st Century Trade Initiative.

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BY AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

In mid-2023, the (non-existent) relations between the two Koreas got even worse, if that were possible. Confronting enlarged US-ROK military exercises, and the first visit of a US nuclear-armed submarine to

the peninsula since 1981, Pyongyang's nuclear threats grew ever more frenzied. In Seoul, President Yoon Suk Yeol institutionalized his hard line by downsizing and repurposing the Ministry of Unification (MOU). Criticizing MOU for acting in the past as a support department for North Korea, Yoon evidently conceives its future role as being to hinder Kim Jong Un's regime—publicizing its human rights abuses, for instance—rather than help. Much as the DPRK's ever-expanding WMD threat requires robust deterrence, for Seoul to start emulating Pyongyang's unalloyed hostility hardly seems conducive to peace. The period under review also saw two attempts by North Korea to put a spy satellite into orbit; both failed. By contrast, the North's missile launches hardly ever go wrong these days. The large solid-fuel *Hwasong-18* ICBM, with a 15,000-km (9,300-mile) range, which first flew in April, had a second successful test on July 12.

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BY SCOTT SNYDER, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS & SEE-WON BYUN, SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY

PRC Ambassador to South Korea Xing Haiming's public statement in June sharpened Beijing-Seoul frictions following President Yoon Suk Yeol's Taiwan remarks in an April interview, sparking mutual accusations of interference in internal affairs. Multilateral engagements offered opportunities to reaffirm China-ROK relations through bilateral talks between China's Commerce Minister Wang Wentao and South Korea's Trade Minister Ahn Duk-geun (May), Defense Ministers Li Shangfu and Lee Jong-sup (June), Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Park Jin (July), Finance Ministers Liu Kun and Choo Kyung-ho (July), and Trade Ministers Wang Shouwen and Ahn (August). The revival of high-level exchanges, Beijing's lifting of travel restrictions on South Korea in August, and North Korea's border reopening that same month are sources of optimism in China-Korea relations despite overarching tensions. Discord remains on regional security priorities, South Korea's overt alignment with the United States under the Yoon administration, and the escalating US-China technology war. Meanwhile, Chinese and Russian delegations joined Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the end of the Korean War, reflecting the shape of North Korea's first post-COVID diplomatic activity.

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China's mid-August decision to allow group travel to Japan days ahead of the 45th anniversary of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the two nations as well as indications that China would be open to a meeting between Xi Jinping and Fumio Kishida on the sidelines of the Group of 20 (G20) leaders' summit in India in September gave hope for improvement in China-Japan ties. The optimism proved short-lived. Chinese media [responded](#) that Japan would first have to turn away from following the US

lead, stop encouraging Taiwanese pro-independence forces, and strictly abide by the four communiqués signed between Beijing and Tokyo. China's protests over Japan's release of radioactive water culminated in a total ban on Japanese marine products. The PRC also expressed annoyance with Japanese restrictions on the export of computer chips, the ministry of defense's release of its annual Defense of Japan 2023 white paper, Tokyo's closer relations with NATO, and its tripartite agreement with South Korea and the US. Japan expressed uneasiness with Russia-China cooperation and became concerned with renewed Chinese interest in Okinawa, with its purchases of Japanese land, cyberattacks, and its refusal to import Japanese seafood products.

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BY JI-YOUNG LEE, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY & ANDY LIM, CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Japan-South Korea relations are going strong. In the months leading up to the historic Camp David trilateral summit in August, we saw the return of shuttle diplomacy between Korea and Japan. If President Yoon Suk Yeol's March visit to Japan was groundbreaking, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's May visit to Seoul signified the continued momentum of improving bilateral ties. The Aug. 18 trilateral summit meeting, where President Biden, President Yoon, and Prime Minister Kishida announced bold steps to cement trilateral cooperation into the institutional fabric of the relationship, represents the deepest attempt in recent memory. A successful trilateral summit like this one was possible only because Seoul and Tokyo mended their bilateral ties. A positive cycle is expected the other way around, as well. For example, the "[Commitment to Consult](#)" — to expeditiously "share information, align messaging and coordinate response actions" among the three leaders -- will likely create more incentives and opportunities for Seoul and Tokyo to keep bilateral relations friendly and cooperative.

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BY YU BIN, WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY

In the summer months, both the upper and lower limits of the China-Russia strategic partnership were put to considerable tests. In the West, China's peace-probing effort continued despite virtual stalemate in the Ukraine war and its sudden twists and turns (drone attacks on the Kremlin and Wagner mutiny). Beijing treaded carefully in restoring relations with Kyiv with the new Ukrainian ambassador in place. In the East, Russian and Chinese militaries conducted a series of aerial and naval exercises/operations with unprecedented scope and closer interoperability for almost three months (from early June to late August), something not seen even at the peak of the Sino-Soviet alliance in the 1950s. All of this occurred against the backdrop of increasingly hardened US-led alliance networks both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Meanwhile, Moscow and Beijing remained “strategic partners” without the interlocking mechanism of the typical military alliance such as NATO’s Article 5. Beyond these divergences and convergences, both sides tried to restore normalcy in bilateral interactions. Despite the absence of Putin from both the SCO and BRICS summits, these multilateral forums were able to grow in size amid unprecedented Western sanctions against Russia and China.

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GRAEME DOBELL, AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC POLICY INSTITUTE

Australia has peeled back China trade coercion as it ramps-up the alliance with the United States to balance China. The Labor government, elected in May 2022, claims a diplomatic thaw with China as a key achievement. The major defense step was agreeing for Australia to get nuclear submarines under the AUKUS agreement with Britain and the United States. The government’s [2023 National Defense Statement](#) describes “an intense contest of values” in the Indo-Pacific, with growing “risks of military escalation or miscalculation.” Because of the worsening strategic environment, the Australian Defense Force is judged “not fully fit for purpose” as the government seeks greater long-range strike capability. The era of alliance integration will see more US troops, planes, and ships in Australia, and the creation of a US-Australia combined intelligence center in Canberra. The contest with China in the South Pacific frames a new Australian aid policy and a greater US role in the islands.

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Growing China-US Tensions

Academics continue to spend a great deal of time arguing whether a new Cold War is upon us—both the differences and similarities to the original US-USSR version are pretty obvious—but there is no disputing that tensions between Washington and Beijing have grown considerably over the past year or so, with the implications being felt not only in the Indo-Pacific neighborhood but globally. US allies are becoming more candid in expressing concerns about China’s current actions and long-term ambitions, even as many in Asia and the so-called “Global South” repeat their time-honored “don’t force us to choose” refrain.

In the great East-West or Democracy-Authoritarianism divide, support for Ukraine and/or a willingness to condemn the Russian invasion increasingly appears to be a litmus test, one that many attempt to evade out of fear of alienating Moscow and/or Beijing. Some like India and Vietnam do so as a result of security concerns. Both rely heavily on Russian military hardware (at least for now; India is looking to diversify). Others like the Central Asian “Stans” claim neutrality while fearing they could be next. Some countries (read: China) unconvincingly claim neutrality while clearly tilting toward Moscow, while some members of the Global South want to pick the pockets of both sides. As the old saying (Miles’ Law) goes, “Where you stand depends on where you sit.” The Ukraine “issue” becomes particularly challenging at multilateral meetings where both Americans/Westerners and China/Russia are present.

The G7 Revives

The first big multilateral event of this reporting period was the annual summit of the Group of Seven (G7) leading industrial nations, hosted by Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio in Hiroshima. We’ve been G7 skeptics, the symbol of a global order whose time has passed. Recently, however, the group has re-emerged as a vehicle for global governance, and Kishida deserves a good bit of the credit.



Figure 1 Leaders of the G7 member states in Hiroshima

When formed 50 years ago, G7 countries represented nearly two-thirds of global wealth. That figure has dropped to just 44% and its role as international economic manager has been eclipsed by the G20, formed in the wake of the 2007-08 Global Financial Crisis. The invasion of Ukraine has given the group new urgency as its members seek to backstop an international order under assault, even as it has placed new challenges on G20 unity.

Kishida has made Ukraine the starting point for Japan’s chairmanship, and he has repeatedly declared that Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is a concern for the entire world and its operating rules and principles. In the [Leaders Declaration](#), the grandees pledged to

- support Ukraine for as long as it takes in the face of Russia’s illegal war of aggression;
- coordinate our approach to economic resilience and economic security that is based on diversifying and deepening partnerships and de-risking, not de-coupling;
- drive the transition to clean energy economies of the future through cooperation within and beyond the G7;
- launch the Hiroshima Action Statement for Resilient Global Food Security with partner countries to address needs today and into the future; and
- deliver our goal of mobilizing up to \$600 billion in financing for quality infrastructure through the Partnership

for Global Infrastructure Investment (PGII).

The first three priorities—resist unilateral attempts to redraw the status quo, promote economic security and resilience, and promote sustainable development—are repeated throughout the document.

While Russia is the immediate threat, China is clearly a concern. But China is not mentioned until the 51st paragraph, and the first four bullet points in that discussion emphasize cooperation with Beijing. It isn't until the penultimate line of the 35th page that a “China threat” emerges. The leaders voiced concern about Beijing's militarization of the Indo-Pacific, the stability of the Taiwan Strait, and its expansive territorial claims in the East and South China Seas. Yet G7 countries still balance competing interests when engaging China. They seek mutual economic opportunities and de-risking rather than decoupling.

Beijing was not happy with the resulting compromise. It [charged](#) the G7 with “hindering international peace, undermining regional stability and curbing other countries' development,” and called in Japan's ambassador to scold his government for attempting “to smear and attack China, grossly interfering in China's internal affairs.”

Kishida's decision to hold the meeting in Hiroshima, his hometown, reflected his determination to produce a clear unambiguous statement that denounces the use of nuclear weapons, especially for intimidation or in furtherance of national territorial ambitions. The Declaration promised “to strengthen disarmament and nonproliferation efforts, towards the ultimate goal of a world without nuclear weapons with undiminished security for all.” As Kishida [explained](#), “Hiroshima, once devastated by the atomic bombing, has rebuilt itself to become a city that seeks peace. I want the leaders of the G7 members and major countries of various regions to make efforts to demonstrate their commitment to peace that will go down in history in this city.” The leaders visited the Hiroshima Peace Park, laid wreaths

at the cenotaph for victims of the atomic bomb, were briefed by Hiroshima Mayor Matsui Kazumi on the history of the Atomic Bomb Dome and the events of Aug. 6, 1945, and met Ogura Keiko, a survivor of the attack. The power of those events was balanced by the realist calculations—the reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence and peace—that guide decision-making in G7 capitals.

Another priority is protecting countries from economic coercion. Both Russia and China have tried to use economic leverage for political gain, and the G7 declaration condemned such practices. The group launched the Coordination Platform on Economic Coercion to increase “collective assessment, preparedness, deterrence and response to economic coercion, and further promote cooperation with partners beyond the G7.” The leaders also released the [G7 Leaders' Statement on Economic Resilience and Economic Security](#), which focused on building resilient supply chains and resilient critical infrastructure, and called for joint action to combat economic coercion, harmful practices in the digital sphere, cooperating on international standards setting, and protecting critical technologies.

A key partner in those efforts is the developing world and the declarations underscored outreach to “the Global South” to promote economic resilience and development more generally. As ever, the words make much sense and deserve applause. But they mean nothing in the absence of efforts to promote shared security, growth, and prosperity.

NATO Takes a Dip in the Indo-Pacific

Four regional leaders ventured to Vilnius, Lithuania in July for the annual summit of NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. This was the second consecutive year that the organization's four major Indo-Pacific partners—Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea, referred to as the AP4—attended that meeting. Each of the four is working on an Individually Tailored Partnership Program (ITPP) that will upgrade relations and facilitate cooperation on issues such as maritime security

cooperation, cybersecurity, new and emerging technologies, outer space, combatting disinformation and the impact of climate change on security.

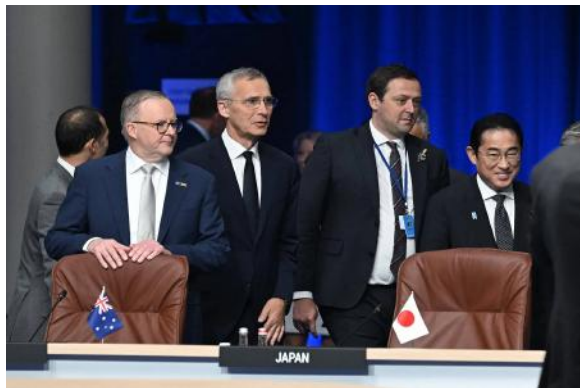


Figure 2 Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese (left), NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg (second from left), and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (right) arrive for a meeting with NATO's Indo-Pacific partners during the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, on July 12. JACQUES WITT/POOL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Closer ties make sense in an age of “indivisible security” and the growing interest of European governments in the Indo-Pacific region. NATO’s most recent Strategic Concept, the document that guides planning and policy, was released last year and it noted that China’s stated ambitions and coercive policies “challenge our interests, security and values.”

There were reports during the spring that NATO might open a regional office in Japan, to facilitate contacts and implementation of those ITPPs. There has been support for closer ties from both Asian and European governments. Japan has been particularly assiduous in courting NATO. The office did not materialize, however, reportedly a result of French opposition: Paris wants NATO to remain focused on trans-Atlantic threats and challenges.

China wasn’t happy either. A foreign ministry spokesperson [warned](#) that “the Asia-Pacific does not welcome group confrontation, does not welcome military confrontation,” that NATO’s plan to develop a presence in the region “[undermines regional peace and stability](#)” and that countries in the area “should be on high

alert.” *China Daily* [editorialized](#) that Japan’s support for that effort was making it the “doorman” of NATO.

In truth, NATO is unlikely to make a direct contribution to regional security. It is too far away and there are far more compelling needs closer to home. Still, the possibility of a European presence complicates an adversary’s planning and a united front of like-minded nations would support deterrence in other ways. They should not be undervalued.

Bigger May Not be Better for BRICS

Countering the G7 (at least in the minds of some of its participants) was the 15th BRICS summit that convened in late August in Johannesburg, South Africa. The BRICS—which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—seems to have adopted as its *raison d’être* the revision of a world that does not afford its members the respect and influence they feel they deserve. As their Declaration [explained](#), they are animated by the “BRICS spirit of mutual respect and understanding, sovereign equality, solidarity, democracy, openness, inclusiveness, strengthened collaboration and consensus.” They seek “a more representative, fairer international order, a reinvigorated and reformed multilateral system, sustainable development and inclusive growth.”



Figure 3 South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, center, delivers the XV BRICS Summit declaration, flanked by, from left, President of Brazil Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, President of China Xi Jinping, Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi and Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in Johannesburg, South Africa, Thursday, Aug. 24, 2023. /AP

They were originally identified as a group of countries that were underestimated in assessments of global power and would, if their trajectories continued, exercise real influence. That potential remains potential for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, the five countries still clamor for change and a greater say in the international system. Chinese leader Xi Jinping [explained](#) “Right now, changes in the world, in our times, and in history are unfolding in ways like never before, bringing human society to a critical juncture,” adding that “The course of history will be shaped by the choices we make.”

Russian President Vladimir Putin was angrier—understandably so, as he was prevented from attending because of an indictment issued by the International Criminal Court for actions in Ukraine and his South African hosts would have been obliged to arrest him if showed up. He [condemned](#) the West for domineering policies and hypocrisy, and countered that “We are against any kind of hegemony,” and accused the West of “continuing neocolonialism.” He blamed “the desire of some countries to maintain this hegemony that led to the severe crisis in Ukraine.”

The BRICS resent dominance by the West and the imposition of Western values. That is a powerful attraction. Reportedly over 40 countries have expressed interest in joining the group and two dozen are said to have applied to join. At the end of the meeting, the group agreed to expand and Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were invited to join from the start of next year as the “first phase of the expansion process.” South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, meeting chair, added that other nations will join later.

Doubling the size of the group is ambitious and on paper the new members are impressive. They are big trading nations and that, as well as their desire to reduce US power and influence, encourages them to find alternatives to the dollar in international trade. That will not be easy, however, as most other nations have discovered over the last 50 years. No other

currency is used as widely, is tradeable, and enjoys the trust of third parties.

In addition, expanding the group will make it even harder to find consensus. Their shared sense of grievance will not be enough to paper over tensions between, say, China and India, or Saudi Arabia and Iran. Delhi and Beijing are at odds over many issues, relations with Washington among them. Moreover, there is little appetite for the most ambitious agenda. Brazil’s president, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, was more circumspect, [saying](#) “We do not want to be a counterpoint to the G7, G20, or the United States,” adding that “We just want to organize ourselves.”

Shanghai Cooperation Organization Expands as Well

The [Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#), originally comprised of China, Russia, and four former Soviet Central Asia Republics (Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), has also expanded in recent years to include Pakistan and BRICS member India, which served as 2022–23 chair and thus hosted this year’s SCO Summit on July 4. Since the meeting was held virtually, Putin was among the attendees. The Council of Heads of State of SCO issued a [New Delhi Declaration](#) which, unsurprisingly, made no reference to Ukraine even as it professed support for “non-interference in internal affairs and non-use of force or threats to use force” and the “peaceful settlement of disagreements and disputes.” Given its peace-loving nature, this year the SCO welcomed Iran as its ninth member.

ASEAN-led Multilateralism Overshadowed

Readers will be excused if they missed the meeting of regional foreign ministers as ASEAN convened the annual ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and associated side meetings in Jakarta in July, an event that has become largely overshadowed not only by the East Asia Summit (EAS) but by its own ineffectiveness in dealing with key regional security issues like Myanmar,

the South China Sea, and North Korea's missile and nuclear ambitions.



Figure 4 Various Foreign Ministers at the Asian Regional Forum in July

With foreign ministers from China, Russia, and the United States in attendance, the July 14 ARF session proved to be quite [contentious](#). ASEAN struck a careful pose on Russia since it is seeking Moscow's support for an initiative on food security at the EAS. Most ASEAN members maintain their own ties with Russia despite condemning its attacks on Ukraine, underscoring ASEAN's "complex balancing act of pushing for peace in Ukraine without compromising key economic interests."

The ARF [Chairman's Statement](#) stated: "With regard to the war in Ukraine, as for all nations, the Meeting continued to reaffirm its respect for sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity. The Meeting discussed the war in Ukraine, and views were expressed on the recent developments and the need to address the root causes. The Meeting reiterated its call for compliance with the UN Charter and international law. The Meeting underlined the importance of an immediate cessation of hostilities and the creation of an enabling environment for peaceful resolution."

The Statement was tougher when it came to Myanmar, not only reaffirming the importance of the largely-ignored [Five Point Consensus](#), but strongly condemning "continued acts of violence, including air strikes, artillery shelling, and destruction of public facilities." It called on "all parties" to "take concrete action to

immediately halt indiscriminate violence, denounce any escalation, and create a conducive environment for the delivery of humanitarian assistance and inclusive national dialogue," which the ruling junta will no doubt continue to ignore.

After two decades of discussions, China and ASEAN, during their bilateral side session, "[edged closer](#)" to agreeing upon a South China Sea Code of Conduct by instituting some guidelines aimed at preventing further deterioration of the security situation. The ARF Chairman's Statement "welcomed the progress achieved so far in the ongoing negotiations on the Code of Conduct." Forgive us if we don't hold our breath.

Shangri-la Standoff

Tensions were also clearly in evidence at this year's 20th [Shangri-la Dialogue](#) in Singapore in June, as highlighted by Beijing's refusal to allow its Minister of National Defense, General Li Shangfu, from meeting bilaterally with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, [citing](#) continuing US sanctions against Li and other senior Chinese officials. (Li was originally sanctioned by the Trump administration over his role in the acquisition of weapons from Russia.)

Austin, in his opening [plenary address](#) on "US Leadership in the Indo-Pacific," focused primarily on America's positive contributions to regional security but did, toward the end, complain about the "alarming number of risky intercepts" by Chinese aircraft against US and allied aircraft "flying lawfully in international airspace." His final words reminded Beijing that the US "remains deeply committed to preserving the status quo in the strait, consistent with our long-standing One China policy and...will continue to categorically oppose unilateral changes to the status quo from either side."

Li, in his separate [plenary remarks](#) on "China's New Security Initiatives," praised President Xi Jinping's "win-win" Global Security Initiative and outlined China's contributions to international peace and stability. He also noted

China's "objective and impartial stance" on the Ukraine "issue" – perish the thought that we might call it an invasion or war. Li addressed US-China tensions more directly and comprehensively, noting that "severe conflict or confrontation between China and the US will be an unbearable disaster for the world."

In time-honored Chinese fashion, Li generally avoided naming names, merely noting that "a major country should behave like one...instead of provoking bloc confrontation for self-interests" while accusing "some countries" of taking a "selective approach to rules and international laws" or "willfully [interfering] in other countries' internal affairs and matters." He asked the audience: "Who is disrupting peace in the region?" We would have been inclined to name China as the most likely culprit but suspect he had the United States in mind.

Implications for ASEAN

At this year's 36th [Asia-Pacific Roundtable](#) in Kuala Lumpur in August, major power confrontation and its implications for the Asia-Pacific region (Indo-Pacific being a less-favored term in Southeast Asia at least) was a central feature in almost all discussions. There was spirited debate between US and Chinese interlocutors (one example is summarized [here](#)), with Chinese lamenting the deterioration in bilateral relations while failing to recognize (or at least acknowledge) China's role in this downturn. Southeast Asian participants were more concerned on the impact major power tensions could have on the already-fragile state of ASEAN unity.

These concerns were best summed up by Malaysian Prime Minister Yab Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim in his Roundtable [keynote address](#). "The intensifying major power rivalry between China and the United States is testing, and straining, the fabric of the region's longstanding architecture and norms." After lamenting "the emergence of new mini-lateral groupings across the board, which despite its window dressing, could be cast as exclusive and

exclusionary in nature," Anwar concluded that "It would be a great loss for the entire region if this unfettered rivalry affects all that have been painstakingly achieved by existing and consequential ASEAN-led multilateral mechanisms."

True, but as other conference discussions highlighted and Anwar himself acknowledged, "continued post-coup violence and instability in Myanmar, remains one of ASEAN's biggest strategic and humanitarian challenges." While one could point a finger at Beijing and Moscow for propping up the junta—Anwar didn't—he did note that a "failure to act [by ASEAN] would be tantamount to a dereliction of collective responsibility."

Anwar avoided the subject of Ukraine in his prepared remarks. When asked about Kuala Lumpur's stance on the Russia-Ukraine War in the Q&A session, however, he noted that though war stands in violation of international law, "Russia's concerns behind the attack" must be taken into consideration.

ASEAN participants were also bound and determined to avoid making what Anwar described as a "binary choice" between the United States and China. Good relations with both were necessary "to promote a stronger rules-and-norms-based order." Sending a message to both Washington and Beijing, Anwar stressed that "This order is not based on might, or the tendency to ignore the very rules and norms one preaches about when it is inconvenient. That is unconducive and hypocritical." However, Washington would have little trouble agreeing with him when he argued that "it must be an order based on fairness, respect and understanding, compassion, and international law."

ASEAN participants had little trouble making a binary choice when it came to the South China Sea, however. Anwar noted that "the continued militarization of the maritime region coupled with the use of grey zone tactics to reinforce claims and stymie the lawful exploitation of resources is neither peaceful nor constructive." The Philippine and Vietnamese presentations, in particular, pointed a finger directly at Beijing for

changing the status quo in these contested waters. And all this was before China further [infuriated its neighbors](#) with a new national map reaffirming its now 10-dash line claim (the tenth being to the east of Taiwan). For a summary of all Roundtable discussions, see ISIS-Malaysia’s conference [report](#).

Busy, Busy, Busy

While, as argued earlier, NATO as an organization may not have a direct role to play in the Indo-Pacific, NATO is a model of cooperation and coordination among security partners, and the growing complexity of regional security relationships in the Indo-Pacific will soon demand some rationalization. There is just too much going on for security bureaucracies to just keep piling on meetings, initiatives, and mechanisms.

For example:

After mounting complaints from Australian [analysts](#) and UK [legislators](#), the US appears [ready](#) to modify International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) that pose significant obstacles to the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) security partnership. While this has immediate implications for the submarine deal that dominates perceptions of AUKUS, it will have longer term, and likely more significant, payoffs in Pillar 2 of the agreement, which concerns new technologies. There are several working groups focused on these technologies, and that expanding body of work has echoes in other bilateral and multilateral security forums.

The first quadrilateral defense leaders meeting, involving Australia, Japan, the Philippines and the United States [occurred](#) on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue. The four officials—Defense Ministers Richard Marles, Hamada Yasukazu, Carlito Galvez, and Lloyd Austin, respectively—“reaffirmed that they share a vision for Free and Open Indo-Pacific and collectively make efforts to ensure the vision continues to thrive.”

This was followed two weeks later by the first [meeting](#) of national security advisors from the Japan, the Philippines and the US, in Tokyo, at which “they emphasized the importance of enhancing trilateral cooperation and response capabilities based on the Japan-United States Alliance and Philippines-United States Alliance in order to maintain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.”

The four governments [held](#) joint naval exercises in the South China Sea in August. Originally scheduled to be a trilateral, the Philippines joined as tensions increased following Chinese attempts to prevent Manila from resupplying forces in the region.

Then there was the Camp David Summit between the US, Japan, and South Korea in August, which attempted to take advantage of the political moment in the three countries and pushed for the institutionalization of relations between them. The Camp David Summit is discussed in more depth elsewhere in this issue of *Comparative Connections*, but for us, the key point here is the progress in multilateralization—and the growing burden that it poses for security bureaucracies as relations thicken among allies and partners. In that summit [statement](#), the three leaders pledged to “hold trilateral meetings between our leaders, foreign ministers, defense ministers, and national security advisors at least annually, complementing existing trilateral meetings between our respective foreign and defense ministries. We will also hold the first trilateral meeting between our finance ministers as well as launch a new commerce and industry ministers track that will meet annually. We will also launch an annual Trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue to coordinate implementation of our Indo-Pacific approaches and to continually identify new areas for common action.” They will also discuss ways to coordinate efforts to counter disinformation and launch a trilateral development policy dialogue.

All this is applaudable progress, but we have been there before. Prior to the turn of this century, spurred on by the then-historic

[Statement](#) on a “new partnership” between Japan and Korea, we were talking about a “[virtual alliance](#)” among the US, Japan, and Korea as “both possible and essential for long-term peace and stability in the region.” We wish all three better luck this time around.

Add to the above mix developments in all US alliances, the Quad, relations among allies without the US, the economic dialogues, technology consultations and, well, you get the idea. It is a huge and growing menu of conversations and some form of rationalization is required. NATO isn’t the archetype, but it is a model of organization. Something is needed.

That something won’t emerge in the last trimester of the year but the need for some way to make regional security discussions more efficient will become ever more apparent. Keep an eye out for the inklings of an expanded—viz the tri- and multilateral frameworks—regional security conversation. And expect still greater pushback from China, Russia and like-minded nations as they contemplate its purpose and prospects.

REGIONAL CHRONOLOGY

MAY—AUGUST 2023

May 1, 2023: US says it is [prepared](#) to assist the Philippines as China interferes with Manila’s efforts to resupply a grounded naval ship in the South China Sea.

May 1–5, 2023: Philippine President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr., [visits](#) Washington, his first visit to the capital since his father was forced to leave office in 1986.

May 3, 2023: US and the Philippines [move](#) toward real-time sharing of military information and greater coordination to guard against any coercive behavior by China in the South China Sea.

May 4, 2023: Philippine President Marcos [expands](#) upon his agreement to grant the US access to more military bases in his country and reassures Chinese officials by stating that the bases will not be used for “offensive action” against any country. He also clarifies that the US has not asked the Philippines to provide troops in case of war between China and the US over Taiwan.

May 5, 2023: US [moves](#) a \$500 million proposed arms sale package bound for Taiwan to a fast track through the “Presidential Drawdown Authority” created for streamlining aid to Ukraine.

May 8, 2023: US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns [meets](#) China’s Foreign Minister Qin Gang in Beijing where they agree on the need to stabilize relations between the two countries.

May 10, 2023: House Rules Committee [holds](#) a hearing on “Examining China’s Coercive Economic Tactics.”

May 10–11, 2023: National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [meets](#) Chinese Communist Party Politburo Member and Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission Wang Yi in Vienna.

May 10–12, 2022: Indonesia [hosts](#) the first ASEAN Summit of the year in Labun Bajo. Myanmar is not represented .

May 10, 2023: Flotilla of Chinese vessels [enters](#) Vietnamese waters and loiter in a Russia–Vietnam offshore lease. A Chinese research vessel moves at speed appropriate for surveying,

May 11, 2023: US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen [calls](#) on G7 democracies to build economic resilience to help developing nations counter the threat of nondemocratic states like China and Russia.

May 12, 2023: President Yoon [hosts](#) former Japanese Prime Minister Aso Taro for dinner.

May 12, 2023: Japan and South Korea announce [aim](#) to lower blind spots on North Korean missile activity by linking radar systems through the US, a move designed to allow the sharing of launch data in real time. The US would link the radar systems used by the Japanese Self-Defense Forces, the South Korean military, and US troops stationed in both Japan and South Korea, to share data such as where North Korean missiles are launched, as well as the speed and distance travelled.

May 14, 2023: Thai general elections [are held](#), with a record turnout of 75.22%. Parties cover the political spectrum from the pro-democracy Move Forward Party to two parties —Thai Union and Phalang Pracharat—headed by the organizers of the 2014 coup.

May 15, 2023: US and Micronesia [agree](#) to renew a key strategic pact—the Compact of Free Association Agreement—as the US shores up support among Pacific Island states to counter competition from China.

May 17, 2023: Biden [cancels](#) visit to Papua New Guinea to return to Washington for debt ceiling negotiations.

May 18, 2023: China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs [publishes](#) a 5,000-word report criticizing "America's Coercive Diplomacy and Its Harm."

May 18, 2023: President Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [meet](#), seeking unified G7 policies on China and agree to work together to counter "coercive behavior."

May 17, 2023: United States and Palau [agree](#) to renew COFA.

May 20, 2023: Leaders of the Quad countries—the US, Japan, India and Australia—[meet](#) on the sidelines of the G7 summit and hold brief discussion releasing a joint statement, vision statement, and fact sheet, which includes support for quality undersea cable networks in the Indo-Pacific.

May 20, 2023: G7 communique, released by member countries [lays](#) out common "de-risking" path on China, and calls for international standards that regulate artificial intelligence.

May 20, 2023: US and Japan [impose](#) sanctions on hundreds of people and organizations connected to Russia's war on Ukraine, including businesses involved in aerospace, quantum computing and finance as the G7 reiterates its determination to raise the costs of Moscow's invasion.

May 22, 2023: United States and Papua New Guinea [conclude](#) a Defense Cooperation Agreement and an Agreement Concerning Counter Illicit Transnational Maritime Activity Operations.

May 25, 2023: South Korea and US [stage](#) massive live-fire drills marking the 70th anniversary of their alliance.

May 28, 2023: At US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework meeting, trade ministers [agree](#) to strengthen supply chains for essential materials such as chips and critical minerals to reduce dependence on China. This is the first time the 14 participating countries—the US, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, India, Fiji, and

seven members of ASEAN—agreed on specific measures since IPEF launched in May 2022.

May 31, 2023: Pyongyang [fails](#) to launch a claimed military spy satellite.

June 2, 2023: Defense Minister Andrew Little [acknowledges](#) New Zealand's interest in cooperating with Australia, the UK, and the US under their AUKUS trilateral security framework in nonnuclear areas such as artificial intelligence, cyber-security and quantum computing.

June 2, 2023: Japanese, US, and Philippines Coast Guards [conduct](#) joint drills, the first exercise of its kind between the three countries, in the face of China's expansion in the South China Sea.

June 2-4, 2023: 20th Asia Security Summit (Shangri-la Dialogue, SLD) is held in Singapore. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin [meets](#) on the sidelines with counterparts from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

June 2, 2023: Defense Secretary Austin [shakes hands](#) with Chinese counterpart Li Shangfu at 20th SLD, but they hold no "substantive dialogue"; Beijing rejected Washington's request for a meeting on the conference's sidelines.

June 2, 2023: China and Singapore defense establishments [agree](#) to set up a secure, bilateral hotline to strengthen high-level communication between their defense leaders.

June 2, 2023: CIA [announces](#) that Director William Burns made a secret trip to China in May in an attempt to keep lines of communication open despite security and economic tensions.

June 3, 2023: US, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines [hold](#) first quadrilateral defense chief talks in Singapore on the sidelines of the SLD to ponder challenges posed by China in the South China Sea and in waters around Taiwan.

June 3, 2023: Japan, US, and South Korean defense chiefs [agree](#) to real-time sharing of information about North Korean missiles by the

end of 2023. This system will allow the three nations to detect and track projectiles fired by the North more accurately and swiftly

June 4, 2023: North Korea [denounces](#) UN Security Council for holding a meeting on its recent satellite launch upon “robbery demands” from the US, vowing to continue rejecting sanctions and taking “self-defensive” action.

June 5, 2023: US and India [release](#) a Roadmap for US-India Defense Industrial Cooperation prior to Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s four-day state visit to the US.

June 6-7, 2023: Two Russian Tu-96 and two Chinese H-6K strategic bombers [conduct](#) the [sixth](#) joint patrols of the Sea of Japan, East China Sea, and Western Pacific. Russian bombers landed and took off from a Chinese military airfield.

June 7, 2023: China, Pakistan, and Iran [hold](#) their first trilateral meeting on counter-terrorism in Beijing, involving “in-depth” exchanges on the prevailing regional counter-terrorism situation.

June 8, 2023: US Senate panel [approves](#) measure to strip China of “developing” status after passing the “Ending China’s Developing Nation Status Act” without dissent.

June 8, 2023: ASEAN [announces](#) it will hold its first joint military exercise in the North Natuna Sea, the southernmost waters of the South China Sea, in its latest multilateral security drills.

June 8, 2023: Japan [conveys](#) “strong concern” and lodges protest against China after the PLA Navy enters Japan’s waters near Yakushima Island. Two Chinese Coast Guard vessels also reportedly entered Japan’s territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands, which China calls Diaoyu, and attempted to approach a Japanese fishing boat.

June 8, 2023: Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar [notes](#) that India and China must find a way to step back from potential confrontation in the western Himalayas, as militarized,

disputed border could lead to conflict between the nuclear-armed neighbors.

June 9, 2023: With eye on China, the Five Eyes (Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and the US) and Japan [condemn](#) trade practices that amount to economic coercion in a joint declaration.

June 9, 2023: China’s largest naval training ship [sails](#) for the Philippines on a regional “friendly” tour, amid growing unease over Chinese maritime activities in the South China Sea. Training conducted by the ship, is expected to focus on navigation, anti-piracy and shooting exercises with light-weight weapons, according to Chinese state media.

June 9, 2023: Chinese coastal patrol ship Haixun03 [starts](#) patrolling waters around Hainan Island and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea and aims to inspect ships in these waters. The patrol is expected to continue for around one month and cover 900 nautical miles.

June 11, 2023: Taiwan military [releases](#) updated civil defense handbook including a section on differentiating between Chinese and Taiwanese soldiers based on uniforms, camouflage, and insignia.

June 11, 2023: Taiwan’s Air Force [scrambles](#) after spotting 10 Chinese warplanes crossing the median line of the Taiwan Strait, in its second recce in less than a week after 37 Chinese military aircraft flew into the island’s air defense zone.

June 11, 2023: China’s Assistant Foreign Minister Nong Rong [summons](#) South Korean ambassador to express “serious concern and dissatisfaction” over Seoul’s “improper reaction” to comments made by the Chinese envoy, who warned Seoul against making “wrong bets” in the Sino-US rivalry.

June 11, 2023: Honduras [opens](#) embassy in China after cutting diplomatic relations with Taiwan earlier this year.

June 12, 2023: Biden administration [adds](#) 43 entities to an export control list, including

Frontier Services Group Ltd, a security and aviation company previously run by Erik Prince, for training Chinese military pilots and other activities that threaten US national security.

June 12, 2023: China [deploys](#) a reconnaissance aircraft over Pacific waters east of Taiwan to monitor and gather intelligence on an exercise involving the navies of the United States, Japan, France, and Canada.

June 12-16, 2023: South Korea and the US [stage](#) the Combined Distribution Exercise in Pohang.

June 13, 2023: China [holds](#) military exercises in the East China Sea north of Taiwan, including live-fire exercises from warships, as the US and its allies conduct their drills in the Western Pacific.

June 14, 2023: Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu [discusses](#) the need for maintaining the status quo in its relationship with neighboring China, encouraging European states to offer support and courage for resilience; while addressing a press conference in Prague.

June 15, 2023: National Security Advisers for the US, Japan, and South Korea [discuss](#) maintaining stability in the Taiwan Strait and coordination in the East China and South China Seas. At a trilateral meeting in Tokyo, they also examined North Korea's "illicit nuclear and missile programs and most recent provocations and identified next steps to strengthen their cooperation."

June 15, 2023: North Korea [condemns South Korea's live-fire drills with the United States](#) and threatens to sternly respond to "any kind of protests or provocations by enemies" in the region.

June 15, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) two short-range [ballistic missiles](#) toward East Sea.

June 15, 2023: US [targets](#) North Korea's missile development in new sanctions after South Korea's military raps Pyongyang for firing two short-range missiles less than an hour after it warned of an "inevitable" response to military drills staged by South Korean and US troops.

June 16, 2023: National security advisers of the US, Japan and the Philippines hold trilateral meeting to [discuss](#) regional security issues and ways to [strengthen](#) relations. They deliberate contentious issues in the South and the East China Sea, North Korea and reiterate the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.

June 16, 2023: US [imposes sanctions](#) on two North Korean nationals for assisting the country's illegal weapons program.

June 16, 2023: China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Hong Kong [condemns](#) Hong Kong resolutions passed by the European Parliament, calling them a "despicable act" that "trampled" on principles of international law.

June 17, 2023: Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, [share](#) pessimism on Myanmar, calling for continued pressure on the military junta and sustained efforts to scale-up negotiation across all stakeholders.

June 18-19, 2023: Secretary of State Blinken [visits](#) Beijing where he holds 12 hours of meetings with top Chinese officials including President Xi—the first visit of its kind since 2018. Blinken [also holds](#) meetings with then-Foreign Minister Qing Gang and Central Foreign Affairs Commission director Wang Yi. Xi and Blinken [agree](#) to stabilize US-China relations in Beijing talks, while failing to produce any breakthrough during Blinken's visit to the city.

June 19, 2023: North Korea [cites](#) botched [satellite launch](#) as its "most serious" failure.

June 19, 2023: Secretary Blinken [urges](#) China's vigilance on its firms providing technology to Russia that could be used against Ukraine.

June 19, 2023: German Chancellor Olaf Scholz [rejects](#) blanket state supervision of exports to China, noting that the country has drafted a new laws to guarantee the security of the economy.

June 19, 2023: US Navy [runs](#) rehearsal for ballistic submarine USS Michigan visit to Busan

amid tensions driven by North Korea's weapons testing, and as Seoul and Washington are bolstering their military cooperation to deter Pyongyang.

June 20, 2023: Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov [shows](#) confidence in Russia's strategic partnership with China. He acknowledges that China has the sovereign right to forge ties with other countries and that Russia is not worried about US attempts to sway the former's policy toward Moscow.

June 20, 2023: Wall Street Journal report [suggests](#) that China and Cuba negotiating to establish a new joint military training facility on the island, sparking alarm in the US that it could lead to stationing Chinese troops and other security operations 100 miles off Florida's coast.

June 20, 2023: Lowy Institute Poll of Public Attitudes [finds](#) 82% of Australians support the security alliance with the US. They also favored responding to a Chinese attack on Taiwan with economic sanctions, arms supplies, or using the navy to prevent a blockade, without becoming an active combatant. The prospect of a military conflict between the US and China over Taiwan is seen as a "critical threat" by 64% of Australians, twice as many people as two years ago. The top threat cited by 68% percent of respondents, was cyber attacks from other countries.

June 21, 2023: US Treasury [announces](#) new sanctions on Myanmar and designates two regime-controlled banks, Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank (MFTB) and Myanma Investment and Commercial Bank (MKN), both of which have been instrumental in facilitating the military's use of foreign currency to procure arms and jet fuel abroad.

June 21, 2023: Taiwan [raises](#) caution over a Chinese aircraft carrier group led by the vessel Shandong, sailing through the Taiwan Strait amid heightened military tension.

June 21, 2023: Taiwan on [alert](#) for Chinese-funded election interference through means of illicit funding of Beijing-friendly

candidates using communications apps or group tours, according to three internal security reports released by the government.

June 21, 2023: Annual position paper released by the European Chamber of Commerce in China [notes](#) slowdown in both the Chinese and global economies as the biggest issue affecting European firms in the country. The number of European companies reporting China-sourced revenues decreased in 2022, while the importance of China to companies' global profits fell for a second consecutive year.

June 21, 2023: North Korea [criticizes](#) Blinken's China visit as "begging trip," in what it called a policy failure to pressure China. The commentary carried by KCNA news agency, states that the US is responsible for escalating regional tensions with "anti-China complexes," such as the Quad grouping with Japan, India, and Australia, and the AUKUS pact with Britain and Australia.

June 21, 2023: Japan to [harmonize](#) standards for domestically produced defense equipment with those of the US and Europe to reduce maintenance costs and increase business opportunities for Japanese defense companies, under draft guidelines issued by the government.

June 21, 2023: Secretary Blinken [voices](#) deep concerns over Chinese military activities in Cuba, at a press conference in London.

June 22, 2023: US Coast Guard ship Stratton [sails](#) through the Taiwan Strait, after Secretary Blinken's high-profile visit to Beijing. The US Navy's 7th Fleet in an official statement declares that "Stratton's transit through the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the United States' commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific."

June 22, 2023: US and India [declare](#) themselves "among the closest partners in the world" [during a state visit](#) by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Washington hosted by President Biden.

June 22, 2023: G7 [affirms](#) unity and need for close coordination on China after Secretary

Blinken's meeting with Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the EU on the sidelines of a conference in London.

June 22, 2023: Chancellor Olaf Scholz [addresses](#) German Parliament, vowing to reject all unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East and South China Seas by force or coercion, especially Taiwan. He reiterates concern for human rights and the state of the rule of law in China.

June 22, 2023: In the 18th intrusion this year, four Chinese coast guard Haijing vessels [sail](#) near the contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands for around two hours.

June 23, 2023: US [convenes](#) a meeting of working-level experts from China, France, Russia, and the UK to discuss nuclear weapons issues including strategic risk reduction, as a part of "a routine, continuing dialogue and ongoing exchange in the context of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty."

June 23-24, 2023: Russia's mercenary Wagner Group [rebels](#) against Russian leadership over its handling of the Ukraine war, only to halt the uprising before reaching Moscow a day later after a deal allows group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin to go to Belarus. Prigozhin is later [killed](#) in a plane crash on Aug. 23.

June 26, 2023: Suspicions over Chinese intelligence collection outposts in Cuba [renew](#) concerns over its efforts to establish a global network for power projection.

June 28, 2023: China [signs](#) cooperative arrangements with "friend" New Zealand, aimed at improving market access for a Western country that has long maintained a conciliatory approach toward China.

June 28, 2023: A Chinese survey vessel is [detected](#) in the waters near the Senkaku Islands in Okinawa Prefecture, though there is no intrusion into Japanese territorial waters.

June 28, 2023: China [issues](#) warnings to foreign consulates, reminding them that dual-national

detainees cannot receive visits from consular officers.

June 28, 2023: Taiwan says it [spots](#) two Russian frigates sailing through waters near Taiwan, in a move that could heighten tensions in the region.

June 29, 2023: Japan's Ministry of Defense [announces](#) that engineering company IHI will begin repairing engines in F-35 fighter jets used by the SDF and the US military, in a move that will enable troops to move more quickly and act as a deterrent against aggressive neighbors.

June 30, 2023: South Korea and US [stage](#) air drills involving a B-52H strategic bomber.

July 1, 2023: Chinese media [announce](#) that a PLAN flotilla led by a Type 075 amphibious assault ship recently passed through the first island chain from straits south of Japan, marking the first time that this type of large warship was reported operating in the vicinity of Japan.

July 1, 2023: An investigative report says Russia has been [importing](#) drones from Chinese companies explicitly for use in its invasion of Ukraine, despite denials from Beijing.

July 4, 2023: Taiwan Vice President and Democratic Progressive Party Presidential candidate [Lai Ching-te, publishes an opinion column](#) in the Wall Street Journal promising to defend Taiwan's democracy against Chinese coercion.

July 6, 2023: Justice ministers from Japan and ASEAN [pledge](#) to cooperate in promoting the rule of law amid China's increasing maritime assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region.

July 6-9, 2023: Treasury Secretary Yellen [visits](#) China where she has "frank, pragmatic, in-depth and constructive" meetings with top Chinese officials in charge of economic affairs.

July 7, 2023: South Korean government [announces](#) that based on its own scientific [analysis](#), Japan's plan to release the Fukushima wastewater would meet international standards.

July 10, 2023: North Korea [denounces](#) US move to introduce a nuclear missile submarine to waters near the Korean Peninsula, stating that the action brings a nuclear conflict closer to reality.

July 10, 2023: China and the Solomon Islands [announce](#) a comprehensive strategic partnership, as they bolster relations four years after the Pacific nation switched ties from Taiwan to China.

July 10, 2023: China and South Korea [push](#) for deep-sea mining as a United Nations body convenes a meeting in Jamaica to discuss setting guidelines for such activities.

July 10, 2023: 10 members of South Korea's National Assembly, civic activists, and South Korean fishermen [protest](#) Japan's planned discharge of Fukushima water outside Japanese Prime Minister Kishida's residence in Tokyo.

July 10-14: China [conducts](#) a week of naval and air exercises in the Taiwan Strait.

July 11, 2023: North Korea [accuses](#) the United States of violating its airspace.

July 12, 2023: Philippines [launches](#) website containing "official information" about Manila's arbitration victory against Beijing in their South China Sea territorial dispute. The site's launch represents the latest effort by President Marcos' administration to firm up Manila's position in the dispute.

July 12, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) an intercontinental ballistic missile.

July 12, 2023: Chinese company [launches](#) world's first methane-liquid oxygen rocket-Zhuque-2, beating US rivals in sending what could become the next generation of launch vehicles into space.

July 12, 2023: State-owned Bank of China (BOC) [opens](#) first representative office in Papua New Guinea, kick-starting Xi Jinping's plans to build a comprehensive strategic partnership with PNG.

July 13, 2023: South Korea and the US [stage air drills](#) involving s B-52H strategic bomber in response to the North's launch.

July 13, 2023: Japanese government [signs](#) a new partnership agreement with NATO to enhance security coordination with Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg explicitly referencing concern China's military buildup.

July 13-14, 2023: Secretary Blinken [travels](#) to Indonesia, where he participates in the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting and the 30th ASEAN Regional Forum. Blinken [meets](#) China's top diplomat Wang Yi on the sidelines for "candid and productive" talks.

July 14, 2023: US [calls](#) for [UN Security Council](#) action against North Korea's ICBM test, but permanent members China and Russia oppose it.

July 14, 2023: Secretary Blinken [holds](#) "candid and constructive" talks with Wang Yi in Jakarta in interactions Washington says are aimed at managing competition between the rival superpowers.

July 14, 2023: Solomon Islands [denies](#) suggestions by the US, New Zealand, and Australia on its policies dealing with Beijing and maintains that China will enhance the capability of its 1,500 police officers in cybersecurity and community policing.

July 15, 2023: President Yoon [makes](#) a [surprise visit](#) to Ukraine in show of support.

June 15, 2023: Pyongyang fires two short-range ballistic missiles.

July 16-19, 2023: Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry [visits](#) China where he holds meetings with top Chinese climate officials to discuss opportunities for cooperation.

July 18, 2023: US nuclear missile sub [visits](#) South Korea for the first time since the 1980s, as the allies launched Nuclear Consultative Group talks to coordinate responses in the event of a nuclear war with North Korea.

July 18, 2023: UN Command says US national Travis King [crosses](#) military [demarcation line](#) into North Korea.

July 18, 2023: Officers from the JSDF and the Chinese military [meet](#) in Beijing, resuming an in-person exchange program for the first time since before the COVID-19 pandemic.

July 19, 2023: US climate envoy Kerry [urges](#) China to separate climate from politics in a meeting with Chinese Vice President Han Zheng, calling it a “universal threat” that should be handled separately from broader diplomatic issues and be treated as a “free-standing” challenge that requires the collective efforts of the world’s largest economies to resolve.

July 19, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) two short-range ballistic missiles into [East Sea](#).

July 20-23, 2023: Russia and China [conduct](#) joint sea and naval drill “North/Interaction-2023” in the Sea of Japan. Five Russian and five Chinese naval ships participate.

July 22, 2023: US [commissions](#) warship in Sydney, the first time a US Navy vessel joined active service at a foreign port, as the allies step up military ties in response to China’s expanding regional reach.

July 21, 2023: Japan [returns](#) South Korea to its white list of preferred trading partners, four years after removing it from the list.

July 22, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) “several” [cruise missiles](#) toward west coast.

July 22, 2023: China [seeks](#) to reassure multinationals over anti-spying law and pledges transparency to Western, Japanese, and South Korean business lobbies by increasing the predictability of policies via regular exchanges with foreign partner companies.

July 23, 2023: Following general elections in Cambodia in which the Cambodian People’s Party won 120 out of 125 seats, the State Department [said](#) it had “taken steps” to impose visa restrictions “on individuals who

undermined democracy and implemented a pause of foreign assistance programs” after determining the elections were “neither free nor fair.”

July 24, 2023: Australia to [buy](#) 20 Hercules military planes worth \$6.6 billion ahead of visit by Secretary Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

July 24, 2023: China and Russia [conclude](#) four-day military exercise in the Sea of Japan to, according to the Chinese defense ministry, “enhance strategic cooperation between the two countries and strengthen their ability to jointly safeguard regional peace and stability.”

July 25, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) late-night [ballistic missiles](#) after US submarine visits South.

July 25, 2023: Qin Gang is [replaced](#) in as China’s foreign minister by his predecessor Wang Yi.

July 26, 2023: Secretary Blinken [visits](#) Tonga, dedicating a new embassy there as part of efforts to shore up the US presence in the Pacific.

July 27, 2023: North Korea and South Korea [mark](#) 70th anniversary of the Korean Armistice agreement.

July 28, 2023: Indonesia [secures](#) at least \$13 billion in investment pledges from Chinese companies following meeting between Indonesian President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo and President Xi in Chengdu.

July 28, 2023: Japan [releases](#) 2023 Defense White Paper saying that the international community is facing its greatest trial since World War II and has entered a new era of crisis. This includes China rapidly enhancing its military capability qualitatively and quantitatively, including nuclear and missile forces.

July 28, 2023: White House [announces](#) \$345 million military aid package for Taiwan—including anti-air and anti-armored munitions—through the fast-track “Presidential Drawdown Authority,” prompting

China to accuse the US of turning the island into a “powder keg and ammunition depot” a day later.

July 28, 2023: South Korea and the US [stage](#) joint air drills with F-35A and F-16 jets.

July 28-Aug. 21, 2023: Chinese and Russian navies [conduct](#) the third joint patrol of the western and northern Pacific.

July 29, 2023: US and Australia [agree](#) to upgrade two additional air bases in northern Australia and to step up cooperation on weapons production and maintenance, as China’s growing strategic ambitions solidify defense ties between Washington and Canberra.

July 29, 2023: US [bars](#) Hong Kong leader from APEC summit, for his role in crackdowns against pro-democracy protests under a stringent national security law enacted by Beijing in 2020.

July 29, 2023: Japanese defense ministry [announces](#) the presence of five Chinese and five Russian warships in its territorial waters, as they sailed through the Soya Strait between Hokkaido and Sakhalin to the Sea of Okhotsk, possibly in connection with a joint patrol in the Pacific Ocean.

July 29, 2023: South Korea and US [stage](#) joint [anti-submarine](#) [drills](#) involving nuclear-powered sub.

July 29, 2023: US [announces](#) \$345 million in military aid for Taiwan that includes defense, education and training for the Taiwanese, in addition to supply of man-portable air defense systems, or MANPADS, intelligence and surveillance capabilities, firearms, and missiles.

July 30, 2023: Ten Chinese and Russian naval vessels [pass](#) through the Soya Strait between Cape Soya in the northernmost prefecture of Hokkaido and the Russian island of Sakhalin in the first China-Russia joint naval vessel sailing near Japan since September 2022.

July 31, 2023: China [announces](#) curbs on exports of drone-related equipment including drone engines, lasers, communication equipment, and

anti-drone systems; set to take effect Sept. 1 2023, amid US tech tensions.

July 31, 2023: State Administrative Council (SAC) on Myanmar [extends](#) the state of emergency for another six months.

Aug. 1, 2023: Xi [appoints](#) new chief of China’s nuclear arsenal to oversee conventional and nuclear missiles, one day before the anniversary of the People’s Liberation Army. Wang Houbin, former deputy commander of the navy, is named head of the PLA Rocket Force, and Xu Xisheng its new political commissar.

Aug. 1, 2023: President Xi [calls](#) “for enhancing the planning of war and combat, strengthening the command system for joint operations, and stepping up training under real combat conditions to raise the forces’ capabilities to fight and win,” during visit to PLA Eastern Theater Command headquarters.

Aug. 2, 2023: US [extends](#) invite to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during meeting at the State Department between Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink and Yang Tao, director-general of North American and Oceanian Affairs at China’s Foreign Ministry.

Aug. 3, 2023: Xi Jinping announces that China [seeks](#) advances in artificial intelligence-powered drones and hypersonic weapons in a broader military buildup, as Xi prepares the country for “extreme” scenarios.

Aug. 4, 2023: China [deepens](#) military ties with Russia for “non-Western” front, as Russian anti-submarine ships and fighter jets join the Northern Theater Command of the PLA for joint exercises.

Aug. 4, 2023: China to [lift](#) tariffs on Australian barley imports that had been in place for three years affecting billions of dollars of trade, as the two nations repair strained ties.

Aug. 5, 2023: US [weighs](#) deploying new military elements in Japan to better coordinate operations with the JSDF under the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), as a

Taiwan contingency would necessitate a swift collective response.

Aug. 5, 2023: Chinese Coast Guard and maritime militia vessels [use](#) water cannons and other maneuvers to obstruct a Philippine resupply mission to Second Thomas Shoal. The State Department issues an immediate statement of support for the Philippines. The Philippine military [condemns](#) this as “excessive and offensive,” to block a Filipino supply boat from delivering

Aug. 7, 2023: China [asks](#) Philippines to remove grounded ship from Second Thomas Shoal after blocking two Manila supply ships with water cannons, as both sides assert their claims of the area.

Aug. 9, 2023: Australia [revamps](#) Pacific Island foreign aid by unveiling a new international development aid policy focusing on climate change. The policy, revised for the first time in roughly a decade, will establish a fund of up to A\$250 million (\$163 billion) to encourage private-sector investment in Pacific Island and Southeast Asian nations.

Aug. 9, 2023: Secretary of Defense Austin [pledges](#) to defend Philippine vessels if attacked in the South China Sea, after the China Coast Guard ship water cannon firing incident.

Aug. 9, 2023: President Biden [signs](#) executive order requiring US persons to notify the Treasury Department of certain transactions and investments in China, particularly those in high-tech sectors such as semiconductors, quantum computing, artificial intelligence, and other technologies with potential military applications.

Aug. 10, 2023: India, Japan, the US, and Australia [hold](#) naval exercise off Sydney, and Japanese and Indian navy vessels make pit-stops in Solomon Islands and PNG on the way to Sydney, highlighting the strategic importance of the region. In a news conference in Sydney, Vice Adm. Karl Thomas, commander of the US Seventh Fleet notes that the deterrence that the four Quad nations provide as they

operate together “shall serve as a “foundation for all the other nations operating in this region. “

Aug. 11, 2023: New Zealand [acknowledges](#) awareness of China-linked intelligence activity in country, calling it a “complex intelligence concern.” The accusations are the latest comments from the New Zealand government outlining concerns about China’s behavior and its destabilizing impact.

Aug. 12, 2023: Malaysia [holds](#) six state elections, a contest between the government coalition (PH) led by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and the opposition coalition (BN), which includes the Islamist fundamentalist party PAS. As expected, results are split evenly—each side won three states each—but the PH won their states with a smaller majority than previously, with gains by PAS.

Aug. 13, 2023: China’s foreign ministry [condemns](#) brief US visit by Taiwan Vice President William Lai Ching-te, saying he is “troublemaker through and through” and Beijing would take strong steps to protect its sovereignty.

Aug. 13, 2023: China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi [visits](#) Cambodia to reaffirm his country’s commitment to the country after its incumbent prime minister handed off the job to his son, Hun Manet following an election in July.

Aug. 14, 2023: Beijing [concludes](#) agreements with government of Guinea to build a trans-Guinean railway to carry iron ore from the nation’s inland to the coast to cut China’s reliance on Australia iron-ore.

Aug. 14, 2023: During US visit, Taiwan’s Vice President Lai [vows](#) that his country shall remain unafraid and never back down in the face of authoritarian threats.

Aug. 14, 2023: Japan and US [begin](#) discussions on joint development of an interceptor missile for hypersonic projectiles, expected to improve deterrence against China, Russia, and North Korea.

Aug. 14, 2023: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [calls](#) for increase in missile production to help secure “overwhelming military power” and be ready for war, as South Korea and the US prepare for annual military drills.

Aug. 15, 2023: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [calls](#) for real-time nuclear and missile information sharing with Japan and the US as Seoul marks Liberation Day.

Aug. 16, 2023: US [cements](#) “game-changing” defense ties with Australia and Japan amid growing concerns posed by China, following a new security deal between Canberra and Tokyo.

Aug. 16, 2023: North Korea [claims](#) US Pvt. Travis King wants [refuge](#) in North or third country.

Aug. 18, 2023: Indonesia [taps](#) local fishers to boost Natuna Islands defense, which have transformed into the front lines of the country’s remote island protection, amid increased Chinese activity in the area.

Aug. 18, 2023: President Biden, President Yoon, and Prime Minister Kishida [hold](#) historic trilateral summit at Camp David, and adopt the [Spirit of Camp David](#) and the [Camp David Principles](#). They [commit](#) to immediately consult in event of [common threat](#).

Aug. 18, 2023: Associated Press reports that China [appears](#) to be constructing an airstrip on a disputed South China Sea island.

Aug. 19, 2023: Vietnam announces [plans](#) to fortify its military presence on the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, where it is locked in territorial disputes with China and the Philippines. The project, led by Vietnam’s defense ministry and navy, involves constructing and expanding military and other facilities on Pearson Reef and Pigeon Reef, over which Hanoi holds effective control.

Aug. 19, 2023: US [tightens](#) export controls of nuclear power items to China to ensure that items are used only for peaceful purposes rather than proliferation of atomic weapons.

Aug. 19, 2023: Chinese sources [denounce](#) the spirit of Camp David—the meeting of President Biden, President Yoon, and Prime Minister Kishida—as “hypocritical anti-China pantomime with a mini-NATO in the making.”

Aug. 21, 2023: China [lodges](#) representations with relevant parties over US, Japanese, and South Korean leaders’ criticism of China at Camp David.

Aug. 21, 2023: South Korea and India [join](#) the US, Japan, and European countries in supporting the Philippines in its maritime disputes with Beijing in the South China Sea, as China’s recent use of water cannon against a Philippine resupply ship creates a global backlash.

Aug. 21, 2023: Central American parliament expels Taiwan, replacing it with China at the behest of Nicaragua, which switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in December 2021.

Aug. 21, 2023: South Korea and the US [begin](#) joint large-scale military exercise aimed at bolstering defense and preparedness against North Korea’s evolving nuclear and missile threats.

Aug. 22, 2023: Philippines [completes](#) resupply mission to grounded warship on Second Thomas Shoal despite attempts by the China Coast Guard and Chinese Maritime Militia “to block, harass, and interfere.”

Aug. 22, 2023: Cambodian legislature [approves](#) nomination of Hun Manet, eldest son of former prime minister Hun Sen, as prime minister, marking a generational shift in the dominant Cambodian People’s Party (CPP).

Aug. 22, 2023: China firmly [opposes](#) the Philippines exploiting the opportunity of resupplying troops to transport “illegal” construction materials to a grounded warship Sierra Madre, in Second Thomas Shoal.

Aug. 22, 2023: After more than three months of political and judicial maneuvering, the Thai Parliament [approves](#) nomination of the Pheu Thai Party’s Srettha Thavasin for prime

minister. On the same day, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra returns to Thailand after a 15-year exile.

Aug. 22–24, 2023: 15th BRICS Summit is held in Johannesburg, South Africa and invites six countries (Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) to join the group, from Jan. 1, 2024.

Aug. 23, 2023: China's climate envoy Xie Zhenhua and US counterpart Kerry [hold](#) video talks on climate-change cooperation.

Aug. 23, 2023: US Treasury [expands](#) use of sanctions in Myanmar to impose penalties on any individual or entity operating in the jet fuel section of the country's economy, designating two individuals and three entities involved in procuring and distributing jet fuel to the its military.

Aug. 23, 2023: Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen [makes](#) rare visit to a memorial park on Kinmen Island, less than 1.2 miles from Chinese-controlled territory, to commemorate the 65th anniversary of the beginning of the Second Taiwan Strait crisis.

Aug. 24, 2023: Japan [commences](#) releasing treated radioactive water from the wrecked Fukushima nuclear power plant into the Pacific Ocean, prompting China to announce an immediate blanket ban on all aquatic products imported from the former.

Aug. 24, 2023: Deputy Treasury Chief Adeyemo [says](#) the US is well-prepared to weather China's economic headwinds and is closely monitoring economic developments in China, [where growth is faltering](#) amid a worsening property slump, weak consumer spending, and tumbling credit growth.

Aug. 24, 2023: Taiwan [proposes](#) \$3 billion spending on new weapons.

Aug. 24, 2023: United States [seeks](#) a six-month extension to a science and technology agreement with China, to undergo negotiations with the latter to "amend and strengthen" the landmark deal.

Aug. 24, 2023: US State Department [approves](#) sale of equipment worth \$500 million to Taiwan, to upgrade infrared search and track systems for F-16 fighter jets, as well as other machinery.

Aug. 24, 2023: China [suspends](#) imports of Taiwanese mangoes, citing a "severe threat" to China's agricultural and ecological security posed by citrus mealybugs in shipments of the fruit, making full use of its economic and military playbook to scare the Taiwanese electorate ahead of January's presidential election. Imports of Taiwanese apples, pineapples, and grouper fish had previously been banned by Beijing.

Aug. 24, 2023: North Korea claims a failed satellite launch.

Aug. 25, 2023: Japan [scrambles](#) jet to monitor Chinese military drone flying near the country's westernmost Yonaguni island and Taiwan. As per the Defense Ministry, the spy drone came from the East China Sea north of Taiwan and went to the Bashi Channel that separates Taiwan's southern coast and the Philippines.

Aug. 25, 2023: China's Defense Ministry [urges](#) the US to stop "arming" Taiwan, after the State Department approved a [\\$500 million sale](#) of infrared search, track systems for F-16 fighter jets and well as other equipment, to the island.

Aug. 25, 2023: Australia [acknowledges](#) its security interest in the South China Sea and vows to work more closely with the Philippines on joint patrols. More than 2,000 Australian and Philippine defense personnel, as well as US Marines, are participating in amphibious landing and air assault drills and [conducting bilateral exercises](#) with the Philippine Navy.

Aug. 25, 2023: Fiji's Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka [indicates](#) that the Pacific Islands should remain a "zone of peace," adding that he hopes a rivalry between the US and China does not develop into a military conflict.

Aug. 25, 2023: China and Australia [raise](#) climate change, security at Pacific leaders' summit as the leaders of four nations debate declaring the

strategic region “neutral” as China and the US [jostle for influence](#). Climate change, security and trade dominate the opening day of a summit of the leaders of PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and New Caledonia’s ruling FLNKS party.

Aug. 25, 2023: Taiwan’s presidential front-runner William Lai Ching-te [pledges](#) to adopt “values-based diplomacy” to support democracies in the region, an apparent sign of a shift from President Tsai’s approach of prioritizing commerce and countries that formally recognize Taiwan.

Aug. 26, 2023: Chinese police experts [arrive](#) in Vanuatu amid political crisis in which Prime Minister Ishmael Kalsakau lost a no-confidence vote for signing a security pact with Australia.

Aug. 26, 2023: Taiwan [reports](#) 20 Chinese air force planes entering the island’s air defense zone, including a combat drone that flew along Taiwan’s Pacific east coast.

Aug. 26, 2023: Japan’s ASDF [scrambles](#) jet fighters to monitor two Chinese H-6 bombers flying between Okinawa and Miyako islands.

Aug. 27, 2023: Three US marines killed when an Osprey aircraft [crashes](#) near Darwin, Australia during an exercise.

Aug. 27, 2023: US Navy official [highlights](#) the need for China’s ‘aggressive behavior’ in South China Sea to be challenged and checked after the country used the water canon of its coast guard against a Philippine vessel.

Aug. 27, 2023: Russian ships [return](#) after more than three weeks of joint-patrolling the Pacific Ocean with Chinese navy ships. Warships of Russia’s Pacific Fleet, together with a detachment of Chinese navy ships travelled more than 7,000 nautical miles through the Sea of Japan, the Sea of Okhotsk, the Bering Sea, and the Pacific Ocean.

Aug. 27-30, 2023: Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo [visits](#) China to meet with counterparts, and the two sides agree to new

consultations on trade and export control systems.

Aug. 28, 2023: China and Japan [agree](#) to postpone visit by head of Japan junior coalition partner “in light of current China-Japan relations.” China’s foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin remarks that the country “stands ready to work with it to make active efforts for improving and growing China-Japan relations.”

Aug. 28, 2023: South Korean government [announces](#) that the amount of tritium in seawater after Japan began discharging ALPS-treated wastewater is safe and well below the standard limit.

Aug. 28, 2023: Japan [complains](#) of harassment calls from China over Fukushima water release, with condemning the instances of stone-pelting of the Japanese Embassy in Beijing.

Aug. 29, 2023: South Korea, Japan, and the US [hold](#) a trilateral missile defense exercise in respond to North Korea’s failed satellite test.

Aug. 29, 2023: Taiwan [warns](#) of surge in tensions after reporting renewed Chinese military activity including fighter jets crossing the median line of the Taiwan Strait. The ministry spotted 12 Chinese military aircraft in its air defense identification zone, of which seven crossed the median line in addition to five Chinese ships which carried out “combat readiness patrols” in the region.

Aug. 29, 2023: In a speech to [mark](#) Navy Day, North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un condemns “gang bosses” of the US, Japan, and South Korea after they announced regular joint military exercises, apparently referring to their [Aug. 18 summit](#) as a “confrontational move” forcing the waters off the Korean Peninsula to be reduced to “world’s biggest war hardware concentration spot.”

Aug. 30, 2023: US [deploys](#) B-1B bombers for separate drills with South Korea, Japan as the three allies step up responses to counter threats from North Korea. A US B-1B flew alongside South Korean FA-50 jets and US Air Force F-16

fighters as part of Ulchi Freedom Shield exercises.

Aug. 30, 2023: State Department [notifies](#) Congress of \$80 million arms deal to Taiwan through the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program, which is usually reserved for sovereign states.

Aug. 31, 2023: Philippines, Taiwan, and Malaysia [reject](#) China's latest South China Sea map with an updated 10-dash line that covers about 90% of the South China Sea.

Aug. 31, 2023: Russia [says](#) it will deepen ties with North Korea as "Moscow and Pyongyang maintain good, mutually respectful relations," but doesn't confirm Putin-Kim letter exchange.

Aug. 31, 2023: China [holds](#) intensive anti-submarine exercises in the South China Sea as part of efforts to hone its capabilities amid rising maritime tensions with its neighbors and their allies.

Aug. 31, 2023: China and former Taiwan-ally Nicaragua [sign](#) free trade agreement, deepening economic ties since the country switched its allegiance to Beijing from Taiwan in 2021.

Aug. 31, 2023: Biden [approves](#) military aid worth \$80 million to Taiwan under the Foreign Military Financing program normally used for sovereign states.

Aug. 31, 2023: Fiji to [sign](#) a defense agreement with France, after the Cabinet of the Pacific Islands nation approved the deal. French President Emmanuel Macron toured the Pacific Islands in July, where France has overseas territories, [denouncing predatory behavior](#) by big powers in a region where China is extending trade and security ties.

Aug. 31, 2023: Japan [makes](#) record defense spending request amid tension with China by asking for a \$52.67 billion in spending for the 2024 fiscal year. The plan, announced last year, seeks to double defense spending to 2% of GDP by 2027.

Aug. 31, 2023: China [says](#) countries should see its national map in 'objective' way after countries, including the Philippines, India and Malaysia, protested Beijing's newly released map expanding its claim over regions of the South China Sea.

Aug. 31, 2023: China's Ministry of Defense [states](#) that military-to-military communication between Beijing and Washington has "not stopped," amid high tensions between the two superpowers over the South China Sea, Taiwan, and other issues.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

US-JAPAN RELATIONS

A BUSY DIPLOMATIC CALENDAR FOR BIDEN AND KISHIDA

SHEILA A. SMITH, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
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2023 is the year for the US and Japan to [intensify their cooperation](#) in multilateral venues. The first opportunity was the G7 meeting in Hiroshima in May, and the last will be the APEC meeting in San Francisco in November. In between, partners were hosting other important meetings: the NATO Summit in Lithuania and the G20 in India. Across these meetings, Russia's war in Ukraine has stayed at the top of the agenda. The war has focused attention on the rules-based order, but global economic cooperation was not far behind. Prime Minister Kishida Fumio traveled to Africa and the Middle East to offer assistance for food insecurity and to stabilize energy markets, while President Joe Biden reached out to nations in the Indo-Pacific, including Pacific Island nations and Vietnam, to deepen strategic cooperation. China continues to loom large. The Biden administration sent three Cabinet members to Beijing for long sought consultations. Secretary of State Antony Blinken finally [realized](#) his planned trip on June 18-19. Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen [followed](#) on July 6-9 to meet with her counterpart, Vice Premier He Lifeng.

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Finally, Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo [traveled](#) to China on Aug. 27-30 to meet Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao, addressing the difficult challenges of technology and supply chains. Whether these visits achieved a sufficient level of trust remains to be seen.



Figure 1 President Biden meets with Nguyen Phu Trong, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, in Hanoi. Photo: Kenny Holston/New York Times

The diplomatic highlight this summer was the [trilateral summit](#) between President Biden, Prime Minister Kishida, and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol on Aug. 18 at Camp David. Described as “[historic](#),” the scene of these three allied leaders meeting at one of the most celebrated locations in US diplomacy was set carefully by all three leaders. Bilateral strains between Tokyo and Seoul had been tended by shuttle diplomacy by Yoon and Kishida, and the military cooperation between the two US allies had been restored and deepened as North Korea demonstrated the growing sophistication of its missile arsenal. China [complained](#) bitterly about this “Cold War mentality,” revealing that the hard work of all three leaders to strengthen their cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula to the Indo-Pacific had been duly noted in Beijing.

Japan’s G7

Prime Minister Kishida assiduously traveled to visit partners, [creating the foundation](#) for a successful G7 summit in Hiroshima. After his early 2023 trip to Europe and North America, Kishida traveled to [India](#) on March 20 and to

[Ukraine](#) the following day to meet President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the last G7 leader to do so. With an eye to the Global South and its support for the G7, Kishida also traveled to [Egypt](#), [Ghana](#), [Kenya](#), and [Mozambique](#) from April 29 to May 4, where he [pledged](#) \$500 million in assistance to promote peace and stability in Africa. Finally, Kishida focused on relations with South Korea, inviting President Yoon as a special guest to the G7 Summit. A [trip](#) to Seoul on May 7-8, the [first](#) by a Japanese prime minister in 12 years, cemented the commitment to improving bilateral ties.

The G7 [agenda](#) was impressively global. The [war in Ukraine](#) was at the top of the list of concerns, of course, with members agreeing to [tighten sanctions](#) on Russia. But so too were the concerns over the future of the Indo-Pacific. President Yoon’s presence, together with that of Prime Ministers Anthony Albanese of Australia and Narendra Modi of India, alongside the largely European grouping, reminded the world of the growing convergence and collaboration among the US and its allies and partners. Modi in particular presented a link to the grouping referred to as the Global South, and the leaders of Brazil and regional organizations including the African Union, ASEAN, and Pacific Islands Forum brought a decidedly [global feel](#) to the gathering of advanced industrial economies that make up the G7.



Figure 2 The leaders of the four Quad countries take a group photo during the G7 summit in Hiroshima. Photo: AP

Held in Hiroshima, Kishida’s own constituency, the G7 directly addressed the nuclear dimension of the conflict in Ukraine. Signing a declaration,

the [Hiroshima Vision on Nuclear Disarmament](#), all seven leaders committed themselves to efforts to reduce the risk that nuclear weapons will be used again and condemned any threats by countries to carry out nuclear tests.

Perhaps the most dramatic moment was the arrival of Ukrainian President Zelenskyy via a French military aircraft. His appearance was certain but initially expected to be a virtual one. He met with Prime Minister Kishida, and they together [visited](#) the Hiroshima Peace Memorial to lay wreaths. In a speech on May 21, Zelenskyy said that while it “wouldn’t be fair” to compare the attack on Hiroshima to the war in his own country, “the pictures of ruined Hiroshima really totally [remind me](#) of Bakhmut,” a Ukrainian city that Russia claimed to have captured earlier that day. Zelenskyy went on to urge Russian President Vladimir Putin to abandon his “[nuclear blackmail](#) of the world.” Equally telling was the meeting held for the first time between Zelenskyy and Modi, signaling Indian support for Ukraine despite its caution toward sanctions on Russia. Modi said India would do “[everything we can](#)” to help end the war, calling the war not “just an issue of economy or politics...[but] an issue of humanity.”

President Biden’s trip to Tokyo for the G7 was to be the first stop on a broader Indo-Pacific jaunt that included Australia and Papua New Guinea. Domestic politics in Washington over the debt ceiling led to an abbreviated trip, however. The [Quad meeting](#), originally intended to be hosted by Prime Minister Albanese in Canberra, was held on the sidelines of the G7 and proved to be a much briefer demonstration of the convictions of the Quad leaders. Nonetheless, the Quad continues to [expand its agenda](#) for ensuring Indo-Pacific needs are met in a [wide range of fields](#), including climate change, global health, infrastructure, space, cyber, maritime security, and critical and emerging technologies.

Below the headlines of these leaders’ meetings, this G7 meeting produced a notable new effort to coordinate a concerted policy response when

one member suffered from economic coercion. A Coordination Platform on Economic Coercion was [created](#) to ensure that any member who suffered economic pressures would be able to draw on the support of others to mitigate their impact. This initiative [builds](#) on the US Countering Economic Coercion Task Force, established last December and led by the National Security Council, which as part of its mandate seeks to work with US allies to determine how best to respond to Chinese economic pressure.

US Allies Join Hands

Where the G7 began strengthening the diplomatic agenda for European and Indo-Pacific nations, the NATO Summit held in Vilnius, Lithuania on July 11-12 deepened strategic cooperation among US allies. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg [welcomed](#) Prime Minister Kishida’s participation in the summit, noting that “[no other partner is closer to NATO than Japan](#),” a reflection of the growing strategic ties between Tokyo and US allies in Europe. As NATO leaders gathered to discuss their enhanced security goals in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, they reasserted their commitment to collective defense as set out by Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. The [Vilnius Summit Communiqué](#) further reiterated the Russian Federation’s violation of international norms and principles, noting that “peace in the Euro-Atlantic area has been shattered.” But the NATO leaders also acknowledged that threats were global and interconnected, and that “strategic competition, pervasive instability, and recurrent shocks define our broader security environment,” identifying China’s “ambitions and coercive policies” as a challenge to their interests.

Japan’s partnership with NATO is expanding. The [Individually Tailored Partnership Programme](#) for 2023-2026 noted Japan’s new national security strategy and defense plan as an important contribution to deepening strategic ties in support of the Rules-Based International

Order. Specifically, cooperation between the two will focus on emerging security challenges, including cybersecurity, disruptive emerging technologies, space, maritime security, and climate change. Bilateral security ties and exercises remain central to these goals. Three specific goals were identified: greater dialogue and consultations, enhanced interoperability, and stronger resilience “across the peace-crisis spectrum.”



Figure 3 Leaders and heads of state pose for a group photo at the NATO Summit in Vilnius on July 11, 2023. Photo: Adrian Wyld/AP

On May 3, the *Nikkei Shimbun* [reported](#) that these growing ties between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security goals would lead to the establishment of a NATO liaison office in Tokyo. China [reacted immediately](#), with foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning saying that the “Asia-Pacific does not welcome group confrontation [or] military confrontation.” She went on to say that Japan should be “extra cautious on the issue of military security [given its] history of aggression.” French President Emmanuel Macron did not seem to be onboard with the idea, stating that NATO [should remain focused](#) on the North Atlantic. When asked about the Tokyo office in July, NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg said the idea was still [up for discussion](#).

At the Vilnius Summit on July 12, Prime Minister Kishida and President Biden also appeared alongside President Zelenskyy to [announce](#) the G7 Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine. After some brief introductory remarks from Kishida, Biden used the opportunity to publicly thank Japan’s prime minister for his country’s

aid and assistance to Ukraine. In remarks that seemed unplanned, Biden said that while “very few people” in Europe or North America expected Japan to step up following Russia’s invasion, Kishida had done so because he “understood that when any part of the world has 185,000 people, soldiers crossing a border, stealing sovereignty from another nation, that affects the whole world.”

Japan’s support for Ukraine has continued through the summer. Later in July, reports surfaced that Japan was preparing a [new round](#) of defense equipment and infrastructure assistance, including the possible transfer of military communication systems and aid with repairing military and civilian seaports and airports. On Sept. 9, Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa [made](#) a surprise trip to Kyiv to meet President Zelenskyy, where the two agreed to begin negotiations on a security pact. Hayashi brought with him a delegation of Japanese business leaders, which Hayashi said he hoped would “mark the beginning of reconstruction support that only Japan can provide.” In a message posted to X (formerly Twitter), Zelenskyy said he was “confident that the Ukrainian-Japanese partnership will [set a global example](#) of how to protect life and create new opportunities for free nations.”

The Camp David Summit

One of the highest priorities of the Biden administration has been the restoration of close trilateral policy coordination between Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul. Early consultations between national security advisors, military leaders, and intelligence heads [brought the security agenda into focus](#), and exercises between the three militaries increased. North Korean missile launches created even more chances to deepen missile and air defense cooperation, and anti-submarine warfare exercises also helped repair their maritime ties.

As President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida addressed their bilateral challenges, an

expanded trilateral agenda emerged. At Phnom Penh last November on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit, the three leaders embraced a new Indo-Pacific framing for their cooperation, revealing progress in aligning their strategic goals beyond the Korean Peninsula. Economic security as well as the stability of the region has increasingly defined their trilateral cooperation. Embedding South Korean and Japanese cooperation in multilateral efforts to support the rules-based international order in the wake of the Russian invasion also cast the trilateral in a global effort to act in concert to [demonstrate their shared values](#). President Yoon's attendance at the G7 meeting in Hiroshima as well as his participation in the NATO summit provided an opportunity for deepening trilateral policy coordination.



Figure 4 President Biden, Prime Minister Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol walk together to a joint press conference following talks at Camp David. Photo: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

On Aug. 18, President Biden [hosted](#) Prime Minister Kishida and President Yoon for a trilateral US-Japan-South Korea summit at Camp David. The event marked the fourth meeting of the three leaders, but it was the [first-ever stand-alone](#) summit that did not occur on the sidelines of a larger meeting. It was also Biden's first occasion hosting a foreign leaders' summit at Camp David, a site renowned for past presidential diplomatic achievements. Notable moments include President Dwight Eisenhower hosting Nikita Khrushchev in 1959, the first time a Soviet premier visited the US, and President Jimmy Carter facilitating the

Egyptian-Israeli peace negotiations between Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Al-Sadat in 1978.

The trilateral summit resulted in a joint statement dubbed "[The Spirit of Camp David](#)," complemented by separate statements that outlined [shared principles](#) and a [commitment to consult](#) on regional security threats. In these documents, the three nations vowed to institutionalize annual meetings involving their respective leaders, foreign ministers, defense ministers, national security advisors, and other cabinet-level officials. Furthermore, Biden, Kishida, and Yoon pledged to initiate an annual Trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue to better "coordinate implementation of our Indo-Pacific approaches and to continually identify new areas for common action." This commitment extends to fostering cooperation across a broad spectrum of issues including military exercises, missile defense, economic security, emerging technologies, and development assistance.

Conclusion

While diplomacy drove the US-Japan agenda through a series of important multilateral meetings, politics at home were clearly on the minds of Kishida and Biden. The approval rating of Japan's prime minister has had a series of ups and downs. The G7 was undoubtedly a [boost](#) to Kishida's popularity, with some polls showing that Kishida's approval had increased by as much as 9 percentage points and exceeded 50% for the first time this year. Yet, by the end of summer, once again popular [frustration](#) with the My Number digital release had [removed](#) this year's gains. By early September, Kishida announced he would [reshuffle his Cabinet](#).

The new Cabinet lineup contained a few surprises. The foreign and defense ministers were replaced. Foreign Minister Hayashi, just back from his trip to Ukraine, was replaced by Kamikawa Yoko, a senior LDP member who had served three stints as minister of Justice. Similarly, Minister of Defense Hamada Yasukazu, was replaced by Kihara Minoru, his

first time appointed to the Cabinet. Five women are in this Kishida Cabinet, a [boost](#) to female representation in leadership to be sure but not enough yet to redress the gender imbalance. Taro Kono remains as digital minister with the added portfolio of administrative reform. Takaichi Sanae retained her position as minister for economic security. Both were contenders for party leadership. The LDP party leadership also demonstrates the prime minister's desire to keep potential challengers close. Aso Taro remains as vice president, Motegi Toshimitsu as secretary general, and Hagiuda Koichi as LDP policy chief. Moriyama Hiroshi was appointed chairman of the LDP's executive council, while Obuchi Yuko, daughter of former prime minister Obuchi Keizo, has been put in charge of the party's election strategy. The timing of the next election remains to be seen, but with 2025 as his deadline, speculation about Kishida's ability to shepherd the LDP to a comfortable victory remains.



Figure 5 Prime Minister Kishida poses for a commemorative photo with his newly reshuffled cabinet. Photo: Prime Minister's Office of Japan

The US presidential election in 2024 is beginning to take shape, raising important questions about the direction of US foreign policy. Republican candidates sans Trump gathered for their [first primary debate](#) on Aug. 23 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and a second debate is scheduled for Sept. 27 in Simi Valley, California. While polling still showed Trump as the favorite for the GOP nominee, the debate

provided ample opportunity for others to make their case. As of early September, [polling averages](#) put support for Trump at about 55%, followed far behind by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis (14%), businessman Vivek Ramaswamy (7%), former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley (6%), and former Vice President Mike Pence (5%).

More multilateral coordination lies ahead for the US and Japan on economic security. Their new Economic 2+2 is expected to be held this fall. Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) talks continued in [Singapore](#) and [Busan](#) this summer, followed by [Bangkok](#) in September. Close coordination between Secretary of Commerce Raimondo and METI Minister Nishimura Yasutoshi on IPEF, as well as their [commitment](#) to implementing the Camp David pledge to establish a new Commerce and Industry ministers dialogue with Seoul, suggest that this interweaving of the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral into broader regional initiatives is bearing fruit. The APEC conference, hosted by the United States in San Francisco in mid-November, will give the Biden administration a chance to showcase progress in this regional economic security effort.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-JAPAN RELATIONS

MAY—AUGUST 2023

May 1, 2023: President Biden and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. [release](#) a joint statement in which they mention establishing trilateral modes of cooperation with Japan.

May 12, 2023: Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel [releases](#) a video, in which he and 15 foreign ambassadors advocate that Japan embrace LGBTQ rights.

May 13, 2023: Minister of Foreign Affairs Hayashi meets with State Department Counselor Derek Chollet in Stockholm on the sidelines of the EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum.

May 15-Aug. 19, 2023: Japan's three military branches [participate](#) in the US Large Scale Global Exercise 2023 around the Indo-Pacific.

May 18, 2023: President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida [meet](#) in Hiroshima ahead of the G7 summit.

May 19-21, 2023: G7 Summit is [held](#) in Hiroshima.

May 19, 2023: Minister of Foreign Affairs Hayashi and Secretary of State Blinken [meet](#) in Hiroshima on the sidelines of the G7 summit.

May 20, 2023: President Biden, Prime Minister Kishida, Prime Minister of Australia Anthony Albanese, and Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi [hold](#) a Quad Leaders' Meeting in Hiroshima on the sidelines of the G7 Summit.

May 20, 2023: Secretary of State Blinken and MEXT Minister Nagaoka Keiko [sign](#) a Memorandum of Cooperation in education.

May 21, 2023: President Biden, Prime Minister Kishida, and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [meet](#) in Hiroshima on the sidelines of the G7 Summit.

June 1-7, 2023: US Coast Guard, Japan Coast Guard, and Philippine Coast Guard [hold](#) their first ever trilateral maritime exercise in the South China Sea.

June 3, 2023: President Biden [signs](#) a bipartisan agreement to raise the debt ceiling and avoid a debt default.

June 3, 2023: Minister of Defense Hamada Yasukazu, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, and Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defense Richard Marles [hold](#) a Trilateral Defense Ministerial Meeting in Singapore on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD).

June 3, 2023: Minister of Defense Hamada, Secretary of Defense Austin, Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defense Marles, and Philippine Defense Minister Calito Galvez [hold](#) first ever quadrilateral defense ministerial talks in Singapore on the sidelines of the SLD.

June 16, 2023: Japan's Parliament [passes](#) bill addressing anti-LGBTQ discrimination.

June 16, 2023: US Forces Japan and Japan Self-Defense Forces [conduct](#) a bilateral aviation integration exercise.

June 16, 2023: National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, National Security Advisor Akiba Takeo, and Philippines National Security Advisor Eduardo Ano [hold](#) their first trilateral national security advisors meeting in Tokyo.

June 17, 2023: Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Hayashi [speak](#) by telephone.

June 20, 2023: Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Daniel Kritenbrink [meets](#) Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Mori Takeo, Deputy Minister for Foreign Policy and Director-General for

Foreign Policy Bureau Ichikawa Keiichi, and Director-General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Funakoshi Takehiro in Tokyo.

June 24, 2023: The G7 Foreign Ministers and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy [speak](#) by telephone about the ongoing situation in Russia.

June 26, 2023: Foreign Minister Hayashi [meets](#) a delegation from the House Ways and Means Committee in Tokyo. Representatives include Richard Neal, Adrian Smith, Earl Blumenauer, Dan Kildee, and Nicole Malliotakis.

June 26, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) delegation from the House Ways and Means Committee in Tokyo.

June 26-27, 2023: Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance Alexandra Bell, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense and Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Policy Richard Johnson, Deputy Director-General of the North American Affairs Bureau Miyamoto Shingo, and Deputy Director-General of the Defense Policy Bureau Ando Atsushi [hold](#) an Extended Deterrence Dialogue at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri.

July 1-12, 2023: Naval forces from the US, Japan, South Korea, and Australia [participate](#) in the *Pacific Vanguard* exercises.

July 3, 2023: Foreign Minister Hayashi [meets](#) former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Tokyo.

July 11-12, 2023: President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida [attend](#) NATO Summit in Vilnius, Lithuania.

July 12, 2023: President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida [announce](#) the G7 Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine in Vilnius, alongside Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

July 13, 2023: G7 Foreign Ministers [release](#) joint statement on the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile by North Korea.

July 14, 2023: Foreign Minister Hayashi, Secretary Blinken, and Philippines' Secretary for Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo [meet](#) in Jakarta on the sidelines of the ASEAN-related Foreign Ministers' Meetings.

July 14, 2023: Secretary Blinken, Foreign Minister Hayashi, and South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Park Jin [meet](#) in Jakarta on the sidelines of the ASEAN-related Foreign Ministers' Meetings. [Joint statement](#).

July 16-18, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida [visits](#) Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar.

July 20, 2023: Special Representative for the DPRK Sung Kim, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Funakoshi Takehiro, and South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Kim Gunn [meet](#) in Karuizawa, Japan.

July 24, 2023: Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, Vice Foreign Minister Mori, and South Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Chang Ho-jin [speak](#) by telephone.

Aug. 18, 2023: President Biden, Prime Minister Kishida, and South Korean President Yoon [hold](#) a trilateral summit meeting at Camp David.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

US-CHINA RELATIONS

US-CHINA EFFORT TO SET “GUARDRAILS” BACK ON TRACK FOR NOW

SOURABH GUPTA, INSTITUTE FOR CHINA-AMERICA STUDIES

The placement of the proposed “guardrails” that Joe Biden and Xi Jinping sought to erect last fall in Bali finally commenced in earnest with the visits to Beijing by three cabinet secretaries and one National Security Council principals-level appointee. Important steps were taken to put the balloon incident behind them, with lines of communication re-opened, assurances exchanged, and incremental forward progress recorded even in areas such as export controls, where US and China had previously clashed. Defense exchanges remain an area where progress lags. Whether the “guardrails” can survive their first contact with US election year polemics remains to be seen. As ties stabilized, both sides also engaged in sanctions and countermeasures as well as domestic rulemaking to secure their national economic and security interests. All along, the administration continued building “situations of strength” with its allies and partners to shape the strategic environment around China, which Beijing viewed as an act of encirclement.

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Speaking on the sidelines of the G7 summit meeting in Hiroshima in late May, President Biden said that he expected ties with China to “thaw very shortly.” Three weeks later, US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Kritenbrink arrived in Beijing to set the table for a visit by Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Kritenbrink had been on table-setting duties for Blinken in early Dec. 2022 too, following the Biden -Xi meeting at the G20 Leaders Summit in Bali—only to see the visit derailed on the day of Blinken’s departure by a wayward Chinese high-altitude surveillance balloon that overflew the continental US and violated its sovereignty.

The suspension of the Blinken visit led to a standstill in ties as both parties sought not just to exchange recriminations but also to preserve the political momentum stemming from the hard-won consensus in Bali. Several human rights-related sanctions, export control measures and other sensitive actions were stayed, at least at Washington’s end, to limit the damage to ties. With no unwelcome surprise in store the second time around after Kritenbrink’s trip, Blinken paid a successful visit to Beijing—at least, by the modest standards of US-China relations. He was followed in quick succession by Treasury Secretary Yellen, Special Climate Envoy Kerry, and in late-August by Commerce Secretary Raimondo. Just as intuitively, many of the punitive measures that had been stayed since the balloon incident were reintroduced.

Four Meetings and a Snub

Over June 18 and 19, 2023, Secretary of State Antony Blinken held 12 hours of meetings in Beijing, following a preparatory build-up in May that featured exchanges between US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns and now-dismissed Foreign Minister Qin Gang on May 8, between National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and CPC Central Foreign Affairs Commission Director Wang Yi in Vienna on May 10-11, and an undisclosed trip to Beijing during the same month by CIA Director William Burns. At the time, Burns was the highest-ranking official to visit Beijing since Deputy Secretary of State Sherman’s trip to Tianjin in July 2021.

In Beijing, Secretary Blinken held “candid, substantive, and constructive” meetings with Foreign Minister Qin and with Director Wang, and thereafter had a brief sit-down with President Xi Jinping. The seven-and-a-half

hours of meetings with Qin was the most productive of the three with both sides moving consultations forward on the guiding principles for US-China relations and setting up working groups to address specific issues in ties. These working groups are up-and-running, as of August 2023. The State Department’s goals going into the meeting were four-fold: to establish better lines of communication to address misperceptions and ensure that competition did not veer into conflict; to disabuse China that the US was seeking to economically contain or decouple from it; to reiterate that the longstanding US “one-China” policy remained intact and to call out Beijing’s provocative actions in the Taiwan Strait; and to outline areas of cooperation in areas of mutual interest, including climate, macroeconomic stability, public health, counternarcotics, food security, and people-to-people matters including cases of wrongfully detained US nationals.



Figure 1 Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets with China’s Director of the Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission Wang Yi at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing on June 19, 2023. [Source: State Department photo by Chuck Kennedy, Public Domain via Flickr]

Wang’s tone in his meeting with Blinken was more berating, with the Chinese demanding that the US stop playing up the “China threat,” lift the “illegal” economic sanctions, stop suppressing China’s scientific and technological advances, and stop interfering in China’s internal affairs, including on the Taiwan Question. Blinken’s conversation with Xi Jinping, on the other hand, was more at the level of “60,000 feet,” to quote the secretary of state, and pertained to overall relationship management and the handling of differences. In that meeting, Blinken reiterated the commitments made by President Biden in Bali, namely that the US does not seek a new Cold

War, it does not seek to change China's system, its alliances are not directed at China, it does not support Taiwan's independence, and it does not seek conflict with China. The fact, though, that Xi sat at the head of a U-shaped table with Blinken seated below to his right, rather than side-by-side in chairs as has been the case in previous meetings between Chinese leaders and secretaries of state, did not go down well with US observers.

Blinken's meetings in Beijing were not intended to facilitate major breakthroughs; in the event, smaller deliverables were harvested. Aside from setting up working groups on regional and maritime issues, the two sides are to set up a working group on the fentanyl issue, within which Beijing will set out plans to crack down on online vendors of fentanyl precursors while Washington is to consider delisting the Chinese Ministry of Public Security's Institute of Forensic Science from its Entity List. It has been the refrain of the Chinese that Washington's demand for action amounts to a case of "forcing others to take medicine for one's own illness," given that China was the first country in the world to class schedule fentanyl in May 2019 while the United States has yet to do so despite being the largest consumer of the opioid. On passenger air travel, the number of round-trip flights between the two countries will double to 24 per week on Oct. 29—a far cry though from the pre-pandemic 150 roundtrips allowed—with the proviso that Chinese carriers avoid overflying Russian airspace. And in late-August, it was reported that the State Department had sought a six-month extension to the bilateral science and technology agreement to study, amend and strengthen its terms. The first bilateral agreement to be signed after the normalization of ties in 1979, and modified thereafter to strengthen its intellectual property protections, the umbrella S&T agreement was due to expire on Aug. 27, 2023.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen was the next cabinet level official to visit China, holding meetings with Premier Li Qiang, Vice Premier He Lifeng, Finance Minister Liu Kun and People's Bank of China Governor Pan Gongsheng from July 6-9, 2023. In her meetings, Yellen solicited Beijing's cooperation in global matters of mutual interest, namely working together to mobilize financing for climate action, and improving the international development finance debt restructuring process to alleviate distress in developing countries. On

the bilateral front, she emphasized that the administration sought to diversify—not decouple—critical supply chains from China, and that Washington's narrowly scoped and targeted national security measures were not designed to gain a competitive economic advantage. She said China, on the other hand, deployed unfair economic practices that needed to be remedied.

Yellen's outreach in Beijing tracked the themes articulated in her April 2023 speech on US-China economic relations. A week later though, NSA Sullivan had laid out the administration's wider international economic priorities. Of the five pillars enunciated by Sullivan—pursue an expansive industrial policy at home; work with like-minded partners to build a leading-edge techno-industrial base; pivot from traditional trade deals to new international partnerships like IPEF; mobilize sums for global anti-poverty and climate change efforts; and protect foundational technologies with a "small yard, high fence" approach—only one lent itself to fruitful cooperation with Beijing. Four of five priorities had no role for or aimed to de-risk from China. Still, the tone of Yellen's outreach was welcomed by the Chinese who conveyed their own grievances regarding Washington's Section 301 tariffs, bans on products originating from Xinjiang, the treatment of Chinese investments in the US, and the export controls imposed on China. Beijing also declined to join the Green Climate Fund and the Climate Investment Funds alongside the US and other donor governments, citing its status as a developing country.

One week after Yellen's departure, Presidential Special Climate Envoy John Kerry arrived for meetings with Premier Li Qiang, Central Foreign Affairs Commission Director Wang Yi, Vice President Han Zheng, and his climate change counterpart, Special Envoy Xie Zhenhua. While no breakthroughs were recorded, the aim of the visit was to "unstick" bilateral talks on climate change—the last exchange having taken place at the UN Climate Change Conference, COP27, in November 2022. Discussions are thought to have focused generally on the upcoming COP28 in Dubai, and on the state of China's follow-through on its methane emissions reduction pledge, in particular. That China expressed its interest in pragmatic institutionalized cooperation to jointly promote multilateral climate change governance and hinted at ratcheted-up commitments on its

nationally determined contributions (NDCs), suggests that both sides came away from the meetings satisfied. That said, Li pressed Kerry to share scientific and technological support to achieve climate change goals, drawing attention indirectly to the US-China Science and Technology Agreement beneath whose umbrella the exchanges on climate change are housed. And a commentary in Xinhua was forthright in pointing out that the administration's strategy of compartmentalizing cooperation on climate change was "unrealistic in practice and unacceptable for Beijing."

On Aug. 27, 2023, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo became the latest cabinet appointee to visit China—the first in five years by a US commerce secretary. In Beijing, she met with Premier Li Qiang, Vice Premier He Lifeng, Commerce Minister Wang Wentao (her counterpart with whom she had a brief sit-down at the APEC trade ministerial in Detroit in late May) and Culture and Tourism Minister Hu Heping, before concluding her visit in Shanghai with a meeting with local Party Secretary Chen Jining. Raimondo's agenda in China was a tricky one, given her dual-hatted role as chief salesperson of US business internationally and chief enforcer of the US' export control regime. To create a conducive setting prior to her departure, the Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) announced a rare easing of controls removing 27 Chinese entities—many in the optics and optoelectronics sector—from its Unverified List (UVL). The UVL is one of many lists administered by BIS and catalogs entities where the bureau has been unable to conduct end-use checks and verify that an exported American technology or goods is being put to its legitimate use.

In Beijing, useful progress was made. A commercial issues working group composed of senior officials and private sector representatives is to be established, meeting twice annually at the vice-ministerial level to find solutions to specific business problems. An export control information exchange was launched, to enable both sides to exchange information on export controls in accordance with their respective laws. The latter mechanism is not intended as a platform for negotiation. And a framework to conduct consultations to strengthen the protection of trade secrets and confidential business information during administrative licensing proceedings was agreed

upon. The most newsworthy soundbite to emerge from Raimondo's trip however was her characterization of China's business environment as potentially "uninvestable," given the lack of reform, problems with market access, and capricious enforcement of rules. Coming to China's defense on this point, somewhat surprisingly, was the head of the European Union chamber of commerce in Beijing.



Figure 2 US Defense Secretary Gen. Lloyd Austin (far left) and Chinese Defense Minister Gen. Li Shangfu (front, far right) attend a luncheon at the 20th Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 3, 2023. The two generals shook hands at the 2023 Shangri-La Dialogue but did not hold an official meeting. [Photo by Kyodo News via Getty Images, Rights Obtained by Institute for China-America Studies]

For all the earnestness and positivity on display starting with Blinken's mid-June visit, the effort to erect the envisaged Biden-Xi guardrails had started out poorly earlier that month with a snub. At the 20th Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 2-4, the Chinese refused to entertain a meeting between their defense chiefs, despite Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Defense Minister Li Shangfu crossing paths at the venue. The refusal was restated during Blinken's meetings in Beijing, coupled with the demand that Defense Minister Li be removed first from the Treasury Department's CAATSA sanctions-related specially designated national (SDN) list. Given that Li is only six months into his ministerial tenure, the obstacle to renewing ministerial-level talks appears to be insuperable. As a provisional workaround, meetings featuring the Pentagon's top Asia official and senior Chinese foreign ministry officials have been arranged on more than one occasion. Similarly, while China continues to balk at restarting the institutionalized dialog

channels—the Defense Policy Coordination Talks; Military Maritime Consultative Agreement Mechanism meetings—in continuing protest of then-Speaker Pelosi’s visit to Taipei, a delegation led by the PLA’s deputy chief of staff in the Joint Staff Command participated alongside 27 other delegations at the 25th Indo-Pacific Chiefs of Defense conference co-hosted by the US in Fiji from Aug. 14-16. US-China mil-mil dialogue, while no longer dormant, is confined to lower-level officials and routed through multilateral forums.

In their dueling speeches at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Secretary Austin and Defense Minister Li laid out contrasting visions of order for the Indo-Pacific region. Austin focused on the steps taken to modernize the US’ system of alliances and partnerships “to deter aggression and to deepen the [regional] rules and norms.” He called out China’s “alarming number of risky intercepts” of US and allied aircraft and warships in lawful international airspace or waters, including one in the Taiwan Strait while the conference was underway. Li flipped the script in his remarks, painting a rosy picture of China’s benign plans for the world and likened the incidents stemming from the US’ freedom of navigation operations as a provocation that could be prevented if “[US] naval vessels and fighter jets [did] not maneuver close to other countries’ territories.” The two sides sniped at each other and traded accusations on other occasions too. NATO’s assertion that China “strives to subvert the rules-based international order” was met with a rejoinder inferring “NATO’s hypocrisy and its ambition of seeking expansion and hegemony.” And the anti-China language in the G7 Hiroshima Leaders Communique was met not just by a rebuttal but also a 5,000 word-plus report denouncing the US’ coercive diplomacy and its harms.

Restarting “Competitive Actions”

The standout feature of US-China relations during the summer of 2023 was the resumption of high-level dialogue. As ties stabilized, the Biden administration also proceeded to lift the state of suspended animation on its “competitive actions” (a rolling list of punitive measures) that it had instituted in the wake of the balloon incident. On June 23, four days removed from Blinken’s return, the Justice Department filed indictments against four Chinese companies and eight nationals for

trafficking chemical precursors used to produce fentanyl in the US. The action was met with a stern Chinese response. Also, on June 23, the Director of National Intelligence declassified a report on the potential links between the Wuhan Institute of Virology and the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic, which only laid bare the lack of a definitive finding and the divisions within the US intelligence community. The timing of the declassification was driven though by statutory factors. In June and again later in August, four Chinese companies including laser printer maker Ninestar, which majority owns US-based Lexmark International, were added to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) Entity List by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) for business practices that targeted Uyghur minorities. The DHS’ actions too met with a stern rebuttal. Two days later, on Aug. 3, the Justice Department announced the arrest of two US Navy service members for transmitting sensitive military information to Chinese intelligence officers. And in late-August, the State Department imposed visa restrictions on Chinese officials for their involvement in the alleged forcible assimilation of more than one million Tibetan children in government-run boarding schools.

The administration also took two major actions with regard to economic rulemaking. On June 16, the Commerce Department issued its Final Rule on Securing the Information and Communications Technology and Services (ICTS) Supply Chain. The rule incorporates “connected software applications,” such as TikTok, as a category of ICTS and clarifies the definitions and risk criteria relevant to evaluating an ICTS transaction that could present a national security threat. The final rule is part-and-parcel of the government’s push to secure ICTS infrastructure and safeguard against the exploitation of Americans’ personal data by foreign adversaries. Banning TikTok though will still require fresh legislation from Congress due to First Amendment-related complexities. Of greater import, on Aug. 9, President Biden issued an Executive Order launching an outbound investment screening regime to scrutinize and ban certain US investments into China. The order marks a rare instance of outbound capital flows being regulated and controlled for national security reasons. The “covered national security technologies and products” are semiconductors and microelectronics, quantum information technologies, and certain artificial intelligence

(AI) systems. Consistent with the administration's "small yard, high fence" approach, the scope of application of a "covered transaction" is narrow and leaves all but a small subset of US investments in non-Chinese firms untouched. Separately, administration action is awaited on restricting Chinese AI companies' access to US cloud computing services as well as expansion of export control restrictions on AI chip sales to Chinese end-users. That Huawei's newest smartphone—released pointedly during Raimondo's visit—features performance analogous to top-of-the-line 5G phones suggests nevertheless that the onerous US export controls might not be as binding as previously thought.

China did not reciprocate the Biden administration's pause on its "competitive actions" following the balloon incident, having come late to the business of imposing sanctions and countermeasures. It continued where it had left off. On May 21, the Chinese cyberspace regulator forbade domestic users of computer equipment deemed sensitive from purchasing products from US memory chipmaker Micron Technology, Inc., citing Micron's failure to pass a cybersecurity review. On July 3, China's Ministry of Commerce announced restrictions on the export of gallium and germanium for national security reasons. The minerals are critical inputs for a host of high-tech products, including semiconductors, solar cells, and LED displays, and China dominates the production of both (86% and 68% of gallium and germanium production worldwide, respectively, in 2022). The action is aimed squarely at key importers Japan and the Netherlands, two significant chip players that recently harmonized their chip export control regimes with Washington's, at the latter's behest. On July 5, the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Statistics fined the Beijing arm of the Mintz Group, a US due diligence firm, for unapproved "foreign-related statistical investigations" across 37 projects conducted from March 2019 to July 2022. And in mid-August, in a reprise of its silent treatment that had killed the Qualcomm-NXP semiconductors merger in July 2018, China's State Administration for Market Regulation, the anti-trust regulator, let the deal clock run out on Intel's bid to acquire the Israeli chip manufacturer, Tower Semiconductor.

Relatedly, the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress passed a revised Counter-Espionage Law that significantly

expands the definition of espionage with a catch-all provision to capture not just the illegal obtainment or sharing of state secrets and intelligence but also any other data, materials or items related to national security or national interests (Article 4(3)). The law, which came into effect on July 1, primarily targets private information service providers of publicly available but business sensitive information which the government believes has been the basis of many of the US' sanctions measures. And on June 28, a Foreign Relations Law was adopted which reserves the right to impose countermeasures "against acts that endanger [China's] sovereignty, national security and development interests in violation of international law or fundamental norms governing international relations" (Article 33).

Shaping the Environment Around China with a Number of "Firsts"

The Biden administration's strategy on China has been to invest in domestic competitiveness, align efforts with a network of allies and partners and, harnessing these assets, compete with China. The administration has also sought to shape the strategic environment around China by building "situations of strength" with a "lattice-work of alliances and partnerships" to dictate the effective terms of competition to China. That shaping of the environment continued apace through the summer of 2023.

On May 3, 2023, US Defense Secretary Austin and Philippine Defense Secretary Galvez signed off on Bilateral Defense Guidelines to modernize their alliance cooperation. In addition to reaffirming that an armed attack in the South China Sea on a Philippine Coast Guard vessel would invoke defense commitments under Articles IV and V of the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, the guidelines expand cooperation on maritime domain awareness and security through exercises, training, and combined activities, including joint patrols. A week earlier, as part of exercise Balikatan, the two sides practiced the transport and unloading of HIMARS mobile rocket systems on strategically located islands off northern Luzon, and conducted combined joint littoral live-fire exercises that included the sinking of a target ship for the first time. In late August, a first-ever "Quad" joint exercise featuring the US, Philippines, Australia, and Japan was conducted in waters off Manila. Earlier, in June, two US Air Force nuclear-capable B-52 bombers

landed in Indonesia too for the first time as part of the Cope West exercise.



Figure 3 Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr (center left) attends a live fire drill on April 26, 2023 at the Naval Education Training and Doctrine Command (NETDC) in San Antonio, Zambales, Philippines. The live fire drill is part of the annual US-Philippines drills called Balikatan, meaning "shoulder to shoulder" in Tagalog, which involved more than 17,000 military personnel in its 2023 iteration. [Source: Photo by Jes Aznar via Getty Images, Rights Obtained by Institute for China-America Studies]

On May 22, 2023, the US and Papua New Guinea signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement that will allow the US military to station troops and vessels at six key ports and airfields, including Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island. Access to Lombrum could be used to reinforce US facilities on Guam to the north in the event of a Taiwan contingency, allaying fears that a Chinese military foothold in the South Pacific could outflank these facilities. In mid-June, President Biden hosted Indian Prime Minister Modi for just the third state visit of his presidency. With Australian Prime Minister Albanese due on a state visit in October, three of four state visits will have been reserved for Indo-Pacific allies and partners. Prior to Modi's state visit, the two sides finalized a Defense Industrial Cooperation Roadmap, and advanced an initiative to enable greater transfer of US jet engine technology, including co-producing GE F-414 engines on Indian soil during the visit. Three Indian liaison officers are to be placed at US combatant commands for the first time and New Delhi will join the US' Artemis Accords alongside 26 other space exploring countries.

On Aug. 18, 2023, the US, Japan, and South Korea held a first-ever stand-alone trilateral summit of leaders at the Camp David presidential retreat. At the summit, the parties issued a set of

shared principles, a Commitment to Consult pledge to respond to Indo-Pacific challenges, and a timeline (by end-2023) to activate a trilateral data-sharing mechanism to exchange North Korean real-time missile launch data. Earlier, in July, an 18,000-ton Ohio-class nuclear submarine, the USS Kentucky, made a port call in Busan--the first docking of a nuclear submarine in South Korea in 42 years. The docking coincided with the convening of the inaugural meeting of the US-ROK Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), a mechanism envisaged in the Biden-Yoon Washington Declaration of late-April to enable Seoul to have enhanced access to information, and a voice on deployment, of US nuclear assets and operational plans sub-regionally. The operational plans of the US-ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC) are presently limited to the use of conventional weapons.

Finally, the administration maintained its tempo of arms sales to Taiwan, which also featured several "firsts." On July 28, the White House announced plans to provide weapons from US stockpiles to the tune of \$345 million utilizing Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA) which Congress had authorized last year—the first time that arms will be provided to the self-governing island utilizing PDA. Drawdown authority enables the US government to bypass the lengthy process of contracting and producing weapons, which has resulted in a backlog of transfers to Taipei. On Aug. 30, the State Department notified Congress of its decision to provide Taiwan with air and coastal defense systems, armored vehicles, infantry fighting vehicles, drones, ballistic missile and cyber defenses, and advanced communications equipment to the tune of \$80 million under its Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program. Although the amounts involved are small, the transfer would be the first instance of military aid provided to Taipei under the FMF route, and only the second such instance to a non-nation state actor after the African Union. China deplored the proposed transfer as a severe violation of its "one-China principle and...the [US-China] Communiqué of 1982." Earlier, in late-June and in August, the US approved Foreign Military Sale packages to Taiwan. The August sale of US\$500 million worth of F-16 Infrared Search and Tracker (IRST) systems—the 11th arms sale approved by this administration—will enable Taiwanese fighter jets to detect and track Chinese J-20 stealth jets at longer distances, without activating radar.

China is displeased with the administration's strategy of building "situations of strength" around its periphery. It believes it is intended to isolate China diplomatically, encircle it militarily, build it out economically, and suppress its development technologically. The networking of alliances, partnerships and minilateral groupings are also, in Beijing's view, an accelerant of major power conflict than a building block for stability. That it is not sitting still in shaping the environment around the US can be gauged from revelations in the press that China and Cuba are negotiating to establish a new joint training facility on the island that could lead to a skeletal but continuous Chinese troop presence 100 miles off Florida. China already operates listening posts in Cuba.

A Fragile "Window of Opportunity"

The past three months in US-China relations have been as purposeful as the three months following the balloon incident were unproductive. The two sides took important first steps to put the incident behind and stabilize their rocky relationship. Lines of communication were re-opened, assurances exchanged, and incremental forward progress recorded even in areas such as export controls where the two sides had previously clashed. Even the (low-key) US transit in mid-August of Taiwan Vice President William Lai, the independence-leaning presidential candidate, failed to deflect ties from their path. The lack of defense exchanges as well as engagement on their reciprocal tariff hikes remain the key areas where progress continues to lag. The next three months in the run-up to the proposed Biden-Xi meeting at the San Francisco APEC Summit provides a "window of opportunity" to lock down progress on a number of fronts—be it the fentanyl precursors issue, updating their umbrella S&T agreement, and deepening people-to-people contacts. It remains to be seen if the guardrails can survive their first contact with US election year polemics though. There are calls to revoke China's most favored nation status, discard the Taiwan Strait policy of 'strategic ambiguity,' ban TikTok, and investigate the Biden family's financial dealings with China. Republicans have even claimed that "Bidenomics" translated into Chinese means surrender! A holding pattern in ties is probably the best that can be expected through 2024.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-CHINA RELATIONS

MAY—AUGUST 2023

May 1, 2023: Adm. Samuel Paparo, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, [says](#) that the US is prepared to assist the Philippines in its efforts to resupply its forces in the Second Thomas Shoal that China has “frequently interfered with.”

May 3, 2023: US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin III and Philippine Secretary of the Department of National Defense Carlito Galvez [establish](#) the Bilateral Defense Guidelines to modernize their alliance cooperation.

May 4, 2023: China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs [says](#) that the South China Sea should not become a “hunting ground for external forces” after the US and the Philippines affirm new guidelines to govern their mutual defense commitments.

May 5, 2023: US [moves](#) a \$500 million proposed arms sale package bound for Taiwan to a fast track through the “Presidential Drawdown Authority” created for streamlining aid to Ukraine.

May 8, 2023: US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns [meets](#) with China’s Foreign Minister Qin Gang in Beijing where the two sides agree on the need to stabilize the relationship between the two countries.

May 10, 2023: House Rules Committee [holds](#) a hearing on “Examining China’s Coercive Economic Tactics.”

May 10–11, 2023: National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [meets](#) with Chinese Communist Party Politburo Member and Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission Wang Yi over the course of two days in Vienna.

May 12, 2023: US federal court in Boston [charges](#) a Chinese-American man with conspiracy over allegedly working with Chinese officials to spy on and suppress pro-democracy activism by Chinese nationals in the US.

May 12, 2023: Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman is [ushered out](#) of her role at the State Department and replaced by Victoria Nuland as her acting successor.

May 15, 2023: China [sentences](#) 78-year-old US citizen and Hong Kong national John Shing-Wan Leung to life in prison on espionage charges.

May 16, 2023: Included among the inaugural cases of an interagency “technology strike force” are [charges](#) against a former Apple engineer for allegedly trying to sell source code for advanced machinery with military implications to China, and against China-based agents attempting to send blacklisted weapons components to Iran.

May 16, 2023: Senate Appropriations Committee [holds](#) a hearing on “A Review of the President’s Fiscal Year 24 Budget Request: Investing in US Security, Competitiveness, and the Path Ahead for the US–China Relationship” with Secretaries Austin, Blinken, and Raimondo testifying.

May 16, 2023: House Natural Resources Committee [holds](#) a hearing on “Preserving US Interests in the Indo-Pacific: Examining How US Engagement Counters Chinese Influence in the Region.”

May 17, 2023: Montana becomes the first state to [ban](#) TikTok from operating inside its borders.

May 17, 2023: House Armed Services Committee [holds](#) a hearing “To receive special testimony on the role of Special Operations Forces in supporting the National Defense Strategy, including activities that contribute to long-term strategic competition with China and Russia.”

May 17, 2023: House Select Committee on China [holds](#) a hearing titled “Leveling the Playing Field: How to Counter the CCP’s Economic Aggression.”

May 18, 2023: China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs [publishes](#) a 5,000-word report criticizing “America’s Coercive Diplomacy and Its Harm.”

May 18, 2023: US Trade Representative [reaches](#) an initial agreement with Taiwan on the “21st-Century” Trade Initiative.

May 18, 2023: House Foreign Affairs Committee [holds](#) a hearing titled “Standing United Against the People’s Republic of China’s Economic Aggression and Predatory Practices.”

May 20, 2023: China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson [describes](#) the G7 leaders’ communiqué as “hindering international peace, undermining regional stability and curbing other countries’ development.”

May 20, 2023: Leaders of the G7 countries [issue](#) a joint communiqué at the bloc’s annual summit’s climax saying that they aim to “de-risk and diversify” their economic relationship with China, rather than decoupling, and to confront its actions which “distort the global economy.”

May 21, 2023: President Biden [says](#) that US-China relations will “thaw very shortly” during a press conference prior to departing the G7 Summit in Hiroshima.

May 21, 2023: China [bans](#) domestic companies that handle critical information from buying products made by US chipmaker Micron over “serious network security risks.”

May 22, 2023: The US and Papua New Guinea conclude a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) and an Agreement Concerning Illicit Transnational Maritime Activity Operations. It later emerges that the DCA will enable the US military to station troops and vessels at six key ports and airports and allow “unimpeded access” to the sites to pre-position equipment and supplies and “exclusive use” of some zones for development and construction activities.

May 23, 2023: China’s new Ambassador to the US Xie Feng [arrives](#) in Washington.

May 23, 2023: House Homeland Security Committee [holds](#) a hearing titled “A Security Sprint: Assessing the US Homeland’s Vulnerabilities to Chinese Communist Party Aggression”

May 24, 2023: Microsoft and US intelligence [accuse](#) China of sponsoring hacker network Volt Typhoon upon discovering efforts to target military communications infrastructure in Guam.

May 25, 2023: Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo [meets](#) with her Chinese counterpart Wang Wentao in Washington where the two had “candid and substantive discussions on issues relating to the US-China commercial relationship.”

May 26, 2023: US Trade Representative Katherine Tai [meets](#) with China’s Commerce Minister Wang Wentao on the sidelines of an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) conference in Detroit in a continuing thaw.

May 30, 2023: US Indo-Pacific Command [denounces](#) a Chinese jet for performing an “unnecessarily aggressive” maneuver against one of its reconnaissance planes during a routine overflight in international airspace over South China Sea on May 26.

May 31, 2023: Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee [holds](#) a hearing “To examine countering China, focusing on advancing US national security, economic security, and foreign policy, including S.1271, to impose sanctions with respect to trafficking of illicit fentanyl and its precursors by transnational criminal organizations, including cartels.”

June 2, 2023: Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin [shakes hands](#) with his Chinese counterpart Li Shangfu at the 20th Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, but they hold no “substantive dialogue”; Beijing rejected Washington’s request for a meeting on the conference’s sidelines.

June 2, 2023: Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin [calls out](#) China’s “alarming number of risky intercepts of US and allied aircraft flying lawfully in international airspace” in his remarks delivered at the 20th Shangri-La Dialogue.

June 2, 2023: CIA [announces](#) that Director William Burns made a secret trip to China in May in an attempt to keep lines of communication open despite security and economic tensions.

June 3, 2023: American destroyer USS *Chung-Hoon* and Canadian frigate *HMCS Montreal* [transit](#) the Taiwan Strait during which a Chinese guided-missile destroyer veered across the former’s bow in an “unsafe” maneuver.

June 4, 2023: Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu [hails](#) China's regional ties and criticizes "countries outside the region" for asserting "hegemony of navigation in the name of freedom of navigation" in his remarks delivered at the 20th Shangri-La Dialogue.

June 5, 2023: US and India [release](#) a Roadmap for US-India Defense Industrial Cooperation prior to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's four-day state visit to the US.

June 5, 2023: Daniel Kritenbrink, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, [meets](#) with China's Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu in Beijing with the two holding "candid and productive" talks.

June 6, 2023: House Judiciary Committee [holds](#) a hearing titled "IP and Strategic Competition with China: Part II—Prioritizing US Innovation Over Assisting Foreign Adversaries."

June 7, 2023: Senate Foreign Relations Committee [holds](#) a hearing on "Aligning transatlantic approaches on China."

June 8, 2023: Senate Foreign Relations Committee [approves](#) the "Ending China's Developing Nation Status Act" calling on the Secretary of State to work towards stripping China of its 'developing' country status in international organizations.

June 8, 2023: Xie Feng [tells](#) the US-China Business Council that Beijing considers the Taiwan issue "the biggest risk" to US-China relations, but that China "has always been open to dialogue."

June 9, 2023: White House [denies](#) reporting by the *Wall Street Journal* and *Politico* that suggests that China is in talks with Cuba to establish an eavesdropping facility with range over the US.

June 9, 2023: Department of Homeland Security [bans](#) imports from two additional Chinese companies through the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) Entity List.

June 12, 2023: Commerce Department says that it will [extend](#) existing exemptions to US export controls against the Chinese advanced semiconductor sector to apply to manufacturers in South Korea and Taiwan and allow them to continue to do business in China.

June 13, 2023: House Financial Services Committee [holds](#) a hearing on "The Annual Testimony of the Secretary of the Treasury on the State of the International Financial System," where Treasury Secretary Yellen says "it would be disastrous for us to attempt to decouple from China."

June 13, 2023: China [conducts](#) naval exercises off the coast of Zhejiang in the East China Sea, coming at the same time as joint naval exercises between the US, Japan, Canada, and France are underway in the Philippine Sea, beginning on June 9.

June 14, 2023: House Foreign Affairs Committee [holds](#) a hearing on "Assessing US Efforts to Counter China's Coercive Belt and Road Diplomacy."

June 14, 2023: Senate Foreign Relations Committee [holds](#) a hearing "To receive a closed briefing on the current dynamics in US-China relations."

June 18-19, 2023: Secretary of State Antony Blinken [visits](#) Beijing for two days where he holds twelve hours of meetings with top Chinese officials including President Xi—the first visit of its kind since 2018. Blinken [also holds](#) meetings with then-Foreign Minister Qing Gang and Central Foreign Affairs Commission director Wang Yi.

June 19, 2023: President Biden [says](#) that he believes US-China relations are "on the right trail" and hails "progress" after Secretary Blinken's meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

June 20, 2023: President Biden [labels](#) China's President Xi to a "dictator," in remarks during a campaign fundraiser, prompting denunciations from China.

June 22, 2023: US and India [announce](#) an agreement during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to jointly produce General Electric F414 engines in India for New Delhi's future combat aircraft.

June 23, 2023: Justice Department [indicts](#) four Chinese companies and eight nationals over trafficking chemical precursors used in fentanyl production to the US.

June 23, 2023: Director of National Intelligence [declassifies](#) a report investigating the potential links between Wuhan Institute of Virology and the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing a lack of consensus between different intelligence agencies.

June 23, 2023: China [issues](#) an official reprimand to the US ambassador in Beijing over President Biden's "dictator" comment.

June 28, 2023: China's embassy in the US [says](#) that Washington must remove Chinese officials from the sanctioned specially designated nationals list if they want to restart military-to-military dialogue.

June 28, 2023: A Chinese law is [adopted](#) that allows China to take restrictive measures "against acts that endanger [China's] sovereignty, national security and development interests in violation of international law or fundamental norms governing international relations."

June 29, 2023: State Department [approves](#) a sale of \$332.2 million worth of 30mm ammunition to Taiwan.

June 30, 2023: President Biden [receives](#) China's ambassador to the US, Xie Feng, at the White House.

June 30, 2023: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, [says](#) that there is still time to dissuade and deter China from mounting an invasion of Taiwan.

July 1, 2023: CIA Director William Burns [says](#) that decoupling from China would be "foolish," but that the US must work to diversify its supply chains.

July 2, 2023: Drug Enforcement Administration head Anne Milgram [says](#) that China is not cooperating enough on combatting the flow of fentanyl into the US via Mexico.

July 3, 2023: China's Ministry of Commerce [announces](#) that a licensing system on gallium and germanium exports, key components in chip production, will come into effect on August 1 in order to "safeguard national security and interests."

July 5, 2023: Beijing Municipal Bureau of Statistics fines the Beijing arm of the Mintz

Group for unapproved "foreign-related statistical investigations" across 37 projects conducted during the March 2019 to July 2022 period.

July 6–9, 2023: Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen [visits](#) China for four days where she has several "frank, pragmatic, in-depth and constructive" meetings with top Chinese officials in charge of economic affairs.

July 10–14: China [conducts](#) a week of naval and air exercises in the Taiwan Strait.

July 11, 2023: Microsoft [reveals](#) that a Chinese hacking group gained access to US government email accounts, including those of the ambassador to China Nicholas Burns and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink, but the National Security Council reassures that no classified information was affected.

July 12, 2023: China's Embassy in the Philippines [calls](#) Washington the "mastermind" of the seven-year-old arbitration over the South China Sea and accuses the US of coercing its allies "to gang up against China...and force China into accepting the award."

July 13, 2023: Secretary of State Antony Blinken [meets](#) with China's top diplomat Wang Yi on the sidelines of the ASEAN foreign ministers meeting in Jakarta for "candid and productive" talks.

July 13, 2023: A US Navy P-8A Poseidon patrol and reconnaissance aircraft [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait.

July 16–19, 2023: Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry [visits](#) China where he holds meetings with top Chinese climate officials to discuss opportunities for cooperation.

July 17, 2023: House Select Committee on China [holds](#) a hearing titled "Risky Business: Growing Peril for American Companies in China."

July 18–20, 2023: Henry Kissinger [meets](#) President Xi Jinping and other senior officials in Beijing at a time when almost all incumbent US government officials are frozen out of contact with Mr. Xi. Xi tells Kissinger that US-China ties are at a crossroads.

July 18, 2023: National security authorities of the US and South Korea convene for the inaugural meeting of their Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) in Seoul. On the same day, a US nuclear-powered submarine, the *USS Kennedy*, docked in South Korea for the first time in four decades.

July 18, 2023: House Intelligence Committee [holds](#) a closed hearing on the “People’s Republic of China Threats to the Homeland.”

July 20, 2023: House Select Committee on China [holds](#) a hearing on “The Biden Administration’s PRC Strategy.”

July 21, 2023: During a fireside chat at the Aspen Security Forum, Secretary of State Antony Blinken [calls](#) on Beijing to use its “unique influence” to bring about North Korea’s denuclearization, and not to take US efforts to develop South Korea and Japan’s defense capabilities as directed at China.

July 25, 2023: Qin Gang is [replaced](#) in his role as China’s foreign minister by his predecessor Wang Yi.

July 26, 2023: Secretary of State Antony Blinken [criticizes](#) China’s “problematic behavior...in the region” in remarks during a visit to Tonga.

July 26, 2023: Senate Foreign Relations Committee [holds](#) a hearing on “US Economic Security to Address Economic Coercion and Increasing Competitiveness” where Treasury Undersecretary Jay Shambaugh testifies that the Department “will use a suite of tools” to protect US national security *vis-à-vis* China.

July 26, 2023: House Select Committee on China [holds](#) a hearing titled “Commanding Heights: Ensuring US Leadership in the Critical and Emerging Technologies of the 21st Century.”

July 26, 2023: House Committee on Energy and Commerce [holds](#) a hearing titled “Self-Driving Vehicle Legislative Framework: Enhancing Safety, Improving Lives and Mobility, and Beating China.”

July 28, 2023: White House [announces](#) a \$345 million military aid package for Taiwan—including anti-air and anti-armored munitions—through the fast-track ‘Presidential Drawdown Authority,’ prompting China to accuse the US of turning the island into

a “powder keg and ammunition depot” a day later.

Aug. 1, 2023: Department of Homeland Security [bans](#) imports from two additional Chinese companies through the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) Entity List

Aug. 3, 2023: Two US Navy sailors are [charged](#) over providing sensitive military information to China.

Aug. 7, 2023: President Biden signs legislation to implement the “21st-Century” Trade Initiative with Taiwan.

Aug. 9, 2023: President Biden [signs](#) an executive order requiring US persons to notify the Treasury Department of certain transactions and investments in China, particularly targeting those in high-tech sectors such as semiconductors, quantum computing, artificial intelligence, and other technologies with potential military applications.

Aug. 10, 2023: President Biden [calls](#) China’s slowing economy “a ticking time bomb” at a campaign fundraiser event.

Aug. 10, 2023: China [expresses](#) “serious concerns” with the White House’s recent Executive Order and accuses the US of pursuing “technology hegemony.”

Aug. 11, 2023: China’s Ministry of State Security [arrests](#) a 52-year-old worker for a military-industrial company on suspicion of selling military secrets to the CIA.

Aug. 11, 2023: China’s Ministry of Commerce [publishes](#) a report attacking Washington’s failed compliance with World Trade Organization (WTO) obligations.

Aug. 13, 2023: Taiwanese vice president and presidential candidate in next year’s elections William Lai Ching-te [stops over](#) in New York en route to Paraguay, prompting his condemnation by China as a “troublemaker through and through.”

Aug. 16, 2023: Intel scraps its attempted acquisition of Tower Semiconductor after China’s anti-trust regulator stalls on the deal, in effect, signaling its refusal to approve the deal.

Aug. 18, 2023: Commerce Department [issues](#) a final determination in a year-long investigation into solar tariff contravention which finds five Chinese solar panel companies guilty of skirting said tariffs by shipping their products through Southeast Asia.

Aug. 19, 2023: In response to Lai's visit to the US, China conducts military drills in the Taiwan Strait as a "stern warning to the collusion of 'Taiwan independence' separatists with foreign elements and their provocations."

Aug. 19, 2023: US, Japan, and South Korea issue a set of shared Camp David Principles and a Commitment to Consult pledge on regional challenges during a trilateral leaders summit at the Camp David presidential retreat in rural Maryland.

Aug. 21, 2023: Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security [removes](#) 27 Chinese companies from its "Unverified List."

Aug. 22, 2023: State Department [imposes](#) visa restrictions on Chinese officials in Tibet for their involvement in forced assimilation in government-run boarding schools in the province.

Aug. 22, 2023: Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo [meets](#) with the Chinese ambassador to the US, Xie Feng, ahead of her planned trip to China.

Aug. 23, 2023: State Department [approves](#) an arms sale to Taiwan of \$500 million worth of F-16 Infrared Search and Track (IRST) systems and related equipment.

Aug. 24, 2023: House Committee on Natural Resources [holds](#) a hearing titled "Peace Through Strength: The Strategic Importance of the Pacific Islands to US-led Global Security."

Aug. 27-30, 2023: Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo [visits](#) China for four days to meet with her counterparts, and the two sides agree to new consultations on trade and export control systems.

Aug. 29, 2023: White House temporarily [extends](#) a science and technology agreement with China by six months to provide time for its renegotiation with stakeholder input.

Aug. 30, 2023: State Department [notifies](#) Congress of an \$80 million arms deal to Taiwan through the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program, a scheme usually reserved for sales to sovereign states.

COMPARATIVE

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DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS

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The May-August 2023 reporting period saw further divergence between Washington's relations with Seoul and Pyongyang. This dynamic was an acceleration of a trend already evinced at the April Joe Biden-Yoon Suk-yeol summit that produced the [Washington Declaration](#) modernizing US-South Korea extended deterrence, and the alliance as a whole. Washington-Seoul bonhomie contrasts manifestly with Washington-Pyongyang relations, whose level of hostility remains the same as four months ago, 14 months ago, or 24 months ago. That is, all the positive action during summer 2023 came from the continued dramatic growth in the US-South Korea alliance, notably via the extraordinary formation of a genuine trilateral US-South Korea-Japan quasi-alliance. This development has been in the works for the last 18-24 months, was given momentum by improving South Korea-Japan government relations and a Yoon-Kishida summit in May, and was concretely founded in August at the [US-South Korea-Japan summit at Camp David](#).

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All this was in addition to sideline meetings (bilateral and trilateral) among Biden, Yoon, and Kishida at the [May G7](#) and the [July 2023 NATO summit](#). Thus, the period between May and August 2023 in US-South Korea relations unfolded as a sequence of formative diplomatic events, accompanied by continued Washington-Seoul practical cooperation (e.g., combined military exercises, including some with Japan), culminating in the 2023 US-South Korea-Japan Camp David summit. The summit's [deliverables](#)—especially the institutionalization of trilateral military exercises and the [Commitment to Consult](#) agreement obliging Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo to immediately consult each other in the case of regional threats or contingencies—meet some scholarly definitions of an alliance. Perhaps that is a bridge to far—there is no trilateral mutual defense treaty—and certainly there is no East Asian NATO *in nuce*. But the progress in US-South Korea-Japan relations is a major foreign and security policy shift, even if questions remain about its long-term sustainability in the face of potential domestic political changes.



Figure 1 U.S. President Joe Biden speaks during a joint news conference with South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol at the Presidential office in Seoul, South Korea, May 21, 2022. Jeon Heon-Kyun | Reuters

In the background of this deterrence- and containment-focused trilateral tie-up are China and North Korea, both of which have [criticized increasing](#) US-South Korea-Japan security cooperation. Given this antagonistic context, it is unsurprising that Washington-Pyongyang relations did not improve over the May-August 2023 period. To the contrary, in fact. The Kim Jong Un regime instead exacerbated a growing Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia arms race with multiple ballistic missile tests and demonstrations, including both the (second) [successful launch](#) of the *Hwasong-18* solid-fuel

intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in June and [failed military satellite launches](#) in May and August. A July [military parade](#)—celebrating 70 years since the signing of the Korean War armistice—featured ICBMs (both *Hwasong-17* and *Hwasong-18* models), drones, (UAVs), and other high-tech weaponry in violation of UN Security Council sanctions. The presence of Chinese and Russian delegations at the parade indicated both that North Korea was re-opening post-COVID (a re-opening [made official](#) in August) and that the Kim regime is potentially interested in ramping up armaments sales to Russia, which, [according to US intelligence](#), are continuing to take place and likely will further support Russia in its war against Ukraine, which is backed by the US. The [New York Times](#) reported (in early September) that the US government believes Kim Jong Un is scheduled to travel to Vladivostok to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin to make final progress on a Pyongyang-Moscow arms deal.

US-South Korea-(Japan!) Relations: Three's Company

An already full 2023 in US-South Korea diplomatic relations continued in May with the G7 summit in Hiroshima, to which South Korea was invited as an observer. There was no significant Biden-Yoon sideline bilateral, as the G7 came on the heels of a Biden-Yoon summit during Yoon's pomp-and-circumstance [state visit](#) to fête the 70th anniversary of the US-South Korea alliance. However, Biden used the sidelines of the G7 to hold a short trilateral meeting with Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio. This meeting was the opportunity for Biden to [invite](#) his counterparts to come to the US for a trilateral summit in late summer, which became the historic Camp David summit in August.

A tripartite summit at Camp David is historic in and of itself. It was the first standalone US-South Korea-Japan leader-level summit, the prospect of which for decades seemed highly unlikely due to historical animosity and domestic politics in Seoul and Tokyo. Precisely this rocky background animated a significant part of the summit desiderata—namely, the institutionalization of cooperative mechanisms agreed upon in the [Spirit of Camp David](#) joint statement. Biden, Yoon, and Kishida each seemingly realized that a superficial statement of principles and political agreement to cooperate—as denoted in the gauzier [Camp](#)

[David Principles](#) statement—would be vulnerable to both adverse domestic political conditions (e.g., future presidents with less belief in alliances) and challenges from international actors (e.g., wedge strategies by China or North Korea). Consequently, a major component of the Camp David outcome was the establishment of annual trilateral leader-level meetings; annual trilateral meetings of foreign ministers, defense ministers, national security advisors, and commerce and industry ministers; an annual trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue at vice-minister level; and multi-year trilateral military exercises.



Figure 2 South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, left, speaks during a joint news conference with President Joe Biden, center, and Japan's Prime Minister Kishida Fumio on Friday, Aug. 18, 2023, at Camp David, the presidential retreat, near Thurmont, Md. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

No practice of international affairs is irrevocable, but the rhetorical investment and practical/planning commitment to realizing these projects in the mid-term future means that future leaders in Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo will have a harder time abrogating participation in this trilateral quasi-alliance, just as adversary states will have a harder time breaking apart cooperation externally.

These institutionalized meetings were accompanied by pledges—peppered throughout the Spirit of Camp David—to cooperate in a range of areas: security/defense, Indo-Pacific regionalism, economy and technology, and public health.

Aside from the aforementioned multi-year trilateral military exercises, the security/defense dimension of the Spirit of Camp David statement covers ballistic missile defense cooperation, a working group on North

Korean cyber activities, enhanced information sharing (improving TISA (Trilateral Information Sharing Agreement) and GSOMIA (General Security of Military Information Agreement) utilization), and discussion on countering disinformation campaigns. Taken together, the US-South Korea-Japan security/defense cooperation outlined at Camp David is an ambitious project aiming at enhancing deterrence against both North Korea and China. Both states responded (as expected) with ire, and although Beijing was more muted in its rhetoric than Pyongyang, Xi Jinping cannot help but notice that Camp David's security/defense areas touch on the Three Nos that China extracted from South Korea as a partial resolution to the diplomatic dispute over the installation of a US THAAD battery on South Korean territory in 2017. (The three nos are: No more THAAD batteries in South Korea, No integrated US-South Korea ballistic missile defense system, No trilateral alliance with Japan). Raising the stakes even higher was the fact that South Korea signed on to the Spirit of Camp David statement including its direct reference to the collective need to defend the rules-based international order in and around the Taiwan Strait, which China clearly considers a red line.

The economic and technology counterpart to Camp David's security/defense component both anchors the US-South Korea-Japan "minilateral" in multilateral frameworks, and dovetails with much of the trade/technology de-risking/de-coupling vis-à-vis China that the US has emphasized over the last six years. On the multilateral side of the equation, trilateral effort to protect the rules-based international economic order gets its obligatory shout-out, as does both APEC and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) more regionally. The US, South Korea, and Japan also pledged to work together to improve uptake into international economic institutions of (still to be determined) standards for emerging technologies (e.g., artificial intelligence). On the de-risking/de-coupling side, future trilateral Economic Security Dialogues promise to support the Minerals Security Partnership, an Early Warning System for supply chains, export controls on advanced technology, and information/best-practices sharing (as well as domestic law enforcement cooperation) related to disruptive technologies. Women's economic empowerment and trilateral scientific laboratory cooperation also featured in the

economic/technology section of the Spirit of Camp David.

Cooperation on the Indo-Pacific region made it into the summit joint statement as well, with a focus on trilateral development financing cooperation, maritime security capacity building (notably for Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands), and the establishment of a humanitarian response policy dialogue. In the realm of global health, the Camp David Spirit document mentions trilateral cooperation on a cancer “moonshot,” while the three states also pledged to set up a Global Leadership Youth summit and a technology leadership training program to promote people-to-people contact.

Arguably, the feature that got the most attention at Camp David was the Commitment to Consult. The signatures of Biden, Yoon, and Kishida on the Commitment to Consult document represent a significant step in strengthening the US-South Korea-Japan trilateral toward a partnership that resembles an alliance. In fact, it is a [Type III alliance](#) by the Correlates of War definition (“a commitment obligat[ing] members to consult in times of crisis or armed attack”). The Camp David Commitment to Consult even requires consultation on matters short of “crisis or armed attack”—namely, “challenges, provocations, and threats that affect their collective interest and security.” This seemingly emphasizes the importance of continuous consultation among the three states, an institutionalization of the consultation practice that will be backed up by the regularization of high-level meetings and summits fed by greater (aforementioned) intelligence sharing. To be sure, the Commitment to Consult is not a mutual defense treaty, and does not contain an actionable collective security and defense requirement, but the trilateral does reach the status of a “quasi” or “soft” alliance.

The North Korea nuclear threat is the obvious referent for the trilateral Commitment to Consult—North Korea is referred to multiple times as a threat in the summit joint statement, and denuclearization of North Korea as a key for Korean Peninsula and regional stability. But China is clearly also operating in the background of the consultation commitment, a prospect for Washington-Seoul-Japan quasi-alliance coordination that surely worries Beijing.



Figure 3 Source: Korean Central Television

Actions accompanied words. The diplomatic flurry of the May-August period was backed up by both US-South Korea and US-South Korea-Japan military exercises. Mid-May set the stage for a summer of high-tempo alliance military cooperation, with major US-South Korea [live fire drills](#) to mark the 70th anniversary of the alliance, followed at the end of the month with an F-16 “[elephant walk](#)” display. The US, South Korea, and Japan also publicized plans to [link radars](#) to reduce blind spots against North Korean missile launches. June featured US-South Korea [joint logistics](#) and [live fire drills](#) (the latter in response to a North Korean short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) launch). The US and South Korean militaries also cooperated to successfully [salvage components](#) of a failed North Korean satellite launch vehicle (SLV), which has now doubtless been subject to intelligence collection by US and South Korean authorities. This salvage success was not simply fortuitous, as the alliance militaries practiced salvage operations in May, during the lead-up to Pyongyang’s satellite launch. And in an effort to support the Washington Declaration—which, inter alia, commits the US to greater rotation of strategic assets into the Korean Peninsula region—the US [dispatched](#) a nuclear-powered guided-missile submarine to South Korea. This was a first since the fire-and-fury tensions of 2017, which indicates the parlous nature of security in Northeast Asia. June finished with the US again following up on its Washington Declaration pledge to enhance extended deterrence, as US and South Korean air forces held combined air drills featuring [B-52 nuclear bombers](#). The emphasis on extended deterrence extended into July, with the [inaugural meeting](#) of the Nuclear Consultative Group established in the Washington Declaration and, in addition, [US-South Korea air drills with B-52s](#). These drills followed the July 12 North Korean launch of a solid-fuel ICBM ([Hwasong-18](#)), which led to US-South Korea-Japan [trilateral military](#)

[exercises and missile defense drills](#). Although perhaps already planned in support of the Washington Declaration, Pyongyang's successful solid-fuel ICBM launch was followed by the [first South Korean port call of a US SSBN](#) (nuclear ballistic missile submarine) since 1981. The US and South Korea also carried out [joint air drills with F-35s and F-16s](#), as well as [anti-submarine warfare exercises](#) including the USS *Annapolis* nuclear-powered fast-attack submarine. Finally, the May-August reporting period finished with US-South Korea-Japan [trilateral missile defense exercises](#) and the annual US-South Korea [Ulchi Freedom Shield](#) combined military exercises, which this year included the first wartime deployment drills since 2017 and a civil defense component requiring the population of South Korea to shelter in place for a brief period.



Figure 4 US nuclear-powered submarine arrives in South Korea. *Deutsche Welle*

Also on the security/defense front, as a part of [Yoon's participation at the 2023 NATO summit](#) (as a member of the so-called Asia Pacific⁴ or AP⁴), South Korea announced indirect [ammunition sales for Ukraine](#) (passing through the US), increased intelligence sharing with NATO, and a new suite of 11 cooperation areas with NATO (which will presumably be advanced through the [Individually Tailored Partnership Programme](#) that South Korea signed with NATO during the summit). During his swing through Europe for the NATO summit, Yoon took the occasion to [visit Ukraine](#) and show solidarity with Kyiv's war effort. July also saw the US and South Korea sign a new agreement bolstering defense supply chain cooperation.

Beyond security/defense, the US and South Korea engaged in the typically thick set of exchanges—along axes of bilateral/multilateral coordination, economy/trade, countering North

Korea, etc.—that are necessary parts of alliance management; thus the typical series of senior officials meetings throughout the May-August reporting period (see chronology below). One notable discussion was US Secretary of State Tony Blinken briefing his counterpart, Foreign Minister Park Jin, both before and after Blinken's visit to Beijing in an attempt to put a floor under a deteriorating US-China relationship that has major consequences for South Korea. South Korea also won a seat as a nonpermanent member of the UN Security Council for the 2024-2025 term, an effort that was doubtless aided by US diplomatic support.

Diplomacy implies friction also, and a persistent area of tension in US-South Korea relations has been economy/trade, as the US has tried to spur partners to participate in the US-led effort to contain China in high-technology areas, resulting in knock-on effects for South Korea, which is reliant on China as both an input source and export market in several high-tech sectors (in addition to simply being its number one overall trade partner, accounting for about 20% of Korea's trade volume by value). Throughout the summer US and South Korean trade representatives and other senior officials met to discuss and clarify policies and expectations on semi-conductor exports, critical mineral supplies, the evolution of the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), and the status of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). The US and South Korea also discussed further cooperation (both bilaterally and within larger groupings) on high-tech supply chains. No doubt some of these discussions were substantive in and of themselves, but they were also important for clearing up potential disagreements in advance of the Camp David summit, whose joint statement included language on some of these sensitive economic issues.

With a raft of international investments, the private sector did its part to contribute to summertime good vibes, with Hyundai and LG [pledging \\$4.3 billion](#) in a US battery plant, SK Signet announcing [completion](#) of its first US factory, Samsung SDI and GM finalizing a battery plant [joint venture](#) in Indiana, and Samsung Biologics signing a [\\$400+mn deal](#) with Pfizer, among other deals. In the culture industry space, BTS continued to garner US mind share, as the group's book [Beyond the Story](#) became the first Korean book to top the *New York Times* bestseller list, while BTS member

Jung Kook's solo album [topped the Billboard Top 40](#). Netflix's CEO [visited Seoul](#) in June, indicating how important South Korea has become as a content source for Netflix series.

A staple of Washington-Seoul diplomacy is the ritual condemnation of North Korea for its many malign acts, including missile tests and other sanctions violations, cyberattacks, and human rights abuses. There were plenty of occasions during the May-August 2023 period: failed SLV launches in May and August; a successful solid-fuel ICBM test in July; SRBM demonstrations in June, July, and August; an August cruise missile demonstration; revelations of Pyongyang's [ongoing cyberattacks to steal cryptocurrency](#) to fund the Kim regime; [possible North Korea-Russia rocket sales](#) for use in the Ukraine war; and the lead-up to a [UNSC hearing on North Korean human rights](#) violations all occasioned in-person and telephone/video discussions on possible responses (sanctions, condemnation, etc.) between senior administration officials in Washington and Seoul (with numerous discussions including Japanese counterparts as well).

US-North Korea Relations: (Un)happy Days

US-North Korea relations—such as they are—continued their abysmal trajectory during the summer of 2023. A failed end of May SLV launch by Pyongyang opened the summer season, while late August featured an unsuccessful re-do. In principle these SLV launches are intended to allow North Korea to place military satellites in orbit, which might (depending on the satellite's camera resolution, inter alia) give the Kim regime better awareness of US-South Korea military developments. The SLV failures are expensive setbacks, but not unexpected. Pyongyang publicly acknowledged the failures, indicating a certain comfort with admitting SLV program growing pains and/or a strategy of “normalizing” the use of SLV technology. Pyongyang likely has learned from the failures, bringing them closer to functioning military satellites.

Pyongyang's misbehavior led to the standard coordinated US-South Korea response (along with Japan) noting the SLV launches as violations of international sanctions; investigating and implementing new sanctions; attempting to rein in North Korean cybersecurity breaches (notably cryptocurrency

theft) that fund the regime's military activities; and condemning the launches at the UNSC (as well as at the NATO summit), albeit fruitlessly given Chinese and Russian support for North Korea at the UNSC. Beyond an alliance military riposte (including trilateral drills with Japan), Washington and Seoul also cooperated in salvage operations of components of both failed SLVs, which splashed down in the Yellow Sea. Technical analysis of the SLV may give the US and South Korea a better idea of the state of North Korea's rocket and satellite technology, as well as an idea of where parts nonindigenous to North Korea may have originated.

North Korea's weapons development programs also proceeded apace during summer 2023. Although the long-sSpeculated seventh nuclear test remains unexecuted, Pyongyang did launch numerous SRBMs and cruise missiles, as well as a successful solid-fuel ICBM (*Hwasong-18*) that in principle gives the Kim regime greater reliability, survivability, mobility, and flexibility in its ability to attack intercontinental-range targets (such as the US) with nuclear weapons. Although the usual caveats apply—unknown guidance system, re-entry vehicle reliability, penetration aids, deployment status, etc.—the *Hwasong-18* likely represents a meaningful, if marginal, improvement to North Korea's nuclear arsenal. Wanting to avoid the appearance of normalization of Pyongyang's weapons development, the US and its East Asia alliance partners were in lockstep in condemning the missile demonstrations/tests and imposing new sanctions, which naturally occasioned fiery rhetoric from the Kim regime, [lambasting the US for imperialist policies](#) of regional domination, castigating South Korea for its supposed “lap dog” status, and promising development of increasingly powerful nuclear weapons.

North Korean missiles were not the only game in town in terms of weapons. Pyongyang's annual Armistice Day parade featured drones ([strikingly similar](#) to US-made *Reapers* and *Global Hawks*) both on display and in demonstrations. Kim Jong Un toured munitions factories, announced updated military actions plans against the US-South Korea alliance, and visited the KPA Navy to [pledge nuclear weapons](#) for that service branch. Presumably in part as a tit-for-tat in the context of US-South Korea *Ulchi Freedom Shield* combined military exercises, late August also saw North Korea drill for offensive military operations against South

Korea, including both cruise missile [tactical nuclear strikes](#) and [occupation of South Korean territory](#).

Armistice Day welcomed to Pyongyang [two international delegations from China and Russia](#). This was, on the one hand, a standard diplomatic gesture among like-minded, aligned states. On the other hand, the presence of international delegations for the festivities functioned (a) to signal that North Korea was [slowly re-opening](#) after 3+ years of COVID shutdown, and (b) to provide an opportunity for North Korea and Russia to [discuss weapon sales](#) from Pyongyang to Moscow. North Korea has apparently re-opened in a limited fashion (including regularly scheduled flights and ground transportation, currently only for returning citizens), with trade with China and Russia likely to pick up. At least some of that trade is slated to involve weapons, as US intelligence has reported ongoing Russia-North Korea negotiations for the former to purchase artillery and other arms from the latter. [US intelligence believes](#) that Kim Jong Un is to travel to Vladivostok to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin to make critical final progress on the arms deal, which might include, from the Russian side, [food assistance, satellite technology, and perhaps even nuclear-propulsion technology for submarines](#). Such a deal would doubly vex the US: Russian use of North Korean artillery in Ukraine could make it harder for Washington to assist Ukraine in winning enough militarily to force Moscow to the negotiation table, while Russian satellite and submarine nuclear-propulsion technology in Pyongyang's possession could provide it with qualitative military improvements that would complicate US-South Korea deterrence and warfighting strategies around the Korean Peninsula.

Finally, in the various and sundry category, an apparently troubled US enlisted soldier—Travis King—[fled over the](#) military demarcation line (MDL) at Panmunjom and was taken into North Korean custody. His precise whereabouts and condition are unknown (at least publicly), as is the motive for his actions. Diplomatic efforts to secure his release and return have not born fruit.



Figure 5 South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, left, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy stand for photos after delivering statements, on July 15, 2023, in Kyiv, Ukraine. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

Conclusion: Good Times vs. The Bad News Bears

Washington-Seoul relations are arguably at a high point in history, even to the point of the bilateral alliance flirting with transformation into a trilateral structure. There is no guarantee that the institutionalization of US-South Korea-Japan cooperation will continue, as there are still unresolved historical issues (for Seoul and Tokyo) and potential domestic political pitfalls (for all three states). However, threats from China and North Korea have developed such that the US, South Korea, and Japan have sufficiently overlapping security fears to move forward on security and defense cooperation that was hard to imagine even two years ago.

For its part, North Korea finds itself in a closer constellation with China and Russia. Speculation, over the last several years, that a China-North Korea-Russia bloc would emerge from the regional/global destabilization caused by increased US-China great power competition and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has been born out. Not only does this tightening of authoritarian bonds make US-North Korea relations even harder to jump-start than they already are, but it potentially represents a force multiplier for the various interests of Kim, Putin, and Xi. This both increases the regional threat to the US-South Korea alliance, and makes that alliance (and its trilateral transformation) all the more critical.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

MAY—AUGUST 2023

May 24, 2023: *Wall Street Journal* [reports](#) that South Korean ammunition is [headed](#) to Ukraine via US.

May 25, 2023: South Korea and the US [stage](#) massive live-fire drills marking the 70th anniversary of their alliance.

May 26, 2023: Hyundai Motors and LG Energy Solution announce that they will [invest](#) 5.7 trillion won (\$4.3 billion) in a US [battery plant](#).

May 27, 2023: Seoul's trade minister [holds talks with his US](#) counterpart Katherine Tai over the Inflation Reduction Act and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework; he asks for support for stable supply of key raw materials and parts.

May 28, 2023: US military in South Korea [stages Elephant Walk](#) training with F-16 fighters.

May 31, 2023: North Korea's [attempt](#) to launch [its first spy satellite](#) fails after an “abnormal” flight, according to the South Korean military. Nuclear envoys of South Korea, the US, and Japan “[strongly condemn](#)” North Korea’s space launch.

May 31, 2023: Multinational [antiproliferation drills kick off](#) on the day of North Korea's botched space launch.

May 31, 2023: US [reveals joint salvage drills](#) with South Korea before the botched North Korea “space vehicle” launch.

May 31, 2023: South Korea [holds](#) public-private meeting on the US-led [IPEF developments](#) and strategies. Trade Minister Ahn Duk-geun notes that the IPEF deal on supply chains “lays the foundation for joint responses to any global supply chain disruptions among the member nations.”

June 1, 2023: Kim Yo Jong [says](#) North Korea will “correctly” place a [spy satellite](#) into orbit soon despite its failed launch.

June 2, 2023: President Biden says the US is [deepening trilateral cooperation](#) with South Korea and Japan against North Korean threats.

June 2, 2023: South Korea [slaps](#) sanctions on a [North Korean hacking group](#) after Pyongyang's space launch.

June 2, 2023: North Korea [slams](#) UN and NATO criticism of its [spy satellite](#) launch.

June 4, 2023: Kim Yo Jong [slams](#) the [UN Security Council's meeting](#) on its space rocket launch as “the most unfair and biased act of interfering in internal affairs.”

June 6, 2023: A survey [reveals](#) that South Korean support for nukes drops as public debate ramps up.

June 7, 2023: South Korea [wins a seat](#) on the UN Security Council for 2024–25.

June 7, 2023: SK Signet [completes construction](#) of its first US plant.

June 8, 2023: [Samsung Biologics inks](#) a \$411.3 million manufacturing deal with Pfizer.

June 9, 2023: North Korea [claims](#) the Kakhovka [dam collapse](#) in Ukraine occurred with Washington and Kyiv “in cahoots.”

June 9, 2023: South Korea's foreign ministry [summons](#) Chinese envoy Xing Haiming to [protest](#) Xing's comments on Seoul-Washington ties. Xing said, in a meeting with main opposition party leader Lee Jae-myung, that Seoul had wrongly bet on US-China competition and needed to abide by Beijing's one-China principle.

June 12, 2023: US officials say Washington will [allow](#) South Korean and Taiwanese [chip makers](#) to keep operations in China.

June 13, 2023: South Korea and the US [agree](#) to additional efforts to cut off [funds](#) to North Korea's weapons programs.

June 12–16, 2023: South Korea and the US [stage](#) the Combined Distribution Exercise in Pohang.

June 13, 2023: Indiana’s governor says Samsung SDI and General Motors will [build](#) an electric vehicle battery plant in the state.

June 15, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) two short-range [ballistic missiles](#) toward East Sea.

June 15, 2023: President Yoon [oversees](#) South Korea-US [live-fire drills](#).

June 15, 2023: National security advisers of South Korea, the US, and Japan [agree](#) to strengthen [cooperation](#) on North Korea and regional security in a sign of deepening trilateral cooperation.

June 16, 2023: US [imposes sanctions](#) on two North Korean nationals for assisting with the country’s illegal weapons program.

June 16, 2023: US nuclear-powered [submarine](#) USS *Michigan* [arrives](#) in South Korea after North Korea launch.

June 17, 2023: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [holds](#) phone [talks](#) with South Korea’s foreign minister ahead of his China trip.

June 19, 2023: North Korea [cites](#) botched [satellite launch](#) as its “most serious” failure.

June 19, 2023: Blinken [says](#) he urged China to [encourage](#) North Korea to act responsibly.

June 19, 2023: North Korea [promises](#) more “[powerful nuclear weapons](#)” to counter US “domination.”

June 21, 2023: North Korea [calls](#) Blinken's [visit](#) to China a “disgraceful begging trip.”

June 23, 2023: US intelligence report says North Korea is most likely to [use nuclear weapons](#) as a means of coercion.

June 26, 2023: North Korea [warns](#) that the Korean Peninsula close to the “brink of nuclear war.”

June 27, 2023: South Korea and US [discuss](#) nuclear security [cooperation](#) in their working group meeting.

June 29, 2023: Yoon [names](#) Kim Yung-ho, a professor of political science and diplomacy at

Sungshin Women's University, new unification [minister](#).

June 29, 2023: South Korea [requests](#) that the US expand the list of countries that may supply key critical minerals under the Inflation Reduction Act.

June 30, 2023: South Korea and the US [stage](#) combined [air drills](#) involving a B-52H strategic bomber.

July 4, 2023: US House committee [calls](#) for trilateral defense [cooperation](#) between South Korea, Japan, and the US.

July 10, 2023: North Korea [slams](#) the US plan to send strategic nuclear [submarine](#) to Korean Peninsula.

July 10, 2023: New round of US-led [IPEF talks](#) [kicks off](#) in South Korea.

July 11, 2023: Kim Yo Jong [warns](#) US military will face “very critical flight” in case of “repeated illegal intrusion,” after alleging that a US spy aircraft entered North Korean airspace within its exclusive economic zone. US responds by [urging](#) North Korea to halt escalatory actions following the accusation.

July 11, 2023: President Yoon [arrives](#) in Lithuania for [NATO summit](#). While there, South Korea and NATO [establish](#) new [partnership](#) for cooperation in 11 areas, and Yoon [says](#) South Korea will increase military [info-sharing](#) with NATO.

July 12, 2023: Yoon [warns](#) North Korea will be made to pay price for its [illicit missile launch](#).

July 12, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) an intercontinental ballistic missile.

July 12, 2023: Envoys of South Korea, the US, and Japan strongly [denounce](#) North Korea's [ICBM test](#).

July 13, 2023: South Korea and the US [stage air drills](#) involving s B-52H strategic bomber in response to the North’s launch.

July 14, 2023: US [calls](#) for [UN Security Council](#) action against North Korea’s ICBM test, but permanent members China and Russia oppose it.

July 14, 2023: Kim Yo Jong [slams](#) UNSC meeting over its ICBM launch, defending it as exercise of self-defense.

July 15, 2023: South Korea [ramps up diplomatic pressure](#) campaign against North Korea during ASEAN meetings.

July 15, 2023: Yoon [makes](#) a [surprise visit](#) to Ukraine in show of support.

July 15, 2023: South Korean Defense [Minister](#) Lee Jong-sup [meets](#) visiting US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark A. Milley on regional security and the bilateral alliance.

July 15, 2023: Yoon [promises](#) a package of security, humanitarian, and reconstruction [aid](#) for Ukraine.

July 16, 2023: South Korea, the US, and Japan [hold missile defense drills](#) in East Sea after North Korea's ICBM launch.

July 16, 2023: US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan says the US is [concerned](#) about potential additional North Korean missile launches, [nuclear test](#).

July 18, 2023: UN Command says US national Travis King [crosses](#) military [demarcation line](#) into North Korea.

July 18, 2023: A US nuclear-capable [submarine](#) [makes](#) port call in Busan for first time in decades.

July 18, 2023: South Korea-US nuclear consulting group [aims](#) to curb North Korea's nuclear threat.

July 19, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) two short-range ballistic missiles into [East Sea](#).

July 20, 2023: US State Department says North Korea [remains](#) silent to US calls to verify status of [soldier](#) in its custody.

July 20, 2023: Top nuclear envoys of South Korea, the US, and Japan [denounce](#) North Korea's latest [missile test](#).

July 20, 2023: [BTS'](#) *Beyond the Story* [becomes](#) first Korean book to top New York Times bestseller lists.

July 20, 2023: North Korea [warns](#) that US nuke deployment to South could trigger preemptive strike.

July 21, 2023: North Korean [hackers break](#) into US software firms in latest supply chain hack.

July 22, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) “several” [cruise missiles](#) toward west coast.

July 25, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) late-night [ballistic missiles](#) after US submarine visits South.

July 25, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) two ballistic missiles into East Sea: JCS.

July 25, 2023: [BTS](#) member Jungkook's solo single “Seven” [tops](#) Billboard Hot 100.

July 26, 2023: Kim Jong Un [stresses](#) “anti-US” stance at [war anniversary](#) cemetery visits.

July 27, 2023: North Korea [debuts](#) new spy and combat [drones](#) that mimic US models.

July 28, 2023: North Korea [showcases drones](#) and ICBMs at a military parade on armistice anniversary.

July 28, 2023: North Korea visit by Russian and Chinese delegates [shows](#) support for [unlawful weapons](#) programs, the US State Department says.

July 28, 2023: South Korea and the US [stage joint air drills](#) with F-35A and F-16 jets.

July 28, 2023: New [drones conduct](#) flyovers as North Korea shows off nukes at military parade.

July 29, 2023: South Korea and the US [stage joint anti-submarine drills](#) involving nuclear-powered sub.

July 31, 2023: South Korea and the US [agree](#) to [sign](#) arrangement on bolstering defense supply chains.

July 31, 2023: Seoul [demands](#) North Korea stop [arms sales](#) after its rockets show up in Ukraine.

Aug. 2, 2023: North Korea [slams](#) new US human rights [envoy](#) designate Julie Turner as “wicked woman” meddling in state affairs.

Aug. 2, 2023: North Korea [appears](#) to [test](#) rocket engine as it preps for next satellite launch.

Aug. 4, 2023: North Korea [criticizes](#) the US over its [weapons](#) package for Taiwan.

Aug. 4, 2023: US National Security Council official says North Korea is [considering](#) providing [military support](#) to Russia.

Aug. 7, 2023: North Korea [insists](#) it is “responsible nuclear state,” slamming US [nuke policy](#).

Aug. 10, 2023: Kim Jong Un [calls](#) for bolstering [war preparations](#) in “offensive” way.

Aug. 13, 2023: [SK Telecom](#) says it will [invest](#) \$100 million in the US artificial intelligence firm Anthropic.

Aug. 13, 2023: [Hyundai Bioscience](#), US NIH to [co-develop](#) broad-spectrum antiviral drug.

Aug. 14, 2023: Kim Jong Un [inspects](#) short-range nuke and rocket factories to [arm](#) ‘front lines.’

Aug. 16, 2023: North Korea [claims](#) US Pvt. Travis King wants [refuge](#) in North or third country.

Aug. 16, 2023: South Korean Navy to [join](#) multinational Indo-Pacific [humanitarian exercise](#).

Aug. 17, 2023: South Korea [welcomes US sanctions](#) against arms trade between North Korea, Russia.

Aug. 19, 2023: Yoon and Biden [agree](#) to closely [cooperate](#) to strengthen credibility of US extended deterrence.

Aug. 19, 2023: Yoon, Biden, and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [commit](#) to immediately consult in event of [common threat](#).

Aug. 21, 2023: Kim Jong Un [inspects](#) a [cruise missile test](#) as South Korea-US military drills begin.

Aug. 24, 2023: North Korea [says](#) its second attempt to launch [spy satellite](#) failed.

Aug. 24, 2023: South Korea, the US, and Japan [weigh](#) more unilateral [sanctions](#) over North Korea's space launch.

Aug. 24, 2023: US Army [stages](#) first key wartime [deployment drills](#) in Korea in 6 years amid growing North Korea threats.

Aug. 24, 2023: US [charges](#) founders of [crypto mixer](#) with enabling North Korean money laundering.

Aug. 25, 2023: South Korea and the US [work](#) together to search for and salvage sunken parts of North Korea's [space rocket](#).

Aug. 29, 2023: South Korea, the US, and Japan [hold missile defense drills](#) after North Korea's botched rocket launch.

Aug. 29, 2023: Kim Jong Un [visits](#) the navy command, calls for bolstering naval forces.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

US-INDIA RELATIONS

FROM NON-ALIGNMENT TO REALIGNMENT

AKHIL RAMESH, PACIFIC FORUM
CLEO PASKAL, FOUNDATION FOR DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES

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The US and India expanded cooperation across various domains in the second reporting period of 2023. The two moved to materialize projects and initiatives that were conceived in the first quarter, in wide-ranging domains with significant geopolitical and geoeconomic scope including defense cooperation, critical and emerging technologies, and infrastructure development. While New Delhi continued to straddle groupings such as BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the US-India partnership broke ground on more initiatives than any of India's other bilateral relationships. Modi and Biden visited each other's capitals and reaffirmed their commitment to a rules-based international order. The rousing reception Modi received in Washington and the continued US preeminence in most major trade and technology initiatives conceived by India highlighted the growing partnership between the two democracies. And the two leaders, while facing elections next year, seem willing to work together on common global priorities—sometimes at domestic political costs.

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Also, while taking place outside the May–August reporting period, the enormous groundwork Delhi laid over the summer (and earlier), plus the absence of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, transformed the G20 meeting that took place in September into an event that showcased India’s leadership in finding common ground between the priorities of the Global South and the US. The result was potentially transformative geoeconomic initiatives that could reshape geopolitics, and encourage, for example, the conditions necessary for a free, open and *inclusive* Indo-Pacific. This wasn’t the India of nonalignment; this was an India shaping a realignment, with tacit US support.



Figure 1 President Biden and Prime Minister Modi meet at the Oval Office in Washington on June 22, 2023. Evan Vucci/AP

Democracy is Boisterous

In India, the months between May and August witnessed the clamor associated with election season, although in this case, it was the year before national elections. Arbitrary and historical issues filled headlines over pressing matters of economic or national security concern.

Meanwhile, Delhi worked on feats such as landing a rover on the dark side of the moon. On Aug. 23, the country celebrated as India’s spacecraft, [Chandrayaan-3](#) successfully landed on the [lunar south pole](#), making India the fourth nation to successfully land on the moon and the first on the lunar south pole. Space has been an arena for increased cooperation between the US and India. The Modi administration embarked on a privatization drive of the space industry,

opening it up to private investors and players in the private sector. The success of the mission, coming on the heels of privatization measures and expanding US-India cooperation, was welcomed by policymakers in both nations.

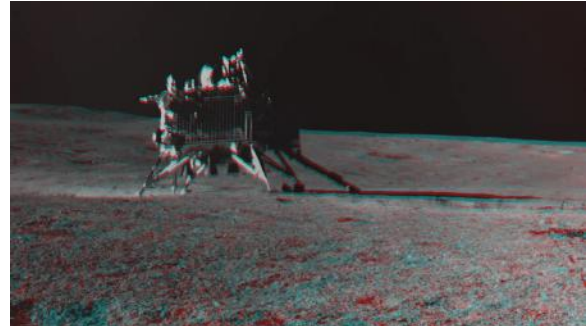


Figure 2 A 3-channel image of the Chandrayaan-3 lunar lander from the rover’s NavCam Stereo Images on the Moon. LEOS/SAC/ISRO

Given the nature of politics and media in a democracy, some tried to turn the success of the mission into a debate over attributing credit to different leaders, with the immediate distraction coming in the form of comments surrounding the [Hindu faith](#) by a political leader in the Southern part of India; and soon after there was debate surrounding the name of the nation itself. In late August, invitations to the G20 went out with “[Bharat](#)” over India, sparking commotion throughout the nation. Historical debates surrounding the etymology of the word’s origins in Hindu religious texts only subsided when the event convened in early September.

The clamor was not limited to political and cultural issues. Between May and July, unusual weather affected crop cultivation across parts of India, shooting up risks of inflation. In response, the Indian government instituted a ban on rice exports affecting the price of rice around the world. As one of the world’s largest exporters of rice, the export ban squeezed the rice market and shot up the price of the staple by [20%](#) in select markets across the Indo-Pacific region where rice is largely consumed.

Similarly, with the US going to the polls next year, a wide range of issues tested Biden’s presidency, including wildfires that raged across the island of Maui in Hawaii, storms in Florida,

the relentless war in Ukraine. Another serious issue was the administration's slow [walk-back](#) of its initial hawkishness toward China. Over the summer, the administration made repeated attempts at thawing relations with China by sending several high-ranking officials to Beijing. These overtures in hope of stabilizing relations have not paid dividends.

These domestic pressures could influence the administration's foreign policies, and affect US-India relations. For example, the catalyst for expanded cooperation between these two democracies has been the shared concern over a rising, belligerent, and expansionist China. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the US and India have faced China's repeated violations of their sovereignty. India [lost](#) men in the border clashes at the Galwan valley in 2020, and this year the US came to [discover spy balloons](#) and secret police stations across the nation, which may be used to harass dissident communities.

The bone of [contention](#) since Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been the divergence in views between US and India surrounding Moscow. Domestic pressure in the US, especially coupled with inflationary pressure and a rolling debt crisis raise questions on increasing US financial commitments to Ukraine. A recent poll by [CNN](#) found that the majority of Americans opposed giving more aid to Ukraine. Right or wrong, supporting Ukraine with aid and addressing domestic issues are increasingly viewed by some voters as a zero-sum endeavor. This could pressure Biden vis-a-vis Ukraine.

There are other domestic US issues with trajectories difficult to predict. Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy, under pressure from Freedom Caucus Republicans, [opened](#) an impeachment enquiry against the president. The migrant crisis is no longer limited to border states. With less than a year to elections, domestic pressures could unpredictably affect Biden's foreign policy.

At the recently concluded G20 event, despite fears that the leaders would not be able to find consensus, the group managed to settle differences and agree to a statement raising concerns over the war in Ukraine without

naming Russia—the US has supported Ukraine in the conflict, while India has thus far declined to speak out against Russia. While speculations ran amok, the watered-down message may have been the US helping India save face at the G20. With tensions surrounding the Russia-Ukraine war relatively contained, Modi capitalized on Xi and Putin's absence at the G20 meeting to introduce several initiatives with the US, such as the one with Brazil, South Africa and the US, the [Global Biofuel Alliance](#) and the [India-Middle East-Europe corridor](#) promoting trade and connectivity from the shores of India to the shores of Europe.



Figure 3 Members of the newly launched Global Biofuels Alliance pose together at the G20 Summit on Sept. 9, 2023. Photo: Press Trust of India

Geoeconomics (albeit with geopolitical implications), continued to be a lynchpin for increased cooperation between the world's largest and fifth-largest economy.

Trade as National Security

As noted in earlier chapters of *Comparative Connections* covering US-India bilateral relations, the Indian economy has come a long way from the days of a [“license raj”](#) marred by socialist regulations to one now being positioned as a friendly shore for supply chain diversification and more. Dregs of the raj era still clog parts of the system however and the Modi government has embarked on a reform drive to liberalize, privatize, and shape policies to positively affect the investment climate. Since the term “friend-shoring” came into parlance a few years ago, the US has consistently positioned India in that context and explored

supply chain diversification opportunities across various sectors.

During their trips to New Delhi, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, and US Trade Representative Katherine Tai [emphasized](#) India's role as an alternative to China. Moreover, at the Semicon India conference—[a large-scale conference](#) on semiconductors and other critical technologies organized in the western state of Gujarat—several US conglomerates discussed their interest in establishing manufacturing in the country.

There weren't just grand statements; there were several acts of walking the walk. For example, India and the US decided to [settle](#) all outstanding trade disputes at the WTO, and Indian Ambassador to the US Taranjit Singh Sandhu signed the Artemis accords for increased space cooperation. In late July, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry [met](#) with counterparts in the Indian government to explore India's potential to be a key manufacturer of electric vehicles.

Cooperation, or at least the stated intent to grow cooperation, in trade, supply chains and critical technology has become a mainstay of US-India relations. Even on the margins of the G20, US and India settled trade disputes, finalized purchases of drones and other defense equipment, and announced new geoeconomic and geopolitical initiatives. Slicing the BRICS grouping, India brought the US into a group with South Africa and Brazil now known as the IBSA. Furthermore, several nations formed the Global Biofuel Alliance. Probably the most geoeconomically significant development was the India-Middle East-Europe trade corridor established to promote connectivity between these regions. Dubbed an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, this connectivity project [announced](#) at the G20 event Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment aims to stimulate economic development through enhanced connectivity across two continents. While these initiatives were conceived by policymakers, all have a large private sector

role, making their foundation stronger and their shelf life longer.

A bone of contention for big businesses trying to operate in India has been the difficult operating environment. Threats of China's weaponization of interdependence and economic coercion have pushed policymakers in Washington and New Delhi to drive policy changes with relative urgency, giving confidence to select businesses interested in operating in India. The increasing intersection of national security and trade policymaking that initially raised concerns in business circles is now encouraging the development of economic engagement with India's large market. For example, US and Indian conglomerates are beginning to explore complimentary attributes across verticals in the critical technology and defense sectors. For US businesses, these collaborations provide access without the bottlenecks they'd face when operating solo. For Indian conglomerates, these partnerships give them access to advanced technologies and a leg up as they compete with the technological giants of China.

Friend-shoring Begins to Materialize

Among the many proposed joint ventures and partnerships, a few stand out due to their geoeconomic and geopolitical significance. Increased cooperation in defense, infrastructure, and critical technology are three spheres with such relevance.

For India, increased cooperation in the defense realm strengthens national security as it faces persistent Chinese aggression at its northern and eastern borders. China's infrastructure development across the Indian Ocean and subcontinent, from Sri Lanka to Nepal has increased risk in the operating environment. These existing and developing risks have made India a customer for US predator drones and helicopters, including New Delhi's [purchase](#) of 31 MQ-9B Predator drones from General Atomics. General Electric (GE) is working with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) to co-produce GE F-414 fighter jet engines for the Indian Air Force.

In terms of infrastructure, for Washington, India's hegemonic position in the Indian Ocean, while under constant threat from China and its proxies, remains a potent force to leverage. In late June, the US Navy concluded a master ship repairs agreement (MSRA) with the Indian infrastructure company Larson and Toubro (L&T) in Kattupalli, India. There was also an announcement about the US and India [recommitting](#) "to advancing India's emergence as a hub for the maintenance and repair of forward-deployed U.S. Navy assets and other aircraft and vessels."

In the critical and advanced technology space, US chipmaker Advanced Micro Devices (AMD) announced a \$4,00 million investment in India over the next five years, including a new design center in Bengaluru. And in late August, Nvidia announced [partnerships](#) with India's TATA and Reliance in the field of artificial intelligence.

These initial successes are a result of increased coordination at the highest levels of government. During Modi's visit to Washington in early summer, a defense initiative, the India-US Defense Acceleration Ecosystem (Indus-X) was launched to strengthen defense industrial ecosystems, making them more innovative, accessible, and resilient. This initiative is a product of the US Department of Defense and the Indian Ministry of Defense's joint efforts to expand cooperation not only amongst large firms but startups in the defense space.

These joint ventures are not limited to the China+1 strategy of companies but serve Washington's larger geopolitical goal of strengthening India's deterrent capabilities in the Indian Ocean region. The complimentary nature of industrial policies in both nations that are designed to reduce overdependence on China for vital inputs in key strategic sectors is well supplemented by these joint ventures.

While the success of industrial policies can only be measured over time, these initiatives are what the doctor ordered for increased diversification. Plus, a perennial challenge for the US in courting India was its long friendship with Russia and its reliance on Russian arms and

defense imports. With increased defense collaboration, Washington may have a chance at limiting India's reliance on Russian defense equipment. Furthermore, through partnerships, the US is supporting India's "Make in India" goals. This can have spillover effects in the global defense sector. Indian defense production companies' partnerships with Russian state-owned firms have paid dividends through new export markets such as Philippines and Vietnam. The Indian defense industry, while in its nascent stages, is exploring new markets, particularly emerging ones in Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The US can capitalize on India's access to these markets to outcompete Russian defense exports.



Figure 4 Prime Minister Modi and President Biden meet with various CEOs and other senior officials in the East Room of the White House on June 23, 2023. Photo: Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters

While the US technology supports India's ascent to the fourth industrial revolution, India's goodwill in the Global South could pay dividends for the US, particularly in parts of the world where it has a complex legacy.

The Bridge Between the Global South and North

COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, and the resulting economic and political crises have led the resurgence of the "Global South"—developing countries seeking a leverage through unity on the global stage. Increasingly, they've found themselves caught in the crossfire of larger nations such as the US and China. James Marape, prime minister of Papua New Guinea (PNG), in his address at the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation, called for Modi to offer a third voice in the face of the

Global North. Hailing Modi as the leader of the Global South, Marape went on to suggest that the Pacific Island countries would rally behind him voice at global forums. Interestingly, Biden had to cancel his scheduled participation at the meeting to attend more pressing domestic concerns over the debt ceiling crisis. While Secretary of State Antony Blinken made the trip and signed a crucial defense agreement with PNG, he did not receive the same warmth and welcome as the Indian prime minister. Modi and Marape shared solidarity and as the PNG leader [called](#) it, “shared history of being colonized by colonial masters” brought about a unique kinship.

India is not the only state capitalizing on the shared experiences of colonial rule or Western imperialism and the resulting solidarity to strengthen ties with nations of the Global South. China has consistently reminded former colonies in the Global South of the brutality of the Western world and sought to gain goodwill among leaders and civil society. While the wounds evoked may be the same, the remedy offered is markedly different. The stark contrast between the Indian approach to the Global South and the Chinese approach can be seen in how they talk about the Western world. New Delhi does not remind nations of their past as a motivation for revenge but rather to spur cooperation with the West on more equal terms. Beijing (much like Moscow) calls for deliberate mechanisms and groupings in opposition to the West.

For example, since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions on its economy, Moscow has sought the creation, expansion, or hardening of groupings to stand against the Western world. The BRICS grouping, initially a talk shop, has expanded to address a plethora of issues impacting the larger Global South. Russia and China are trying to shape it into a platform for nations with disputes with the Western world to exacerbate the cleavage. In early 2023, [16](#) nations applied to become part of the BRICS. In the last major meeting of the group in Johannesburg, South Africa in August, six nations were added. Moscow and Beijing continue to use the group to test alternative

mechanisms for the SWIFT banking network and other instruments to sanction-proof themselves. The creation of development banks such as the NDB has given the group more access to the developing world and tapped into the grievances surrounding the debts offered by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

New Delhi continues to engage with a range of groups to capitalize on the benefits they offer while advocating for its own interests, and having useful sideline meetings with others that, like India, may be looking for options. Its outreach to the Global South has largely been bilateral and it hasn’t used these platforms for broad anti-West coalition building. Rather it has tried to build multilateral inclusivity that can lead to stronger bilateral ties.

Take India’s successful advocacy to include the African Union (AU) in the G20 group. Modi had consistently [called](#) for including the AU in the group. At the G20 meeting in September, the African Union represented by Azali Assoumani, president of Comoros, was made a permanent member. This makes the G20 more inclusive and broader in scope, and dovetails with India’s own outreach to African countries. As one small example, Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar visited Tanzania earlier in the summer to inaugurate a university and discuss increased cooperation on a variety of sectors.

Part of this has strategic implications. India’s conception of the Indo-Pacific region is not the same as that of the US. While the US conceptualization roughly parallels the operational area of the US Indo-Pacific Command—from just west of the Maldives to the coast of the Americas—India includes the whole Indian Ocean, [including](#) the eastern shore of Africa.

Also, over the last six months, India has increasingly shown willingness to be involved in the Pacific part of the Indo-Pacific, beyond ASEAN and including the Pacific Islands. There was a port call in Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea and India opened a new embassy in Dilli, Timor-Leste. There is eagerness in the Pacific

Islands to see what follows the 12 point plan for engagement that Modi announced in his May visit to PNG. India's engagement with the Pacific Islands has traditionally been on nonconventional security issues such as public health and capacity building, exactly the [sort of engagement](#) many Pacific Islands have said they want.



Figure 5 Prime Minister Modi delivers opening remarks in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea at the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation summit on May 22, 2023. Adek Berry/AFP via Getty Images

Furthermore, in an unusual turn of events, the former heads of the three branches of the Indian military [visited](#) Taiwan for a closed-door meeting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Taiwan. By engaging with the full Indo-Pacific, from east African nations to Pacific Islands, and including sensitive points such as Taiwan, India is more than testing the waters as an expanding security provider—especially in human security, which is much in demand across the region.

India does not have the same legacy as the West's previous "point country" in the Pacific Islands, Australia, nor has it been as disconnected from the African continent as has the US. The last US president to visit the continent was Barack Obama in 2015, and that was not a state visit but a visit to his ancestral village in Kenya. Over the same decade, China has made inroads into nations small and big. Beijing's BRI project runs along the length and breadth of the continent. To counter China's predatory lending, New Delhi has advocated for expanding lending to poorer nations, including at the recently concluded G20. President Biden has [supported](#) India's recommendation and

called for increased funding for the World Bank. From the Pacific Islands to east Africa, India can knit the region together in a way that the West can't, and China doesn't want to. The G20 showcased the potential for India and the US (and likeminded countries) to work together to develop solutions for the people of Global South, aiding in economic stability and ultimately for upholding a rules-based international order.

With Xi and Putin not attending the event, Modi and Biden stole the spotlight and shone it on a potential future that many wanted to see. That said, press releases are one thing. It will be outcomes that matter.

Conclusion

On social media, two covers of the Indian magazine *India Today* have been making the rounds. One was from the early '80s, with Indira Gandhi and Fidel Castro on the cover, with the headline "India Leads." The other, from 2023, had Xi, and Putin together on one side, and Modi and Biden together on the other, with the headline "the big power game."

Long gone are the '80s and the era of nonalignment. In this era of realignment, the US-India relationship is not perfect (and no relationship between two clamorous democracies should be) but it is on solid ground and planting serious roots, as the last four months would indicate.

The areas and scale of cooperation keep expanding, and the evolving world order may be a good opening for the US and India to reimagine a world driven by shared interests and a commitment for the rules-based order. Perhaps it is time for something along the lines of an Indo-Pacific Charter for an Indo-Pacific Century, just as the [Atlantic Charter](#) shaped the Atlantic Century. In the coming months, if policymakers in both democracies live by the motto "carpe diem," they can take inspiration from India's inspiring moonshot and realize that even the sky is not the limit.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-INDIA RELATIONS

MAY—AUGUST 2023

Chronology by Pacific Forum interns Patrick Kovacs and Chelsea Patrick.

May 1, 2023: Indian Ambassador to the US Taranjit Singh Sandhu Sandhu [attends](#) the SelectUSA Investment Summit in the Washington, DC area.

May 2, 2023: United States Agency for International Development (USAID) [convenes](#) the first South Asia Clean Energy Forum (SACEF) to foster regional cooperation and advance clean energy initiatives in South Asian countries including India.

May 11, 2023: Prime Minister Narendra Modi [lays](#) the foundation stone of LIGO-India, a project funded by the US National Science Foundation.

May 11, 2023: Eric Garcetti [presents](#) credentials to President Droupadi Murmu to be US ambassador to India.

May 17, 2023: 17th US-India Defense Policy Group [discuss](#) goals in the Indo-Pacific to deepen the Major Defense Partnership.

May 19, 2023: US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Indo-American Chamber of Commerce in India [renew](#) MOU to enhance development collaboration in India.

May 20, 2023: Indian Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar [meets](#) US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the sidelines of the G7 leaders' summit in Hiroshima.

May 21, 2023: India, the US, and their G7 partners [conclude](#) a successful summit, having discussed several issues including climate, food security, investment, and nuclear disarmament.

May 21, 2023: MH-60R helicopters purchased by India from the United States [land](#) for the first time on INS Kolkata, representing a major increase in Indian antisubmarine capabilities.

May 22, 2023: US Department of Commerce's Cybersecurity Business Development Trade Mission [arrives](#) in India for four days of talks with officials of the local governments of Mumbai and New Delhi and the central government.

May 22, 2023: Neeta Prasad, joint secretary for International Cooperation at the Indian Ministry of Education, and Donald Lu, assistant secretary at the State Dept. Bureau of South and Central Asia, [co-host](#) launch of the US India Education and Skills Development Working Group and hold, in hybrid format, its first meeting.

May 23, 2023: US Trade and Development Agency (USTDA) [hosts](#) workshop on US-India 5G & Next Generation Networks to develop new opportunities for US-India technical and commercial cooperation in the sector.

May 26, 2023: State Department formally [dedicates](#) new consulate in Hyderabad.

May 29, 2023: US Consulate General Kolkata [announces](#) that after years of coordination between the US and Indian governments, the remains of Maj. Gen. Henry Kleinbeck Pickett, decorated veteran of both world wars who passed away in Darjeeling in 1965, would be repatriated to the United States.

May 30, 2023: US Navy Vice Adm. Brad Cooper [meets](#) Indian Navy Vice Adm. Dinesh K. Tripathi on a visit to Mumbai.

May 30, 2023: Department of Labor [awards](#) Lalitha Natarajan, a Chennai-based lawyer, with the 2023 Iqbal Masih Award for the Elimination of Child Labor at the US Consulate General in Chennai.

May 31, 2023: Two more American-made MH-60R Romeo helicopters [arrive](#) in India for use on INS Vikrant and INS Vikramaditya. One of them [makes](#) its maiden landing on INS Vikrant.

June 1, 2023: US [collaborates](#) with India to address air pollution and climate change during a workshop with the Delhi-based nonprofit Lung Care Foundation at the India International Center.

June 3, 2023: President Biden [releases](#) a press statement expressing sorrow over a crash in eastern India when two passenger trains and a freight train collide, resulting in the deaths of at least 288 people.

June 4, 2023: US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin [meets](#) Defense Minister Rajnath Singh in New Delhi to strengthen the US-India defense partnership.

June 9, 2023: India and the US [launch](#) the India-US Strategic Trade Dialogue (IUSSTD), designed to further enhance collaboration and trade in critical domains.

June 13, 2023: US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [meets](#) Prime Minister Modi, Minister for External Affairs S. Jaishankar, and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval in New Delhi to discuss removing obstacles to technology and defense trade between the US and India in preparation for the upcoming official state visit.

June 15, 2023: Indian government [approves](#) the acquisition of 31 MQ-9B Predator drones from US manufacturer General Atomics. They will be used for maritime surveillance and monitoring the country's borders with China and Pakistan.

June 21, 2023: Minister of State for Tourism Shripad Yesso Naik [meets](#) US Director of

National Travel and Tourism Office Brian Beall at the fourth Tourism Working Group and Ministerial Meeting at G20.

June 21, 2023: Prime Minister Modi and First Lady Jill Biden [participate](#) in the "India and USA: Skilling for Future" event at the National Science Center in Washington, DC.

June 21, 2023: US Department of Defense and the Indian Ministry of Defense [launch](#) the India-US Defense Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X).

June 21, 2023: Indian Ambassador to the US Taranjit Singh Sandhu [signs](#) the Artemis Accords, an agreement on space cooperation, on behalf of India in Washington, DC.

June 22, 2023: President Joe Biden [meets](#) Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Washington, DC to discuss deals on critical technologies, strengthen their defense partnership and prioritize clean energy. During these meetings, after years of preparation, India also became the 14th member of the US-led Minerals Security Partnership.

June 22, 2023: India [agrees](#) with the US to terminate six disputes at the World Trade Organization (WTO), and India removes retaliatory tariffs.

June 22, 2023: General Electric [signs](#) an MOU with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited to co-produce GE F-414 fighter jet engines for the Indian Air Force.

June 22, 2023: USAID and Indian Railways [announced](#) an MOU to combat climate change and achieve Indian Railways' target of net-zero carbon emissions by 2030.

June 23, 2023: Secretary Blinken and Vice President Kamala Harris [host](#) State Luncheon for Prime Minister Modi.

June 23, 2023: India's Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) successfully [concludes](#)

Operation Broader Sword, a joint effort with various US agencies.

June 23, 2023: Prime Minister Modi speaks to about 1,000 leading professionals of various disciplines, inviting them to [partner](#) with India in their business ventures, at the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington DC.

July 6, 2023: Ambassador Eric Garcetti [expresses](#) sorrow over ethnic violence in India's northeastern state of Manipur after 120 people were killed in clashes between Kuki and Meiteis tribes.

July 9, 2023: Uzra Zeya, US undersecretary for civilian security, democracy, and human rights [meets](#) with senior Indian officials, including Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra, to deepen US-India cooperation on humanitarian support and Indo-Pacific stability.

July 9, 2023: US Navy Ship *Salvor* [arrives](#) in India for repairs, the first ship to be welcomed to the L&T Shipyard since the signing of the Master Ship Repair Agreement (MSRA) between the shipyard and the Navy.

July 12, 2023: US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti and Minister of State Jitendra Singh [launch](#) a new grant from the United States-India Science & Technology Endowment Fund, available to innovators from both nations in quantum technologies and artificial intelligence.

July 13, 2023: NASA [announces](#) that the two main components of the NISAR satellite, one primarily built by the US, and one primarily built by India, had been joined in mid-June.

July 17, 2023: US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen [discusses](#) the advancement of multilateral development banks with the Minister of Finance of India Nirmala Sitharaman at the G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors in Gandhinagar, Gujarat.

July 18, 2023: Prime Minister Modi [thanks](#) the US for the return of 105 trafficked antiquities as old as the 2nd century A.D.

July 18, 2023: US Navy vessel *USS Stethem* [conducts](#) exercises with Indian Navy vessel *INS Tarkash* to improve interoperability and demonstrate a commitment to cooperation on the seas.

July 18, 2023: Indian Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas Hardeep S. Puri and Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm [hold](#) third ministerial meeting of the US-India Strategic Clean Energy Partnership (SCEP) in New Delhi. The sides noted the growing importance of bilateral energy cooperation while underscoring the critical importance of bilateral clean energy engagement.

July 25, 2023: Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry [meets](#) Dr. Mahendra Nath Pandey to discuss sustainable energy and India's potential to be a key manufacturer of electric vehicles.

July 27, 2023: Michael Regan, administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency, joins a shore walk across the Chennai coastline, where he [meets](#) Indian high school students who provide demonstrations of the impact of ocean health on climate.

July 28, 2023: G20 climate summit in Bengaluru [concludes](#) with an agreement on the majority, but not all 68 points of discussion.

July 28, 2023: Consul General of Mumbai Mike Hankey [affirms](#) his belief in India's "golden opportunity" for US private sector investment at Semicon India 2023, inaugurated by Modi.

July 28, 2023: US chipmaker Advanced Micro Devices (AMD) [dedicates](#) \$400 million investment in India over the next five years to include a new design center in Bengaluru and the creation of 3,000 new engineering roles.

Aug. 8, 2023: Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Rao Gupta [concludes](#) a week-long visit to India, during which she leads the US delegation to the G20 Alliance for the Empowerment and Progression of Women's Economic Representation Conference and the G20 Ministerial Conference on Women's Empowerment.

Aug. 9, 2023: Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM) [hosts](#) an international conference in celebration of World Biofuel Day 2023 in New Delhi, with speakers including Minister of State for Environment, Forests, and Climate Change Shri Ashwini Kumar Choubey, and Jonathan Heimer, Minister Counselor for Commercial Affairs at the Commercial Service.

Aug. 9, 2023: Ambassador Garcetti [meets](#) Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan to discuss student mobility and promote skill cooperation.

Aug. 16, 2023: Prime Minister Modi [receives](#) a US congressional delegation, emphasizing the importance of the two countries' shared democratic ideals and expressing his appreciation for the US Congress' support for US-India relations.

Aug. 21, 2023: US and Indian Navies [conclude](#) their annual *Exercise Malabar*, this time accompanied by Japan and Australian forces and hosted in Sydney.

Aug. 26, 2023: Indian Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal [meets](#) US Trade Representative Katherine Tai, including to address concerns over India's decision to impose import restrictions on certain electronic devices and the effect this may have on US exports.

Aug. 26, 2023: EducationUSA, supported by the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Department of State, [kicks off](#) a fair bringing US university representatives to India to meet potential Indian students.

Aug. 22-27, 2023: Assistant Secretary of State for Education and Cultural Affairs Lee Satterfield [concludes](#) a visit to India, which included leading the US delegation to the G20 Culture Ministers' Meeting in Varanasi.

Aug. 28, 2023: US "Tridents" of Patrol Squadron (VP) 26 [complete](#) a week-long training on maritime patrol and reconnaissance with Indian Naval Air Squadron (INAS) 312 in Tamil Nadu.

Aug. 29, 2023: Indian Health Minister Mansukh Mandviya [meets](#) Ambassador Garcetti to discuss "health collaborations in Research and Development, artificial intelligence and increasing health access and equity."

Aug. 29, 2023: Officials from Department of Energy (DOE) [meet](#) counterparts from the Indian Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) to launch the US-India Renewable Energy Technology Action Platform (RETAP), designed to advance new and emerging renewable technologies.

PACIFIC FORUM

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

US-SOUTHEAST ASIA
RELATIONS

NEW LEADERS CHALLENGED BY US-CHINA RIVALRY

CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Over the summer three Southeast Asian nations—Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia—conducted political contests or prepared for them, with Washington and Beijing watching closely for shifts in alignments or opportunities to make inroads with new leaders. Despite this, and possibly because of it, China made bold moves in the South China Sea and caused outcry in the region with the [release](#) of a map supporting its claims to the “Nine-Dash Line.” Beijing also showed signs of worry about Russian inroads into Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. The high-profile [visit](#) to Washington of Philippine President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr. enabled both countries to reconfirm the US-Philippines alliance publicly, although it gave little indication of where the broader relationship may be headed. ASEAN continued to make little headway in helping to resolve the conflict in Myanmar; and the 2023 chair, Jakarta attempted to redirect the group toward economic goals and a common approach to looming food insecurity in the region.

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Chinese provocations in the South China Sea led Jakarta to announce that ASEAN would conduct joint military exercises in the SCS for the first time. However, Jakarta may be set to swim in deeper waters: Indonesia was among 20 countries invited to join the BRICS group of “middle powers,” and the only one from Southeast Asia. Jakarta deferred membership for two years in order to “consult” with regional leaders, leaving the new president to make a decision on entering the BRICS, but Indonesia is not likely to turn down the opportunity to play a greater role on the world stage.

Marcos Goes to Washington

Philippines President Marcos’ official visit to the United States in the first week of May signaled the normalization of relations between Washington and the Marcos dynasty—an optic of greater benefit to Marcos—and solidification of the agreement in February to add four basing sites to the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), thus expanding US “flexible basing” in the South China Sea.

At the top of the Biden administration’s list of topics for the visit was “modernization” of the US-Philippines alliance, the culmination of which was the [release](#) during Marcos’ visit of the first-ever Philippines Basic Defense Guidelines. The Guidelines clarified language in the bilateral Mutual Defense Treaty to specify that the United States would defend the Philippines if its official vessels were attacked in the South China Sea, although the defense of Filipino fishing vessels was presumed to be left to the Philippine Coast Guard, which Washington also pledged to strengthen. An underlying objective of the guidelines is to achieve greater interoperability between the US and Philippine armed forces, with significant assistance from Washington, although asymmetry between the two militaries could make that an uphill battle.

Although welcoming the Guidelines and the overall expansion of the alliance, Manila expressed some reservations:

- First was a longstanding concern that the Mutual Defense Treaty applies to attacks on official Philippine vessels and not on fishing or other private vessels.

Defense of the Philippine fishing fleet will be handled through US support to strengthen the Philippine Coast Guard, but Washington will not have formal responsibility under the current MDT.

- Second, the addition of new EDCA sites will expand the US military presence in the Philippines. The local population around sites facing the Taiwan Strait have expressed concern that they will become targets of Chinese aggression. An increased US presence also revives longstanding demands from Manila that US troops come under the jurisdiction of host country courts, as they do in Japan and South Korea; however, Washington held firm on its refusal to agree to forfeit jurisdiction over US soldiers in the Philippines.
- Third, Manila fears that promises of long-term security assistance to strengthen inter-operability between the two militaries could fail to materialize if the 2024 elections put an “America First” president in office who downplays the value of alliances in US foreign policy.

Manila likely envisioned a broader agenda. In the days leading up to Marcos’ arrival in Washington, the Philippines issued a press release describing the agenda for the two presidents as purely economic. Throughout his visit, Marcos made public statements to the effect that “the real security is economic security,” avoiding mention of geopolitical security whenever he could. Any significant movement in US-Philippine economic relations is likely to be in the announcement of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), loosely scheduled for the end of 2023. Marcos did secure one small gain through his trip: Biden [promised](#) to dispatch a Presidential Trade and Investment Mission to the Philippines.

One item on Manila’s agenda for the visit of the US investment delegation will be the Maharlika Investment Fund (MIF), the Philippines’ first

sovereign wealth fund. Signed into law by Marcos on July 18, the MIF [is](#) intended to be the flagship initiative for the administration's goals of strengthening Philippine infrastructure and lifting a greater proportion of the population into the middle class. The government will provide a nest egg of just over \$3 billion and hopes to attract multiples of that from foreign investors, both private sector and government. The MIF has drawn criticism for its potential to encourage corruption—opponents point to the 1MDB scandal in Malaysia—but Marcos insists that guardrails have been written into the MIF charter. For funding, he has modeled the MIF on Indonesia's sovereign wealth fund, the Indonesian Investment Authority (INA) established in 2021, which Jakarta [reports](#) has garnered \$20 billion in pledges. The US Development Finance Corporation (DFC) is one contributor to the INA's nest egg, and Manila will press Washington to follow suit for the MIF.

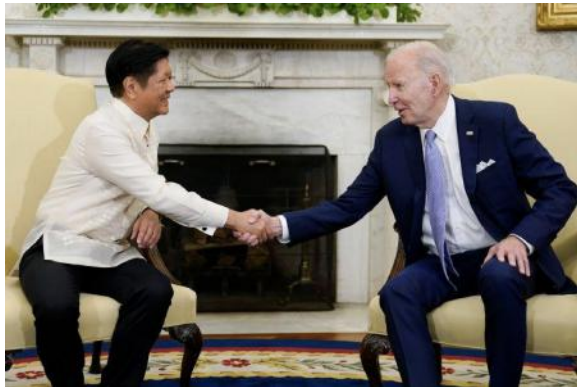


Figure 1 US President Joe Biden shakes hands with Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr as they meet in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, DC, on May 1, 2023 [Carolyn Kaster/AP Photo]

Political Contests and Currents

During the Cold War era, one-man rule was common in Southeast Asia and superpower rivals sought to build client states in the region by competing for the allegiance of individual leaders. Although personalities still weigh heavily in Southeast Asian politics, they are often less important than political systems, imbedded interest groups and political dynasties. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of

political transitions or the lead-up to them, major powers still seek to make early inroads with new leaders. This competition is a key feature in US-China rivalry in Southeast Asia, and political contests in 2023, and into 2024, offer several opportunities.

Thailand

From elections on May 14 to the inauguration of Prime Minister Srettha Tavisin on Aug. 22, the political maneuvering that drove the Move Forward Party, the pro-democracy party that won the most votes, out of the ruling coalition and put the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), the second-largest vote-getter, at the helm of the new administration was predictable. Pheu Thai, the political base for the family of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, brought the two parties most closely aligned with the military, Phalang Pracharat and Thai Union, into the coalition. This all but assured that the military-dominated Senate would approve Srettha's nomination as prime minister.

On Aug. 22, as Srettha [was](#) inaugurated, Thaksin returned to Thailand after two decades in exile and was transferred from the airport to the Bangkok Central Prison, to begin serving an eight-year sentence on three criminal charges. On Aug. 28 King Maha Vajiralongkorn [granted](#) Thaksin a royal pardon and reduced his sentence to one year; he is unlikely to be required to serve out the full year.

Although Move Forward's robust political base, which is dominated by younger generation Thais, has publicly [expressed](#) disappointment and disapproval of this series of political sleight-of-hand tricks, the coalition led by Pheu Thai promises some stability. Apart from bringing the military into the tent, Pheu Thai populist policies have traditionally been very popular. Srettha has promised to [raise](#) the minimum wage; give each Thai a small payment through a "digital wallet"; and raise agricultural prices. Although Pheu Thai is now more of a fixture of the Thai political establishment than it was in the first decade of the century, when its "Red Shirt" adherents fought an urban war

against “Yellow Shirt” conservatives, it could still fall afoul of the military if it is viewed as accruing too much power. That is unlikely in the near-term—it must manage an 11-party coalition—but Thaksin’s rehabilitation will need to be managed carefully.

The change of leadership from former Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, co-leader of the 2014 coup against Yingluck Shinawatra, to Srettha raises questions of shifts in Thailand’s foreign policies. In recent months Prayuth had raised hackles ASEAN and the West for setting up direct dialogue with the junta in Myanmar. Pheu Thai will attempt to be more inclusive and draw in the National Unity Government, but it will also represent Thai economic interests in Myanmar. Thailand is Southeast Asia’s top trading partner with Myanmar at present, primarily in energy.

Of equal, if not greater, interest will be Thailand’s relations with the United States and with China. Washington and Bangkok have attempted a reboot of the US–Thailand alliance, but it lacks the centrality of the alliance with the Philippines because Thailand is not a claimant in the South China Sea. At the same time, Chinese tourism in Thailand is an important component in recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. More importantly, Beijing is pressing Bangkok to move forward on its most important BRI project in Thailand, a high-speed rail link from northern Thailand to Bangkok, which would complete the rail line from Kunming to Bangkok.

Thailand’s trade with China was a critical element in the country’s double-digit growth in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Thaksin entered politics and Pheu Thai, whose leadership is comprised of self-made billionaires, will look for opportunities to expand economic relations with Beijing. At the same time, Srettha has [signaled](#) that he intends strengthen relations with Washington: he will participate in a US–Thailand security meeting with Defense Minister Sutin Klungsang when he

visits New York in September for the opening of the UN General Assembly.

Cambodia



Figure 2 Hun Manet, Cambodia’s new prime minister, right, shakes hands with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during a meeting at the Peace Palace in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on Sunday, Aug. 13, 2023. Photo: EPA-EFE

The inauguration of former Army Commander Hun Manet, eldest son of Hun Sen, in Cambodia on Aug. 22 will likely spark more intense competition for political influence between Washington and Beijing than the contest in Thailand. Hun Manet’s ties to the West are far deeper than those of his father: he is a graduate of West Point and also holds an MBA (from the US) and a PhD in economics (from the UK). Western hopes that Hun Manet will be more democratic are probably overblown; whether he will seek a foreign policy that is better balanced between China and the United States is a more open question.

Nor is it clear whether the move from Hun Sen to Hun Manet [represents](#) a genuine transition of power. Hun Sen will remain as leader of the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) and in early 2024 will assume the role as president of the Senate. The latter will entitle him to step in as head-of-state if King Sihamoni is unable to serve. More to the point, he has said publicly that he would take back the position of prime minister if his son “fails to meet expectations.” It is more certain that the transition represents a generational shift within the CPP. However this shift will, if anything, strengthen the family-based dynasties that make up the party.

Of the 30 Cabinet slots expected to be finalized in the early fall (the candidates for which were chosen by Hun Sen, not by Manet), 13 are expected to [go](#) to the sons and daughters of high-ranking CPP officials. Most significantly, Tea Seiha will succeed his father Tea Banh as defense minister, and Sar Sokha will replace his father Sar Kheng as interior minister. Hun Sen's youngest son, Hun Many, will be minister of civil service.

That said, the new Cabinet will be more technocratic than previous ones: eight ministers are technocrat holdovers, and four new ones will join their ranks. Most notably, Sok Chenda Sophea, a French-trained economist who recently served as secretary-general of the Council for Development, which vets all foreign investment, will [be](#) foreign minister and a deputy prime minister.

China's eagerness to make an early bid for influence over the new leader in Phnom Penh was obvious when Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited to meet Hun Manet prior to his inauguration. Washington has not made such overt overtures, but the administration's response to the election on July 23 was muted. It criticized the July 23 election, in which the CPP had no real competition because Hun Sen had hollowed out the opposition with criminal charges and other measures and held out the possibility of imposing sanctions on a few unnamed individuals. However, there is little enthusiasm in the West for significant tightening of sanctions at this point.

Although many Western observers place Cambodia squarely in China's camp, the issue is more complicated. China is Cambodia's largest foreign investor, but the United States is its largest export market. Compared to other mainland Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, Phnom Penh has been more outspoken in opposing the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

An early indicator for Washington will be Hun Manet's handling of the Chinese [presence](#) at

Ream Naval Base. Both Beijing and Phnom Penh continue to insist that China will not have exclusive rights to the base, but there are many arrangements short of permanent basing that might be extended. US-Cambodian military-to-military relations are constrained, if not completely obstructed, at this time but Hun Manet has often said that he favors restarting a military dialogue. For Washington, this may be an appealing first step in relations with the new leader.

Indonesia

Although the official campaign season for the February 2024 presidential elections in Indonesia will not open until later this year, public opinion surveys [show](#) two candidates in the lead: Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto and West Java Governor Ganjar Pranowo, nominee for of the powerful PDI-P led by former president Megawati Sukarnoputri. The two are running neck-and-neck in the polls and may continue to do so up to the election. Current president Joko Widodo is ineligible for re-election of because of term limits.

Of the two candidates, Prabowo has more experience in foreign policy, although he has also attracted criticism on that score. A former military leader, in the 1990s Prabowo was accused of human-rights violations when he was a member of KOPASSAS, the military's special forces and was periodically placed on visa blacklists by the State Department. More recently, a proposal that Probowo [made](#) to resolve the conflict in Ukraine at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June, with terms that would potentially favor Russia, was met with public disbelief and criticism, including from Joko.

In broad terms, there may not be dramatic differences between Indonesian foreign policy under Prabowo and under Ganjar. Indonesian leaders all show deference to Jakarta's deep vein of non-alignment and to ASEAN centrality. That said, both Prabowo and Ganjar have made pro-China statements in recent months. In his capacity as defense minister, Prabowo has [advocated](#) stronger military-to-military relations with Beijing. He has also called for

greater economic “self-reliance” for Indonesia; this more cryptic statement likely refers to balancing trade and investment between China and the West. Ganjar has not made specific proposals for his foreign policy as yet, but has included China-friendly rhetoric in his broad statements.

In the run-up to the elections, Washington will make use of the channel between Defense departments to promote dialogue with Prabowo. He and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin met on the margins of the Shangri-la Dialogue. In August, the two officials [issued](#) a joint statement, declaring that the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (which was issued in response to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) and the US Indo-Pacific Strategy have common fundamental principles and that Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea are “inconsistent with international law.” The purpose of this statement was likely two-fold. It helped to assuage Southeast Asian objections that Austin’s speech at Shangri-la made little mention of ASEAN, and it put Prabowo on the record expressing concern over Chinese behavior in the South China Sea.



Figure 3 Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III greets Indonesian Minister of Defense Prabowo Subianto at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) 20th Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, on June 2, 2023. (DoD photo by Chad J. McNeeley)

Beijing Rumbles in The Region

As Southeast Asian leaders attempt to navigate a path between China and the United States, Beijing has made that more difficult in recent

months with hostile maneuvers in the South China Sea. [Incursions](#) into the EEZs of Southeast Asian countries are often cyclical for the Chinese Coast Guard and its maritime militia. Incidents to intimidate Southeast Asian private vessels often occur in the springtime, the high season for fishing in the Spratlys. Oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea typically takes place in the summer, and China attempts to obstruct Southeast Asian operations that are often joint projects with other regional powers. For the past several years there has been a strong pattern of such intimidation in Vietnamese waters, to disrupt joint exploration between Vietnam and Russia. However, just as many if not more incidents are intended to make a political statement—aimed at external powers as well as Southeast Asian governments—or have no apparent reason other than a display of force.

On May 10 a flotilla of Chinese vessels [entered](#) the Vietnamese EEZ and loitered in a Russian-Vietnamese offshore lease block. A Chinese survey ship was noted by commercial satellites to be accompanied by two Chinese Coast Guard patrol vessels with at least seven maritime militia trawlers. The size of the flotilla was widely interpreted as an attempt to intimidate not only Vietnam but also Russia, whose presence in the Indo-Pacific appears to worry Beijing as the Ukraine war goes on. On Aug. 5 Chinese [attempted](#) to obstruct a Philippine resupply mission to Second Thomas Shoal. The US State Department issued an immediate statement of support for the Philippines. To crown these incidents, in late August the Chinese Ministry of Natural Resources issued a “standard” map of the Indo-Pacific which showed Chinese claims on most of the South China Sea, as well as disputed areas in Russia and India. The collective outcry was swift and uniform among Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.



Figure 4 A China Coast Guard vessel patrols at the disputed Scarborough Shoal April 5, 2017. Picture taken April 5, 2017. Reuters/Erik De Castro/File

This trajectory adds both urgency and skepticism to longstanding ASEAN efforts to develop a Code of Conduct on the South China Sea with Beijing. On July 13, in a China-ASEAN post-ministerial meeting, the two sides agreed upon new guidelines for negotiation of a COC. Southeast Asian leaders place little faith in the COC process—or believe that China would necessarily follow a Code if one is negotiated—but pursue it to maintain a channel for dialogue with Beijing. Nevertheless, under Indonesia’s chairmanship this year ASEAN intends to strengthen its joint approach to the South China Sea: in June Jakarta [announced](#) that at the 10 member states would conduct their first-ever ASEAN joint military exercises in the South China Sea in September, in the North Natuna Sea.

Indonesia’s Expanding Role

ASEAN’s continued lack of success in pushing the Five-Point Consensus Plan for Myanmar has led to inevitable speculation on whether the regional group is losing traction. This is partly in anticipation of the ASEAN chair’s rotation from Jakarta to Vientiane in 2024. However, although Laos lacks the resources to conduct a robust chairmanship, Vientiane generally allows itself to be guided by the larger members. That said, there is no reason to believe that ASEAN can play a pivotal role in resolving the conflict in Myanmar in the near-term.

As a result, Jakarta has focused the ASEAN agenda on other issues. Of particular urgency this year is the possibility of a two-pronged food crisis in the region, due to Russian threats to blockade Ukrainian shipment of grain out of ports in the Black Sea, which will have particular

impact on Southeast Asia’s wheat imports, and the El Nino cycle, which will have a negative impact on Southeast Asian rice harvests this year and the next. As the world’s largest wheat importer, Indonesia will experience severe shortages of the grain unless Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan can persuade Vladimir Putin to reverse course.



Figure 5 The participating countries of the East Asia Summit (EAS) met on 7 September 2023 in Jakarta, Indonesia, under Indonesia’s 2023 ASEAN Chairmanship on the occasion of the 18th East Asia Summit. Photo: Association of Southeast Asian Nations

In reality, there is little that ASEAN can do to avert either situation, but Jakarta is focused on collective action that may cushion shocks in food prices. Joko has proposed a structure similar to that ASEAN adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic to set up intra-regional supply chains and create reserves of food supplies that may be particularly endangered during global shortages.

Although Indonesia is often viewed as the unofficial leader of ASEAN, Jakarta is also contemplating a larger role in global groups that offer space for “middle powers” to exercise leadership, particularly of the “Global South.” Indonesia received good marks for its chairmanship of the G20 in 2022, not least because it was forced to operate in an international environment electrified by the war in Ukraine. In August the BRICS group [announced](#) that it intended to add 20 new members over time; it issued immediate invitations to Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Included in the group of 20 is Indonesia, the only Southeast Asian

country to be considered for membership. Jakarta has requested that an invitation be deferred for two years, citing the need to conduct regional consultations. Those consultations will go beyond other ASEAN states and most importantly include Beijing, New Delhi, and Moscow.

Looking Ahead

The remaining months of 2023 will be an intense time for US diplomacy with Southeast Asia, all the more so because Washington will likely be distracted by US elections in 2024. President Biden's planned trip Vietnam, where the two countries are expected to elevate the bilateral partnership, will raise the US profile in Southeast Asia. However his decision to skip the East Asia Summit in Indonesia will [be](#) viewed as lack of US support for ASEAN and a win for China by default.

The APEC meeting in San Francisco in November and the anticipated release of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework in late 2023 will push Washington to reveal its economic agenda for the region. China's maritime aggression has motivated some Southeast Asian states to strengthen security cooperation with the United States and its allies, but they still seek to balance stronger economic relations with China—Marcos spoke for the region when he underscored the importance of economic security.

The fall months will also clarify the tone for US relations with Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia in the near-term. However, just as Washington will watch for signs of shifting alignments among Southeast Asia's newly-elected or prospective leaders, Southeast Asians will look to US elections in 2024 with an eye to the possibilities for continuity or change.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

MAY—AUGUST 2023

May 1-5, 2023: Philippine President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr., [visits](#) Washington, his first visit to the capital since his father was forced to leave office in 1986.

May 10-12, 2023: Indonesia [hosts](#) the first ASEAN Summit of the year in Labun Bajo. Myanmar is not represented.

May 10, 2023: A flotilla of Chinese vessels [enter](#) Vietnamese waters and loiter in a Russia-Vietnam offshore lease block. A Chinese research vessel moves at a speed appropriate for surveying,

May 14, 2023: Thai general elections [are held](#), with a record turnout of 75.22%. The competing parties cover the political spectrum from the pro-democracy Move Forward Party to two parties —Thai Union and Phalang Pracharat—headed by the organizers of the 2014 coup.

June 2-4, 2023: 20th Asia Security Summit (Shangri-la Dialogue) is held in Singapore. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin [meets](#) on the sidelines with counterparts from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

June 8, 2023: In its capacity as ASEAN chair, Jakarta [announces](#) that the 10 ASEAN states will hold the first-ever ASEAN joint military exercises in the South China Sea in September. The exercises will not include combat operations training and will be held in the North Natuna Sea.

June 16, 2023: Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan [meets](#) US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during his visit to Washington. They discuss US-China relations and US-Singapore environmental cooperation,

including the Green Shipping Challenge which aims to reduce emissions in trade.

June 21, 2023: US Treasury Department [announces](#) new sanctions on Myanmar and designates two regime-controlled banks, Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank (MFTB) and Myanma Investment and Commercial Bank (MKN), both of which have been instrumental in facilitating the military’s use of foreign currency to procure arms and jet fuel abroad.

June 29, 2023: Vietnam Communist Party External Relations Chairman Le Hoai Trung visits Washington and [meets](#) Secretary of State Blinken.

July 13-14, 2023: Secretary of State Blinken [travels](#) to Indonesia, where he participates in the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting and the 30th ASEAN Regional Forum. While in Jakarta he and Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi hold the second US-Indonesia Ministerial Dialogue, discussing supply chains, advancing energy transition, and bilateral cooperation on maritime security and defense.

July 13, 2023: On the margins of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting, China and ASEAN [announced](#) new guidelines for negotiation of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

July 18, 2023: Philippine President Bongbong Marcos [signs](#) into law legislation to create the Philippines’ first sovereign wealth fund, the Maharlika Investment Fund (MIF).

July 23, 2023: Following general elections in Cambodia in which the Cambodian People’s Party won 120 out of 125 seats, the US State Department [said](#) it had “taken steps” to impose visa restrictions “on individuals who

undermined democracy and implemented a pause of foreign assistance programs” after determining the elections were “neither free nor fair.”

July 25, 2023: United States and Vietnam [mark](#) the 10th anniversary of the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership, increasing speculation that the two countries will move to a Strategic Partnership in the near future.

July 31, 2023: State Administrative Council (SAC) on Myanmar [extends](#) the state of emergency for another six months. The first SOE was imposed in the February 2021 coup which overthrew the elected civilian government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD).

Aug. 4, 2023: Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Investment and Maritime Affairs Lahut Binsar Pandjaitan [visits](#) Washington and meets Secretary Blinken to discuss implementation of Indonesia’s Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) and the importance of critical minerals to clean energy.

Aug. 5, 2023: Chinese Coast Guard and maritime militia vessels [use](#) water cannons and other maneuvers to obstruct a Philippine resupply mission to Second Thomas Shoal. The US State Department issues an immediate statement of support for the Philippines.

Aug. 8, 2023: Secretary of Defense Austin and Philippines Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro, Jr., [confer](#) by telephone on recent events in the South China Sea.

Aug. 12, 2023: Malaysia [holds](#) six state elections, which are viewed as a contest of political strength between the government coalition (PH) led by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and the opposition coalition (BN), which includes the Islamist fundamentalist party PAS. As expected, the results are split evenly—each side won three states each—but the PH won their states with a smaller majority than it had previously held, with gains shown by PAS.

Aug. 17, 2023: United States and Philippines [launch](#) inaugural US-Philippines Energy Policy Dialogue, established during Vice President Kamala Harris’ trip to the Philippines in November 2022.

Aug. 22, 2023: After more than three months of political and judicial maneuvering, the Thai parliament [approves](#) nomination of the Pheu Thai Party’s Srettha Thavasin for prime minister. On the same day former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra returns to Thailand after a 15-year self-exile. As there are three criminal charges outstanding against him, Thaksin is taken from the airport to prison, where he is placed in a hospital ward. He faces eight years in detention.

Aug. 22, 2023: Cambodian legislature [approves](#) nomination of Hun Manet, eldest son of former prime minister Hun Sen, as prime minister, marking a generational shift in the dominant Cambodian People’s Party (CPP).

Aug. 23, 2023: US Treasury [expands](#) use of sanctions in Burma to impose penalties on any individual or entity operating in the jet fuel section of the Burmese economy, designating two individuals and three entities involved in procuring and distributing jet fuel to the Burmese military.

Aug. 24, 2023: Secretary of Defense Austin and Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto [issue](#) a joint statement that the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the US Indo-Pacific Strategy have fundamental principles and that Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea are “inconsistent with international law.”

Aug. 24, 2023: BRICS Summit opens in South Africa with the announcement that six nations were [invited](#) to join the group. Indonesia, in the group of 20 countries on track to enter, announced that it would defer decision on entering for two years.

Aug. 28, 2023: China’s Ministry of Natural Resources [issues](#) a “standard” map of the

Indo-Pacific region which reflects Chinese claims to most of the South China Sea as well as disputed areas in India and Russia. Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines make public statements of protest over the map.

Aug. 31, 2023: Thai King Maha Vajiralongkorn [pardons](#) Thaksin and reduces his prison sentence to one year.

PACIFIC FORUM

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA
RELATIONS

CHINA-US RIVALRY VERY MUCH “IN PLAY”: OUTCOME UNCERTAIN

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China’s recently recognized position as Southeast Asia’s leading power faces growing challenges from efforts of the Biden administration to counter Chinese ambitions and advance US regional influence. Beijing has stuck to practices of strong diplomatic engagement, economic enticement and a range of coercive measures that have been broadly successful in the past but seem to have failed badly in the Philippines, now moving into the US orbit.

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Measuring Competition for Regional Leadership

After more than a decade of growing Chinese influence leading to perceived greater dominance in Southeast Asia and gradual US decline, two years of Biden administration activism have increased US influence and challenged China's recent ascendance. Southeast Asia has emerged as the Indo-Pacific sub-region most in play in the acute China-US regional rivalry, with no clear sense of which power will prevail.

An [authoritative study](#) published by the Asia Society providing the findings of deliberations by leading regional and US experts emphasized China's ascendance. A [report](#) by CSIS summarizing the strengths and weaknesses of recent polls about the competition between the US and China in Southeast Asia generally agreed on China's prominence in terms of economic power and to a degree in strategic power, but saw the United States as more popular than China in the region.

Beijing's mix of economic inducements deepening regional dependence often used as leverage to compel Southeast Asian compliance, and its overt and covert use of coercive measures to counter Southeast Asian resistance have proven successful in allowing China to increasingly have its way in the South China Sea disputes and other sensitive matters. China's advantages relative to the United States include common borders and proximity, control of headwaters of major rivers of utmost importance to Southeast Asia, a lasting position as leading trader and largest or second largest source of financing for infrastructure, and Southeast Asian states deeply invested in China while China's investment in ASEAN states grows substantially.

China also influences and controls significant regional transportation, communications, and other infrastructure, and large segments of the ethnic Chinese diaspora and local media. It accommodates corrupt practices by regional leaders. Regional economies often depend on large numbers of Chinese tourists and students, now returning after COVID restrictions.

The Asia Society and CSIS studies cited the Lowy Institute's [Asia Power Snapshot](#) of April 2023

covering Southeast Asian countries, which offered an historical perspective to conclude that in over five years China's influence has soared, largely at the expense of the United States. Nevertheless, the Asia Society report duly assessed US strengths in military networks across the region, strategic counterbalancing against Chinese expansionism, foreign investment, and the large role of US businesses and non-government as well as government cultural and educational exchanges.

Perhaps the most important advantage the United States has in dealing with China's rising influence is the synergy that flows from the Biden administration's coordination of its efforts with those by allies and partners to work with the United States and among themselves and others outside the region to build regional resilience and deter the danger posed by increasing Chinese regional expansionism and dominance. Seemingly reflecting this development in was the Lowy Institute's annual [Asia Power Index 2023](#) covering 22 Indo-Pacific countries including all 10 ASEAN members. The Index was available soon after the release of the Snapshot. It pointed to a surprising pause over the past year in China's rising regional influence and some increase in that of the US. It claimed that China's Economic Capacity—a measure of core economic strength and ability to use the economy to political advantage—is at its lowest level since 2018, with the United States again leading on this measure. It forecast that China will remain second to the US in regional influence for at least the rest of this decade.

Official Chinese media and leadership commentary, along with some international specialists, see ever-stronger negative consequences for Chinese interests from the growing array of US-ally-partner arrangements establishing what the Biden government calls “positions of strength” allowing for more effective efforts to counter adverse Chinese challenges. Australian specialists [advised](#) recently that AUKUS is not just a trilateral Australia, United Kingdom, US agreement involving nuclear-powered submarines, but it

also aims to “transform the Indo-Pacific order” in ways adverse to China’s ambitions. Beijing has long viewed the Quadrilateral dialogue (The Quad) —involving the US, Australia, India, and Japan -- as working actively against Chinese regional interests. Strong Chinese [criticism](#) followed the summit of the Quad leaders in Japan in May. Beijing’s [criticism](#) also took note of the announcement in May of progress of the United States and 13 other countries including several from Southeast Asia in seeking to lessen dependence on China in their supply chains under the rubric of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

Beijing has long attacked the G7 and NATO for their growing involvement in the Indo-Pacific, including Southeast Asia. The G7 summit in Japan in May featured the attendance of eight other countries, two from Southeast Asia (Indonesia and Vietnam) and one from the Pacific Islands (the Cook Islands) representing the Pacific Islands Forum. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson issued a detailed [statement](#) condemning the G7 leaders’ communique criticizing China’s actions over the South China Sea and other issues sensitive to Beijing.



Figure 1 Chinese Defence Minister Li Shangfu salutes the audience before delivering a speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on Sunday. Photo: AFP

Speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June, China’s Defense Minister Li Shangfu rebutted Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin’s complaint about China’s dangerous aerial intercepts of US aircraft over the South China Sea and [warned](#) the

region of US-led “NATO-like alliances in the Asia Pacific.” Official Chinese [commentary](#) was shrill in opposition to the criticism of China at the NATO summit in Lithuania July 11-12. China was particularly critical of the attendance of “the Indo-Pacific Four”—Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea—arguing they were all becoming more active in support of the US “Indo-Pacific Strategy.”

Strident anti-NATO rhetoric overshadowed Chinese [claims](#) of stability in the Asia-Pacific at the ASEAN-led foreign ministers’ meetings in Indonesia July 12-14. Substituting at those meetings for recently appointed and then abruptly removed Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang, China’s Director of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Minister Wang Yi [warned](#) of US-led NATO expansion into Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific. Other official [commentary](#) charged the US was using these measures to promote “containment” of China.

Authoritative Chinese [commentary](#) on the Biden government’s effort to solidify the trilateral US-Japan-South Korea alliances at a remarkable summit meeting at the presidential retreat at Camp David on Aug. 18 saw wide-ranging negative implications for China throughout the Indo-Pacific, including Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. In particular, the summit saw South Korea, an influential power in these areas, increasingly joining with the US and Japan as well as leading NATO powers in countering Chinese expansionism while cooperating in economic and trade measures to counter Beijing’s adverse practices.

Most recently, initial Chinese media commentary [reacted](#) warily to the White House announcement on Aug. 28 that President Biden would visit Vietnam on Sept. 10 amid reports that the two countries would upgrade their relationship.

China’s Regional Leadership

Beijing sustained strong efforts in Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the so-called “Global

South” to portray China as a major source of strategic stability and economic growth with comprehensive global governance plans supportive of interests of developing countries and opposing the United States. Nevertheless, the expected boost in 2023 in Chinese trade with ASEAN and the four other members of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) free trade pact (Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea) failed to materialize. China-ASEAN [two-way trade](#) hit \$447.3 billion in January-June, down 1.5% year-on-year. [Chinese exports](#) to Southeast Asia fell by 21.43% in July compared with a year earlier.

Wang Yi and Chinese official commentary emphasized the positive during the ASEAN-led foreign ministers’ meetings in Jakarta in July. On the sidelines of the China-ASEAN foreign ministers’ meeting on July 13, Wang [echoed](#) Chinese commentary lauding the 20th anniversary of China signing the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the first foreign power to do so. He highlighted building an even closer China-ASEAN community and reaching important common understandings with Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia on what China calls a community with a shared future. He praised the Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia, and asserted that the value of China-ASEAN trade in 2023 was expected to exceed \$1 trillion. He highlighted progress on reaching version 3.0 of a China-ASEAN free trade agreement.

On other matters, negotiations were held in preparation for a new multinational [military exercise Aman Yuyi-2023](#) involving China and five Southeast Asian countries in 2023. China also began construction of a \$10 billion [canal](#) connecting the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region with Southeast Asia.

South China Sea Issues Apart from the Philippines-China Furor

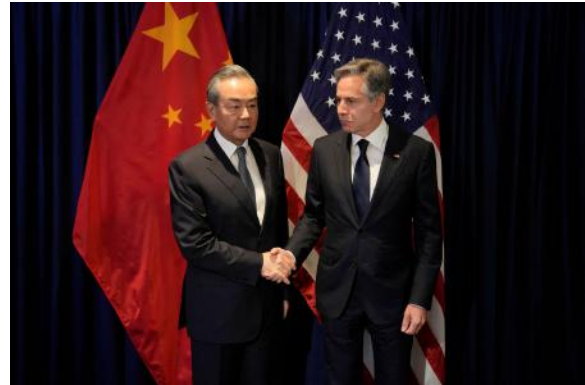


Figure 2 US Secretary of State Antony Blinken shakes hands with Chinese Communist Party's foreign policy chief Wang Yi during their bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Jakarta, Indonesia, Thursday, July 13, 2023. Dita Alangkara/Pool via Reuters

While Chinese media duly reported Wang’s talks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the meetings in Indonesia, they [criticized](#) Blinken’s purported efforts during the sessions to drive a wedge between China and Southeast Asia over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Blinken earlier [criticized](#) China’s refusal to meet with Austin in Singapore or with other senior US military officials to discuss a close mid-air encounter between a US surveillance aircraft and a Chinese jet fighter over the South China Sea on May 26.

At the meetings in Indonesia, Wang Yi [said](#) China welcomes the successful completion of the second reading of the draft text of the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea, supports the guidelines reached in July to accelerate the conclusion of the COC, and stands ready to continue to play a constructive role for an early conclusion of the COC.

In other developments, Indonesia’s defense chief [noted](#) that an agreement was reached with ASEAN counterparts to hold the first ASEAN joint military drills in the South China Sea later in 2023. Vietnam on May 25 [demanded](#) that China’s survey ship and escort vessels leave waters near Vanguard Bank claimed by Vietnam but challenged by China where Vietnam has been carrying out exploration for oil and natural gas. Vietnam also protested China and the

Philippines deploying [buoys](#) in South China Sea areas claimed by all three countries. The CSIS Asia Maritime Initiative [reported](#) a big increase over the past year in governments supporting the July 2016 South China Sea arbitral ruling which voided China's expansive claims to the South China Sea. Since November 2022, 16 governments including India and 15 European countries have moved from positively acknowledging the ruling to fully supporting it as legally binding. Significantly, none of the Philippines' Southeast Asian neighbors have formally endorsed the ruling as binding.

Most recently, the Chinese embassy in Indonesia and official Chinese media [criticized](#) a US Defense Department statement marking Defense Secretary Austin's meeting with Indonesia's defense minister in the United States on Aug. 24 for asserting that the two ministers "shared the view that the People's Republic of China's (PRC) expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea are inconsistent with international law as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea." In rebuttal, the Chinese embassy and supporting media said "We're informed by the Indonesian side that what the US side described is not true." They noted that "no such content can be found in the news release by the Indonesian side at the same meeting."



Figure 3 An undated photo of the amphibious BRP Sierra Madre the Philippines have used as an outpost in the South China Sea. Photo: Jay Directo via Getty Images

As discussed in the Philippines section below, a dramatic confrontation took place on Aug. 5 near the Philippines outpost on Second Thomas

Shoal between large Chinese Coast Guard ships using threatening maneuvers and water cannons to block two much smaller Philippine supply ships seeking to reach the outpost. The incident, [video recorded](#) and released by the Philippines Coast Guard, prompted a barrage of harsh criticism of Chinese coercive behaviour by the Philippines, the United States and their allies and partners, representing a new low in Philippines-China relations and a stronger international effort against Chinese bullying in the South China Sea. Chinese officials and commentary were preoccupied with [defending China's actions](#) in the following weeks.

Philippines Rebuke China's Coercion, Embrace Closer US, Allied Ties

Chinese officials and media commentary in 2023 registered growing concern with the steady decline in relations with the Philippines as President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., while voicing support for good relations with China, markedly strengthened alliance relations with the United States as well as closer ties with Japan and Australia; all were seen by Beijing in strongly negative terms as attempting to contain China. Chinese [criticism](#) of Philippine actions put much of the blame on the United States, though Manila was also seen as willingly joining in perceived anti-China measures for its own reasons. There were repeated warnings of unspecified negative consequences but Chinese [coercion](#) against the Philippines remained covert, notably in swarming maritime militia, coast guard, and naval forces in June to dissuade the Philippines from resuming oil and gas exploitation in the disputed Reed Bank of the South China Sea.

Beijing [criticized](#) Marcos' joint statement with President Biden on May 1, in which the Philippines aligned more closely with US positions opposing China on Taiwan, the war in Ukraine, and the US-Australia-India-Japan Quadrilateral Dialogue. Prominent Chinese South China Sea expert [Wu Shicun](#) saw the "ever deepening US-Philippines security cooperation" as "a main driver of militarization of the South

China Sea.” In a step unwelcome in Beijing, the first-ever quadrilateral defense leaders meeting, involving the Philippines with the United States and fellow US allies Japan and Australia, occurred on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in June.

Beijing did welcome China-friendly visitors to China, notably former Presidents Gloria Arroyo in April and Rodrigo Duterte in July. Xi Jinping [met](#) Duterte, praising his “strategic choice to improve relations with China.” In late June, Duterte [said](#) that the Chinese ambassador in the Philippines told him that the Philippines will be a target of Chinese attack if it allows US forces to use bases in the Philippines to launch military strikes against China.

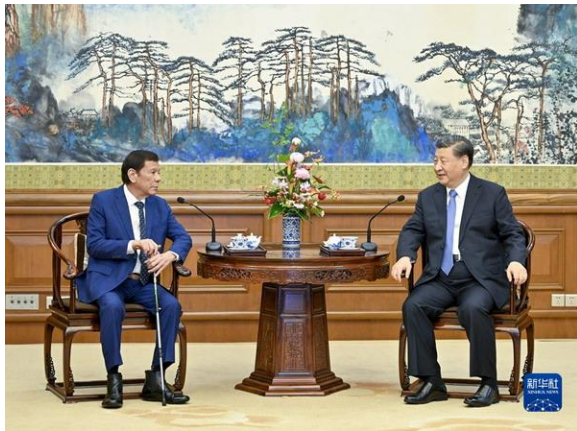


Figure 4 On the afternoon of July 17, 2023, President Xi Jinping met with former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing. Photo: Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America

The Aug. 5 confrontation at Second Thomas Shoal prompted across-the-board condemnations from Philippine foreign policy, coast guard and military leaders with President Marcos leading the pack in putting aside any ambiguity in his stance against China's actions. Marcos strongly [attacked](#) Beijing's argument that the Philippine supply ships were bringing in construction supplies to make permanent the outpost, a long grounded and rusting ship, breaking an agreement to eventually remove the grounded ship. He said there was no such agreement and if there were such an accord he declared it rescinded.

Subsequently, the Philippines Coast Guard [suspended](#) a “hotline” with its Chinese counterpart begun during the Duterte government, arguing “we didn't gain anything from this.” During a meeting with the Vietnamese ambassador, President Marcos [urged](#) discussions on a maritime cooperation agreement with Vietnam. The president also [appointed](#) former foreign minister and now ambassador to Britain and Ireland Teodoro Locsin as the president's “Special envoy” to deal with unspecified “special concerns” with China. Locsin was the most outspoken critic of China's practices in the previous Duterte government.

The US State Department [reacted](#) quickly to “stand with our Philippine allies” and Defense Secretary Austin followed with promises of [“iron-clad” support](#). There were prompt strong statements against China's behavior by Japan, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the UK, and the European Union. Other [reports](#) indicated that recently improved US intelligence sharing with the Philippines had assisted the Philippines in its operations. Philippines Coast Guard observers were ready to create a good quality video of the incident to show to viewers at home and abroad the comparatively tiny supply ship being doused by the much larger Chinese Coast Guard ship.

The resulting outrage in the Philippines put pro-China advocates in the country on the defensive, with a Coast Guard official targeting pro-China Filipinos as [“traitors.”](#) Chinese commentary was also on the defensive, actively attempting to defend Beijing's actions. Frequent Chinese official commentary continued to repeatedly warn Manila of usually unspecified [negative consequences](#) for its alignment with the United States and its allies and partners against China's interests. Wang Yi was sent to Singapore, Malaysia, and Cambodia on Aug. 9 to boost “strategic communication” that focused on giving China's side of the story about the dispute with the Philippines.

It was [disclosed](#) that one of the two Philippine supply ship containing routine supplies for the troops at the outpost was eventually allowed to reach the outpost. The other with construction supplies to reinforce the outpost was turned away, with the reported expectation that it would attempt to reach the outpost in the coming week.

The new supply mission encountered resistance from Chinese Coast Guard vessels and Maritime Militia boats as it approached the outpost on Aug. 22. Over a period of five hours, the Coast Guard ships harassed two supply ships and two accompanying Philippines Coast Guard vessels, surrounding the latter as the small supply ships reached shallow waters and landed at the outpost. Once deliveries were made, all Philippine vessels departed. The prolonged encounter was [publicized](#) by reporters invited to accompany the crew on the Philippines Coast Guard vessels, a step said by the reporters' news items to represent a new strategy by the Philippines government to highlight Beijing's "increasingly aggressive actions in the South China Sea." The reports added that throughout the encounter a US Navy surveillance aircraft flew overhead as the Chinese ships blocked and harassed the Philippine vessels. In response to questions about US involvement, the US Embassy issued a general reassurance that US military activities in the Philippines are conducted "in full coordination with our Philippine allies."

Concurrently, Philippine officials [disclosed](#) on Aug. 20 that exercises by warships involving three aircraft or helicopter carriers from the United States, Japan, and Australia would hold joint drills in the South China Sea near the Philippines, with the commanders meeting Philippine officials after the exercises. As it [turned out](#), the Philippines unexpectedly sent a warship to join the allies in the exercise, a further demonstration of Manila standing with the allies in the face of Chinese intimidation and coercion.

China-Myanmar Relations in the Spotlight Again

Prior to the sudden removal from his post, Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang stepped up his engagement with Myanmar in May. He met Noeleen Heyzer, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Myanmar. Qin expressed China's support to assist Heyzer's mediation efforts, as well as the ongoing ASEAN-led efforts and the region's Five Point Consensus on Myanmar. Qin also shared that "we need to act prudently and pragmatically to prevent escalating tensions and the spillover of the crisis." He added that "more than any other country," China hopes that Myanmar can achieve stability, "as it is a close neighbor."

Following the meeting with Heyzer, Qin visited Ruili, the border town in Yunnan province, and urged local officials to help maintain the stability of China-Myanmar borders. He then proceeded on an official visit to Myanmar, meeting with the junta leaders in the capital of Naypyitaw, the first such meeting since Myanmar's coup in February 2021. The trip comes at a time of growing ASEAN frustration with stalled progress in Myanmar's cooperation on and implementation of the Five Point Consensus. At the same time, international pressure is also mounting as clashes between the junta and resistance groups have become more frequent with increasing levels of violence and civilian deaths. Local media reported that Qin and Myanmar's junta leader Min Aung Hlaing met to discuss the country's political situation as well as cooperation on trade and investment. China's diplomatic approach appears to strengthen its formal ties with the junta, all the while mediating and engaging with the ethnic minority response groups as well. China's special envoy on Myanmar has been in contact with the armed ethnic minority groups along the Chinese border since December in attempts to mediate.

China-Indonesia Summit

Indonesian President Joko Widodo visited Chengdu and met in July with Chinese President Xi Jinping for a bilateral summit. The talks between the two leaders centered on deepening business and trade ties, given the significance of bilateral economic activities. Indonesia's trade data show that two-way exchange stood at \$133.7 billion in 2022. China invested \$8.2 billion last year, making it Indonesia's second-largest foreign investor (after Singapore). Beijing's investment in Indonesia throughout the first half of 2023 amounted to

nearly \$4 billion. The discussion also focused on stepping up cooperation and investment in public health and research and technology in renewable energy. Both sides also inked agreements to exchange knowledge and experience for Indonesia's capital project as it plans to relocate its capital city from the heavily congested Jakarta to Nusantara on Indonesia's Borneo island in 2024.

Singapore Clarifies its Stance Amidst US-China Competition

A recent article [published](#) by the *Washington Post* asserted that the political alignment of *Lianhe Zaobao*, Singapore's largest Chinese-language newspaper, is largely pro-China, prompting Singapore's Ambassador to the United States Lui Tuck Yew to clarify the city-state's position on intensifying US-China competition. The article, published in late July, finds that *Lianhe Zaobao* "routinely echoes some of Beijing's most strident falsehoods, including denying evidence of rights abuses in Xinjiang and alleging that protests in Hong Kong and in mainland China were instigated by 'foreign forces.'"

In Lui's response via a letter to the editor, he [explained](#) that "Singapore's mainstream media, including *Lianhe Zaobao*, reflect our distinct societal concerns, cultural history and perspectives. They report local and global news for Singaporeans and play a crucial role in preserving the voices of our multi-cultural communities." He added that it was "misguided for American news outlets to expect *Zaobao* to resemble the *Washington Post* or for Singapore to follow either the US or China," while emphasizing that Singapore does not pick sides in the rivalry. The statement echoed senior Singaporean leaders' views. Earlier in May, Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, who is widely expected to become the next prime minister, [stated](#) that Singapore "cannot prescribe policy for the US and China;" instead it is a "friend to both China and America, and we want to stay friends with both sides."

Vietnam-China Relations—Warily Cordial

Vietnam's relations with China remained cordial in the wake of Vietnam's top leader General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's visit to Beijing in October, marking the first foreign leader to visit China to personally congratulate Xi Jinping on his success in winning a new five year term at the 20th Chinese Communist Party Congress. And in June, Vietnam's Prime Minister made a four day visit to China. Both sides routinely emphasized their extensive common ground while managing differences without disrupting the regional stability, especially in the South China Sea.

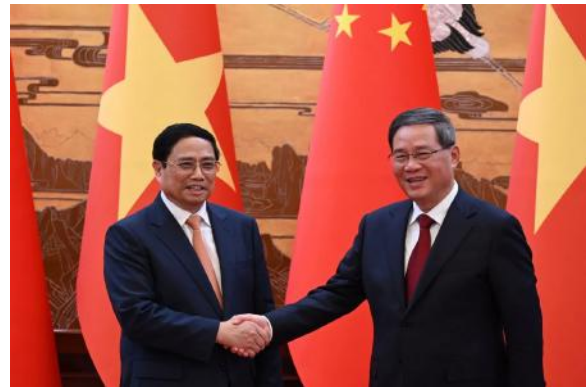


Figure 5 Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh (left) with Chinese Premier Li Qiang in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Monday. Photo: EPA-EFE

Nonetheless, as noted above, Vietnam protested China's dispatch in May-June of a survey ship and escorts to harass Vietnamese-backed oil and gas exploration activities near Vanguard Bank in the disputed South China Sea. China put heavy pressure on Vietnam in the same area five years ago, forcing Vietnam to terminate exploration activities at that time. Vietnam has also shown its independence from China in reaching an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) delimitation [agreement](#) with Indonesia, reflecting their respective claims in the South China which are at odds with China's wide-ranging claim. President Marcos' meeting with the Vietnamese ambassador in August signaled that Manila and Hanoi will start discussions on a maritime cooperation [agreement](#) in hopes of stabilizing tensions in the South China Sea. Marcos reportedly underscored the need for such cooperation as Beijing escalates tensions in the South China Sea.

Vietnam also showed independence from China in [welcoming](#) the US aircraft carrier *Ronald Reagan* to Vietnam after having hosted one of Japan's largest naval combatants. Both ships were exercising in the South China Sea, demonstrating their opposition to Chinese coercive intimidation.

Vietnam's sensitivity regarding China's South China Sea claim showed as Hanoi banned the Hollywood movie *Barbie* because it allegedly portrayed China's nine-dash line claim, which is at odds with Vietnam's claim. The other main disputant of China's claim, the Philippines, did not see the map shown in the movie as grounds for banning the film.

Beijing reacted cautiously to rumors and then final confirmation that President Biden would visit Hanoi on September 10. Initial Chinese [commentary](#) focused on US intentions to use improved relations with Vietnam to increase its regional influence and contain China. [Global Times](#) cited Chinese experts in Chinese government think tanks and universities for the view that the visit will have a "limited impact" on China as Beijing leaders have strong "mutual trust" with their Vietnamese counterparts. The reports took note that the US and Vietnamese leaders might raise their relationship to the level of "strategic partnership" and did not anticipate relations being upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership as was reported by [foreign media](#) on September 2. China has long had a solid position in this highest rung of Vietnam's relationships, with Hanoi recently establishing this status with South Korea and Australia.

Thailand-China Relations—Treading Water

Foreign [assessments](#) often depicted China as having gained influence in relations with Thailand at the expense of the United States over the past decade of Thai military rule and partial return to civilian leadership. Official Chinese commentary duly noted that the surprise victory of the newly formed Move Forward Party and its Harvard- and

MIT-educated leader Pita Limjaroenrat in the general elections in May might lead to a [change](#) and some turn away from China.

China [remained](#) Thailand's largest trading partner with trade in 2022 valued at \$107 billion, representing 18% of Thailand's total trade. China was also the top investor with \$2.3 billion invested in Thai industries in 2022. Despite the longstanding US alliance with Thailand and its large-scale signature military exercise *Cobra Gold*, China has markedly increased military ties with Thailand. It has surpassed the United States as the [primary supplier](#) of military equipment to the country.

Against this background, official Chinese media have reported generally without comment what has turned out to be a prolonged process in approving a new government after elections in May. Chinese commentary only recently raised [complaints](#) about the negative economic costs for Thai businesses and foreign businesses working in Thailand because a government has not yet been approved. In the end, [China Daily](#) noted controversy surrounding the selection of the new prime minister but judged his government could now fill the vacuum of government leadership that has complicated economic development.

Cambodia-China Relations—Uninterrupted Progress

The government leadership transition in August from long-serving Prime Minister Hun Sen to his eldest son Hun Manet prompted nothing but effusive official Chinese commentary depicting ever-stronger economic, military, and political relations. Chinese media focused on major projects done under the rubric of the Belt and Road Initiative, while [foreign coverage](#) added that China's military base in Cambodia is nearing completion. Chinese [commentary](#) duly noted the new prime minister's undergraduate studies at West Point and a PhD in economics from a university in England, but it averred that the deeply rooted Sino-Cambodia cooperation seen for over two decades will advance smoothly. Beijing media relied on none other

than [Hun Sen himself](#) to write the most important commentary marking the leadership transition. It advised that the former prime minister will remain actively involved in policy making as leader of the country's ruling political party.

Relations with New Zealand and the Pacific Islands

Chinese advances in this reporting period included the visit to Beijing of the prime minister of New Zealand in June and the prime minister of the Solomon Islands in July. In power since January, Prime Minister Chris Hipkins adopted a [public posture](#) notably less critical of China than previous New Zealand prime minister and also less critical than the United States and its other allies and partners. Beijing appreciated the new leader's emphasis on advancing economic relations while playing down differences. How far this moderation will go remained to be seen as concurrent New Zealand strategy documents sustained a tougher approach to Chinese behavior more in line with US policies.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare's [China visit](#) featured an upgrading of relations to a "comprehensive strategic partnership," with Xi Jinping promising deeper cooperation in all areas of the relationship. Beijing media praised Sogavare for resisting the "constant pressure" from the United States and Australia particularly regarding a security agreement the country signed with China in 2022. It noted that one of the new agreements signed during the visit involved "deepening police cooperation" with China.

In the process of criticizing US policy in the Pacific Islands, Chinese [commentary](#) underlined impressive US activism over the past year. It adopted a low-key posture, maintaining that Beijing is not interested in engaging in a geopolitical contest with the United States in the Pacific Islands region. The defense pact with Papua New Guinea signed in May was said to give the US military access to the country's ports and airports. Renewed US security related pacts

with Palau, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands were noted as was Secretary of State Blinken's meeting with representatives of 14 Pacific Island countries when visiting the region in May. Other US [advances](#) included a deal with Papua New Guinea, allowing the US Coast Guard to board the country's ships to help patrol for illegal fishing, with Chinese fleets as a leading target. Micronesia and Palau are expected to go forward with plans for the United States to build military bases on their territories.

Another advantage the US has is close relations with Australia and New Zealand, both members of the Pacific Islands Forum, the region's leading decision-making group. Both have been active in security matters in the Solomon Islands, with Australia also active in Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and Kiribati.

Outlook

Beijing depicts a pattern of US initiatives challenging China's position in the region as having momentum and likely to continue during the Biden administration. The ASEAN summit and the G20 gathering in September are two platforms where US-China competition will likely take center stage yet again. Among uncertainties going forward is China's capacity for effective responses in these venues and American resolve given Biden's continued mediocre public approval ratings and the prospect that Donald Trump will win the 2024 election with an America First platform that could complicate and weaken US alliances and partnerships.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

MAY—AUGUST 2023

May 1, 2023: Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang [meets](#) UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Myanmar, Noeleen Heyzer, in Beijing. Qin reiterates China's position to respect Myanmar's sovereignty and that China is willing to provide support to ASEAN and UN's mediation efforts.

May 2, 2023: Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang [visits](#) the China-Myanmar border areas in southwestern Yunnan province. Qin calls for local authorities in the border town of Ruili to maintain friendly cooperation with Myanmar.

May 17, 2023: Chinese Premier Li Qiang meets Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong in Beijing. The two sides [discuss](#) furthering bilateral cooperation in such areas as energy, digitalization, sustainability, and increasing people-to-people exchanges.

June 2, 2023: China and Singapore defense establishments [agree](#) to set up a secure, bilateral hotline to strengthen high-level communication between their defense leaders.

June 13, 2023: Eurasia Group [reports](#) on new survey results regarding Asia's views on US and China's influence in the region. The survey of 1,500 adults from Singapore, South Korea, and the Philippines finds that Singaporeans are less worried about rising great power tensions and have a more balanced view of US-China competition, compared to others. Most respondents across the three countries have a positive view of US influence, with Singaporeans being more evenly divided: 63% of those surveyed think China's influence has been positive, while 64% think the same of the United States.

June 22, 2023: Indonesia, host of ASEAN's first-ever joint military drills in the South China Sea due in late September, [announces](#) that it will move the location of the regional exercise to the South Natuna Sea, closer to Indonesian waters.

July 8, 2023: Philippine military [raises](#) concerns about the increasing presence of Chinese coast guard ships and militia vessels in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone, specifically near Sabina Shoal, Second Thomas Shoal, and the Reed Bank. The Philippines' air surveillance missions also report that Chinese coast guard vessels are shadowing and firing water cannons at the Philippine coast guard ships escorting boats on a resupply mission for Philippine naval soldiers stationed in the Second Thomas Shoal.

July 10-14, 2023: Southeast Asian foreign ministers [convene](#) in Jakarta for the region's semi-annual meeting and for their meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. ASEAN and China agree on the "Guidelines for Accelerating the Early Conclusion of an Effective and Substantive Code of Conduct" to expedite the negotiations. In addition, ASEAN and Chinese diplomats engage in discussions to more fully implement the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a trade deal involving 15 countries in the region.

July 28, 2023: Chinese President Xi Jinping [meets](#) Indonesian President Joko Widodo in Chengdu. Both leaders agree to enhance bilateral cooperation in the areas of public health, research and technology, as well as regional security and development.

Aug. 10-13, 2023: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi is on a four-day, three-country visit to Southeast Asia that includes Singapore,

Malaysia, and Cambodia. The tour [signals](#) China's intention to shore up diplomatic relations and deepen engagement with Southeast Asia. In Singapore, Wang's meetings and discussion with Singapore's leaders conclude with Singapore's in-principle support for China's interest in joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Aug. 29, 2023: China's People's Liberation Army Southern Theater Command and the Singapore Armed Forces announce that they will [conduct](#) "Exercise Cooperation," a two-week joint exercise that will commence in mid-September and focus on tactical training, and small arms live firing, among other activities.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

CHINA-TAIWAN
RELATIONS

STARK CHOICES CONFRONT TAIWAN VOTERS

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Taiwan's presidential election campaign has begun. Lai Ching-te, Taiwan's vice president and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate, Hou Yu-ih from the Nationalist (Kuomintang, or KMT) Party, Ko Wen-je of Taiwan People's Party (TPP), and independent Terry Gou offer Taiwan voters four different visions of Taiwan's future relationship with China. As senior US and Chinese officials resumed long-stalled face-to-face meetings, China warned once again that it has no room for compromise or concession on Taiwan. Yet, when Lai completed almost invisible transits through the US en route to Paraguay and back, China's military response seemed almost pro-forma. When US, Japanese, and South Korean leaders reiterated at the trilateral Camp David summit their staunch opposition to China's intimidation, China chose to interpret their words as one more promise to support Taiwan. The US accelerated weapons deliveries to Taiwan and expanded training for Taiwan's military, and Taiwan announced that its defense budget will increase by 7.5% in 2024. Taiwan's TSMC moved forward on constructing its Arizona factory despite some hiccups, and the US and Taiwan signed a long-awaited trade deal—the first part of their 21st Century Trade Initiative.

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As Taiwan's presidential and legislative election campaigns enter the home stretch, the DPP's Lai continues to lead the race. How will Beijing respond? Will Taiwan voters choose caution and vote for the KMT, or will they again interpret Chinese intimidation as one more reason to give four more years to the DPP with its insistence on de-facto independence?

And Now There Are Four

Our four-month reporting period has seen four candidates join the race to be president of the Republic of China. Their sharply contrasting platforms and party postures toward China and cross-Strait issues mean that the election on Jan. 13, 2024, will set Taiwan's approach for the next four years.

First out of the gate was incumbent Vice President William Lai Ching-te, designated successor of President Tsai Ing-wen, who was confirmed by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as its presidential candidate on April 12. All political commentators immediately focused on [Lai's description of himself](#) as "a politician who supports Taiwanese independence." Would Lai take the step that divides Taiwan political opinion like no other? Would he declare Taiwan independence and risk a Chinese invasion? Lai sought to undercut this concern by saying that there was no reason to declare independence because Taiwan, as the Republic of China, was already independent. In making this assertion, Lai was repeating Tsai's approach, [articulated](#) in her first inaugural address in May 2016—"I was elected President in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of China, thus it is my responsibility to safeguard the sovereignty and territory of the Republic of China." [Lai set off alarm bells](#) when he told an audience in Taiwan in early July that his goal was an independent Taiwan formally recognized by others including the US: "when a Taiwan president can walk into the White House, we have achieved the political goal that we are pursuing." This language seemed to suggest that Lai might upend the cross-Strait status quo and the balancing act that the US has maintained since 1979.



Figure 1 Current Taiwanese VP and DPP candidate Lai Ching-te maintains the lead in 2024 election polls. Photo: CNA

Lai's repeated emphasis on Taiwan independence worried officials in Beijing. [China's Taiwan Affairs Office said](#) that the DPP's talk of "Taiwan independence" was the real source of war anxiety among the Taiwan people, and it disqualifies them from talking of peace. Lai, despite occasional rhetorical flourishes, appears to be carefully using a formulation that President Tsai has made familiar, as had Taiwan presidents before her—that the Republic of China has never been subordinate to the People's Republic of China and is independent—but he is upending it. This formulation sounds very much like a one-China formulation that is secondarily an independence formulation. Lai has reversed the emphasis. Taiwan is independent, and secondarily it is called the Republic of China. Taiwan's independence is no longer tied to a one-China framework. While making this shift, Lai has insisted that he will adhere rigorously to Tsai's disciplined cross-Strait approach, even retaining her national security team. By doing this he has signaled that he will seek to continue Tsai's policies that the US has welcomed as "responsible."

On May 17, the KMT nominated Hou Yu-ih as its presidential candidate, citing poll data to support its assessment that Hou has a better chance of defeating Lai than Terry Gou, who had also sought the KMT nod. Even before the nomination was final, Hou found himself trying to articulate a sustainable cross-Strait position that could bridge differences among KMT factions. According to his campaign advisor, King Pu-tsong, [Hou's policy boils down](#) to

“three if’s”: support the 1992 Consensus if it accords with the ROC constitution; return military conscription to four months from the one-year period announced by President Tsai if the cross-Strait situation is stable; and finish the fourth nuclear power plant if it can be done safely. Hou’s attempt to present those highly qualified positions in a TV interview with KMT stalwart and television personality Jaw Shaw-kong left many feeling that Hou was muddled. During a trip to Japan at the beginning of August, Hou said he would [return to the “three no’s”](#) advocated by former President Ma Ying-jeou—“no unification, no independence, and no use of force.” Hou promised he would seek to be a “risk reducer” as president. Thus far, Hou has done little to clarify the confusion, and his standing in the polls has drifted lower.

Former Taipei City Mayor Ko Wen-je was also confirmed on May 17 as the presidential candidate of the Taiwan People’s Party he created. He promised that he would seek “harmony, reconciliation, and peace” as president although he has offered few details about how he would do that beyond insisting that he will bring the same pragmatism to cross-Strait relations that he applied during his two terms as Taipei mayor. He has promised to eschew the rhetorical posturing that he argues has characterized the DPP and KMT approaches toward China.

The last to throw his hat into the ring, on Aug. 28, was Terry Gou (Guo Tai-ming), the founder of Foxconn, who had competed in the spring to win the KMT presidential nod, only to be told by KMT party chairman Eric Chu Li-lun that party polling indicated he was less likely to win than Hou Yu-ih. Gou had promised to support whomever the KMT selected, but he made no secret of his opinion that Chu’s choice of his protégé, whom Chu had groomed to replace him as mayor of Greater Taipei, was unfair. Announcing his independent candidacy for president on Aug. 28, [Gou promised](#) to make Taiwan a center of regional prosperity and saying that, like the youngest of the three little pigs, he would build Taiwan’s house of sturdy bricks that the (China) wolf could not blow down, although he has yet to give any indication of the bricks he might use.

Lai Manages Transit Politics

Shortly after Lai’s remarks about entering the White House, [Taiwan’s Foreign Ministry](#)

[announced](#) that Lai would attend the inauguration of the new president of Paraguay, one of Taiwan’s few remaining allies, in early August. This would enable Lai to visit the US under the guise of a transit, a visit Lai would otherwise be unable to make as Taiwan’s vice president. [The US insisted](#) that Lai’s transit was in accordance with previous Taiwan transits, that the US would not interfere in Taiwan’s elections, and that it expected China to show the same restraint. China’s new ambassador to Washington, Xie Feng, announced that China’s priority was to stop Lai’s transit. Why Xie chose to set himself a task at which he was sure to fail is unclear. Speculation swirled as to whether Lai and the DPP would seek some upgraded treatment by the US during his transit, perhaps a stop near Washington. Would the US seek to downgrade Lai’s treatment to signal its discomfort with Lai’s position on independence?

Lai’s two stops—in New York City on Aug. 13-14 and in San Francisco on Aug. 16—proved to be low-key, without any contact with US government officials. Lai’s remarks at welcome banquets in both cities emphasized Taiwan and his commitment to democracy, peace, and stability, as he thanked the United States and the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), the unofficial US representative to Taiwan, for their support. Perhaps because the chairperson of AIT, Laura Rosenberger, who met with Lai in San Francisco, had been the senior China director at the National Security Council until she became AIT chairperson on March 1, both sides were comfortable that the White House and NSC could use the AIT channel to have a dialogue with Lai.

Lai’s transits appeared to thread the needle exactly as the DPP might have wished. His treatment by the US was respectful, his response was grateful, and it appeared that the two sides had worked cooperatively on the transit. This cooperation may help to persuade the US that it could work with Lai if he is elected president next January, although US doubts will remain and Washington officials will be monitoring his every word.

China had warned it would respond to a Lai transit with military activity around Taiwan. The day before Lai departed Taipei for his trip, [China announced](#) it would conduct military drills in the East China Sea overlapping his stop in New York, although press reports from

Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense indicated there was no noticeable uptick in aircraft or ships from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) operating near Taiwan on those days. During his return stop in San Francisco, the [PLA's Eastern Theater Command released](#) a video showing the readiness of PLA forces to respond to Lai's successionist attitudes and stops in the US. The numbers of PLA aircraft and ships near Taiwan on Aug. 19 spiked to multi-month highs as Lai returned to Taiwan—45 aircraft near Taiwan, 27 crossing the Taiwan Strait median line, and nine naval vessels in the vicinity. Overall, however, China's military response seemed muted, especially when compared to its response to the visit to Taiwan by Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi a year earlier, and it was not entirely clear whether the PLA military signaling was in response to Lai's travel or to the trilateral Camp David summit happening at the same time.

Blinken's Beijing Visit Shaped by US-China Discord over Taiwan

Antony Blinken traveled to Beijing in mid-June, the first visit by a US Secretary of State to China in five years. Blinken's visit came soon after a PLA Navy ship cut immediately in front of a US destroyer transiting the Taiwan Strait and the US and Taiwan signed a trade agreement that irked Beijing.



Figure 2 US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (L) shakes hands with China's President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on June 19, 2023. Leah Millis | AFP | Getty Images

According to US officials, Taiwan received more time than any other topic during Blinken's consecutive meetings with Foreign Minister Qin Gang and Director of the CCP's Central Foreign Affairs Office Wang Yi. Qin [told](#) Blinken that Taiwan is the "core of China's core interests" and warned about this "pronounced risk" getting out of hand. Wang [took](#) a more lecturing

tack, having "specially analyzed" the Taiwan question for his US counterpart and saying "China has no room for compromise or concession." Blinken [emphasized](#) the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and said the US's longstanding One China policy has not changed.

Blinken's visit to Beijing did very little to smooth over US-China disagreements over Taiwan, but it did afford a more in-depth airing of views beyond *ad hoc* phone calls and side meetings at international summits. Blinken's visit also helped to re-open communication channels between Washington and Beijing, enabling tensions in and around the Taiwan Strait to be discussed more frequently by officials within the two governments.

Taiwan and China Issue Front and Center at Camp David Summit

At the conclusion of their trilateral summit on July 18, Japan's Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, the Republic of Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol, and President Biden [announced the Camp David Principles](#), which included "we strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the waters of the Indo-Pacific...We reaffirm the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community. There is no change in our basic positions on Taiwan, and we call for a peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues." Their language clearly tied China's efforts to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait to its broader infringement on the regional status quo. If there were any doubt that China was a principle focus of the leaders' concerns, the vehement response of the Chinese government and official media dispelled it. [China's Foreign Ministry spokesman said](#) that the three leaders "smeared and attacked China on Taiwan-related and maritime issues."



Figure 3 South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, left, speaks during a joint news conference with President Joe Biden, center, and Japan's Prime Minister Kishida Fumio on Friday, Aug. 18, 2023, at Camp David, the presidential retreat, near Thurmont, MD. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

This trilateral summit took place shortly after Japan [issued its 2023 Defense White Paper](#), which said that the military balance between China and Taiwan is “rapidly tilting in China’s favor” and that “the overall international community’s concerns [about China’s threats to Taiwan] are rapidly increasing.” Former Japanese Prime Minister [Aso Taro echoed those concerns](#) during a speech in Taipei on Aug. 8. Aso said that Japan, the United States, and other likeminded countries must make it clear that they would be prepared to go to war to defend Taiwan in order to deter a Chinese invasion.

US Arms Transfers to Taiwan Have Novel Adjustments

On June 28, President Biden [authorized](#) the transfer of weapons from US stockpiles to Taiwan. This use of presidential drawdown authority, a mechanism used by the Biden administration to rush arms to Ukraine, will ensure the selected weapons reach Taiwan on a much faster timeline than under conventional arms sales. Biden’s directive does not specify which weapons systems are to be delivered to Taiwan but caps the total amount at \$345 million. Delays in US weapons deliveries to Taiwan under the Foreign Military Sales process and increasing Congressional pressure to shore up Taiwan’s defenses likely weighed on Biden’s decision to use this fast-track tool generally reserved for US allies and partners in an active military crisis. The FY 2023 NDAA, for instance, authorized \$1 billion in weapons transfers to Taiwan using presidential drawdown authority.

In another unprecedented step, the Biden administration informed Congress in late August it would [make \\$80 million available](#) for Taiwan to purchase US weapons. It was not immediately clear whether this aid, known as Foreign Military Financing, would take the form of grants or repayable loans. The latter appears more likely in the absence of a Congressional appropriation. In its letter to Congress, the State Department identified a long list of potential uses for the aid spanning missile and cyber defenses, drones, ammunition, protective gear, and military training. This suggests the Biden administration is foremost seeking to establish a precedent for providing financial support for Taiwan’s military over particular uses for the \$80 million.

The Biden administration also authorized three Taiwan arms sales during this reporting period. In a routine move, the State Department greenlit two sales on June 29, [one](#) for ammunition rounds and the [other](#) a support package to sustain the lifespan of vehicles and munitions. Of much greater significance, the Biden administration on Aug. 23 [approved](#) the sale of infrared tracking systems for Taiwan’s F-16 fighter jets, a sale valued at \$500 million. This technology will allow the Taiwan air force to search and monitor PLA aircraft without needing to activate radar. Some observers view this particular arms sale as possible evidence that the Biden administration has softened its stance of only approving weapons needed to deter a PLA invasion, as it upgrades a capability to counter gray-zone challenges.

The US is also reportedly [expanding training](#) for Taiwan army battalions in the US and will [establish a joint training unit](#) located at AIT Taipei, but subordinated to the US Pacific Command, which could substantially increase AIT’s ability to support the growing range of complex US systems, which Taiwan is acquiring. In part to support those acquisitions, Taiwan’s Cabinet announced it would seek to [increase Taiwan’s military spending](#) for 2024 by 3.5% to \$19 billion. With additional spending for major new weapons systems, that budget may go higher still.

Semiconductors Pose Increasing Test for US-Taiwan Ties

According to media reports, the Biden administration will permit TSMC to continue installing chipmaking equipment at its plant in

China beyond October. TSMC's current waiver was due to expire on Oct. 7, the one-year anniversary of the US Commerce Department's restrictions on the transfer of US chip manufacturing technology and knowhow to China. Washington has yet to announce whether TSMC's waiver will be extended for another year or longer. While this move avoids upsetting TSMC as it seeks further expansion of its Nanjing plant, some see it as diluting the effectiveness of the export controls.

In Arizona, construction of TSMC's \$40 billion semiconductor factory has run into challenges, causing the company to delay the scheduled opening in late 2024 of its semiconductor fabrication factory, or fab. Various media reports have cited worker shortages, higher than expected construction costs, and even safety concerns. TSMC is seeking to bring in 500 engineers and workers from Taiwan to address some of the challenges and has requested accelerated visa approvals from the US government. According to the company, Americans with the requisite technical skillsets have been difficult to find. Some local voices in Arizona dispute this assertion and worry employment opportunities will be undermined. With TSMC's plant serving as the major showpiece of its campaign to revitalize U.S chip production, the Biden administration will likely seek to smooth over these frictions.

The US and Taiwan are looking for other ways to strengthen synergy and cooperation in semiconductors. In late May, the US-Taiwan Science and Technology Cooperation Dialogue (STCD) held its inaugural meeting of scientists and technology developers in Taipei, with a key pillar being semiconductor research and advanced applications. Members of the US Congress also introduced [legislation](#) in May to advance a US-Taiwan agreement that would provide relief from double taxation for Taiwan investors in the US and US investors in Taiwan, an idea discussed for several years but which has gained more currency recently because it could incentivize Taiwan semiconductor companies to invest in the United States.

Washington and Taipei Clinch First-Ever Trade Agreement

After six months of intensive negotiations, [Washington and Taipei signed](#) an 80-page agreement on June 1, the first half of the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade.

Although tariff reductions are not included, the agreement contains substantial provisions on streamlined customs procedures and regulatory best practices that will help to facilitate bilateral trade, if only marginally. For Taiwan this is a major step forward in its efforts over many years to secure a trade deal with its major economic and security partner. PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning [called](#) the agreement a violation of the three US-China joint communiqués because it implies official relations between the US and Taiwan.



Figure 4 A demonstrator holds flags of Taiwan and the United States in support of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen during a stop-over after her visit to Latin America in Burlingame, California, on Jan. 14, 2017. Reuters/Stephen Lam

The US Congress, while strongly supportive of trade negotiations with Taiwan, felt the Biden administration did not properly seek its input on this agreement and, as a result, [crafted legislation](#) to require greater consultation from USTR under future trade negotiations. In a further assertion of its authority over trade policy, Congress also made sure to give *ex post facto* approval to the trade deal signed on June 1. The Senate promptly sent this piece of legislation, Initiative on 21st-Century Trade First Agreement Implementation Act, to Biden's desk in early August. Biden signed the bill on Aug. 7, even though the White House [chafed](#) at some of the transparency requirements. Now codified in US law, the 21st Century Trade Initiative and its agreements will enjoy stronger durability. US and Taiwan trade negotiators have already pivoted to addressing other components of the trade initiative, with an in-person negotiating round held on Aug. 14-18.

Looking Ahead—The Campaign Sets the Agenda

Over the next four months, Taiwan's presidential election campaign will likely dominate Taiwan-China relations. In mid-September, KMT candidate Hou Yu-ih will visit the US for what has become an obligatory stop for presidential candidates. As President Tsai's stops in Washington during her 2012 and 2016 campaigns demonstrated, any signal from the US—direct, indirect, or simply inferred—can have a real impact on a candidate's prospects. Hou will tread carefully, and US officials will likely avoid any comments that might be misread by the Taiwan electorate. Whether US media and China watchers will be as cautious is less certain.

As of late August, public opinion surveys indicated that DPP presidential hopeful Lai Ching-te maintains a double-digit lead over his opponents and that Lai's lead has been strengthened by Terry Gou's entry into the race. At the same time, Lai faces headwinds as the campaign heads into the home stretch. Those same opinion surveys indicate that, although voters favor Lai, they may hesitate to give his party the same control over Taiwan's executive branch and legislative Yuan that Tsai enjoyed. Does that indirectly reflect concerns about Lai or Tsai that may cost him votes in the presidential balloting? The KMT suggested that it may introduce its platform for Hou in October, perhaps enabling the candidate to offer a clearer vision of his campaign priorities. If Lai continues to hold his current lead as the election approaches, will Hou, Ko, and Gou regroup and combine their efforts? Since none of them have announced their vice presidential running mates, perhaps one of them will take the second slot to strengthen their challenge to the front runner, a move Beijing would likely welcome. Will voters blame the incumbent DPP for Taiwan's flagging export economy, which is feeling the effects of the global slowdown? Lai's final headwind, or perhaps a tailwind, may come from Beijing. The Communist Party has made clear its discomfort with the DPP candidate, and perhaps it will take overt or covert steps to weaken his campaign. If they do, will it backfire, as Xi's Jan. 1, 2019 speech did so famously, resuscitating Tsai Ing-wen's then-flagging reelection bid? Looking beyond the election, is Beijing preparing to intensify its coercion of Taiwan should Lai win, as seems likely?

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

MAY—AUGUST 2023

May 1, 2023: US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) [announces sale](#) of two MQ-9B unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and associated equipment with a value of \$217.6 million.

May 2, 2023: Paraguay President-elect Santiago Pena pledges to strengthen ties with Taiwan.

May 3, 2023: Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) announces it will receive the first delivery of F-16Vs almost a year later than scheduled.

May 4, 2023: Multinational [companies add China-Taiwan risk clauses](#) to contracts as tensions rise.

May 4, 2023: China's [Global Times announces](#) that People's Liberation Army (PLA) drones have circled Taiwan.

May 6, 2023: [Warren Buffet says](#) the threat of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan makes him prefer investment in Japan.

May 10, 2023: Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio says peace in the Taiwan Strait concerns both Japan and the entire international community.

May 11, 2023: Taiwan MND announces it will begin receiving US High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) M142 launchers in 2026, a year earlier than originally scheduled.

May 11, 2023: Head of the Communist Party's Taiwan Work Office [Song Tao met](#) Sean Lien, vice chair of Taiwan's Nationalist (Kuomintang, KMT) party in Xi'an.

May 17, 2023: KMT nominates Hou Yu-ih, second-term mayor of New Taipei City, as its candidate for president.

May 17, 2023: Taiwan People's Party nominates its founder and former Taipei City Mayor Ko Wen-je as its candidate for president.

May 24, 2023: US House of Representatives Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party issues "Ten for Taiwan: Policy Recommendations to Preserve Peace and Stability in the Taiwan Strait."

June 1, 2023: Taiwan and the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) [sign the first agreement](#) under the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade.

June 8, 2023: Ministry of Finance (MOF) said on Wednesday that [Taiwanese exports fell](#) for the ninth consecutive month in May, down 14.1% from a year earlier to \$36.13 billion.

June 8, 2023: *Financial Times* reports that the [US to link up with Taiwan and Japan drones](#) to share real-time data.

June 10, 2023: Taiwan's KMT party announces that Vice Chair Andrew Hsia will lead a delegation to the China-organized Straits Forum in Fujian.

June 27, 2023: Taiwan's [unemployment rate fell](#) to 3.46% in May, the lowest in the month of May since 2000 according to data released by Taiwan's Directorate General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics (DGBAS).

July 4, 2023: Taiwan Vice President and Democratic Progressive Party candidate for president [Lai Ching-te, publishes an opinion](#)

[column](#) in the *Wall Street Journal* promising to defend Taiwan's democracy against Chinese coercion.

July 4, 2023: A spokesman for China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) [welcomes](#) Hou Yu-ih's statement the previous day that he will support the 1992 Consensus.

July 5, 2023: Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) announces it will open a new representative office in Mumbai, India.

July 6, 2023: President Tsai Ing-wen makes a very unusual appearance at the US July 4 celebration hosted by the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT). All three of the then declared presidential candidates—Lai Ching-te, Hou Yu-ih, and Ko Wen-je—also attended.

July 15, 2023: A group of 37 Chinese university students and faculty arrive in Taiwan for a nine-day exchange program hosted by former President Ma Ying-jeou's foundation.

July 18, 2023: Liu Pengyu, spokesman for the PRC embassy in Washington [responds to Lai Ching-te's op-ed](#) in the *Wall Street Journal*, saying "The DPP's attempt to sell out Taiwan is despicable. Seeking independence is doomed to fail."

July 24, 2023: Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Officer (TECRO) in Washington [responds to the PRC Embassy's criticism](#) of Taiwan Vice President Lai Ching-te's opinion column in the *Wall Street Journal*, saying "Beijing's diplomats, who have never voted in a free and fair election, have no grounds to criticize the democratic system that the Taiwanese people cherish."

July 27, 2023: Taiwan businessman [Lee Meng-chu leaves China](#) after completing a prison term for "activities endangering national security."

Aug. 7, 2023: President Biden signs legislation approving US-Taiwan trade agreement.

Aug. 8, 2023: Taiwan's TSMC approves an investment of up to \$3.83 billion to establish a semiconductor fabrication plant in Dresden, Germany.

Aug. 10, 2023: Lloyds of London is reported to be [tightening coverage requirements](#) for insurance on trade with Taiwan.

Aug. 13, 2023: Taiwan Vice President Lai Ching-te lands in New York transiting en route to Paraguay.

Aug. 16, 2023: Lai Ching-te lands in San Francisco, transiting en route from Paraguay back to Taipei.

Aug. 21, 2023: Chinese customs suspends the import of mangoes from Taiwan, saying it had detected pests on the fruit. Taiwan announces it will challenge the ban at the World Trade Organization Phytosanitary Measures Committee.

Aug. 21, 2023: Central American parliament expels Taiwan, replacing it with China at the behest of Nicaragua, which switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in December 2021.

Aug. 28, 2023: Terry Gou (Guo Tai-ming), founder of the iPhone manufacturer Foxconn, declares he is a candidate for president of Taiwan.

Aug. 30, 2023: KMT Taipei City Mayor Chiang wan-an visits Shanghai to participate in the Taipei-Shanghai City Forum

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RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

IN BOTH PYONGYANG AND SEOUL, AN OMINOUS HARDENING

AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

In mid-2023, the (non-existent) relations between the two Koreas got even worse, if that were possible. Confronting enlarged US-ROK military exercises, and the first visit of a US nuclear-armed submarine to the peninsula since 1981, Pyongyang's nuclear threats grew ever more frenzied. In Seoul, President Yoon Suk Yeol institutionalized his hard line by downsizing and repurposing the Ministry of Unification (MOU). Criticizing MOU for acting in the past as a support department for North Korea, Yoon evidently conceives its future role as being to hinder Kim Jong Un's regime—publicizing its human rights abuses, for instance—rather than help. Much as the DPRK's ever-expanding WMD threat requires robust deterrence, for Seoul to start emulating Pyongyang's unalloyed hostility hardly seems conducive to peace. The period under review also saw two attempts by North Korea to put a spy satellite into orbit; both failed. By contrast, the North's missile launches hardly ever go wrong these days. The large solid-fuel *Hwasong-18* ICBM, with a 15,000-km (9,300-mile) range, which first flew in April, had a second successful test on July 12.

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Two Failed DPRK Satellite Launches; ROK Retrieves Debris

While North Korean missile launches are now routine and nearly always successful, its space program is a different matter. Just how different is in one sense a matter of dispute. Whereas Pyongyang indignantly maintains its right to launch satellites, the international community's view is that a big rocket is a big rocket, and as such dual-use. Hence UN Security Council resolutions have censured and banned DPRK space launches, viewing these as tantamount to ballistic missile (BM) tests. Not that the Kim regime takes the slightest notice in either case.

It is said of London buses that you wait for ages, and then two come at once. Similarly, after a long hiatus—plus some preliminary related tests, as discussed here earlier—the period under review brought not one but two attempts by North Korea to place a military reconnaissance satellite in orbit. To Seoul's relief and Pyongyang's embarrassment, both launches failed—as the North promptly admitted, with uncharacteristic honesty and transparency. (In the past it had sometimes [claimed](#) to have placed satellites in orbit, oddly undetectable by anyone else.)

On May 31, the official *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA) [reported](#) that the National Aerospace Development Administration (NADA) had launched a military reconnaissance satellite, “*Malligyong-1*,” mounted on a new-type carrier rocket, “*Chollima-1*,” at the Sohae Satellite Launching Ground in Cholsan County of North Phyongan Province at 0627. (So much detail!) However, the rocket fell into the West Sea of Korea (the Yellow Sea) “after losing thrust due to the abnormal starting of the second-stage engine after the separation of the first stage.” KCNA quoted NADA as blaming “the low reliability and stability of the new-type engine system...and the unstable character of the fuel used.”

There are three reasons to classify this as an inter-Korean event. First, given that in December North Korea published grainy aerial

[shots](#) of Seoul and Incheon gained from one of its preliminary tests, we can assume that South Korea would be a principal target of any DPRK satellite.



Figure 1 Aerial shots of Seoul and Incheon published by North Korea are said to be from their preliminary tests. Photo: KCNA

Second, ROK authorities seem to share that view. At 0641 on May 31, 14 minutes after the North's launch, millions of Seoul residents—but not those living in the surrounding Gyeonggi province (in effect, greater Seoul)—were jolted awake by text alarms sent to their mobile phones. The brief and opaque message urged them to evacuate to safety—but did not explain why, or how, or whither. Twenty-two minutes later, the Ministry of the Interior and Safety (MOIS) sent a follow-up message cancelling the first one, which it said had been sent in error: it was intended only for denizens of Baengnyeong-do, a frontline island close to the North Korean coast and the rocket's flight-path. (This shambles inspires scant confidence in the readiness or efficiency of ROK procedures and systems in case of a genuine emergency: an impression only reinforced by the first civil defense drill for six years, held on Aug. 23. Once again instructions were unclear, and most people simply ignored calls to take shelter.)

Third, in a nice twist of history's dialectic, it was the other Korea which ended up doing the spying. Unlike the North's missiles which usually travel eastward, this rocket was launched in a south-westerly direction: meaning that when it failed, it fell into South Korea's lap—or at least near ROK waters. Seoul did not miss this opportunity. Pyongyang may

have tried too, vicariously: Chinese vessels also [searched](#) the area, presumably on the DPRK's behalf. But South Korea got there first, eventually [salvaging](#) around 180 pieces of debris—including the satellite itself. Adding insult to injury, after examining it the [verdict](#) of ROK and US experts was that this had “absolutely no military utility as a reconnaissance satellite at all.”



Figure 2 A South Korean ship recovers a piece of what is believed to be a North Korean space launch vehicle. Photo: South Korean Defense Ministry/Reuters

On Aug. 24, North Korea tried again—and [failed](#) again. As before, KCNA [admitted](#) this fully and promptly. This time “the flights of the first and second stages of the rocket were normal, but the launch failed due to an error in the emergency blasting system during the third-stage flight.” Calling this “not a big problem in aspect (sic) of the reliability of cascade engines and the system,” NADA vowed to make a third attempt in October. Watch this, erm, space. Again, South Korea and China searched for debris, but nothing seems to have been found.

Pyongyang's blasé public face regarding these failures is impressive, but unconvincing. Kim Jong Un's Swiss education may not have included Oscar Wilde, but he would surely endorse a famous quip from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which might be adapted as: To fail once may be regarded as a misfortune; to fail twice looks like carelessness. The Kim regime has an ominously low tolerance for failure, especially when it is so embarrassingly public. In normal countries, you might lose your job; in Pyongyang, it could be your life. Economists

have been executed for failed projects, such as price reforms which backfired.

By one anecdotal account (which I have been unable to retrace), that was how Kim's father Kim Jong Il reacted during the long years when rocket reliability was Pyongyang's weak link. Failed launches could be fatal for those involved. His son, by contrast, is said to have decided that shooting scientists—whose numbers are finite—*pour encourager les autres* is not the way to go. Whatever the reason, under Kim Jong Un North Korea's success rate in missile tests has increased hugely: failures are now rare. Satellite launches, by contrast, are evidently still a work in progress. One would not wish to be a DPRK space rocket scientist right now. The next attempt to put up a satellite may indeed be a matter of life or death.

MOU: Ministry Redefined, Minister Replaced

One of the period's major developments unfolded at mid-year. As usual these days, this was not anything that occurred directly between North and South—for the simple reason that they currently have no contact whatever. Though all the action took place in Seoul, this looks to be highly consequential—and perhaps ominous—for inter-Korean relations.

On June 28, after barely a year in office, President Yoon Suk Yeol named a new minister of Unification. Cabinet reshuffles are common in South Korea, and arguably over-frequent. While this one replaced a dozen vice-ministers, the sole Cabinet minister to lose his job was MOU Kwon Young-se. That drew attention. The official explanation is that Kwon is stepping down to focus on his parliamentary career, ahead of next April's National Assembly elections. Be that as it may, there is a striking contrast between the old man and the new. Kwon, who (like Yoon) used to be a prosecutor, and was once ambassador to China, is a moderate conservative—from a working-class background, unlike Yoon and unusually for South Korea. While he frankly had precious little to do as MOU, given the dire state of North-South relations these days, his

comments usually sounded reasoned and thoughtful.



Figure 3 Kim Yung-ho, recently appointed unification minister, speaks to reporters in front of the Office of the Inter-Korean dialogue in central Seoul in June of 2023, before his parliamentary confirmation hearing. Photo: Yonhap

Evidently this is not the note that Yoon wants Seoul to strike. Kwon's successor, Kim Yung-ho, could hardly be more different. A professor and former leftist—he translated the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and in 1987 was jailed for 10 months for publishing “unlawful” books and breaching the National Security Act (NSA)—he later moved sharply to the right, becoming a trenchant critic of the Kim regime. Until recently he ran a YouTube channel (now deleted) on North Korea. Its thousands of videos—sources say 2,800, 4,000, or 5,000—[included](#) calls for Kim Jong Un to be overthrown, repeated predictions of the DPRK's imminent collapse, and related fringe conspiracy theories (some of which mentioned Jews).

What was Yoon thinking, appointing such a person to head the ministry whose job it is to handle liaison with Pyongyang? We soon found out. A few days after nominating Kim, Yoon bluntly unveiled a new vision for MOU. He told his staff:

So far, the unification ministry has operated as if it were a support department for North Korea, and that shouldn't be the case anymore...Now, it's time for [MOU] to change...From now on,

the unification ministry must carry out its proper responsibilities, in accordance with the constitutional principles that unification must be based on liberal democratic order...The unification that we pursue must be one in which all the people from the South and the North enjoy better lives and are treated better as human beings.”

Yoon's characterization of MOU's role hitherto is correct. Institutionally, South Korea deals with the North under two major headings. Security is of course the main one, handled by the Ministry of National Defense (MND) and related agencies such as the National Intelligence Service (NIS). Everything else falls to MOU. When the two Koreas are actually talking and interacting, as most recently in 2018, the ministry springs into life. When they are not, as for the past four years, it still goes through the motions. Bureaucrats will bureaucrat, so under both Yoon and his liberal predecessor Moon Jae-in MOU has published annual Work Plans which, while very different, shared a disconnect from reality (especially Moon's, with its notional commitment to spend aid money which was clearly never going to be disbursed.)

With progressives appalled that Yoon had (in their view) put a fox in charge of the hen-house, Kim Yung-ho's confirmation hearing before the opposition-controlled National Assembly on July 21 was predictably [stormy](#). Democratic Party (DPK) lawmakers questioned his fitness to lead MOU, calling him an “ultra-right wing YouTuber.” Even members of the conservative ruling People Power Party (PPP) urged him to be cautious in managing inter-Korean relations and to keep doors open. For his part, moderating some views he had expressed in the [past](#), Kim endorsed the Yoon administration's official stance that it does not pursue unification by absorption. (Yet what can Yoon's insistence, quoted above, that “unification must be based on liberal democratic order” mean, if not absorption? It will certainly be read so in Pyongyang.)

On July 27 DP lawmakers [urged](#) Yoon to withdraw the nomination, calling Kim “unsuitable” to head MOU: “[His] inconsistent attitude and outdated and Cold War-like thinking will only worsen the complex and delicate inter-Korean issues.” Ignoring this, Yoon appointed him on July 28—as the Constitution permits, and has become the norm under this administration—despite his not gaining parliamentary endorsement. The same day, MOU Vice-Minister Moon Seung-hyun lost no time in beginning the reorientation Yoon demanded—with a [purge](#): “As of today, five [of MOU’s] six high-level public servants tendered resignations.” Eighty of MOU’s 617-strong staff are to go, as four departments which all handle inter-Korean dialogue will be merged into a single unit. As Moon crisply put it: “This reflects the situation where there is zero inter-Korean dialogue and exchange going on.” Instead new teams will be created with fresh portfolios, such as South Korean detainees and prisoners of war held in North Korea.

POWs: A Hiding to Nothing?

Reflecting these new priorities, Kim Yung-ho’s first official business as minister on Aug. 3 was a meeting with relatives of South Koreans detained by the North, and NGOs focusing on this issue. The plight of such persons—from the tens of thousands marched North during the Korean War, thousands of POWs not repatriated after the 1953 Armistice, hundreds of fishermen and others kidnapped in past decades, down to three missionaries and three others [detained](#) in recent years as alleged spies—is indeed scandalous. Yet it has been neglected especially by left-leaning ROK leaders such as Moon Jae-in, in their quest for dialogue with the Kim regime.



Figure 4 Three South Korean missionaries detained in North Korea and accused of espionage. Photos: KCNA / Uriminzokkiri

That said, Moon could retort: But what good will it do? The original 1950 abductees—much the largest cohort—and illegally held POWs are nearly all dead by now. A pragmatic ROK government would focus on the six most recent cases, whose freedom will be hard enough to secure. Arrested rather than abducted, lumping them into the wider story of DPRK kidnaps makes little sense analytically, and none at all politically. Yoon’s new MOU task force will cast a fresh spotlight on a heinous crime—but do nothing whatever to mitigate or resolve it.

MOU’s new priorities are also evident in the Ministry’s draft [budget](#) for 2024, unveiled on Aug. 29. A 23% cut in total spending—the largest in a decade—includes slashing the amount earmarked for economic cooperation projects with Pyongyang by 42%. By contrast, spending on political analysis of the DPRK is slated to rise by 36%.

Tears For Fears: MOU Tracks KJU

At least in this long-time reader’s impressionistic view—not based, I must add, on any formal statistical analysis—the new broom at MOU has already begun to sweep clean. If in one sense the Ministry has been reined in and its priorities reshaped, the other side of the coin is a new freedom of expression: a flexing of muscles.

Consider, for example, data regarding Kim Jong Un published on Aug. 17. Taking the longer view, MOU notes that North Korea’s leader no longer gads about as he used to earlier in his reign, now in its 12th year. His “on the spot guidance”—a

practice inherited from his late father and grandfather, visiting a range of mainly economic or military sites—began vigorously, peaking at 214 separate field visits in 2013. Since 2017, however, the number of such trips each year has fallen below 100. This year, Kim has (or had at that point) chalked up 57 public appearances so far, of which 34 were field guidance trips; the remainder, no doubt, being Party meetings, parades and so forth. Notable too is the shifting balance of such trips, which nowadays are overwhelmingly military: 30 so far this year, as against just four which were economy-related.



Figure 5 Kim Jong Un and his daughter attend a parade celebrating the 75th anniversary of North Korea's founding on Sept. 9, 2023. Photo: KCNA/Reuters

So far, so familiar: MOU has long issued figures of this sort. But then it gets edgier. Kim may be getting out less, but he wants more respect. References to him as “President”—an honorific not long ago reserved for his grandfather Kim Il Sung—rose from four in 2020 to 16 in 2021, 23 in 2022, and 26 this year. And now MOU even tracks Kim crying: it reported that he was seen to shed tears on 10 occasions (over what time period is unclear), including late July’s military parade. Rubbing it in, an anonymous official commented: “This is the epitome of a tyrant’s politics appealing to people’s emotions.”

This is a new MOU: no longer a handmaiden but a gadfly. Evidently that is what Yoon wants. One may wonder if the foreign ministry (MOFA) is quite so keen. When US media reports claimed—correctly, as it transpired—that Kim Jong Un would soon visit Russia to discuss a possible arms deal with Putin, MOU promptly chimed in: “cooperation between North Korea and a nearby country, in all forms, should be conducted in a direction that does not hurt international order and peace.” Calling Kim a tyrant is one thing, but telling Russia what to do

(not by name, but the meaning was clear enough) arguably exceeds MOU’s brief—even if Yoon, in Jakarta for ASEAN summits, said much the same.

Returning to more familiar terrain, the same MOU report also offered economic analysis. After a tight period, when disruptions to food supply caused by border closure had led to deaths from starvation in some areas, now the “serious food situation seems to be somewhat alleviating, aided by supplies of summer farm produce such as potatoes and corn” (this is Yonhap’s summary). With no severe damage this year from heavy rains, the main autumn harvests “may not be bad.” That said, in the first quarter the price of flour was over four times higher than pre-Covid in 2019, and Engel’s coefficient rose from 58% to an estimated 94%—meaning most North Koreans now spend nearly all their income on food.

Mocking the ROK? Or Reframing It as Foreign?

MOU also weighed in on a current mini-debate in Seoul. Pyongyang has long eschewed calling the ROK by that official name, except during rare periods of bonhomie such as 2018’s summits. It prefers “south Korea” (note the lower case). Recently, however, DPRK media have begun using ROK more, albeit usually in quotes (“ROK”). Given that Kim Jong Un is evidently not making nice, some analysts interpret this change as intended to redefine inter-Korean ties as a normal state-to-state relationship rather than anything unique and special. MOU is having none of that: in their eyes the new usage is sheer mockery.

Yet other evidence suggests that, just as Seoul under Yoon is reframing how it deals with North Korea, Pyongyang may be doing the same vis-à-vis the South. In late June, the chair of the Hyundai Group, Hyun Jeong-eun, told MOU she is applying to visit North Korea. Today’s Hyundai Group is a small rump after the break-up of the once-mighty chaebol (conglomerate); it no longer includes such titans as Hyundai Motor or the world’s largest shipbuilder, Hyundai Heavy. What it does include is Hyundai Asan, which for a decade (1998-2008) invested heavily in tourism into North Korea, following the dream of Hyundai’s hard-driving Northern-born founder Chung Ju-yung. When his sons quarreled and Hyundai broke up, Chung gave Asan to his fourth and favorite son, Chung Mong-hun. This proved a

poisoned chalice. Pyongyang milked Hyundai shamelessly, and under multiple pressures Mong-hoon took his life in Aug. 2003. When Seoul banned further trips after the KPA shot a tourist in 2008, the North seized Hyundai's facilities (worth some \$400 million) at the Mount Kumgang resort it had built on the DPRK's southeast coast. After intermittent use for rare reunions of separated families in happier times, these moldering facilities are now being torn down on the orders of Kim Jong Un, who—repudiating the stance of his father Kim Jong Il—explicitly rejects any idea of a joint North-South project on DPRK soil.

Despite all that, hitherto Ms. Hyun (widow of Chung Mong-hun) had been an honored guest in the North—even attending Kim Jong Il's funeral in 2011. Several times, most recently in 2018, she visited Mount Kumgang for a joint ceremony in memory of her late husband. That was her plan again, to mark the 20th anniversary of his death. Yet this time she was brusquely rejected. Hours after MOU publicized her intentions—megaphone diplomacy being the sole mode of inter-Korean contact these days—Pyongyang shot back. Kim Song Il, an official at North Korea's foreign ministry, told KCNA: "We make it clear that we have neither been informed about any South Korean personage's willingness for visit nor known about it and that we have no intention to examine it." Kim added two wider riders. It is DPRK policy not to allow South Korean nationals entry. And the Asia-Pacific Peace Committee (APPC), the body which Ms. Hyun sought to contact (as in the past), has no authority in this regard.

Beyond the rude rebuff to Ms. Hyun, this looks like a policy shift by Pyongyang. MOU called it "quite unusual" for the North's foreign ministry to be handling this, rather than an agency under the United Front Department (UFD) of the ruling Workers Party (WPK) such as the APPC. This may mean North Korea now rejects the concept hitherto shared by both Koreas (one of the few things they had agreed on) that the peninsula's division renders their relationship special—both regard Korea as a single country—and hence not to be dealt with under foreign affairs.

War Rhetoric Escalates

The period under review closed dismally. One might think North Korea's rhetoric could not get more bellicose than it already is, but somehow they find a way. After a summer of major US-ROK war games and trilateral exercises including Japan, Pyongyang no doubt felt it had to respond in kind. KCNA, which does not normally disclose the exact date of Kim Jong Un's military-related activities, reported that on Aug. 29 he visited "the training command post of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army (KPA)," to observe a command drill "aimed at occupying the whole territory of the southern half by repelling the enemy's sudden armed invasion and switching over to an all-out counterattack." This was in response to "the US and 'ROK' [sic, including quote marks] military gangsters [staging] extremely provocative and dangerous large-scale joint exercises simulating an all-out war against the DPRK." Kim was [pictured](#) pointing at a (rather fuzzy) map of South Korea KCNA's report ended by describing KPA commanding officers as "burning with the will to accelerate the war preparations and thus mercilessly wipe out the enemies and put the whole territory of the southern half under control anytime once an order is issued by [Kim]."



Figure 6 Kim Jong Un points to an area close to Seoul on a map of South Korea at the the 7th Enlarged Meeting of the 8th Central Military Commission on Aug. 9, 2023. Photo: KCNA

Ominously, the current situation is that both sides on the peninsula are escalating in word and deed. In Pyongyang and Seoul alike the talk has got tougher, while war games are becoming

larger and more frequent. In typical chicken and egg fashion, each side blames the other for escalating matters, claiming they are merely responding to the threat the other poses. Even if neither side seriously intends to provoke conflict, this is not a recipe for keeping the peace.

Revamping MOU may not help either. Admittedly, after Moon Jae-in's delusional clinging to a peace process which in reality died in 2019, Yoon Suk Yeol's robust calling a spade a spade is in some degree a relief and refreshing. Yet attitude is not a strategy, nor is striking a pose to be confused with crafting effective policy. Yes, the DPRK is an evil regime which does many terrible things. We knew that. What does Yoon hope to gain by saying this more often, in greater detail, louder, and more widely? There is no new information here, and (crucially) no hint of any mechanism whereby this psy-war campaign—which is what Yoon's plan amounts to—will ameliorate any of the evils or defuse threats it pinpoints.

Similarly, how does reminding Kim Jong Un *ad nauseam* what a bad guy he is, and what a failed state he runs, bring either peace or reunification closer? Kim will conclude (correctly) that Yoon's earlier notional offer of an "[audacious initiative](#)" was hogwash. Telling North Korea to simply surrender its WMD has never worked, and stands no chance now that Kim is strengthening his ties with both China and Russia. A wise ROK government, while ensuring deterrence, would try to keep channels open and offer Kim an off-ramp, even if only on the off chance. Time will tell how Yoon's approach works out, but I fear it may bear bitter fruit.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

MAY—AUGUST 2023

May 1, 2023: Days after ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol's summit in late April with US President Joe Biden, the official DPRK *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* begins a multi-part [series](#) under the title: "Puppet Traitor Yoon Suk Yeol's Visit to US Draws Censure, Ridicule and Concern." This cites media comments criticizing Yoon's trip from around the world, including South Korea. Six installments are published in the ensuing days.

May 3, 2023: ROK Minister of Unification (MOU) Kwon Young-se, [tells](#) the Unification Future Planning Committee: "We need to urge and induce North Korea to make the right decision so that all members of the Korean Peninsula can feel safe and lead prosperous lives."

May 3, 2023: Visiting a front-line area where North Korean drones infiltrated last year, the chairman of South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), army Gen. Kim Seung-kyum, [warns](#) that Pyongyang will attack "in unknown and unexpected formats going forward." South Korea must respond "overwhelmingly...We have to imprint in the enemy minds that the only price for provocation is gruesome punishment."

May 4, 2023: ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) [announces](#) what may be the largest ever joint live-fire drills. The "Joint and Combined Firepower Annihilation Training" will run May 25-June 15 at Pocheon, 20 miles from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), marking the US-ROK alliance's 70th anniversary. This is the 11th such exercise, since 1977; the last was in 2017 (none took place under Moon Jae-in).

May 4, 2023: MOU [says](#) that that [burning](#) Yoon Suk Yeol in effigy at a recent mass rally in Pyongyang was "extremely regrettable" and went "too far," adding that DPRK authorities

seem to be trying "to control citizens by exaggerating external threats via internal media."

May 5, 2023: *Rodong Sinmun*, North Korea's leading daily, fills half a page with [photos](#) of recent anti-Yoon protests in South Korea. DPRK media have not done this for some years. In past instances, according to defectors, it backfired: readers noted that the other Korea looked more developed, and its people better dressed.

May 5, 2023: ROK's ruling conservative People Power Party (PPP) [criticizes](#) the National Election Commission (NEC) for [ignoring](#) warnings from the National Intelligence Service (NIS) that DPRK hackers attacked it eight times in 2021-22. The NEC denies receiving such warnings. The liberal opposition Democrats (DPK) accuse the PPP and NIS of playing politics. On May 23 the NEC [agrees](#) to a cybersecurity check-up by the NIS.

May 5, 2023: MOU [says](#) it may sue the DPRK for "illicit" actions in the Mount Kumgang tourist zone, "including the unauthorized removal of ROK assets like a floating hotel owned by Hyundai Asan." This is a tad tardy. As *NK News* [notes](#), North Korea began demolishing the Haegumgang Hotel in March 2022; by December it was gone.

May 8, 2023: Perhaps celebrating their recent court victory (April 27), the activist group Freedom Fighters for North Korea (FFNK) [say](#) that on May 5 it sent 20 balloons carrying vitamin C tablets, Tylenol pills, and booklets into North Korea from Ganghwa Island, northwest of Seoul.

May 8, 2023: Seoul Central District Court [orders](#) the DPRK and Kim Jong Un to pay 50 million

won (\$37,900) each to three former POWs who escaped from the North in the early 2000s, almost half a century after being taken prisoner during the 1950–53 Korean War. The defendants were not represented. With some understatement *Yonhap* notes: “It seems difficult for the plaintiffs to actually receive the compensation.”

May 9, 2023: MOU [says](#) North Korea seems to be illicitly operating some 10 ROK-owned factories at the former Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), which Seoul withdrew from in 2016.

May 10, 2023: DPRK website [Uriminzokkiri condemns](#) the recent ROK–Japan summit: “The military collusion between South Korea and Japan, much wanted by the United States, has entered the stage...to be recklessly carried out.” It calls Yoon’s foreign policy “submissive.”

May 10, 2023: Two years after a major data breach at Seoul National University Hospital’s intranet, when personal data on 827,000 people—mostly patients—was hacked, ROK police [say](#) they [attribute](#) this cyber-attack to North Korea.

May 10, 2023: Suwon District Court [indicts](#) and detains four former officials of the ROK’s largest and most militant umbrella labor body, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, for allegedly spying for North Korea. The four unnamed accused deny all charges and are refusing to cooperate.

May 18, 2023: Two Koreas are both [drawn](#) in Group B for the second round, to be held this fall, of the Asian women’s soccer tournament, a qualifier for the Olympic Games. China and Thailand complete the group. North Korea has won 15 of 19 previous inter-Korean encounters, against just one win for South Korea; three were draws.

May 19, 2023: NIS [reveals](#) that a family group of 10 North Koreans, who crossed the Northern Limit Line —the de facto marine border in the West/Yellow Sea—by boat on May 6, told their

ROK interrogators that “they had admired our society while watching South Korean television, and decided to defect as they grew exhausted of the North Korean regime amid tightened social control stemming from the pandemic.”

May 22, 2023: MOU Kwon [urges](#) North Korea to return to dialogue, saying the South has no hostile intentions.

May 23, 2023: “A source” [tells](#) *Yonhap* that earlier this month a DPRK boat (whether civilian or military is unclear) told a 30,000-ton ROK cargo ship sailing in the East Sea/Sea of Japan to “move out to the open sea.” The latter complied, even though it was in fact in international waters.

May 23, 2023: Suwon District Court [jails](#) An Bu-soo, chairman of the Asia Pacific Exchange Association (a private body), for 42 months, having found him guilty of embezzlement and unauthorized foreign exchange transfers to North Korea. This is the first conviction related to the case of Ssangbngwool Group’s ex-chairman Kim Seong-tae, whose own trial is ongoing.

May 23, 2023: In the seventh such action under Yoon Suk Yeol, South Korea unilaterally [sanctions](#) three DPRK organizations (all under the North’s Ministry of National Defense) and seven individuals. All are said to be involved in Pyongyang’s illegal cyber activities.

May 29, 2023: ROK’s foreign and health ministries jointly [voice](#) “deep regrets and concerns” at the DPRK’s recent election to the World Health Organization (WHO)’s executive board. “It is questionable whether North Korea, which has continued to contravene UNSC resolutions and disregard the UN’s authority, meets the standards for a WHO executive board member, which should abide by international norms, pursued by the U.N., and contribute to enhancing global health.”

May 31, 2023: North Korea’s attempt to put a spy satellite in orbit [fails](#); the rocket crashes into

the West/Yellow Sea. The launch [triggers](#) an evacuation alarm, sent to millions of phones in Seoul—in error. The Ministry of the Interior and Safety (MOIS) apologizes.

June 2, 2023: Responding to Pyongyang’s failed satellite bid, South Korea becomes the first country to unilaterally [sanction](#) the (not obviously connected) DPRK hacking group known as Kimsuky.

June 7, 2023: South Korea’s National Police Agency [says](#) that the North’s Kimsuky hacked senior ROK officials among others for several months recently, by sending phishing emails to 150 diplomacy and security experts. Nine persons—three former minister and vice minister-level officials, one incumbent government official, four academics or experts, and one reporter—fell for it, and had their account information compromised. Nothing confidential was stolen.

June 7, 2023: Yoon administration publishes its [National Security Strategy](#). Besides (unsurprisingly) identifying North Korea’s WMD threat as the South’s most pressing security challenge, it also focuses on wider issues and the ROK’s ambition to become a “global pivotal state.”

June 9, 2023: MOU [says](#) that it plans to return, via Panmunjom, the corpse of a young (20s–30s) presumed North Korean man, found in waters off Ganghwa island northwest in May. Pyongyang has yet to indicate acceptance. Since 2010 South Korea has sent 23 bodies back to the North, most recently in 2019. In the last such case, a female flood victim in 2022, the DPRK’s radio silence meant the ROK had to cremate her. This time the North again fails to respond, so on June 16 Seoul [says](#) he too will be cremated.

June 15, 2023: NIS [says](#) DPRK hackers have created a fake version of Naver, ROK’s leading Web portal and search engine, which 25 million South Koreans—almost half the total population—use as their homepage. The agency warns netizens to be on their guard.

June 14, 2023: In a further instance—albeit mainly symbolic—of the Yoon administration’s hardening stance, almost three years after North Korea blew up the inter-Korean liaison office at Kaesong, the ROK [sues](#) the DPRK government in Seoul Central District Court; claiming damages of 44.7 billion won (\$35 million) for destruction of state property. (Although located on Northern territory, South Korea built and paid for this facility.)

June 20, 2023: ROK Cabinet approves a plan to establish a drone operations command in September. “A source” [tells Yonhap](#) that South Korea “has adopted an aggressive counter-drone operational principle, under which a single North Korean drone infiltration would prompt it to send 10 or more unmanned aerial vehicles into (sic) Pyongyang.”

June 23, 2023: Amid reports that some 2,000 North Koreans held in China face imminent repatriation now that the PRC–DPRK border has begun to reopen, the head of the ROK’s National Human Rights Commission of Korea, Song Doo-hwan, [urges](#) Beijing not to do this.

June 23, 2023: At the NIS’s request, South Korea blocks three North Korean propaganda channels on YouTube. As of 1400 local time, attempts to access [Sally Parks Song-A Channel](#), [Olivia Natasha- YuMi Space DPRK daily](#), or New DPRK come up as “not available” in the ROK. On June 27 YouTube itself [terminates](#) all three channels.

June 26, 2023: FFNK [says](#) it marked the 73rd anniversary of the start of the Korean War on June 25 with another balloon launch. This one sent 20 balloons carrying 200,000 leaflets, 10,000 face masks, Tylenol pills, and anti-regime booklets into North Korea.

June 29, 2023: President Yoon [nominates](#) Kim Yung-ho, a professor of political science and trenchant “[new Right](#)” critic of North Korea, as minister of unification.

June 30, 2023: MOU nominee Kim [says](#) “there is a need to selectively [re]consider inter-Korean agreements.” Specifically, September 2018’s military accord may require review, if (in *Yonhap*’s paraphrase) “the North continues to violate it with high-intensity provocations.”

June 30, 2023: MOU [says](#) it is considering an application by Hyun Jeong-eun, chairwoman of the Hyundai Group, to visit Mount Kumgang in North Korea—where Hyundai Asan ran tours during 1998–2008—to mark 20 years since the [suicide](#) of her husband, former group chairman Chung Mong-hun, on Aug. 4. She last held a memorial service for him there, with DPRK participation, on the 15th anniversary in 2018.

June 30, 2023: As heavy rain pounds the peninsula, MOU [urges](#) Pyongyang to notify Seoul of any planned release of water from its Hwanggang Dam on the Imjin river, which flows into South Korea. In 2009 flood waters from an unannounced discharge killed six South Koreans who were camping. Despite Pyongyang promising advance notice in future, last year (as often) this was lacking. On July 14 MOU [says](#) the North has made no response.

July 1, 2023: Pyongyang publicly and brusquely [rejects](#) Ms. Hyun’s visit; previously it had welcomed her as an honored guest. Kim Song Il, a director general at North Korea’s foreign ministry, tells KCNA: “We make it clear that we have neither been informed about any South Korean personage’s willingness for visit nor known about it and that we have no intention to examine it.” He adds that policy is not to allow South Korean nationals entry, and that the Asia-Pacific Peace Committee (APPC), which Ms. Hyun sought to contact (as in the past), has no authority in this regard.

July 2, 2023: President Yoon signals a major policy shift on MOU, [telling](#) his staff: “Hitherto the unification ministry has operated as if it were a support department for North Korea. [T]hat shouldn’t be the case any more..It’s time for the unification ministry to change.”

July 3, 2023: After Pyongyang’s rejection, Hyun Jeong-eun [withdraws](#) her application to visit Mt. Kumgang.

July 5, 2023: ROK JCS [say](#) that South Korean and US experts, having analyzed debris from North Korea’s failed satellite launch in May, retrieved from the Yellow/West Sea, have concluded that the spy satellite would have had “absolutely no military utility.”

July 6, 2023: MOU [publishes](#) dossier of hitherto classified government documents on North-South contacts before and after the first inter-Korean accord: joint communiqué signed on July 4, 1972. Covering the period Nov. 1971–Feb. 1979, this has 1,678 pages—of which 230 remain redacted.

July 7, 2023: MOU [says](#) it has issued hard copies of the English translation of its 2023 [report](#) on North Korea human rights, “as part of efforts to raise global awareness on the issue.”

July 10, 2023: At the Hanawon resettlement center for defectors, three North Korean women, recent arrivals from China—where they had lived since 2004, 2014, and 2019, respectively—[describe](#) how Beijing’s anti-coronavirus restrictions worsened their lives. Lacking Chinese ID cards, they could not access most services. Even so, life was better than in North Korea.

July 10, 2023: Kwon Young-se—still unification minister, though his successor has been named—[tells](#) a media briefing that North Korea faces a serious food crisis, despite grain imports from China and prices stabilizing somewhat. On Kim Jong Un’s health, Kwon says it “does not appear good, but it is not serious enough to pose some problems for him to work.”

July 12, 2023: North Korea [test-fires](#) an ICBM off its east coast. According to Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno this flew for a record 74 minutes to an altitude of 6,000 km (3,728 miles) and a range of 1,000 km. Next day Pyongyang [confirms](#) that this launch was of its

large *Hwasong-18* solid-fuel ICBM, first tested in April, which has a range of 15,000 km. Analysts [reckon](#) this second successful test means it could soon be deployed.

July 14, 2023: Seoul retaliates to Pyongyang's latest ICBM test by again [slapping](#) unilateral sanctions on three DPRK entities and four named individuals. Since none (obviously) have any dealings with the ROK, this move is largely symbolic.

July 18, 2023: USS *Kentucky*, an 18,750-ton *Ohio*-class nuclear ballistic missile submarine (SSBN), docks in Busan. This is the [first](#) visit to South Korea by a US SSBN since 1981.

July 18, 2023: US-South Korea Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), set up at April's summit between Presidents Biden and Yoon, [holds](#) inaugural meeting in Seoul. Yoon stops by and [urges](#) that the allies' nuclear deterrence be beefed up such that North Korea "does not dare to use nuclear weapons."

July 18, 2023: A man later identified as Travis King (23), a private (second class) serving in US forces in Korea (USFK), [breaks away](#) from a tour group and dashes to the northern side of the Joint Security Area (JSA) at Panmunjom. It emerges that he was being sent home, unguarded, to face disciplinary charges. Instead of boarding his plane he exited Incheon airport, returned to Seoul, and booked a tour of Panmunjom.

July 18, 2023: MOU [reports](#) that defector arrivals, while still a trickle by historical standards, almost doubled in the second quarter. 65 North Koreans—18 men and 47 women—reached South Korea during April-June, compared to 34 in January-March. The ministry attributes this to China easing its coronavirus restrictions. Almost all defectors come via China.

July 19, 2023: South Korea's NIS [claims](#) North Korea stole cryptocurrency worth \$700 million last year, but has not yet monetized it. The

agency says this could fund 30 ICBMs, and that hacking accounts for 30% of Pyongyang's foreign currency earnings. It adds that a DPRK hacker was caught trying to get a job with an ROK energy company abroad, having posted his resume on LinkedIn, using a forged passport and graduation certificate.

July 20, 2023: North Korea's Minister of National Defense Kang Sun Nam [issues](#) a press statement, warning that the US SSBN deployment "may fall under the conditions of the use of nuclear weapons specified in the DPRK law on the nuclear force policy." This "allows the execution of necessary action procedures...[if] it is judged that the use of nuclear weapons against it is imminent."

July 20, 2023: ROK's Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA), a division of the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MOEF), [reports](#) that last year North Korea's trade dependence on China rose even further to 96.7%, a 10-year high. While doubling in volume year-on-year, trade has grown even more unbalanced. Pyongyang imported goods from Beijing worth \$1,398 million, while exporting a mere \$134 million.

July 21, 2023: Reacting to DPRK Defense Minister Kang Sun Nam's threat (July 20), the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) [warns](#) that any North Korean attack "will face an immediate, overwhelming and decisive response from the [US-ROK] alliance and...will result in the end of the North Korean regime."

July 21, 2023: MOU nominee Kim Yung-ho [tells](#) National Assembly confirmation hearing that he will prioritize "substantive" results in any dealings with North Korea, rather than "dialogue or its own sake."

July 25, 2023: At the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD) meeting in San Diego CA, Chun Young-hee, who heads the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Korean Peninsula Peace Regime Bureau, [deplores](#) North Korea's WMD provocations and inattention to its "dire"

humanitarian crisis. NEACD is an annual Track 1.5 meeting of all the former Six Party Talks participants. The DPRK has not showed up since 2016.

July 28, 2023: President Yoon formally [appoints](#) Kim Yung-ho as minister of unification, as the law permits, despite his not having been confirmed by the opposition-controlled National Assembly. Kim is the 15th minister appointed by Yoon without parliamentary approval.

July 31, 2023: New MOU Kim Yung-ho [visits](#) the National Cemetery in Seoul to pay tribute to South Korea's patriotic martyrs and war dead.

July 31, 2023: A propos Pyongyang's military parade on July 28, which displayed a wide range of WMD and other armaments, MOU spokesman Koo Byoung-sam [expresses](#) "strong regret over how North Korea is adhering to nuclear development and an attitude of confrontation rather than seeking denuclearization and peace despite this year marking the 70th anniversary of the Armistice." He calls on the North to choose the "right" path.

Aug. 1, 2023: South Korea's Ministry of Unification [confirms](#) a *Radio Free Asia* report that on July 20, 24, and 27 North Korea opened floodgates on its Hwanggang Dam to release water, without first warning Seoul as it is supposed to do under inter-Korean accords. Noting that Pyongyang "frequently" released water thus during July, "despite our repeated request" [to be notified], MOU calls this "very regrettable."

Aug. 2, 2023: New MOU Kim Yung-ho announces his first official schedule: a meeting the next day with civic groups focused on Southern abductees and detainees in North Korea, and their relatives. The ministry will create a task force on the abductee issue.

Aug. 3, 2023: MOU Kim [pledges](#) that the Yoon government will "never" seek a formal declaration ending the 1950-53 Korean War.

That had been a key, if chimerical, policy aim of Yoon's liberal predecessor Moon Jae-in. Kim explains: "Conditions for the end-of-war declaration have not been met. If [it happens], the issue of abductees, prisoners of war and detainees in the North will be overshadowed."

Aug. 3, 2023: UN Command (UNC) at Panmunjom, which controls the southern half of the JSA and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), [says](#) North Korea has confirmed that it is holding the fugitive US soldier Travis King.

Aug. 6, 2023: KCNA [reports](#) that on Aug. 3-5 Kim Jong Un "gave field guidance to major munitions factories." These included facilities producing "the shells of super large-caliber multiple rocket launchers," "new serial small arms," engines for cruise missiles and UAVs, "erector launchers for major strategic weapons," and "a new light electrical appliance factory which will play an important role in modernizing the KPA."

Aug. 7, 2023: MOU spokesperson Koo Byoung-sam [tells](#) a regular media briefing that Kim Jong Un's recent visits to major weapons facilities "appear to have had multiple purposes—show off the country's achievements in the defense sector, respond to [US-ROK] joint military drills, and seek arms exports"—despite the last being banned under UN sanctions.

Aug. 11, 2023: Chairing the second quarterly meeting of a new (mostly civilian) presidential defense innovation committee he set up, President Yoon [says](#) Seoul must prioritize boosting its deterrence capability against Pyongyang's "imminent" nuclear and missile menace, along with the North's other asymmetric threats (cyber and drones). By contrast, "we need to...boldly adjust projects aimed at operating weapons systems that are not immediately urgent." (That sounds like bad news for those in MND who [harbor](#) blue water and aircraft carrier ambitions.)

Aug. 16, 2023: MOU Kim Yung-ho [urges](#) Beijing not to send defectors back to the DPRK: "North

Korean defectors in China should be..able to enter countries that they are hoping to go to, including South Korea.” They should be treated as refugees, not as illegal immigrants. According to the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, among 8,148 cases—no time period was given—of such forcible repatriation, 98% were from China.

Aug. 16, 2023: Pyongyang issues its first report on defector Travis King. KCNA says he “decided to come over to the DPRK” due to “inhuman maltreatment and racial discrimination within the U.S. Army.” (King is Black.) “He also expressed his willingness to seek refuge in the DPRK or a third country, saying that he was disillusioned at the unequal American society. The investigation continues.”

Aug. 17, 2023: MOU [offers](#) some figures regarding Kim Jong Un’s titles and trips, as well as DPRK economic trends and nomenclature.

Aug. 18, 2023: After the rightwing Seoul daily *Dong-A Ilbo* [claims](#) there was some sort of terrorist bombing in or near Pyongyang a month or two earlier (alleged details are extremely vague), South Korea’s NIS says it has detected no such event. In May, however, the spy agency told lawmakers that violent crime in the North has tripled from a year earlier, including “large-scale and organized” crimes like “throwing of homemade bombs in attempts to extort goods.”

Aug. 21, 2023: Back from his trilateral [summit](#) with the leaders of the US and Japan at Camp David, President Yoon [tells](#) his Cabinet: “The larger North Korea’s threats of provocations become, the more solid the structure of trilateral security cooperation among South Korea, the US and Japan will become. [This] will lower the risk of North Korea’s provocations and further strengthen our security.”

Aug. 21, 2023: KCNA [reports](#) that Kim Jong Un oversaw a naval drill involving cruise missiles.

Aug. 21, 2023: *Ulchi Freedom Shield* (UFS), a large joint US–South Korea annual military exercise, [begins](#). Continuing through Aug. 31, it includes some 30 field training events—more than in past years—“based on an all-out war scenario,” according to the ROK JCS.

Aug. 22, 2023: In a response to UFS, headlined “DPRK Armed Forces Show No Mercy,” KCNA [warns](#): “An unprecedented large-scale thermonuclear war is approaching the Korean Peninsula every moment as reality.” (Despite the apocalyptic tone, comments from a mere news agency—as opposed to, say, Kim Jong Un—are a relatively low-key reaction.)

Aug. 22, 2023: After Pyongyang [reportedly](#) notifies Japan’s Coast Guard that it plans to put a satellite in orbit during Aug. 24–31, South Korea’s foreign ministry [urges](#) the North “to immediately withdraw the plan.” MOU [chimes in](#): “A satellite launch by the North is a blatant illegal act that flatly violates UN Security Council resolutions that ban any launches using ballistic missile technology. Pyongyang cannot justify it with any excuse.”

Aug. 22, 2023: ROK Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries [issues](#) a maritime safety warning for the three areas which Pyongyang notified Tokyo its satellite launch might affect—while noting that “South Korean ships do not frequently pass through these zones.”

Aug. 23, 2023: Amid several signs that Pyongyang is partially easing stringent border controls it had imposed in Jan. 2020 to keep out COVID-19 (unsuccessfully), MOU [says](#) it is monitoring when North Korea will reopen its border with China “in a full-fledged manner.” Reporting to the National Assembly, the ministry judges that so far the North “has opened its border in a limited manner while struggling to stabilize a food crisis.”

Aug. 23, 2023: South Korea [holds](#) its first nationwide air defense drills in six years. Many citizens [ignore](#) the sirens and officials telling them to get off the streets and seek shelter.

Aug. 24, 2023: For the second time in three months, a North Korean satellite launch [fails](#). Promptly [admitting](#) this, KCNA quotes the DPRK's National Aerospace Development Administration (NADA) as blaming "an error in the emergency blasting system during the third-stage flight." Calling this "not a big problem," NADA vows to try again in October.

Aug. 28, 2023: Amid further [signs](#) that North Korea is starting to partially reopen its borders, MOU [characterizes](#) Pyongyang's steps so far as a "limited border reopening," prompted by economic problems and the inconveniences of closure for personnel.

Aug. 29, 2023: Destroyers (one each) from the US, Japanese, and South Korean navies [stage](#) a trilateral ballistic missile defense exercise. A US military [press release](#) links this to North Korea's recent rocket launches in "brazen violation of multiple unanimous UN Security Council resolutions that raises tension and risks," and cites the recent Camp David summit as "inaugurat[ing] a new era of trilateral partnership."

Aug. 31, 2023: KCNA, which does not normally disclose the exact date of Kim Jong Un's military-related activities, [reports](#) that on Aug. 29 he visited "the training command post of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army (KPA)," to observe a command drill "aimed at occupying the whole territory of the southern half by repelling the enemy's sudden armed invasion and switching over to an all-out counterattack." This is in response to "the US and 'ROK' [sic, including quote marks] military gangsters [staging] extremely provocative and dangerous large-scale joint exercises simulating an all-out war against the DPRK."

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PRC Ambassador to South Korea Xing Haiming's public statement in June sharpened Beijing-Seoul frictions following President Yoon Suk Yeol's Taiwan remarks in an April interview, sparking mutual accusations of interference in internal affairs. Multilateral engagements offered opportunities to reaffirm China-ROK relations through bilateral talks between China's Commerce Minister Wang Wentao and South Korea's Trade Minister Ahn Duk-geun (May), Defense Ministers Li Shangfu and Lee Jong-sup (June), Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Park Jin (July), Finance Ministers Liu Kun and Choo Kyung-ho (July), and Trade Ministers Wang Shouwen and Ahn (August). The revival of high-level exchanges, Beijing's lifting of travel restrictions on South Korea in August, and North Korea's border reopening that same month are sources of optimism in China-Korea relations despite overarching tensions. Discord remains on regional security priorities, South Korea's overt alignment with the United States under the Yoon administration, and the escalating US-China technology war. Meanwhile, Chinese and Russian delegations joined Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the end of the Korean War, reflecting the shape of North Korea's first post-COVID diplomatic activity.

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These exchanges occurred two weeks after Beijing and Moscow blocked UN Security Council (UNSC) action on North Korea's July 12 ICBM test. The UNSC remained paralyzed by Chinese and Russian opposition to UN initiatives both to condemn Pyongyang for its two failed satellite launches in May and August, and to spotlight North Korean human rights violations. Yoon's August summit with US President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio advancing the trilateral partnership drew Chinese disapproval and South Korean domestic ambivalence. US-China retaliatory sanctions from May raised potential costs for South Korean chip industry leaders amid the United States' reemergence as South Korea's biggest market for exports. Current trends in China-Korea relations indicate tightening linkages between regional economic and security dilemmas.

Beijing and Seoul's Extended Diplomatic Clash

Beijing and Seoul have grappled with prolonged frictions since Yoon's [Taiwan remarks](#) in an April interview with *Reuters* and China's stern reaction. Director-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Department of Asian Affairs Liu Jinsong [reaffirmed](#) "China's core concerns" to foreign ministry counterparts in Seoul on May 22. Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong [reasserted](#) China's core interests to South Korea's Deputy Minister for Political Affairs Choi Youngsam in Beijing on July 4. The latest clashes were sparked by Chinese Ambassador Xing Haiming's [June 8 remarks](#) in Seoul to main opposition Democratic Party (DP) leader Lee Jae-myung. Xing told Lee that those who "bet on China's defeat" in the US-China rivalry "will definitely regret it." Noting "many difficulties" in China-South Korea relations, Xing [stated](#), "China is free of responsibility. We will be grateful if Korea respects China's key interests."

South Korea's First Vice Foreign Minister Chang Ho-jin summoned Xing on June 9, [protesting](#) his "unreasonable and provocative" points and possible interference in South Korea's internal affairs. In Beijing, China's Assistant Foreign Minister Nong Rong called in South Korea's Ambassador to China Chung Jae-ho to [protest](#) "the ROK's recent inappropriate response" to the Xing-Lee exchange. China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin [addressed](#) wider bilateral controversies on June 9. In response to Xing's remarks and [reported director-general discussions](#) on May 22

conveying China's "Four Nos," Wang repeated that "the current difficulties and challenges...are not caused by China." On warnings that Beijing will deny high-level contact and cooperation on North Korea if South Korea interferes in China's core interests or coordinates military strategies with the United States and Japan, Wang reinforced the "one-China" principle as an "internal affair...at the core of China's core interests." South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs later [indicated](#) that Xing's offense "lies in intentionally criticizing our government's policy with inaccurate information." The South Korean presidential office redirected Beijing's complaints by [reasserting](#) the "diplomats' duty to respect the laws of the host country" and "not to interfere" in "internal affairs."

Chinese and South Korean mutual accusations unleashed domestic uproar in South Korea about Xing's comments, viewed as a [thinly veiled threat](#) to the Yoon administration for favoring the United States and reversing his liberal predecessor's pro-China direction. Ruling People Power Party (PPP) leader Kim Gi-hyeon [claimed](#) that "Ambassador Xing and Chairman Lee were jointly blaming our government," a "clear interference in domestic affairs and a serious diplomatic discourtesy" on Xing's part. While Kim [targeted](#) his political rivals for facilitating such interference, his party demanded a "responsible apology" from Xing and the Chinese government. PPP lawmakers demanded the [recalling](#) of the Chinese ambassador and [voiced](#) on social media: "It appeared as if China still considers itself the center of the world and regards South Korea as a vassal state in tributary relations."

South Korea's domestic turmoil only deepened with DP visits to China days after the Xing-Lee meeting. In Beijing, a group of DP lawmakers met officials from the National People's Congress and Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of a five-day visit from June 12 "[aimed](#) at seeking improvement in relations as China is important for our businesses and the economy." Another DP delegation followed three days later for cultural exchanges. DP leader Lee Jae-myung [used](#) a June 15 event on inter-Korean ties to criticize Seoul's "rapidly worsened" relations with Beijing and Moscow and declare that "it is time to revive pragmatic diplomacy centered on national interests."

Rebuilding China-South Korea Relations “Based on Mutual Respect, Reciprocity, and Common Interest”

In response to the Xing-Lee controversy, other Yoon officials sought to stabilize relations with Beijing. Addressing a forum in Seoul a day after the incident, National Security Advisor Cho Tae-yong [promised](#) to build “healthy” China-South Korea relations while also promoting ties with the United States and Japan. Before departing to Tokyo the following week, he [reaffirmed](#) the Yoon administration’s “unchanging position” on relations with China, “placing the two core keywords of mutual respect and common interests at the center.” In a June 25 *Yonhap* interview, Foreign Minister Park Jin [backed](#) President Yoon’s position of developing bilateral relations “based on mutual respect, reciprocity and common interest.”



Figure 1 2023 International Forum for China-South Korea-Japan Trilateral Cooperation opens in Qingdao. Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China

Regional engagements presented opportunities to pursue such relations. On the sidelines of ASEAN foreign ministerial meetings in Jakarta on July 14, China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Park [renewed](#) the commitment to advancing the partnership envisioned by the 2022 Xi -Yoon summit. They agreed to promote bilateral diplomacy, supply chain management, cultural exchanges, North Korea policy coordination, and cooperation with Japan. Recognizing “increasing difficulties” in bilateral relations, Wang Yi [affirmed](#) that Beijing’s policy toward South Korea “does not target any third party, nor should it be affected by any third party.” Japan’s Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa joined the two ministers for ASEAN+3 talks on July 13, where Park [vowed](#) South Korea “will play a more active role to move trilateral cooperation forward” as host of the anticipated ninth leader-level trilateral summit. The three

neighbors participated in RCEP’s fourth committee meeting the following week.

As host of a trilateral forum in Qingdao on July 3, China’s foreign ministry promoted China-South Korea-Japan relations through a four-part series on Wang’s remarks, emphasizing mutual respect, independence, and openness and inclusiveness. Wang [reassured](#) that China “will not tread the old path of expansion and plunder pursued by some major countries in history,” [argued](#) “no relations should be used to contain or even suppress neighboring countries,” and [urged](#) the three partners to “see each other’s development as their opportunities.” He [proposed](#) that the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat “should promote bilateral cooperation through multilateral cooperation.” In May, South Korea hosted the 23rd Trilateral Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governor’s Meeting advancing post-pandemic recovery initiatives. Seoul seeks to restart the trilateral leader-level summit this year after three suspensions since its initiation in 2008, most recently from 2020 due to South Korea-Japan tensions and the COVID-19 pandemic. A telephone conversation between Wang and Park in August reinforced anticipation for expanding high-level dialogue.



Figure 2 23rd China-South Korea-Japan Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors’ Meeting is held in Incheon. Yonhap

Another source of relative optimism is China’s lifting of COVID-19 restrictions on Chinese group tours to an additional 78 countries, which included South Korea. Announced on Aug. 10, the policy shift ends a six-year ban on South Korea since the 2017 THAAD dispute. South Korea’s Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism took active steps this year to revive South Korea’s tourism industry, including the resumption of visa waivers for Chinese group

travelers to Jeju Island. In July, Ambassador Xing supported such promotion efforts in a meeting with Jeju's Gov. Oh Young-hun. Beijing's lifting of the pandemic-era ban drove a resurgence of Chinese cruise ship bookings to the island. However, China-South Korea passenger travel from January to April 2023 amounted to just 13% of 2019 pre-pandemic levels, despite more than 70% recovery in South Korean routes with Japan and some Southeast Asian neighbors.

China-South Korea Coordination on Korean Peninsula and Regional Security

North Korea and other regional security concerns remain enduring sources of pessimism. North Korea conducted 69 ballistic missile tests last year, almost three times its previous record of 25. Wang Yi and Park Jin's July meeting in Jakarta occurred a day after Beijing and Moscow blocked UNSC action on Pyongyang's July 12 *Hwasong-18* ICBM test. In addition to [urging](#) China to "play a constructive role" in peninsula security, Park drew broader support including an [ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement](#) condemning Pyongyang's ballistic missile launch. When regional tensions resurfaced with clashes between the Chinese coast guard and Philippines vessels in August, the South Korean Foreign Ministry renewed its support for a "rules-based order in the South China Sea."



Figure 3 Wang Yi and Park Jin hold talks on sidelines of ASEAN foreign ministers' meetings in Jakarta. Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China

Multilateral gatherings in Southeast Asia also facilitated China-South Korea military exchanges. Defense Ministers Li Shangfu and Lee Jong-sup met on June 3 at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, where Lee [described](#) North Korea as "a state turning the Pacific into

its firing range." Pyongyang claimed a failed space rocket launch two days before the event. In his [speech](#) on regional tensions, Lee called for "united action" on UNSC resolutions, emphasized the global risks of "choosing inactivity," and outlined Yoon's policy steps on North Korea including US-South Korea military deterrence and Seoul's "Audacious Initiative" of economic incentives for denuclearization commitments. Lee noted existing sanctions remain constrained since "some countries are ignoring North Korea's unlawful behaviors," while additional resolutions have not passed "due to objections by countries with important responsibilities." Presenting "[China's New Security Initiatives](#)" a day later, Li stated "China has played a constructive role" on the peninsula through "political reconciliation," while "some countries" have favored "exacerbating tension" through military options. The United States imposed sanctions on two China-based DPRK nationals on June 15, when Pyongyang test-fired two short-range ballistic missiles.



Figure 4 Chinese and South Korean defense ministers Li Shangfu and Lee Jong-sup meet in Singapore on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue. Yonhap

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's June 18-19 [visit to Beijing](#) was viewed as "an olive branch to China" creating an [opportunity](#) for improving China-South Korea relations. However, a contributor for North Korea's *Korean Central News Agency* [called](#) it "a disgraceful begging trip of the provoker admitting the failure of the policy of putting pressure on China." Director-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Department of US Affairs Kwon Jong-gun [stated](#) in a June 24 press statement that "there will be neither restraint nor adjustment" in North Korea's "exercise of its right to self-defense." Kim Jong Un's sister Kim

Yo Jong reiterated this position to oppose the UNSC's July 13 meeting on Pyongyang's ICBM test.

As Yoon's April 26 [joint statement](#) with Biden sharpened Chinese criticism over extended deterrence, Yoon [told](#) reporters in Seoul on May 2, "we're left with no choice" given China's failure to enforce UNSC sanctions. After South Korea's June 6 [election](#) as a nonpermanent UNSC member between 2024 and 2025, Foreign Minister Park [described](#) existing UNSC mechanisms on North Korean violations as "virtually paralyzed." Yoon's [National Security Strategy](#), released on June 7, further projected South Korea's resolve as a global pivotal state against North Korean threats..

United Nations Security Council Paralysis and Chinese and Russian "Celebration" of North Korea

Chinese and Russian protection of Pyongyang from US-led UNSC efforts to condemn the North for violating prohibitions on ballistic missile technology in its satellite launches turned the UNSC into a forum for rhetorical combat over North Korea. The UNSC held three sessions following North Korea's May 31 failed satellite launch, July 12 ICBM launch, and Aug. 23 failed satellite launch. At each of these sessions, dialogue between US and Chinese officials grew increasingly pointed while the UNSC itself remained immobilized and unable to respond to North Korean violations. During a June 2 session, Alternate Representative for Special Political Affairs Robert Wood [anticipated](#) that "China and Russia will likely once again attempt to draw false equivalences between the DPRK's unlawful ballistic missile launches and lawful, defensive, and pre-announced US-ROK joint military exercises." On July 13, Acting Deputy Representative to the United Nations Jeffrey DeLaurentis [stated](#) that in contrast to UNSC condemnation of North Korean ICBM launches in 2017, "Russia and China have prevented this Council from speaking with one voice...Pyongyang is demonstrating it feels emboldened—perhaps even encouraged—to continue in this manner because China and Russia have consistently prevented this Council from taking action to halt these transgressions." Aug. 25, Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield [called out](#) China and Russia for "celebrating violations of Security Council resolutions and continuing to block Council action," noting that UNSC unity is obstructed

not by the 13 members that condemned the launch, but by the two that did not.

Chinese Ambassador Geng Shuang [responded](#) with reviews of past multilateral efforts to facilitate US-DPRK dialogue and encourage denuclearization, concluding that "Some countries have repeatedly indicated that the Security Council must not remain indifferent to the status quo of the Peninsula, but should play a constructive role. China shares this view. How can the Security Council play a constructive role? Is it constructive to point the finger at one party and to put all the blame on one party? Obviously not...The constructive role of the Council should be demonstrated by its efforts to promote de-escalation, mutual trust, and unity." Geng's [response](#) to Thomas-Greenfield regarding North Korea's Aug. 23 launch was even more pointed. He argued that "Given where we are, the Council needs unity, not fragmentation or confrontation, its actions should be of assistance, not a hindrance to the political settlement of the Peninsula issue. What these countries should really do is not to use the Council's platform to intensify tension and escalate the situation, but to come up with practical actions and concrete proposals to respond to the DPRK's legitimate concerns and to make efforts and create conditions for the relaunch of the dialogue."

The United States and China also clashed over the [push](#) by the US, Albania, Japan, and South Korea to hold the first meeting of the UNSC since 2017 on the human rights situation in North Korea on Aug. 17, which included testimony from UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in North Korea Elizabeth Salmon, and a North Korean defector as a civil society representative. Ambassador Geng [stated](#) China's opposition to the hearing by arguing that "pushing the Council to consider the human rights situation in the DPRK will not help ease, but escalate the situation. It is irresponsible and nonconstructive, and an abuse of the Council's power."

North Korea's Post-COVID "Victory Day" Hosting of Chinese and Russian Representatives in Pyongyang

North Korea's post-pandemic diplomatic emergence over the summer is a clear reflection of sharpening geopolitical rivalry and the

response from Pyongyang. The resumption of in-person diplomacy with North Korea was marked by the arrival in North Korea and diplomatic welcome of Wang Yajun as China's newly appointed ambassador to North Korea in early May. Ambassador Wang paid courtesy calls to leading DPRK officials including Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui and Premier Kim Tok-hun and received a special tour of Pyongyang. Wang's welcome presaged the normalization of North Korean diplomacy and resumption of official trade with China, including the resumption of Air Koryo flights between Beijing and Pyongyang in mid-August and the participation of a North Korean taekwondo team in a sporting competition in Kazakhstan. These exchanges signified a broader resumption of diplomatic exchanges between North Korea and the rest of the world.

The event that most clearly symbolized the resumption of in-person diplomacy by Pyongyang was North Korea's reception of China's CCP Central Committee member Li Hongzhong and Russia's Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu for events marking the 70th anniversary of the signing of the armistice ending the Korean War, celebrated as Victory Day in North Korea. In advance of the anniversary, Kim Jong Un paid respects at the Cemetery of Martyrs of the Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV) and sent birthday greetings to President Xi Jinping. North Korean media also marked the 62nd anniversary of the signing of the China-DPRK Friendship Treaty. In addition, the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided a [statement of support](#) for China in opposition to US provision of arms to Taiwan.

The presence of both senior Chinese and Russian representatives in Pyongyang for the anniversary signaled an emphasis on the emergence of a China-North Korea-Russia coalition in anticipation of and opposition to the emergence of an opposing US-South Korea-Japan coalition at Camp David. However, Kim's reception of his Chinese and Russian visitors was not trilateral, and North Korean attention to Defense Minister Shoigu seemed to upstage the reception of the Chinese delegation.

Chinese and Korean Responses to the US-South Korea-Japan Summit

The Biden-Yoon-Kishida [Camp David summit](#) on Aug. 18, launching "a new era of trilateral partnership" on rising security challenges,

sharpened regional attention on Beijing's response. In addition to reaffirming their commitment to North Korea's denuclearization, the three leaders jointly opposed "any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the waters of the Indo-Pacific," citing China's "dangerous and aggressive behavior supporting unlawful maritime claims" in the South China Sea. They called cross-strait peace and stability "an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community." China's foreign ministry renewed its position on the two issues, [calling](#) the summit "an act of gross interference in China's internal affairs, a deliberate attempt to sow discord between China and our neighbors and a serious violation of norms in international relations." In an Aug. 21 [Yonhap](#) interview confirming Beijing was briefed on the summit's outcome, Minister Park Jin assured that US-South Korea-Japan trilateralism does not target a specific actor.

Through Chinese state media, Chinese analysts called the summit a "'[starting shot](#)' for new cold war," a "'[mini-NATO](#)' in the making," and a dividing force in "[China-Japan-South Korea](#) economic and trade ties." Korea experts like Lu Chao at Liaoning Academy of Social Sciences pointed to gaps in interests between the United States and its allies. While South Korea places top priority on peninsula security rather than China, "South Korea's losses are likely to be the biggest" when it comes to science and technology cooperation. China Foreign Affairs University's Li Haidong emphasized the domestic costs of "unbalanced" diplomacy and "lack of independence" for South Korea, tracing Yoon's declining approval ratings to pro-US policies and outreach to Japan. He also warned against North Korean and Russian reactions. In the weeks ahead of the Camp David summit, the [China-North Korea-Russia intimacy](#) displayed at commemorations of the Korean War armistice in Pyongyang raised South Korean calls for trilateral security cooperation with US and Japanese counterparts.

South Korean public concern extends to the economic implications of US-South Korea-Japan cooperation amid Beijing's gradual lifting of post-THAAD restrictions. While South Korea may gain the most from the trilateral supply chain partnership by securing traditional advantages over China, it also faces the biggest risks of Chinese economic retaliation. To manage this "[double-edged sword](#)" of "trilateral economic solidarity," a *Korea Times* contributor called on the Yoon administration to

more forcefully persuade Washington not to restrain Korean chip and automakers and strengthen industrial policies at home. The costs of Chinese economic retaliation were soon displayed by Beijing's ban on Japanese seafood imports after [Japan's release](#) of treated radioactive water from the Fukushima nuclear plant into the Pacific Ocean. Initiated from Aug. 24, the water discharge exacerbated protests in both [China and South Korea](#).

China-South Korea Economic Partnership Confronts "Tech Cold War"

Pessimism remains over the China-ROK economic partnership given US-China competition and South Korean domestic division. ROK exports to China, which declined by 26% between January and June 2023, drive Korean pessimism after last year's record high trade deficit numbers. By Bank of Korea measures, the United States replaced China as South Korea's biggest goods market last year, for the first time since 2004. Between January and June 2023, the US even replaced China as the second biggest K-pop market abroad, behind Japan. During his June meeting with DP leader Lee Jae-myung, Ambassador Xing [attributed](#) South Korea's mounting trade deficit to "some efforts to get out of China." But ruling PPP leader Kim Gi-hyeon [stressed](#) China's economic importance in a meeting with White House Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt Campbell on July 11, toning down his party's earlier hostility toward Beijing.



Figure 5 Chinese Ambassador Xing Haiming and Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung meet in Seoul. Yonhap

The US-China "[tech cold war](#)" implies a major restructuring of South Korean trade and investment. Beijing's sanctions on US chipmaker Micron in May heightened South Korea's dilemma as a global industry leader. The sanctions were announced a day after [G7 leaders](#)

pledged to "push for a level playing field" given "challenges posed by China's non-market policies and practices." A *JoongAng Daily* contributor [wondered](#), "Could Korean chipmakers replace the demand for chips in China?," questioning [reported](#) US requests to Seoul before the April Biden-Yoon summit to avoid such a scenario. Beijing's next "[sword of resource control](#)" emerged on July 3 ahead of US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen's [China trip](#) in the form of export restrictions on two metals used in chip-making. In August, Biden's executive order restricting US investment in three Chinese high-tech sectors raised South Korean public calls for [diversifying](#) export markets. Such calls cited the 14-member "[alternative Asian supply chain](#)" (Altaisia) to manage US-China technology competition in the long run. Yoon's June state visit to Vietnam, the leading [source](#) of South Korea's trade surplus and third biggest trade partner after replacing Japan last year, suggested that "[Vietnam](#) has emerged as the alternative for China."



Figure 6 Chinese and South Korean finance ministers meet in India on the sidelines of a G20 meeting. Yonhap

China and South Korea's 27th vice minister-level joint economic committee meeting in Beijing on Aug. 29 focused on supply chains, bilateral consultation mechanisms, the service sector, and new sectors like the digital and green economies. G20 meetings in India facilitated bilateral talks on such priorities between finance ministers Liu Kun and Choo Kyung-ho in July, and trade ministers Wang Shouwen and Ahn Duk-geun in August. Wang and Ahn agreed to expand bilateral trade and investment through regional partnerships like RCEP. In separate talks with US Trade Representative Katherine Tai, Ahn also affirmed

plans to implement new initiatives under the US-South Korea-Japan framework and IPEF.

At a May parliamentary session, Finance Minister Choo [denied](#) any “plan to decouple from China,” South Korea’s “most important” economic partner. In a May meeting with AIIB Vice President Ludger Schuknecht in Seoul, South Korea’s First Vice Finance Minister Bang Ki-sun sought joint opportunities for Korean businesses, financial institutions, and workers. Supply chain cooperation was a priority focus of the 12th Asia Business Summit in Seoul on July 5, co-hosted by the Federation of Korean Industries and Japan Business Federation and also bringing Chinese and Taiwanese counterparts. It was also an overlapping focus area of APEC and IPEF’s parallel ministerial talks in Detroit, where Trade Minister Ahn met China’s Commerce Minister Wang Wentao on May 25, and US counterpart Tai two days later.

Conclusion: Rethinking “The United States for Security and China for Economy”

During her May visit to Seoul, WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala [described](#) South Korea as “a global poster child for trade” that is “relatively friendly with both sides” in the US-China rivalry. But China’s shifting place in South Korea’s economic strategy intensifies domestic polarization on *anmigyeongjung* (the United States for security and China for economy). A *Korea Times* editorial [voiced](#) in June that “while maintaining tight security in alliance with the US,” Seoul “needs to expand its export markets by reducing its reliance on China.” Another [concluded](#) in August, “Korea can no longer depend on America for security and China for the economy.” Others are more concerned about ensuring economic security amid the US-China tech rivalry. As one *Korea Times* commentator [argued](#) in July after the US treasury secretary opposed Beijing’s export controls, “If Yellen’s comment means allies should not seek independent solutions with Beijing, that narrows Seoul’s room to move.”

In response to the Camp David summit in August, China’s Foreign Ministry mapped out “[two trajectories in the Asia-Pacific](#)”: a path of economic integration exemplified by RCEP and CPTPP, and another one of Cold War confrontation modeled by US-South Korea-Japan and other “exclusionary groupings.” While China [urged](#) South Korea to

“join China and other countries in the region,” South Korea’s strategic direction also depends on broader global ambitions. Reflecting on South Korea’s new status as a nonpermanent UNSC member, one account of the UNSC’s emerging bloc dynamics [called](#) South Korea “a contributing member of the liberal bloc” but argued “South Korean leaders and citizens do not seem to grasp” this envisioned identity.

The anticipated deepening of US-ROK alliance cooperation on supply chain resiliency and technology development suggests profound implications for South Korea’s economic orientation and newfound interdependence with US markets, as opposed to historic interdependence with Chinese markets, as well as for South Korea’s geopolitical orientation. But for South Korea, the task of de-risking from China in key sectors such as semiconductors also involves significant economic opportunity costs. Those costs have been reduced somewhat by Chinese economic policies that have raised barriers to entry for Korean companies in China’s domestic economy, and near-term uncertainties about China’s post-COVID economic recovery. In addition, South Korea has pursued decade-long efforts to diversify its supply chains to avoid overdependence on China, calling into question the possible diversionary effects of coalition arrangements among the United States, South Korea, and Japan. These factors will sustain and complicate management of a China-South Korea relationship focused both on common interests and mutual respect, especially as the building of rival coalitions will reinforce the strategic nature of the China-North Korea relationship. But the biggest challenge for the China-South Korea relationship may lie in the psychology of the relationship, particularly whether both sides can find ways to address the gap between South Korea’s historic role as a peripheral state and South Korea’s aspiration to be a global pivotal state.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

MAY—AUGUST 2023

May 2, 2023: 23rd China-South Korea-Japan Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors' Meeting is [held](#) in Incheon.

May 8, 2023: North Korea's Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui meets Wang Yajun, the new Chinese ambassador to North Korea.

May 22, 2023: China's Director General of Asian Affairs Liu Jinsong meets South Korean counterpart Choi Yong-jun and Deputy Minister for Political Affairs Choi Youngsam in Seoul.

May 25, 2023: Chinese and South Korean ministers Wang Wentao and Ahn Duk-guen meet on sidelines of the APEC trade ministers' meeting in Detroit.

May 31, 2023: Pyongyang fails to launch a claimed military spy satellite.

June 2, 2023: UN Security Council holds briefing on North Korea's May 31 reconnaissance satellite launch.

June 3, 2023: Chinese and South Korean defense ministers Li Shangfu and Lee Jong-sup [meet](#) in Singapore on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue.

June 7, 2023: South Korea's defense ministry lodges complaint with China and Russia over Jun. 6 KADIZ incursions.

June 8, 2023: Chinese Ambassador Xing Haiming and Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung [meet](#) in Seoul.

June 9, 2023: South Korea's foreign ministry summons Chinese Ambassador Xing Haiming in Seoul.

June 10, 2023: Chinese foreign ministry summons South Korean Ambassador Chung Jae-ho in Beijing.

June 12-16, 2023: Democratic Party lawmakers visit Beijing.

June 12, 2023: Korean prosecutors announce the indictment of a former Samsung Electronics

executive for stealing trade secrets to replicate a chip plant in China.

June 14, 2023: South Korea's oceans ministry announces agreement reached with China the previous week on illegal fishing.

June 15, 2023: Pyongyang fires two short-range ballistic missiles.

June 15, 2023: United States imposes sanctions on two China-based North Korean nationals for supporting Pyongyang's weapons development programs.

June 15, 2023: Democratic Party lawmakers start their China visit.

June 15, 2023: Kim Jong Un sends Xi Jinping a 70th birthday letter.

June 18, 2023: South Korean soccer player Son Jun-ho is placed under arrest in China on bribery charges.

June 23, 2023: National Human Rights Commission of Korea urges China not to repatriate North Korean defectors.

June 29, 2023: North Korea finishes renovating the China-North Korea friendship tower in Pyongyang.

July 3, 2023: 2023 International Forum for China-South Korea-Japan Trilateral Cooperation [opens](#) in Qingdao.

July 4, 2023: Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong meets South Korean Deputy Minister for Political Affairs Choi Youngsam in Beijing.

July 4, 2023: Ninth South Korea-China Economic Cooperation Forum is held in Hubei, China.

July 11, 2023: Chinese and North Korean officials in Pyongyang attend Chinese embassy celebrations of the friendship treaty's 62nd anniversary.

July 12, 2023: North Korea test-fires a *Hwasong-18* ICBM.

July 12, 2023: UN Security Council holds a briefing on North Korea's ICBM launch.

July 13, 2023: China and Russia block UNSC action on North Korea.

July 14, 2023: Wang Yi and Park Jin [hold talks](#) on sidelines of ASEAN foreign ministers' meetings in Jakarta.

July 17, 2023: Chinese and South Korean finance ministers [meet](#) in India on the sidelines of a G20 meeting.

July 27, 2023: CCP Politburo member Li Hongzhong and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu attend 70th anniversary celebrations of the Korean War armistice in Pyongyang.

Aug. 10, 2023: China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism announces it will allow Chinese group tours to 78 countries including South Korea.

Aug. 16, 2023: Minister of Unification Kim Yung-ho calls on China to stop repatriating North Korean defectors to North Korea and requests China's help in sending North Korean defectors to South Korea.

Aug. 17, 2023: The UN Security Council holds a briefing on North Korea's human rights situation.

Aug. 18, 2023: North Korean taekwondo athletes and officials arrive in Beijing, North Korea's first delegation to travel abroad since 2020, to attend the opening ceremony of the ITF Taekwondo World Championships held in Kazakhstan.

Aug. 22, 2023: Post-pandemic passenger flights between China and North Korea resume with Air Koryo's arrival in Beijing.

Aug. 23, 2023: North Korea participates in the fourteenth China-Northeast Asia Expo in Changchun.

Aug. 24, 2023: North Korea claims a failed satellite launch.

Aug. 25, 2023: UN Security Council holds a briefing on North Korea's failed satellite launch.

Aug. 26, 2023: North Korea announces that North Korean citizens abroad can return home.

Aug. 24-25, 2023: Ministers Wang Shouwen and Ahn Duk-geun attend the G20 Trade and Investment Ministerial Meeting in India and hold bilateral talks on the sidelines.

Aug. 28-30, 2023: 27th China-South Korea joint economic committee meeting is held in Beijing.

Aug. 28, 2023: Media reports indicate that North Koreans have started to return to North Korea by bus from Dandong after Pyongyang's Aug. 27 announcement lifting COVID-19 border restrictions.

Aug. 29, 2023: China's Vice Foreign Minister Deng Li and South Korea's Second Vice Foreign Minister Oh Young-ju meet in Beijing.

Aug. 31, 2023: Chinese and South Korean foreign ministers Wang Yi and Park Jin hold telephone talks.

Aug. 31, 2023: First cruise (Blue Star Dream) from China to South Korea in six years arrives in Jeju Island.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

FROM TALKING PAST EACH OTHER TO BARELY TALKING

JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

China's mid-August decision to allow group travel to Japan days ahead of the 45th anniversary of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the two nations as well as indications that China would be open to a meeting between Xi Jinping and Fumio Kishida on the sidelines of the Group of 20 (G20) leaders' summit in India in September gave hope for improvement in China-Japan ties. The optimism proved short-lived. Chinese media [responded](#) that Japan would first have to turn away from following the US lead, stop encouraging Taiwanese pro-independence forces, and strictly abide by the four communiques signed between Beijing and Tokyo. China's protests over Japan's release of radioactive water culminated in a total ban on Japanese marine products. The PRC also expressed annoyance with Japanese restrictions on the export of computer chips, the ministry of defense's release of its annual Defense of Japan 2023 white paper, Tokyo's closer relations with NATO, and its tripartite agreement with South Korea and the US. Japan expressed uneasiness with Russia-China cooperation and became concerned with renewed Chinese interest in Okinawa, with its purchases of Japanese land, cyberattacks, and its refusal to import Japanese seafood products.

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Political

China and Japan marked the 45th anniversary of the signing of a bilateral treaty of peace and friendship with no large official celebratory events. According to *China Daily*, visiting former Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio [described](#) China-Japan relations as at a crossroads and urged both sides to acknowledge differences, mutual respect, and mutual understanding. The paper also quoted the China-friendly Hatoyama as saying that Japan should uphold its constitutional commitment to renounce war, respect the position that Taiwan is a part of China as outlined in the 1972 Sino-Japanese joint statement, and refrain from supporting Taiwan separatists. Chinese objections to Tokyo's release of water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant into the sea culminated in a total ban on imports of Japanese marine products. Japan's supportive statements about Taiwan, and ongoing territorial and trade disputes continued to rankle. China is also angry with Japan for signing on to US-led efforts to restrict access to computer chips, with Commerce Minister Wang Wentao [urging](#) Japan to halt its semiconductor export controls, terming them a "wrongdoing" that seriously violates international economic and trade rules. Japan responded that it was simply fulfilling its duty to contribute to international peace and security.



Figure 1 Signing of the Treaty of Sino-Japanese Treaty of friendship, Aug. 12 1978. Kyodo

China and Japan also sparred over the G7 meeting held in Hiroshima in May, with Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong [summoning](#) Japanese Ambassador to China Tarumi Hideo to

lodge representations against its harsh tone on China. Sun accused Japan of colluding with other countries in smearing and attacking China, and grossly interfering in China's internal affairs, thus violating the basic principles of international law and the spirit of the four political documents between China and Japan. Unapologetic, Tarumi [replied](#) that unless China changed its behavior, G7 countries would continue to voice their common concerns about Beijing. "If China does not want these issues to be referenced, it should first respond more positively." Japan also complained about Chinese cyberattacks on its defense facilities.

The annual tension-laden issue of high-ranking Japanese personages visiting the Yasukuni Shrine on the 78th anniversary of Japan's surrender on Aug. 15, was relatively low-key. Prime Minister Kishida did not [visit](#) but tendered his usual ritual *tamagushi* offering through an agent at his own expense and presented as president of the ruling LDP rather than in his official capacity as prime minister. Economic Security Minister Takaichi Sanae and LDP policy leader Hagiuda Koichi visited in person, with the former also specifying that her *tamagushi* offering had been made at her own expense. About 70 lawmakers of a suprapartisan group visited the shrine as well, including former Environment Minister Koizumi Shinjiro and son of former prime minister Koizumi Junichiro. China's protest was its standard "serious representation" to the Japanese foreign ministry.

Water

Japan's release of contaminated water remained a source of tension throughout the reporting period, with Chinese media characterizing the release as turning the Pacific into a sewer and refusing to acknowledge an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report that recognized the validity of the ocean release. China's media stated there would be dangers to marine and human life from the contaminated water, and that the action was strongly opposed by other nations.

While Chinese sources [continued](#) to denounce the release, others opined that its opposition to the IAEA report was another of Beijing's challenges to international rules. In July, Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Nishimura Yasutoshi [reported](#) Beijing had rebuffed repeated requests to have experts from both countries meet to discuss from a scientific standpoint the upcoming discharge of treated contaminated water. Although some countries, including Russia, backed China's position, it did not receive the support from South Korea that it hoped for, and opposition to release of the water has not spread widely. In late August, Qingdao police [arrested](#) a man for throwing eggs and stones onto the campus of a Japanese school, and the Japanese government and its embassy in Beijing reported receive many harassing phone calls after the release of water. The government termed the calls "extremely regrettable," while a spokesperson for China's foreign ministry claimed to have no knowledge of the matter. Chinese media [accused](#) the Japanese government and media as hyping the incidents to portray the country as a victim, pointing to the absence of demonstrations or riots. Taiwan has said nothing.

The Japanese government has remained committed to its discharge plan, scheduled to take place in stages. According to the Tokyo Electric Power Corporation, TEPCO, the initial [release](#) entails discharging 31,200 tons of water over four separate occasions during the current fiscal year but made clear that this would not make a dent in the massive amount of contaminated water that has accumulated in its tanks. The goal is completion by 2051 at which time the Fukushima plant is to be decommissioned.

Taiwan

Affirmations of Japanese support for Taiwan's continued de facto independence continued to draw Beijing's anger, with the Chinese ambassador to Tokyo saying in May that if Japan continued to link Taiwan to its own security, "the Japanese people would be dragged into the

fire," a statement Japan's foreign ministry [protested](#) through diplomatic channels. Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa stressed that peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait are important to Japan's security, stating that Japan had repeatedly conveyed its position to China along with Tokyo's wish that China-Taiwan issues be resolved peacefully. Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company in June [announced](#) plans to build its second Japanese plant in Kumamoto Prefecture, while adding that it has no plans to introduce advanced chip manufacturing processes into the plant. The Japanese government will [provide](#) a subsidy of up to \$3.41 billion for the project, which has been joined by Sony and Denso corporations. In addition, Japanese financial firm SBI Holdings will [create](#) a company to help Taiwan's Powerchip Semiconductor Manufacturing Corp to establish a foundry and research lab to develop more advanced chips.

Warm Taiwan-Japan relations included Abe Akie—continuing the Taiwan-friendly policy of her late husband, former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo—[visiting](#) Taiwan in July, meeting with President Tsai Ing-wen and Vice President William Lai and pledging to do everything she can to foster a strong friendship between the two sides. Lai's attendance at Abe's funeral last year provoked a strong response from Beijing. A few weeks later, former prime minister and current LDP Vice-President Aso Taro visited Taiwan at the invitation of the Taiwan government, [laying](#) flowers at the grave of former President Lee Teng-hui and [stating](#) that Japan must be willing to fight to repel a Chinese invasion of the island. To queries about whether this represented official Japanese policy or simply reflected Aso's personal conviction, Suzuki Keisuke, an LDP lawmaker who accompanied Aso to Taiwan, [told](#) a talk show that Aso had discussed the issue with Japanese government officials beforehand, indicating that Aso's view was not Aso's personal remark, but a result of arrangements with government insiders, saying that "I think the Japanese government clearly regards this as the official line." Aso's visit marked the first time that an

LDP vice president officially visited the island since Japan and Taiwan severed diplomatic ties in 1972.



Figure 2 Abe Akie (left) meets with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen (right) at the presidential office in Taipei in July 2023. Photo: Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan)

Two of the three leading contenders for Taiwan’s presidency visited Japan for meetings with Diet members and to give lectures: Taiwan People’s Party leader Ko Wen-je in June and KMT standard bearer Hou Yu-ih in July. Wary of provoking China’s animosity over higher-ranking officials traveling abroad, Democratic Progressive Party head (William) Lai Ching-te, who is also Taiwan’s vice-president, did not visit but instead [hosted](#) a delegation of more than 60, comprising members of the Diet, local government representatives, and university students. In his welcome speech Lai noted that Taiwan is Japan’s fourth-largest trading partner and Japan is Taiwan’s third-largest trading partner, with total bilateral trade reaching a record \$88.2 billion last year. While in Taiwan, the group met with the other leading candidates, with all emphasizing the shared values of the two countries and the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Okinawa

In June, while visiting the China National Archives of Publications and Culture, a facility established on the outskirts of Beijing last year to collect and preserve Chinese publications

from different eras, Xi Jinping [spoke](#) of the “deep relations” between China and the Ryukyu Kingdom, today’s Okinawa. He added that the 36 Clans of the Min-People went to the Ryukyu Islands and settled—a reference to the movement of people during Ming dynasty China in the 14th century. He emphasized the need to collect and sort such historic documents to inherit and develop Chinese civilization well.



Figure 3 Chinese President Xi Jinping, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, visits the China National Archives of Publications and Culture in Beijing, capital of China, June 1, 2023. Xi participated in a meeting on cultural inheritance and development, and delivered an important speech on Friday. (Xinhua/Yao Dawei)

That *Renmin Ribao*, the newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, printed the remarks gave them an imprimatur of official legitimacy, setting off what one columnist [called](#) a “mini Ryukyu boom” of Chinese scholars issuing comments about the topic that mentioned that Okinawa was a tributary state of China. Tributary status has no bearing on sovereignty and during the Tokugawa, the Ryukyu kingdom also paid tribute to Japan, but the flurry of Chinese comments raised Japanese suspicions that they were the precursor of Chinese claims over Okinawa. The disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands are administered as part of Okinawa. Concerns were [deepened](#) when Denny Tamaki, governor of Okinawa, paid a visit to China. The child of an Okinawan mother and a US marine who left the island before he was born, Tamaki is a strong opponent of US bases there, as is Beijing,

thereby providing a convenient wedge issue for China. Kishida then paid a visit to Okinawa to plead for understanding on the base issue, but was told by Tamaki that the islands' inhabitants feared for their safety in time of war, remarks that the conservative daily *Sankei Shimbun* [termed](#) bizarre.

Land Purchases

In light of new revelations on Chinese acquisitions on Okinawa and elsewhere, the Japanese government introduced new measures to [monitor](#) foreign purchases of land. In an effort to address economic and national security concerns, foreign owners and buyers of farmland will be required to register their nationalities, with the amended regulations taking effect on Sept. 1. The nationality of the owner must be stated in the farmland registry and on documents when applying for permission to buy new farmland, after which the government will link the farmland registry system to the basic resident registry. Foreign nationals who already own farmland will have to register their nationality on the farmland registry. Under the new system, authorities may also periodically release statistics on the percentage of farmland held by foreign owners by country or region. Corporations that own farmland will also have to specify their nationality when reporting ownership status to the authorities every year. In addition to nationality, individuals will have to disclose their status of residence, while corporations will have to disclose the nationalities of their principal shareholders. The scope of previous surveys had previously been limited to foreign corporations or people believed to be foreigners living abroad, making it difficult to trace information on land acquired by foreigners in the past. In 2021, a law was enacted to regulate land use near Self-Defense Force bases, nuclear power plants, and on remote islands. Monitoring of agricultural land will be likewise strengthened, since it affects the country's food and economic security.

Economic

Chinese economic news dismal was dismal. In May, GDP growth forecasts were [revised](#) downward and the RMB fell below seven to the dollar for the first time in six months while Citi's economic surprise index had one of its steepest falls on record. In mid-August, property giant Country Garden defaulted and finance giant Zhongrong, one of the biggest players in a \$2.9 trillion dollar shadow finance market, failed to [repay](#) trust products while its parent Zhongzhi separately missed payments to investors its wealth management businesses. In the same month, faced with rising figures on youth unemployment, China stopped reporting the figures. A major bright spot was the automobile industry. In the first quarter of 2023, China, helped by demand for electric cars and sales to Russia, [exported](#) more cars than Japan for the first time. Industry data [revealed](#) that total sales of Japanese auto brands in China fell 32% year-on-year in the first quarter of 2023. Japanese firms now account for 18% of China's new vehicle sales, down from 20% in 2022, 22% in 2021, and 24% in 2020. Mazda, Nissan, and Honda have been particularly hard hit. Chinese sales are increasing even inside Japan: BYD Auto, [helped](#) by multibillion-dollar government subsidies, plans to have 100 showrooms in Japan by 2025, with its Dolphin hatchback and Seal sedans due to enter the market this year. Japanese companies will try to compensate for their tardy response to the manufacture of EVs: motor manufacturer Nidec and chipmaker Renesas will [partner](#) to develop a power-efficient drive system for electric vehicles to keep pace with growing demand in China. A prototype is expected by the end of the year.

In Japan, first-quarter GDP growth [exceeded](#) expectations with the Nikkei rising about 30,000 for the first time in 20 months and the broader Topix index hitting its highest level in 33 years. In the second quarter of 2023, in the third consecutive quarter of expansion and fueled by a strong performance by its export sector, the Japanese economy [grew](#) by an annualized rate of 6 %. Still, a decline in domestic consumption was a cause of concern. Only two days after the

release of GDP growth figures, other data showed Japan's 1st trade deficit in 2 1/2 years, reflecting a slowdown in the Chinese economy. Nonetheless, Japan's business sentiment [improved](#) in the second quarter of 2023 as raw material costs peaked and removal of pandemic curbs lifted consumption, indicating to financial experts that the economy is on course for a steady recovery.

That China's economic [recovery](#) after the removal of pandemic restrictions has been less than hoped for has led to a bear market in equities. While Japanese investors, like those of other countries, were wary of committing funds to the uncertain Chinese economy, others clearly remained optimistic. In July, more than 80 members of a Japan Association for the Promotion of International Trade (JAPIT) delegation [led](#) by its president, Kono Yohei, and including Okinawa Gov. Tamaki, visited Beijing. This was the first such visit in four years and, according to Beijing's *Global Times*, represented the Japanese business community's hope to enhance trade cooperation with China, adding a worrisome political note that "Okinawa's pro-peace voices will be heard." Tamaki was said to have expressed the desire for enhanced Okinawa-China economic and cultural exchanges.

Japanese companies operating in China were reportedly [bracing](#) for employee arrests and other risks after China's revised anti-espionage law took effect, with a particular source of concern being the definition of acts of espionage is opaque under the law. Another cause for concern for Japanese manufacturers was how China's stricter gallium export license requirements will affect Japan. One analysis [concluded](#) that Japan's cheap offshore wind technology might be undermined in the short term, but the impact of China's new export restrictions on defense and EV technology advancement will most likely be minimal and likely to have more of a price impact than an overall supply impact. So far, both the Japanese government and companies are simply

observing the situation, waiting to see how China enforces its restrictions. If Beijing is serious about locking Japan away from its gallium supplies, Japan would find ways to ensure that it is less dependent on Chinese critical minerals in the future. Japan [joined](#) Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States in a Joint Declaration Against Trade-Related Economic Coercion and Non-Market Policies and Practices clearly directed against China and expressing "serious concern over trade-related economic coercion and non-market policies and practices that undermine the functioning of and confidence in the rules-based multilateral trading system" including the World Trade Organization and condemning the use of forced labor as a gross abuse of human rights.

Japan's Lawson chain, already the largest foreign and fifth largest convenience store in China, announced [plans](#) to increase its presence from 5,788 to 10,000 by 2025, and fast fashion giant Uniqlo, although [facing](#) a stumbling block from a trend among young Chinese shoppers for "China chic" (*guochao*) is pressing on with its ambitious goal of more than tripling sales to \$71 billion in 10 years. Huawei Technologies announced that it is [seeking](#) licensing fees from roughly 30 small to midsize Japanese companies for the use of patented technology. Wireless communication modules using Huawei's patented technology are indispensable for connected Internet of Things (IoT) networks, and are being adopted in autonomous driving, automated factories, medicine, power and logistics. Moving from high-tech to traditional handicrafts, in August 35 Chinese executives, many of whom run textile- and apparel-related businesses, [visited](#) Okabun Orimono, a 333-year old brocade-manufacturing company, to inquire about its secret for longevity. Private-sector companies in China were born after the country embarked on its reform and open-door policy in 1978: their founders, bereft of role-models, are now being replaced by successors who seek to establish legacies.

Apart from bilateral trade, each side sought to [expand](#) its trading relations with others. At the BRICS summit in Johannesburg in late August, the five members agreed to admit six additional states: Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, with dozens more countries voicing interest in joining an institution that aims at leveling the global playing field and, not incidentally, supporting Xi Jinping's plan to position China as the fulcrum of a new international order. Whether broadening an organization to include more members with disparate cultures and value systems will enhance this aim remains to be seen.

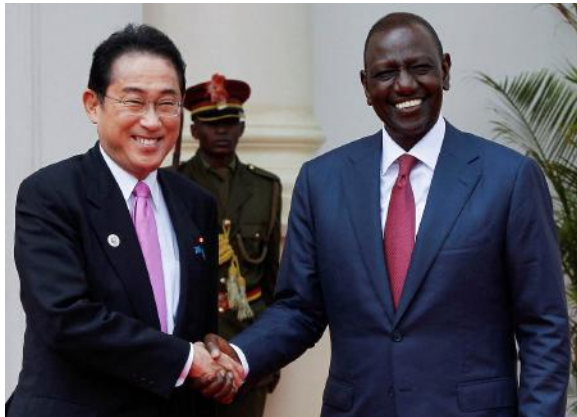


Figure 4 Kenya's President William Ruto meets Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at the State House in Nairobi. Presidential Press Service / Handout via Reuters

With China's increasingly hegemonic moves in mind, Kishida, visiting Nairobi, [pledged](#) Japanese support in developing Mombasa, the largest port in East Africa and facing the Indian Ocean. Chinese companies have been active in infrastructure there, resulting in massive debts to Kenya. To counter China's increasing expansion into the subcontinent, Japan is also [providing](#) full support to an 80-km road India is developing in its northeastern region bordering China that links to neighboring Bangladesh. Other related projects will result in creating a major logistics route from India to the Bay of Bengal. Aiming to counter Chinese restrictions on the free flow of data across borders, Japan and ASEAN have [established a](#) digital innovation center in Jakarta. In an effort to encourage

Middle East investment to shift from China to Japan as well as secure funds to help cover the massive cost of developing semiconductors, the Japanese government will [begin](#) working-level talks with a fund linked to the government of the United Arab Emirates. The aim is to tap the UAE's vast financial resources to [support](#) the growth of Japanese companies in this field. And, concerned with China's use of the Solomon Islands as a bridgehead to accelerate its advances in the South Pacific, Tokyo is [cooperating](#) with the United States and Australia to support infrastructure development, measures against global warming and human resource development to help solidify the foundations of South Pacific states.

Defense

In mid-May, Minister of National Defense Li Shangfu and his counterpart Hamada Yasukazu [talked](#) for the first time via the long-delayed direct telephone line dedicated to the maritime and air liaison [mechanism](#) between the two ministries but there were no reported results. According to *Global Times*, implementing the line took more than a decade "because of Japanese politicians' so-called purchase of the Diaoyu Islands and their intention to 'nationalize' them, as well as other unfavorable political and technical factors from Japan."

Japanese concerns over kinetic confrontation with China were exacerbated by a number of developments during the reporting period. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's annual report [issued in June](#), China [increased](#) its nuclear arsenal by 60 warheads in the 12 months to January 2023, more than in any of the other nine nuclear-armed states and is expected to continue growing to the point that Beijing could have at least as many intercontinental ballistic missiles as either the US or Russia by the turn of the decade. Xi has [told](#) China to be prepared for "extreme" scenarios, with state media proudly announcing the country's latest advances in such fields as hypersonic weapons, the creation of the world's longest wind tunnel with

capability of simulating missile flight environments, and drone swarms. Japanese military analysts pointed out that drone swarms would give China a significant advantage in a landing operation on the Japanese-administered but contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

In a display of power ahead of the G7 summit hosted by Japan, a four-ship flotilla [led](#) by one of the Chinese navy's most powerful warships, the *Type 055* guided missile destroyer *Lhasa*, performed a 12-day counterclockwise circumnavigation of Japan beginning from the Strait of Tsushima, progressing through Tsugaru, and on to the Izu Island chain south of Tokyo. Japan's Coast Guard revealed that Chinese vessels had [appeared](#) in Japan's contiguous zone for a record 336 days in 2022, more than twice the tally from 2018. Since the China Coast Guard now has 157 vessels weighing at least 1,000 tons—twice as many as the Japan Coast Guard—it is feared that the JCG could not handle an incursion on its own. Yet if the MSDF and JCG responded jointly, the Chinese navy would be incentivized to join, escalating hostilities. As the report period closed, a Chinese reconnaissance drone [flew](#) between Yonaguni and Taiwan, the fourth recorded such flight, though there was no violation of Japan's territorial airspace.



The Yomiuri Shimbun
A China Coast Guard vessel, center, is seen between Japan Coast Guard patrol vessels off Uotsuri Island in the Senkaku Islands in January 2023.

Figure 5 Source: Yomiuri

Japan showed continued uneasiness with increased Russia-China military cooperation, particularly after the two conducted successive

naval exercises in the Sea of Japan. In June, Chinese and Russian bombers flew near Japan for two days in a row, and at the end of July 10 Chinese and Russian naval vessels [passed](#) through the Soya Strait between Cape Soya in Hokkaido and Sakhalin in the first China-Russia joint naval vessel sailing near Japan since September 2022. At that time, seven Chinese and Russian ships traveled from the Tsugaru Strait between Hokkaido and Honshu to the Osumi Strait in Kagoshima prefecture, southwestern Japan. With Chinese and Russian killer satellites in mind, Japan affirmed its desire to [participate](#) in the Combined Space Operations Center operated by the US, Britain, Australia, and Canada, which monitors outer space including satellites and space debris around the clock. In addition, the Tokyo government will encourage private investment to develop the space industry.

Showing continued [concern](#) with a Chinese attack on Japan's outer islands, the Maritime SDF and coast guard staged a first-ever joint response in line with new guidelines that enable the defense minister to take command of the coast guard, normally overseen by the land ministry, in an emergency. The coast guard can also share data gathered by US-made *SeaGuardian* drones with the maritime force in real time. The SDF is to respond to hostile advances in and around Japan's territorial waters, while the coast guard focuses on noncombat operations including evacuating and rescuing civilians, providing information to vessels, and monitoring terrorist threats on ports. Adding to Japanese anxiety over the islands, China in late June [announced](#) breakthroughs in unmanned ships including a model that can be carried by landing ships and released upon approaching beachheads, at which time the drone vessel will open up a passage for the landing troops by scattering explosives and breaching obstacles.

Japan also moved closer to NATO. Kishida attended the NATO summit meeting in Vilnius, Lithuania in June. A statement by

Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg [said](#) that NATO is concerned with China's military buildup and its expansion of nuclear forces, and that no other partner is closer to NATO than Japan. Referencing NATO's planned liaison office in Tokyo, China's leading military newspaper [accused](#) Japan as applying for a job as "doorman" of NATO. It said that Kishida's participation at the Vilnius summit could result in Japan's permanent participation in the organization, allowing Tokyo to serve as a transit station from NATO and countries in the Asia-Pacific such as the Republic of Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, that Washington is trying to rally to its cause.

The Chinese [denounced](#) the release of the Japanese defense ministry's annual white paper *Defense of Japan 2023*, noting that China was mentioned 64 times in the 32-page document and constituting "an unprecedented greatest strategic challenge to Japan." PRC media detailed increases to Japan's defense budget in alleged contravention of its peace constitution, which Beijing's *China Daily* described as a typical example of a thief crying to others to catch a thief, just as Japan did before invading in 1931 and 1937.

In August, in a historic summit at Camp David, the leaders of long-term antagonists Japan and Korea [met](#) US President Biden pledging to increase their defense cooperation, work together on ballistic missile defense, hold at least one trilateral meeting annually, and cooperate on security and economic challenges facing their nations. More critical of China than anticipated, they renewed their opposition to changing the status quo in the Indo-Pacific, reaffirmed the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait "as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community," and increasing economic cooperation. The latter will include building more resilient supply chains in semiconductors, batteries, and related technologies.

At a news conference, Biden [said](#) that the summit was not anti-China, but the Chinese leadership, who have long accused the US of seeking to encircle, contain, and suppress the rise of China, did not regard the gathering as benign. In Beijing's worst-case scenario, the trilateral relationship is a mini-NATO that could grow to include the Philippines and Vietnam, possibly drawing in India and Australia, the other members of the Quad, in effect creating an Indo-Pacific NATO. Chinese media have portrayed Japan and South Korea as being strong-armed by the United States into a position that will ultimately harm all of them—one cartoon showed Uncle Sam as the lead paddler in a canoe that is about to take all three over a waterfall. Chinese media attempted to drive a wedge between the already fragile grouping, with nationalistic commentator Hu Xijin [emphasizing](#) how South Korea's prosperity will be impacted by "becoming a more faithful servant of the US."

The Future

The scope for improvement in China-Japan relations is limited. The occasions that could have been used to restore more cordial bilateral relations—the 45th anniversary of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in August and the 50th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations in September 2022—passed with only perfunctory acknowledgement and each side reiterating its grievances with the other. China continues to put pressure on Japan regarding disputed territories and affirms its support for Russia, with whom Japan also has a territorial dispute. Japan has indicated interest in cooperating with NATO as well as moving closer to a tripartite arrangement with the United States and South Korea, thereby deepening fears in Beijing that the PRC is being encircled by hostile powers.

How long this situation can endure is problematic. Anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea is strong and the release of allegedly radioactive water has given President Yoon's critics an additional issue to protest: it is not inconceivable that he could be replaced by a more China-friendly successor. Prime Minister Kishida's popularity ratings hover around the

50% mark, though if he is replaced, it is likely to be by someone more rather than less skeptical about China. And, despite the falling economy and doubts about his leadership after high-level personnel replacements in the foreign ministry and rocket forces, Xi Jinping appears firmly in charge of party, government, and military. Yet trade ties remain robust. As the report period closed, *Asahi* [described](#) China-Japan relations as spiraling out of control so quickly that it may take months, if not years, to restore ties to any semblance of normalcy.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

MAY—AUGUST 2023

May 1, 2023: 80% of respondents to an *Asahi* survey [report](#) worry that Japan will be caught up in a US-China clash over Taiwan, with 56% saying that the SDFs role should be limited to rearguard support to the US military.

May 2, 2023: [Aided](#) by multibillion-dollar government subsidies, BYD Auto plans to have 100 showrooms in Japan by 2025, with its Dolphin hatchback and Seal sedans due to enter the market this year.

May 3, 2023: 61% of respondents to a *Yomiuri* poll [favor](#) amending the constitution while 33% are against doing so, with the gap between those in favor and against amendment widening to 28 percentage points.

May 3, 2023: Of 1,967 people who [respond](#) to an *Asahi* poll, 52% say the constitution is good, down from 58% last year, while another 52% said revisions are needed and 38% say the Constitution is not good, the highest rate since 2013.

May 3, 2023: *Asahi* [editorializes](#) against the government for failing to listen to the people of Ishigakijima. When the city of Ishigaki agreed to host a GSDF base in 2018, it was explained that the missiles to be deployed there would be of a “defensive nature” to prevent enemy landings on the island but now these missiles could have a range capable of reaching beyond Japan, possibly turning Ishigakijima into a target of enemy attack.

May 3, 2023: NATO reportedly plans to [open](#) a liaison office in Tokyo, the first of its kind in Asia, which will allow the alliance to conduct periodic consultations with Japan and key partners in the region such as South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand as China emerges as a new challenge. Japan will in turn create an independent mission to NATO, separating it from the embassy in Belgium, where it is currently based.

May 4, 2023: Kishida, visiting Nairobi, [pledges](#) Japanese support in developing Mombasa, the largest port in East Africa and facing the Indian Ocean. Chinese companies have been active in infrastructure there, resulting in massive debts to Kenya.

May 4, 2023: Industry data [reveal](#) that total sales of Japanese auto brands in China fell 32% year-on-year in the first quarter of 2023. Japanese firms now account for 18% of China’s new vehicle sales, down from 20% in 2022, 22% in 2021, and 24% in 2020. Mazda, Nissan, and Honda have been particularly hard hit.

May 9, 2023: [Referencing](#) a joint call by Kishida and South Korean leader Yoon that the two states will work with Washington to address “growing security threats in Asia” during the former’s trip to Seoul, *South China Morning Post* reports that the Chinese government is concerned that a military alliance among South Korea, Japan, and the US may be developing.

May 10, 2023: Japan [protests](#) through diplomatic channels Chinese Ambassador Wu Jianghao’s statement that if Japan links Taiwan to its own security, the Japanese people “would be dragged into the fire.”

May 11, 2023: In a display of power ahead of the G7 summit hosted by Japan, a four-ship flotilla [led](#) by one of the Chinese navy’s most powerful warships, the Type 055 guided missile destroyer *Lhasa*, performs a 12-day counterclockwise circumnavigation of Japan beginning from the Strait of Tsushima, progressing through Tsugaru, and on to the Izu Island chain south of Tokyo.

May 13, 2023: In an ominous sign, China’s Coast Guard now [has](#) 157 large vessels, nearly quadruple the number of a decade ago, when Japan Coast Guard large ships outnumbered Chinese counterparts by 51 to 40.

May 16, 2023: Minister of National Defense Li Shangfu and counterpart Hamada Yasukazu [talk](#)

[for](#) the first time via the long-delayed direct telephone line dedicated to the maritime and air liaison mechanism between the two ministries.

May 16, 2023: *Reuters* [contrasts](#) dismal economic news from China with a brighter picture in Japan. As GDP growth forecasts were revised downward, the RMB fell below seven to the dollar for the first time in six months while Citi's economic surprise index had one of its steepest falls on record. In Japan, first-quarter GDP growth exceeded expectations with the *Nikkei* rising about 30,000 for the first time in 20 months and the broader Topix index hitting its highest level in 33 years.

May 21, 2023: Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong [summons](#) Japanese Ambassador to China Tarumi Hideo to lodge representations over the G7 Hiroshima Summit that Japan chaired.

May 23, 2023: Draft edition of Japan's 2023 defense report [says](#) that China may move up its plan to build a world-class military by the mid-21st century and states that increasing Russian and Chinese military activities in waters around Japan seem "to clearly intend a show of force."

May 24, 2023: China's Ministry of Commerce [terms](#) Japan's decision to impose curbs on the shipment of 23 types of chipmaking technology an abuse of export control measures that goes against free trade and international trade regulations.

May 25, 2023: With Chinese and Russian killer satellites in mind, Japan reportedly plans to [work](#) with the United States and others to monitor outer space. Specifically, it will participate in the Combined Space Operations Center, operated by the US, Britain, Australia, and Canada, which monitors outer space around the clock, including satellites and space debris.

May 25, 2023: Referencing NATO's planned liaison office in Tokyo, China's leading military newspaper [accuses](#) Japan of applying for a job as doorman of NATO.

May 26, 2023: China's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning [warns](#) against Kishida's attendance at the NATO summit, says

that NATO's eastward foray into the Asia-Pacific "undermines regional peace and stability" and that countries in the area "should be on high alert."

May 28, 2023: Japan Coast Guard sources [reveal](#) that China Coast Guard vessels have been navigating around the contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands since March using automatic identification system (AIS) equipment.

May 29, 2023: Chinese Commerce Minister Wang Wentao [urges](#) Japan to halt its semiconductor export controls, terming them a "wrongdoing" that seriously violates international economic and trade rules.

June 1, 2023: Japan's new destroyers will be [equipped](#) with more vertical launchers that enable them to fire over 30% more interceptor missiles than existing destroyers as well as SM-6 missiles designed to shoot down hypersonic glide weapons.

June 3, 2023: Responding to questions from a Diet member, the government [discloses](#) that 39 students from six of China's so-called Seven Sons of National Defense—seven universities that are believed to have close ties to the Chinese military's weapons development programs—were studying at Japanese universities as of fiscal 2020.

June 3, 2023: Repeating the CCP mantra, Huang Xingyuan, representative director of the Japan-China Friendship Center, [complains](#) that Japan should cease following the US by labelling China its biggest strategic challenge and refrain from interfering in Taiwan. He stresses that under such circumstances, people-to-people diplomacy has become more significant.

June 4, 2023: In a 40-minute meeting on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue summit, Japanese DM Hamada [expresses](#) deep concerns about the situation in the East China and South China seas to counterpart Gen. Li Shangfu, with Li replying that China-Japan relations are "not all about the Diaoyu [Senkaku] Islands and should be viewed from a long-term and big picture perspective."

June 5, 2023: *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) on the need to deepen multilateral cooperation in light of China's repeated provocations in and around the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

June 7, 2023: To save Japan's dwindling domestic defense industrial sector, the Diet [enacts](#) a bill enabling it to buy the factories and other facilities of beleaguered companies that make equipment deemed indispensable for the Self-Defense Forces and outsource their operations to other companies.

June 7, 2023: Japan announces that it is joining the US and Australia in a \$95 million undersea cable project that will connect East Micronesia island nations to improve networks in the Indo-Pacific region where China is increasingly expanding its influence. Completion is expected around 2025.

June 7, 2023: Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. [announces](#) plans to build its second Japanese plant in Kumamoto Prefecture, though has no plans to introduce advanced chip manufacturing processes into it. The government will [provide](#) a subsidy of up to \$3.41 billion for the project, which has been joined by Sony and Denso corporations.

June 7, 2023: Japanese companies Nidec and Renesas will [partner](#) to develop a power-efficient drive system for electric vehicles to keep pace with growing demand in China. A prototype is expected by the end of the year.

June 8, 2023: China, which has been concerned for several years about the formation of an Asian NATO, [criticizes](#) news that the US, Taiwan, and Japan are to share real-time data from naval reconnaissance drones to strengthen coordination in the event of a Chinese attack on Taiwan.

June 8, 2023: Japan [conveys](#) "strong concern" after a Chinese naval ship enters Japan's waters near Yakushima Island. Separately, two China Coast Guard vessels enter Japan's territorial waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and attempt to approach a Japanese fishing boat.

June 9, 2023: Noting that China's aid donations have trapped recipient countries in debt while

allowing the Chinese access to local ports and other infrastructure, Japan [approves](#) a major revision to its development aid policy that focuses on maritime and economic security and its national interests while helping developing nations overcome compound challenges amid China's growing global influence. The revision to the Development Cooperation Charter comes two years early, underscoring the sense of urgency in addressing widening China concern and other global challenges such as the impact of Russia's war on Ukraine.

June 10, 2023: Japan [joins](#) Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the US in a Joint Declaration Against Trade-Related Economic Coercion and Non-Market Policies and Practices, clearly directed against China, that expresses "serious concern over trade-related economic coercion and non-market policies and practices that undermine the functioning of and confidence in the rules-based multilateral trading system."

June 11, 2023: Japanese analysts [believe](#) that Xi Jinping's mention of "deep exchanges" between China and Okinawa in the context of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands are an [attempt](#) by the Chinese government to put pressure on Japan as Tokyo intensifies its involvement in the Taiwan issue.

June 12, 2023: Waseda University Professor Todo Yasuyuki [calculates](#) a disastrous drop in production from an 80% reduction in Chinese and Taiwanese imports for makers of electrical machinery and equipment such as household appliances, consumer electronics, and industrial equipment and producers of information and communications equipment due to conflict. He advocates risk reduction through friendshoring and reshoring, bearing in mind risks involved in domestic supply chains as well, such as earthquakes and volcano eruptions.

June 13, 2023: In a bid to counter China's increasing expansion into the subcontinent under its Belt and Road Initiative, Japan [provides](#) full support to an 80-km road India is developing in its northeastern region bordering China that links to neighboring Bangladesh.

June 14, 2023: Although global chip companies [seeking](#) to move their supply chains out of China have poured over \$14 billion dollars into Japan, problems of land acquisition have arisen. Taiwan's TSMC, wanting a second fab in Kumamoto since it prefers clusters of factories, not single ones, has run [afoul](#) of Japanese law limiting development of forests and land set aside for agriculture

June 14, 2023: Enabled by an April change in guidelines, the Japanese coast guard and MSDF are [preparing](#) for a joint response to an armed attack, due to concerns that the Chinese coast guard could work with the Chinese military in a potential invasion against Japan.

June 15, 2023: A lengthy article in *Nikkei* [discusses](#) the “mini Ryukyu boom” that followed Xi Jinping’s comments on the “deep relationship” between China and Fujian and comments by a museum curator that referred to Chinese sovereignty and the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.

June 16, 2023: A senior Chinese researcher employed by Japan’s National Institute of Advanced Science and Technology is [arrested](#) on charges that he leaked AIST trade secrets to a Chinese company.

June 18, 2023: Huawei Technologies is [seeking](#) licensing fees from roughly 30 small-to-midsize Japanese companies for the use of patented technology, Wireless communication modules using Huawei’s patented technology are indispensable for connected Internet of Things (IoT) networks, and are being adopted in autonomous driving, automated factories, medicine, power, and logistics.

June 19, 2023: Japanese retailer Uniqlo’s ambitious goal of more than tripling sales to \$71 billion in 10 years [faces](#) a stumbling block from trend among young China shoppers for *guochao*, “China chic,” in what had been a top market for Uniqlo.

June 22, 2023: In the 18th intrusion this year, four Chinese coast guard *Haijing* vessels [sail](#) near the contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands for around two hours.

June 23, 2023: To [counter](#) Chinese efforts to create anxiety over Japan’s planned release of discharge of water from the damaged Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, the Japanese government embarks on a major public relations campaign to stress the safety of the discharge.

June 24, 2023: Kishida, visiting Okinawa, [stresses](#) the need to strengthen defense capabilities on the Nansei Islands, “which now faces the harshest and most complicated security environment in the postwar era.” Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki [counters](#) that strengthening defense capabilities is causing anxiety among the people of the prefecture; he opposes deployment of SDF long-range missiles, saying that Okinawa could become a target for attack.

June 25, 2023: In [response](#) to China and Russia strengthening capabilities to attack satellites, the SDF have been using SpaceX’s Starlink satellite constellation on a trial basis since March and moving toward fully making use of them from the next fiscal year.

June 26, 2023: *Sankei Shimbun* [terms](#) Tamaki’s remarks that preparedness for the safety of Okinawa residents causes them anxiety “bizarre” since China taking aim at Okinawa as evidence by Xi Jinping’s June 4 remarks calling for deepening exchanges between “Ryukyu” and China.

June 28, 2023: LDP Secretary-General Motegi Toshimitsu [holds](#) talks with Taiwan Vice Premier Cheng Wen-tsan at the LDP’s Tokyo headquarters where they are believed to have discussed China’s increasing military pressure on Taiwan and the future of Japan-Taiwan relations.

June 28, 2023: A Chinese survey vessel is [detected](#) in the waters near the Senkaku Islands in Okinawa Prefecture, though there is no intrusion into Japanese territorial waters.

June 29, 2023: In an extended deterrence dialogue between Japanese and US diplomatic and defense officials held at a Missouri air force base, the US [conveys](#) its intention to visibly deploy strategic weapons around Japan. With South Korea seen as a vital partner and the US

and the ROK having agreed on the periodic deployment of strategic nuclear submarines there, Japan and the United States are believed to have discussed cooperation regarding extended deterrence among the three countries.

July 1, 2023: Chinese media [announce](#) that a PLAN flotilla led by a Type 075 amphibious assault ship recently broke the first island chain from straits south of Japan, marking the first time that this type of large warship was reported operating in vicinity of Japan. They report it “could” serve to give those with a guilty conscience a warning, including “Taiwan independence” secessionists and external interference forces.

July 3, 2023: Aiming to counter Chinese restrictions on the free flow of data across borders, Japan and ASEAN will [establish](#) a digital innovation center in Jakarta that will begin operations in late August.

July 3, 2023: Jiji [reports](#) that Japanese companies operating in China are bracing for employee arrests and other risks after China’s revised anti-espionage law took effect. A particular source of concern is that what constitutes acts of espionage is opaque under the law.

July 4, 2023: A draft EU-Japan joint statement to be [released](#) at a summit scheduled for July 13 in Brussels sets out plans to bolster the EU-Japan security partnership in light of the threats posed by Beijing and Moscow.

July 4, 2023: More than 80 members of a Japan Association for the Promotion of International Trade (JAPIT) delegation [led](#) by President Yohei Kono and including Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki visit Beijing. This is the first such visit in four years and, according to *Global Times*, represents the Japanese business community’s hope to enhance trade cooperation with China, “and Okinawa’s pro-peace voices will be heard.”

July 4, 2023: Speaking at a Taipei forum, former director-general of the Japan Defense Agency Tamazawa Tokuichiro [says](#) that China has insufficient strength to invade Taiwan, which would need at least 1.3 million troops, which it is not capable of transporting.

July 4, 2023: Attending the International Forum for Trilateral Cooperation, an annual event organized by Beijing, Tokyo, and Seoul since 2011, State Councillor Wang Yi [urges](#) Japan and South Korea to foster a sense of strategic autonomy from the West and cooperate with Beijing to revitalize Asia, saying “No matter how blonde you dye your hair, how sharp you shape your nose, you can never become a European or American, you can never become a Westerner.”

July 5, 2023: In a further example of deepening Japanese relations with Taiwan, Japanese financial firm SBI Holdings will [create](#) a company to help Taiwan’s Powerchip Semiconductor Manufacturing Corp to establish a foundry and research lab for the development of more advanced chips.

July 6, 2023: As part of efforts to reduce dependence on China, Japan, and the EU [conclude](#) a memorandum of understanding on sharing information on supply and demand for rare metals, wind power generators and other items, and for cooperation in research and development for mining and refining. This comes two days after they signed an MOU to strengthen cooperation in the field of semiconductors.

July 6, 2023: China’s leading military newspaper [describes](#) Japan’s desire for a NATO liaison office in Tokyo as the first step towards the establishment of a NATO military support mechanism for Japan, thereby exposing its ambition to elevate its own status with the help of external forces.

July 7, 2023: A Japanese professor of international security [rebutts](#) China’s criticism of NATO opening an office in Tokyo, arguing that if Beijing really wants to forestall NATO or Europe from further security and defense engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, the best way would be to try to reassure Europeans that they will not need to pay attention to the region and will not be adversely affected by what happens here.

July 7, 2023: Citing Tokyo’s [decision](#) to discharge treated radioactive water from the crippled Fukushima plant into the sea, China announces it will tighten its scrutiny on food from Japan and maintain curbs on some

Japanese imports. The UN's nuclear agency had earlier certified the safety of the decision.

July 8, 2023: China's customs authority [announces](#) it will ban food imports from 10 Japanese prefectures over Tokyo's plan to release treated nuclear wastewater into the ocean, despite the UN atomic agency's ruling that the water meets international safety standards.

July 11, 2023: Political science professor Nako Eto [attributes](#) recent assertive remarks by Chinese diplomats as examples of the international discourse power—meaning the power to make others accept what is being said—strategy being pursued by Xi Jinping's administration.

July 13, 2023: Japanese government [signs](#) a new partnership agreement with NATO to enhance security coordination with the organization with Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg explicitly referencing concern China's military buildup.

July 14, 2023: Chinese state media [report](#) that the country's coast guard has taken “necessary control measures” to drive away a Japanese fishing vessel that entered “territorial waters” around the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and “urged the Japanese side to immediately cease all illegal activities in the waters and ensure that similar incidents do not recur.”

July 15, 2023: Referencing concerns raised by the Chinese government's ordinance requiring foreign countries to fully disclose cosmetic products' ingredients and their ratios a Japanese government source advises (1) maintaining an overwhelming advantage in technological capabilities; (2) entering the market [with](#) sole capital as much as possible; (3) even when forming joint ventures, not readily handing over information on technology and suppliers; and (4) each company checking its supply chain, including parts manufacturers.

July 16, 2023: In a brief [exchange](#) at the ASEAN Plus Three meeting in Jakarta, State Councillor Wang Yi criticizes Japan for discharging allegedly contaminated water from the Fukushima nuclear plant into the ocean with Foreign Minister Hayashi objecting to Wang's politicization of the issue after a report by the

UN's International Atomic Energy Agency said that it met safety levels.

July 17, 2023: Kishida, in Jeddah as the first stop in a tour of the Middle East, [stresses](#) the need for a free and open Indo-Pacific and argues against unilateral attempts to “change the status quo,” with China and Russia in mind.

July 17, 2023: Japan Forum for Strategic Studies [holds](#) its third simulation this year of a two-day war game in response to a supposed Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

July 18, 2023: In their first in-person exchange in four years, JSDF officers meet Chinese military personnel and reaffirm the need for dialogue despite what LTG Jing Jianfeng, deputy chief of staff at the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission, calls severe difficulties between the two countries.

July 18, 2023: Industry Minister Nishimura Yasutoshi [says](#) that Beijing rebuffed the Japanese government's repeated requests to have experts from both countries meet to discuss from a scientific standpoint the upcoming discharge of treated contaminated water into the ocean.

July 20, 2023: Widow of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, Abe Akie, [visits](#) Taiwan, meeting President Tsai Ing-wen and Vice-President William Lai and pledging to do everything she can to foster a strong friendship between the two sides.

July 23, 2023: At the [behest](#) of the United States, Japan strengthens export regulations that block China from manufacturing cutting-edge semiconductor products.

July 23, 2023: As China is the largest export market for Japan's semiconductor equipment manufacturers, Chinese chip analysts [predict](#) that Japanese restrictions will undermine its companies' global competitiveness.

July 23, 2023: Japan's Minister of State for Defense Ino Toshiro [says](#) that Japan would likely come to Taiwan's aid if a Chinese invasion provoked the same outpouring in international support as for Ukraine but concedes that Tokyo had not yet decided what form that support would take.

July 24, 2023: Describing Ino's July 23 comments as carrying a provocative undertone, a *Global Times* editorial [asks](#) whether these were Ino's private opinions or whether they represent Japan's official stance.

July 24, 2023: According to the China Association of Automobile Association, Japanese automakers' market share in the region has [fallen](#) from 20% last year to 14.9% in the first half of 2023 even as EV sales in China reached over 2 million through the first five months of the year, up 51.5% year on year.

July 24, 2023: China and Russia [conclude](#) a four-day military exercise in the Sea of Japan to, according to the Chinese defense ministry, "enhance strategic cooperation between the two countries and strengthen their ability to jointly safeguard regional peace and stability."

July 25, 2023: A new report entitled "Asia's Future at a Crossroads: A Japanese Strategy for Peace and Sustainable Prosperity" [advocates](#) a new *Shin-Bei Jiritsu* policy 親米自立 policy under which Japan will pursue a more pro-active middle power diplomacy to mitigate US-China rivalry, avoid a sharp division in Asia, and prevent great power conflict -- a more autonomous foreign policy that is close to but not solely dependent on the United States.

July 27, 2023: Referencing the abrupt replacement of Foreign Minister Qi Gang with his predecessor Wang Yi, an *Asahi* editorial [urges](#) an end to the "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy that has characterized Chinese diplomats, including both Qin and Wang.

July 28, 2023: Japan [releases](#) its 2023 Defense White Paper saying that the international community is facing its greatest trial since World War II and has entered a new era of crisis. This includes China rapidly enhancing its military capability qualitatively and quantitatively, including nuclear and missile forces.

July 29, 2023: Numerous Chinese publications [denounce](#) the Defense of Japan 2023 as grossly interfering in Chinese internal affairs and provoking regional tensions. Far from being a military threat, China is a staunch force for protecting world peace and stability, though

certain countries have frequently sent ships and aircraft to relevant waters to show off force for their own interests, which has seriously aggravated regional tensions. China and Russia's defense cooperation is on the basis of no alliance, no confrontation, and no targeting any third party, is committed to safeguarding regional and world peace and stability and poses no threat to any country. China has lodged stern representations with the Japanese side.

July 29, 2023: A professor at Dalian Maritime University's School of law [suggests](#) that China add more weight to its opposition to Japan's discharge of nuclear-contaminated water from the damaged Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant into the sea.

July 30, 2023: Ten Chinese and Russian naval vessels [pass](#) through the Soya Strait between Cape Soya in the northernmost prefecture of Hokkaido and the Russian island of Sakhalin in the first China-Russia joint naval vessel sailing near Japan since September 2022.

July 31, 2023: Courting Beijing's further displeasure with Japan, Taiwan presidential candidate Hou Yu-ih [begins](#) a three-day visit to meet with Japanese lawmakers.

July 31, 2023: Center-left *Asahi* [criticizes](#) Defense of Japan 2023 for insufficiently answering the public's concerns about national defense and for leaving ambiguities by saying that decisions on the measures to be taken to deal with individual strike capabilities will be made "in light of individual and concrete situations."

July 31, 2023: Owners of Japanese restaurants in China [fear](#) ruin from Chinese restrictions on Japanese seafood.

Aug. 1, 2023: For the first time since 2017, foreign investment inflows into Asian emerging-market stocks excluding China over the past year [top](#) the net buying of mainland China stocks.

Aug. 2, 2023: A new liaison organization between the Defense Ministry and private businesses is [established](#) to promote public-private cooperation to develop cybersecurity talent, based in Yokosuka

Research Park near the GSDF Signal School. The government plans to increase the total number of cybersecurity personnel for the Defense Ministry and the SDF to 20,000 and the organization will be established to help realize the plan.

Aug. 3, 2023: Following an incident in which a Chinese researcher at the National Institute of Advanced Technology allegedly leaked information to a Chinese company, the government [intends](#) to ascertain the quality of the systems and measures in place at universities and research facilities and call for improvements in cases of lax supervision.

Aug. 3, 2023: A *Yomiuri* editorial [laments](#) that defense capabilities cannot be strengthened unless there is an improvement in the current norm in which the number of SDF personnel are lower than the recruitment quota.

Aug. 3, 2023: A tabletop wargame simulating China's invasion of Taiwan [underscores](#) Japan's slow decision-making process, with the delay having implications for the ability to quell the situation.

Aug. 3, 2023: Japan will [monitor](#) foreign purchases of land in light of revelations on Chinese acquisitions on Okinawa.

Aug. 6, 2023: Anticipating the Camp David Summit, *Global Times* [warns](#) Japan and South Korea against Washington's rumored plans for a "historic joint statement."

Aug. 6, 2023: Mindful of the economic security implications of continued Chinese [acquisitions](#) of cobalt and other minerals in Africa, the Japanese government will encourage Japanese companies to develop mines and acquire interests in the continent.

Aug. 8, 2023: Under the new OSA cooperation agreement that allows provision of equipment and supplies to the armed forces of like-minded countries, the Japanese government is [considering](#) military aid totaling ¥5 billion (\$34 million) to Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea and Djibouti, in fiscal 2024, with an eye to keeping China's maritime expansion and military buildup in check.

Aug. 8, 2023: Visiting Taiwan at the invitation of the Taiwan government, LDP vice-president Aso Taro [lays](#) flowers at the grave of former President Lee Teng-hui and [states](#) that Japan must be willing to fight to repel a Chinese invasion of the island. This is the first time that an LDP vice president officially visited the island since Japan and Taiwan severed diplomatic ties in 1972.

Aug. 8, 2023: *Washington Post* [discloses](#) unreported Chinese cyberhack of Japanese security systems in 2020.

Aug. 9, 2023: According to Beijing-based military expert Wei Dongxu, with the Japan-Australia reciprocal access agreement taking effect, enabling Japan to deploy troops in Australia, the SDF's area of operation is being [extended](#) from the East China Sea to the South China Sea, and now in the direction of the Indian Ocean.

Aug. 10, 2023: Suzuki Keisuke, an LDP lawmaker who accompanied Aso to Taiwan, [tells](#) the *BS Fuji* talk show that Aso had discussed the issue with Japanese government officials, indicating that Aso's view was not a personal remark, but a result of arrangements with government insiders, saying that "I think the Japanese government clearly regards this as the official line."

Aug. 10, 2023: China [lifts](#) its ban on group tours to Japan after a suspension of more than three years due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. The decision is expected to be a boon to Japan's tourism industry.

Aug. 11, 2023: Editorial in *Global Times* [rejects](#) optimistic predictions for improving China-Japan relations.

Aug. 12, 2023: Japan and China mark 45th anniversary of the signing of a bilateral treaty of peace and friendship quietly, with no official events.

Aug. 13, 2023: According to *China Daily*, visiting former Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio [describes](#) China-Japan relations as at a crossroads, urged both sides to rather than disliking each other due to differing values and

systems, acknowledge differences, mutual respect, and mutual understanding.

Aug. 13, 2023: China's July automobile exports [increase](#) 63%, further extending its lead over Japan as the world's biggest vehicle-exporting economy

Aug. 14, 2023: In the third consecutive quarter of expansion and fueled by a strong performance by its export sector, the Japanese economy [grows](#) by an annualized rate of 6% in the second quarter of 2023. Still, a decline in domestic consumption is a cause of concern.

Aug. 14, 2023: Expert at the China Institutes for Contemporary International Relations [points](#) to contradictions in Japan's attitudes toward radioactive pollution: in the 1990s, Tokyo was a pioneer in opposing Russia's disposal of nuclear waste into the sea, but it is now promoting dumping of nuclear contaminated wastewater.

Aug. 15, 2023: Wu Qian, spokesman for China's Ministry of National Defense, [urges](#) Japan to stop meaningless interference and refrain from irresponsible words and deeds that harm healthy China-Japan bilateral ties and undermine regional peace and stability.

Aug. 16, 2023: Kishida does not personally [visit](#) the Yasukuni Shrine on the 78th anniversary of the end of World War II but tendered the ritual *tamagushi* offering through an agent and at his own expense as president of the ruling LDP rather than in his official capacity as prime minister.

Aug. 16, 2023: Chinese foreign ministry [makes](#) serious protestations with Japan after Kishida sends a ritual offering to the Yasukuni Shrine.

Aug. 17, 2023: In an effort to encourage Middle East investment to shift from China to Japan as well as secure funds to help cover the massive cost of developing semiconductors, the Japanese government will [begin](#) working-level talks with a fund linked to the government of the United Arab Emirates.

Aug. 17, 2023: Japan [logs](#) a customs-cleared trade deficit of ¥78.7 billion in July, the first year-on-year drop in exports in about two and a half years.

Aug. 17, 2023: 35 Chinese executives, many of whom run textile- and apparel-related businesses, [visit](#) Okabun Orimono, a 333-year old brocade-manufacturing company, to inquire about its secret for longevity.

Aug. 18, 2023: An analysis of how China's stricter gallium export license requirements will affect Japan [concludes](#) that while Japan's cheap offshore wind technology might be undermined in the short term, the impact of new export restrictions on defense and EV technology advancement will most likely be minimal and more of a price impact than an overall supply impact.

Aug. 19, 2023: Chinese sources [denounce](#) the spirit of Camp David—the meeting of President Biden, President Yoon, and Prime Minister Kishida—as “hypocritical anti-China pantomime with a mini-NATO in the making.”

Aug. 19, 2023: According to statistics from Chinese customs authorities, imports of fish from Japan [decline](#) 34% month-on-month in July and are down 28% compared with July 2022. China's blanket radiation testing of all seafood imported from Japan was imposed July 8-9, and the declines are likely to continue.

Aug. 21, 2023: Citing China's use of the Solomon Islands as a bridgehead to accelerate advances in the South Pacific, *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) on the importance of Japanese cooperation with the United States and Australia to help solidify the foundations of South Pacific states.

Aug. 22, 2023: LDP Diet member Suzuki Norikazu [leads](#) a 65-person LDP delegation comprising members of the Diet, local representatives, and university students on a four-day visit to Taiwan.

Aug. 22, 2023: With the increasingly hegemonic behavior of China in mind, the Japanese foreign ministry [hosts](#) first Tokyo International Law Seminar with the aim of enhancing countries' ability to handle legal disputes over territorial waters and other matters, and to strengthen the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific region.

Aug. 22, 2023: In line with its previous pledge to boost total defense spending for the five years to fiscal 2027 to 43 trillion yen, more than 1.5 times

the previous amount, the Japanese defense ministry will [request](#) a 12% increase from the record spending approved for fiscal year 2024.

Aug. 23, 2023: Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) [announces](#) that it will provide compensation for damage linked to the ocean release of treated water from its Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, such as a decline in marine product sales due to lower prices or consumers' reluctance to buy.

Aug. 23, 2023: According to TEPCO, the planned [release](#) of 31,200 tons of water over four separate occasions during the fiscal year will not make a dent in the massive amount of contaminated water accumulating there.

Aug. 24, 2023: Chinese Customs Authority [bans](#) all imports of all Japanese seafood the same day that TEPCO begins releasing treated water from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant into the ocean.

Aug. 24, 2023: Japan's government [considers](#) scrapping a long-held pacifistic principle to allow exporting weapons with lethal capabilities directly to third countries with next-generation fighter jets, which Japan is jointly developing with Britain and Italy, in mind.

Aug. 26, 2023: Air Self-Defense Force [scrambles](#) jet fighters to monitor two Chinese H-6 bombers flying between Okinawa and Miyako islands.

Aug. 26, 2023: China [informs](#) Yamaguchi Natsuo, head of junior partner Komeito in Japan's coalition government, that the timing of his planned visit is not appropriate considering the situation of Japan-China relations. Yamaguchi had planned to hand Xi Jinping a personal letter from Kishida.

Aug. 27, 2023: Chinese security guards [seize](#) a Chinese man who threw stones and eggs onto the premises of Japanese schools in Qingdao while reportedly objecting to the water release.

Aug. 27, 2023: As Tokyo [prepares](#) to sharply boost defense spending in the face of East Asia's worsening security situation, major defense contractors including Britain's BAE and America's Lockheed begin shifting the headquarters of their Asian operations to Japan.

Aug. 28, 2023: Chinese BZK-005 military reconnaissance drone [flies](#) between Japan's westernmost island of Yonaguni in Okinawa Prefecture and Taiwan, in the fourth recorded such flight. There is no violation of Japanese air space.

Aug. 28, 2023: Japan's government and its embassy in Beijing receive many harassment phone calls, likely from China, after release of treated radioactive water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant into the Pacific. Chinese media [accuse](#) the Japanese government and media of trying to portray Japan as a victim by hyping a few incidents by individuals that were not encouraged by either Chinese public opinion or the authorities.

Aug. 28, 2023: Chinese state-backed hackers are [believed](#) to be behind the attack on Japan's National Center of Incident Readiness and Strategy for Cybersecurity (NISC), beginning last autumn and not detected until June.

Aug. 29, 2023: *Asahi* [opines](#) that China's dismissal of Komeito's peace overture shows that China-Japan relations are spiraling out of control so quickly that it may take months, if not years, to restore any semblance of normalcy.

Aug. 30, 2023: *Yomiuri* reports that Xi Jinping's administration tacitly [approved](#) posts on Chinese social media sites that criticize the Japanese government and call for boycotts of Japanese products with the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee apparently leading the campaign.

Aug. 30, 2023: Foreign Minister Hayashi [says](#) Japan may file a complaint against China over its blanket ban on Japanese seafood imports, adding that Japan has no desire to let this dispute escalate into a full-blown diplomatic row.

Aug. 31, 2023: Japan's military asks for the equivalent of a \$16 billion increase in its FY 2024 budget, up 15.5% over 2023, to sustain and maintain equipment, and increased its stores of ammunition.

PACIFIC FORUM

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CONNECTIONS

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

JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

CAMP DAVID: INSTITUTIONALIZING COOPERATION TRILATERALLY

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Japan-South Korea relations are going strong. In the months leading up to the historic Camp David trilateral summit in August, we saw the return of shuttle diplomacy between Korea and Japan. If President Yoon Suk Yeol's March visit to Japan was groundbreaking, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's May visit to Seoul signified the continued momentum of improving bilateral ties. The Aug. 18 trilateral summit meeting, where President Biden, President Yoon, and Prime Minister Kishida announced bold steps to cement trilateral cooperation into the institutional fabric of the relationship, represents the deepest attempt in recent memory. A successful trilateral summit like this one was possible only because Seoul and Tokyo mended their bilateral ties. A positive cycle is expected the other way around, as well. For example, the "[Commitment to Consult](#)"—to expeditiously "share information, align messaging and coordinate response actions" among the three leaders—will likely create more incentives and opportunities for Seoul and Tokyo to keep bilateral relations friendly and cooperative.

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As Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington took the biggest leap toward the goal of institutionalized trilateral cooperation, the big question is how sustainable it will be. The 78th Liberation Day speech by President Yoon, while signaling a helpful tone of goodwill with Japan, [raised](#) some concern as there was hardly any mention of history.

Shuttle Diplomacy is Back

On May 7–8, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [reciprocated](#) President Yoon's March visit to Japan by visiting South Korea. His visit was the first by a Japanese leader since 2018, and marked the return of shuttle diplomacy after 12 years. There were [two](#) noticeable deliverables from the summit. One was the agreement that South Korea would send an inspection team of Korean experts to check the on-site water at the Fukushima nuclear reactor. The second was Kishida's invitation for Yoon to attend the G7 summit in Hiroshima from May 19–21. Both leaders [acknowledged](#) how quickly bilateral ties have improved since their last summit, [alluding](#) to how the “grave” security environment they both face makes bilateral cooperation “essential.”



Figure 1 Prime Minister Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol (left) at a welcome event at the presidential office in Seoul on May 7. (Pool photo/co-published)

On the forced labor plan, President Yoon emphasized once again the plan is the only viable solution that satisfies both the 1965 Basic Treaty and the 2018 Supreme Court ruling. His solution has had a political cost for Yoon—his approval rating had [dropped to 30%](#) and [nearly 60%](#) of South Koreans opposed his plan. But it is worth noting that 10 out of 15 plaintiffs in the

forced labor suit have been compensated by the South Korean government's established foundation. And in the week prior to the May summit meeting with Japan, one of the three surviving forced labor victims [expressed](#) intent to accept the reimbursement, leaving four plaintiffs left. For Prime Minister Kishida, there were [talks](#) leading up to the summit of a desire by the Korean public for some sort of “reciprocal action” from him. During a joint press conference with Yoon, he [offered](#) his own personal feelings and said his “heart hurts” for the “difficult and sad experiences” of the Korean forced laborers. While not the official apology most Koreans wanted, Kishida's unscripted remarks were a compromise.

President Yoon's three-day visit to Hiroshima marked the third time the two leaders have met in two months. During this trip, Yoon and Kishida [paid](#) a symbolic joint visit to the cenotaph for Korean victims of the 1945 atomic bombing at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, a first for the leaders of both countries. They also [held](#) a trilateral summit with President Biden on the sidelines of the G7, where they continued discussions on how to bring cooperation to a “[new level](#)” and “[new heights](#).” At the meeting, Biden [invited](#) them to a formal trilateral summit in the US, which became the Camp David summit.

Amid this positive reciprocity, the defense ministers of Japan and South Korea, Hamada Yasukazu and Lee Jong-sup, agreed in early June to find ways to prevent future disputes like the [radar lock-on incident](#) that took place in December 2018. This meeting marked their first bilateral defense ministerial talks in over three years. Hamada and Lee strongly criticized North Korea's satellite launch on May 31, which violated UN Security Council resolutions that prohibit Pyongyang from conducting any launch that uses ballistic missile technology. Since the Yoon and Kishida administrations began their rapprochement a year ago, their lockstep responses to North Korea's provocations served as a common denominator. So far in 2023, the US, South Korea, and Japan have participated in trilateral anti-submarine warfare exercises, anti-submarine and search-and-rescue exercises, and missile defense exercises. They [continued](#) to respond to North Korea's missile tests with a trilateral joint missile defense exercise in July—the fourth since May 2022—and a [maritime ballistic missile defense warning test](#) in mid-August. They are also

resuming trilateral maritime interdiction and anti-piracy exercises.

The Camp David Trilateral Summit

At Camp David, President Biden began the joint press conference by [saying](#), “if I seem like I’m happy, it’s because I am.” This trilateral summit was the kind that the US government across both Democratic and Republican administrations has been pursuing as an enabler of US Asia strategy. On the sidelines of the summit, Kishida and Yoon held their 7th summit meeting. From the perspective of Seoul-Tokyo relations, the Camp David meeting was historic at least for five reasons.

First, this summit was an unmistakable expression that South Korea under the Yoon administration will actively participate in shaping the future of regional and international order. In a remarkable, if not surprising, contrast to the previous Moon administration, Yoon made it very clear that South Korea sees its future hinging on its working relationship with Japan and the United States. In this trilateral frame, the significance of Japan is visibly enhanced in South Korean foreign policy. In the Spirit of Camp David, they [committed](#) to coordinating responses to “challenges, provocations, and threats” to their collective security and interests. Japan’s major liberal daily *Asahi Shimbun* [commented](#) how the trilateral summit was a “historic step” for South Korea. An editorial in *Yomiuri Shimbun*, a major conservative daily, [attributed](#) the improved relations between Japan and South Korea to President Yoon’s position of regarding Tokyo as a “partner that shares values.”



Figure 2 US President Joe Biden holds a joint press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol during the trilateral summit at Camp David near Thurmont, MD, Aug. 18, 2023. Reuters/Jim Bourg

Second, the trilateral summit suggests a real potential for Seoul and Tokyo to be like-minded partners beyond consultations over North Korea, seeking to shape the contours of international affairs in the Indo-Pacific. A set of shared common principles captured in the so-called [Camp David Principles](#) include a “bedrock of shared values, mutual respect, and a unified commitment to advance prosperity.” Specifically, these principles include a free and open Indo-Pacific, the complete denuclearization of North Korea, human rights in North Korea, peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, as well as technology, climate change, development and humanitarian response cooperation, and much more.

Third, the three partners took huge strides toward institutionalizing and strengthening security cooperation to a point where observers wonder if this summit will be remembered as the beginning of a trilateral alliance. They regularized military exercises with a multi-year trilateral exercise plan to include an “annual, named, multi-domain trilateral exercises on a regular basis.” This outcome is a step beyond the ad-hoc exercises they have held in response to North Korean actions this past year. They outlined their intent to operationalize the sharing of North Korean missile warning data by the end of the year. They established a new trilateral Working Group on North Korean cyber activities. And lastly, they agreed to enhance information sharing and coordination through a 2014 trilateral arrangement and their bilateral General Security of Military Information Agreements (GSOMIA).

Fourth, they released an ambitious schedule of trilateral dialogues to facilitate regular communications at the highest levels. This demonstrates that they seek to put in place the idea that they “stand as one” in [Camp David Principles](#). These include annual meetings of the leaders, foreign ministers, defense ministers, and national security advisors, as well as new annual meetings of the finance, industry and commerce ministers. They also launched a new Trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue, on top of the trilateral economic security dialogue launched earlier this February and the trilateral development policy dialogue planned for October. By having a regular schedule of meetings (unlike one-offs on the sidelines of the G7 or NATO), this ensures that cooperation is constant, coordinated, and timely throughout the year.

Trilateral Meetings	Frequency	Note
Leader	At least annually	Existing
Foreign Minister	At least annually	Existing
Defense Minister	At least annually	Existing
National Security Advisor	At least annually	Existing
Finance Minister	Annual	New
Commerce and Industry Ministers	Annual	New
Indo-Pacific Dialogue	Annual	New
Development policy dialogue	Annual (TBD)	Newly created
Economic Security Dialogue	At least annually	Recently created

Table 1. Schedule of Trilateral Dialogues (Source: “[the Spirit of Camp David](#)”)

Finally, one of the most notable developments is cooperation on economic security issues, including their joint step toward a Supply Chain Early Warning System Pilot. Japan, South Korea, and the United States share the goal of preventing global supply chain disruptions. This signifies the expansion of areas of cooperation beyond traditional security issues, and not only in the Indo-Pacific but also globally. In conjunction with the Biden administration’s “friend-shoring” strategy of reshoring essential materials, goods, and services with only like-minded democratic countries and allies, Seoul and Tokyo have sought to expand coordination with Washington. Under “[the Spirit of Camp David](#)” joint statement, they agreed to broaden cooperation on economic security, supply chain resilience, countering misinformation, development assistance, clean energy, critical minerals, pharmaceuticals and emerging technologies such as biotechnology, artificial intelligence, quantum computing and space. They also [created](#) mechanisms such as a new dialogue on disruptive technology protection measures, a trilateral technology leaders training program, and more collaboration among the three National Laboratories.

The trilateral summit was [popular](#) among the Japanese public. According to the *Yomiuri Shimbun* public opinion poll in late August, 60% of Japanese respondents said that they supported Kishida’s trilateral summit, even while his overall Cabinet approval rating remained unchanged at 35% from July. In South Korea, while the ruling People Power Party evaluated that the outcomes of trilateral summit should be given an A+ grade, the opposition Democratic Party expressed concerns that Korea will become a focal point of the new Cold War politics. President Yoon’s overall public approval rating slightly [went up](#) 2% to 37.6%,

due to the generally positive public assessment of the trilateral summit.

Fukushima Wastewater Release

The Japanese government’s Fukushima wastewater release could have derailed Seoul-Tokyo relations. This issue presented President Yoon with a dilemma and a political risk, making him vulnerable to opposition party criticism that his Japan policy was too accommodating to Japan’s national interests over South Korea’s. On Aug. 24, Japan [began](#) discharging the first tranche of more than a million tons of ALPS-treated wastewater from the Fukushima Daiichi into the Pacific Ocean. This first release of about 7,800 tons of wastewater will last for about 17 days. The planned discharge will likely [take](#) three decades as there are more than 350 million gallons of the radioactive water, stored in more than 1,000 tanks. Since they [announced](#) the plan two years ago, the Japanese government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company, which operates the nuclear powerplant, have repeatedly promised the treated water is safe—despite a finite amount of radioactive tritium—and that their plan was the best course of action (they had assessed five options).



Figure 3 IAEA staff sampling seawater from the coast near the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station as part of the Agency’s safety review of the ALPS treated water discharge. TEPCO

To bolster transparency and accountability, Tokyo requested the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to conduct an independent safety review of the plan. The IAEA findings were released in July 2023, which [concluded](#) that Japan’s plan is 1) consistent with international safety standards, and 2) the

“controlled, gradual discharges of the treated water to the sea” would have a “negligible radiological impact on people and the environment.” Furthermore, the IAEA promised to continue its independent safety review of the discharge plan, which includes having a continuous on-site presence and a [live monitoring website](#).

Despite its effort for reassurance using scientific backing and technical regulatory standards, Japan faced strong public backlash at home and from neighboring countries. At home, Prime Minister Kishida has pledged his full support for the fishing industry and the reputational damage throughout the water discharge process. His government has [offered](#) about \$550 million in aid to fisherman and for sales promotion. In the aftermath of China’s seafood ban, the government [announced](#) it is putting together another package to help those affected. The Japanese public was more [concerned](#) about the reputational damage to Japanese seafood, with 75% of Japanese voters calling the Kishida government’s efforts insufficient. In the same survey, 53% said they supported the water discharge plan, with 41% saying they disapproved. By early September, a poll by the Social Survey Research Center [suggests](#) that nationwide responses within Japan showed a higher level of acceptance of the government decision.

In South Korea, the official government position is that they [have](#) no scientific or technical issues with Japan’s plan, but it neither approves nor opposes the plan. The issue became one that everyday South Koreans, even those who support strong ties with Japan, feel nervous about. Surveys of the South Korean public [showed](#) that more than 80% opposed the water discharge plan. A Gallup Korea poll found that 70% of Koreans were concerned about its impact on seafood, with 60% worried about eating seafood. The poll noted that “half of those who identify as conservative” had expressed concern about the issue. Another poll the same week had 92.4% of respondents saying they will [reduce](#) their seafood consumption.

The ruling People Power Party has emphasized the scientific backing to assuage public concern. The government announced the establishment of a hot line with the IAEA and the Japanese government for effective communication of South Korean views that may arise in the process of monitoring. As part of their efforts to

reduce concerns over local seafood, the Yoon administration [expanded](#) radiation tests on seafood in fish markets, and even started testing sand in its beaches. President Yoon also publicly [ate](#) seafood from the Noryangjin fish market in Seoul to show that the seafood is safe. At the end of August, the Yoon government [announced](#) a \$104 million package to boost local seafood consumption, which includes subsidies for types of fish and discount vouchers.

But in conjunction with the timing of the trilateral summit, the issue is increasingly contentious. South Korea’s environment groups have been [shouting](#), “the sea is not Japan’s trash bin.” A day after the water discharge began, 16 South Korean protesters were [arrested](#) for entering a Japanese embassy building. That weekend, about 50,000 protesters [gathered](#) in Seoul to demand that the Yoon government respond to Japan’s action. On Aug. 31, Lee Jae-myung, the South Korean opposition leader, [began](#) a hunger strike against Yoon’s policies, and [called](#) on Yoon to oppose Japan’s water discharge plan as one of his three demands.

Yoon’s Liberation Day Address and Looking Ahead

President Yoon’s address on the Aug. 15 Liberation Day was striking to many who are familiar with the Korean narrative that accompanies presidential Independence Day speeches. This year, there was no mention of history. Japan’s past atrocities or the Fukushima wastewater release issue were not mentioned. Instead, he [spoke](#) of “still rampant ...anti-state forces [in South Korea] that blindly follow communist totalitarianism, distort public opinion, and disrupt society through manipulative propaganda.” This incurred heavy criticism from the opposition party for not being conducive to national unity. Within the ruling party, Kim Jong-in, for example, [commented](#) that Yoon’s speech generalized the very few who sympathize with communism into much larger forces.

Many South Koreans feel the strong need to work with Japan for national security and economic reasons, and thus support Yoon’s position of improving relations with Japan. But in thinking about the future of Japan-Korea relations, it is important to remember that there is no major change in South Korean public sentiment toward Japan’s past wrongdoings. Nor does there seem to be notable change in the

Japanese position on bilateral historical and territorial issues. During the Camp David trilateral summit joint press conference, a reporter [asked](#) President Yoon, “how much confidence can Japan and the US have about Seoul’s long-term commitment to rapprochement when polls show the solid majority of Korea disapproves of your handling and mending of the forced labor issue?” Yoon [acknowledged](#) that “this is something that we need to continue working on.”



Figure 4 President Yoon Suk Yeol arrives at at Ewha Womans University while accompanied by Oh Seong-gyu, a former Korean independence fighter, and first lady Kim Keon-hee to deliver his Liberation Day address, Aug. 15, 2023. ROK Presidential Office

There are general elections in South Korea next spring, presidential election in the US next fall, and Japan must hold elections before October 2025. Naysayers may be quick to point out that once the current parties in any of the three capitals leave office, these developments are easily reversible by the next administration. For a relationship long fraught by bilateral tensions over history, the leaders of Japan and South Korea seem to understand that for their partnership to last beyond their terms in office, they needed a robust set of actionable commitments and resilient institutions. Both Yoon and Kishida at the top of their respective governments, even while making a strong show of unity between them and with the United States, are have to respond to their publics and navigate domestic political turmoil. While history can repeat itself, only time will tell if the “Spirit of Camp David” can withstand the vagaries of time.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

MAY—AUGUST 2023

May 2, 2023: Total number of surviving comfort woman registered with the South Korean government declines to nine after a comfort woman [passes](#) away.

May 2, 2023: On the sidelines of the Annual Meeting of the Board of Governors of the Asian Development Bank in Incheon, South Korean and Japanese finance ministers [agree](#) to resume their annual finance meeting in the near future. At the same annual meeting, South Korea, Japan, and China [hold](#) their first trilateral meeting of finance ministers and central bank governors since 2019.

May 3, 2023: One of the three surviving South Korean forced labor victim [expresses](#) intent to accept third-party reimbursement as part of the compensation plan reached between South Korea and Japan.

May 7, 2023: Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [arrives](#) in South Korea for the start of two-day visit and a summit with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, the first visit by a Japanese leader since 2018. The two leaders [agree](#) to allow a group of South Korean experts to visit the Fukushima nuclear power plant to conduct an on-site inspection of the planned wastewater release. Kishida also [offers](#) his own personal feelings and said his “heart hurts” for the “difficult and sad experiences” of Korean forced laborers.

May 8, 2023: Japanese Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) the heads of the six major South Korean business associations. South Korean opposition leader Lee Jae-myung [calls](#) the summit between Yoon and Kishida “submissive diplomacy.”

May 9, 2023: South Korea, the US, and Japan [work](#) on a consultation group on sharing missile warning data in real time.

May 10, 2023: South Korea’s Federation of Korean Industry (FKI) and Japan’s Keidanren launches a joint steering committee for their \$1.5 million “partnership fund.”

May 12, 2023: President Yoon [hosts](#) former Japanese Prime Minister Aso Taro for dinner.

May 13, 2023: South Korea and Japan [agree](#) on a four-day visit for the South Korean delegation to assess the Fukushima wastewater discharge plan.

May 15, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida [tells JoongAng Ilbo](#) that he wants to “open a new era of friendship and trust” with South Korea.

May 19, 2023: President Yoon [arrives](#) for a three-day trip to attend the G7 summit in Hiroshima. He [meets](#) 20 Korean atomic bomb victims in Hiroshima. He also [joins](#) Prime Minister Kishida to pay tribute to Korean victims at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park.

May 21, 2023: A 21-member South Korean delegation [arrives](#) in Japan for a four-day visit to assess the Fukushima wastewater discharge plan.

May 26, 2023: South Korea’s Foundation for Victims of Forced Labor Mobilization by Imperial Japan, the foundation set up by the South Korean government to carry out the forced labor compensation plan, [announces](#) it has paid compensation for the first time to one surviving forced labor victim.

May 27, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida [calls](#) for high-level negotiations with North Korea over the abduction issue.

June 3, 2023: US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin, South Korean Defense Minister Lee Jong-sup, and Japanese Defense Minister

Hamada Yasukazu [hold](#) a trilateral ministerial meeting in Singapore and issue a joint statement.

June 4, 2023: Korean DM Lee and Japanese DM Hamada [meet](#) on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue and agree to hold working-level talks to resolve and discuss ways to prevent the recurrence of the 2018 maritime dispute.

June 14, 2023: South Korea and Japan [hold](#) a ceremony to launch the joint technology R&D project to [strengthen](#) the competitiveness of their fine chemical industries.

June 15, 2023: US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [meets](#) with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts in Tokyo for a trilateral national security advisors meeting.

June 15, 2023: South Korean government [starts](#) daily press briefings to update the public on the planned release of treated radioactive water from the Fukushima nuclear plant.

June 19, 2023: Data from the Korea Customs Service [shows](#) that Korean imports of Japanese seafood in May decreased 30.6% compared to the previous year.

June 27, 2023: South Korea and Japan [hold](#) a video conference briefing session on the treated radioactive water from the Fukushima nuclear plant.

June 27, 2023: Japanese Trade Minister Nishimura Yasutoshi [announces](#) Cabinet Decision to [reinstate](#) South Korea to its “white list” of trade partners, which will be promulgated on June 30 and enter into force from July 21.

June 29, 2023: Japanese Finance Minister Suzuki Shunichi and South Korean Deputy Prime Minister Choo Kyungho [hold](#) 8th Korea-Japan Finance Ministerial Dialogue in Tokyo, and [agree](#) to resume the \$10 billion currency swap deal which [expired](#) in 2015.

June 30, 2023: Korea Customs Service [announces](#) that Commissioner Yoon Tae-sik will meet his Japanese counterpart in the second half of 2023, the first such meeting since 2016.

June 30, 2023: South Korean Trade Minister Ahn Duk-geun [meets](#) with Hirohide Hirai, Japan’s vice minister for international affairs in Seoul to discuss the bilateral relationship.

July 3, 2023: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [attends](#) the 2023 International Forum for Trilateral Cooperation held in Qingdao and says China, South Korea, and Japan should “create an atmosphere for the early resumption of leaders’ meetings.”

July 4, 2023: International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) [concludes](#) that Japan’s planned release of treated wastewater is consistent with international safety standards.

July 5, 2023: The South Korean government [announces](#) it “respect[s] the announcement of the IAEA.” The South Korean opposition Democratic Party [questions](#) the credibility of the report and [holds](#) protests at the National Assembly the next day.

July 7, 2023: South Korean government [announces](#) that based on its own scientific [analysis](#), Japan’s plan to release the Fukushima wastewater would meet international standards.

July 7, 2023: IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi [arrives](#) in South Korea to meet Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin and Yoo Guk-hee, chairperson of South Korea’s Nuclear Safety and Security Commission, as well as representatives of the opposition Democratic Party to discuss Japan’s plans to release Fukushima wastewater.

July 7, 2023: South Korea’s Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy and Japan’s Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry [hold](#) Export Control Policy Dialogue and sign a Memorandum of Cooperation to periodically hold these policy dialogues.

July 10, 2023: 10 members of South Korea's National Assembly, civic activists, and South Korean fishermen [protest](#) Japan's planned discharge of Fukushima water outside Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's residence in Tokyo.

July 12, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida and President Yoon [hold](#) a bilateral summit in Lithuania on the sidelines of the NATO summit. The Japan-Australia-New Zealand-South Korea Leaders' Meeting [takes](#) place the same day, followed by a joint statement condemning North Korea's ballistic missile launch.

July 13, 2023: Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi and South Korean Foreign Minister Park [meet](#) in Jakarta on the sidelines of ASEAN-related Foreign Ministers' Meetings, and discuss Japan's plan to discharge treated water as well as North Korea's ballistic missile launch.

July 14, 2023: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Japanese FM Hayashi, and Korean FM Park [hold](#) a trilateral Foreign Ministers' meeting in Jakarta and issue a Joint Statement.

July 16, 2023: Japan, South Korea, and US [hold](#) trilateral missile defense exercise in the sea between Korea and Japan.

July 20, 2023: US, South Korean, and Japanese nuclear envoys, Sung Kim, Kim Gunn, and Funakoshi Takehiro, respectively, [meet](#) in Japan to discuss North Korea's latest missile test.

July 21, 2023: Japan [returns](#) South Korea to its white list of preferred trading partners, four years after removing it from the list.

July 24, 2023: South Korea [begins](#) radiation tests on seawater in 108 ports to check for radioactivity levels to ease concerns over the Fukushima wastewater discharge plan.

July 24, 2023: US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, Korean Vice Foreign Minister Chang Ho-jin, and Japanese Vice Foreign

Minister Takeo Mori [hold](#) call to discuss ways to expand trilateral cooperation.

July 25, 2023: South Korea's Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries [announces](#) the radiation level of all seafood imported from Japan in 2023 is within the safe range.

July 25, 2023: South Korea and Japan [hold](#) first round of working-level meetings in Tokyo to discuss the Fukushima wastewater discharge plan.

July 27, 2023: South Korean government [reassures](#) the public that it has adopted the strictest method to test radiation levels in seafood imports from Japan.

July 28, 2023: South Korean government [protests](#) Japanese claims to Dokdo/Takeshima in its latest defense white paper.

Aug. 7, 2023: South Korea and Japan [hold](#) second round of video conference talks to discuss the Fukushima wastewater discharge plan.

Aug. 15, 2023: In his Liberation Day speech, President Yoon [calls](#) Japan and South Korea "partners that cooperate on security and the economy."

Aug. 16, 2023: South Korea and Japan [hold](#) third and final round of video conference talks to discuss the Fukushima wastewater discharge plan.

Aug. 17, 2023: Busan District Court [rejects](#) lawsuit to stop the Fukushima wastewater discharge plan.

Aug. 18, 2023: President Biden, President Yoon, and Prime Minister Kishida [hold](#) a historic trilateral summit at Camp David, and adopt the [Spirit of Camp David](#) and the [Camp David Principles](#).

Aug. 22, 2023: South Korean environmental groups [hold](#) protests in Seoul against Japan's

Fukushima wastewater discharge plan, scheduled for Aug. 24.

Aug. 23, 2023: IAEA and South Korean government [agree](#) to set up a regular information-sharing framework on Japan's Fukushima wastewater discharge plan.

Aug. 23, 2023: Korean Prime Minister Han Duck-soo [says](#) the Korean government will file an international lawsuit if Japan's wastewater discharge plan is not conducted to standards.

Aug. 24, 2023: Japan [begins](#) the release of ALPS-treated wastewater from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant into the Pacific Ocean.

Aug. 24, 2023: South Korean government [says](#) there are “no scientific or technical problems” with Japan's wastewater discharge plan, but adds that it “neither approves nor opposes the plan.”

Aug. 24, 2023: South Korean opposition leader Lee Jae-myung [calls](#) Japan's release of wastewater from Fukushima an “evil act” and “one of the worst environmental destructions.”

Aug. 24, 2023: Korean PM Han [calls](#) on Japan to transparently disclose information about its wastewater discharge plan at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear powerplant for the next 30 years.

Aug. 25, 2023: South Korean government [says](#) the Fukushima wastewater discharge plan has been carried out as “originally planned” and without any “abnormal situations.” It also [announces](#) it will increase radiation tests on farmed seafood.

Aug. 26, 2023: Sixteen South Korean university students are [arrested](#) for attempting to enter a Japanese embassy building in Seoul in protest of the wastewater discharge plan.

Aug. 27, 2023: Four South Korean opposition party lawmakers [participate](#) in a local protest in

Fukushima against the wastewater discharge plan.

Aug. 28, 2023: South Korean government [announces](#) that the amount of tritium in seawater after Japan began discharging ALPS-treated wastewater into the ocean is safe and well below the standard limit.

Aug. 28, 2023: South Korea [launches](#) a 100-day inspection into the country of origin marking for imported seafood.

Aug. 28, 2023: President Yoon and PM Han [eat](#) seafood together to show domestic seafood is safe and assuage public concerns.

Aug. 29, 2023: South Korea, Japan, and the US [hold](#) a trilateral missile defense exercise in respond to North Korea's failed satellite test.

Aug. 31, 2023: President Yoon [eats](#) seafood in a South Korean fish market in an ongoing campaign to show the safety of domestic seafood.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

TESTING THE LIMITS OF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

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In the summer months, both the upper and lower limits of the China-Russia strategic partnership were put to considerable tests. In the West, China's peace-probing effort continued despite virtual stalemate in the Ukraine war and its sudden twists and turns (drone attacks on the Kremlin and Wagner mutiny). Beijing treaded carefully in restoring relations with Kyiv with the new Ukrainian ambassador in place. In the East, Russian and Chinese militaries conducted a series of aerial and naval exercises/operations with unprecedented scope and closer interoperability for almost three months (from early June to late August), something not seen even at the peak of the Sino-Soviet alliance in the 1950s. All of this occurred against the backdrop of increasingly hardened US-led alliance networks both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Meanwhile, Moscow and Beijing remained "strategic partners" without the interlocking mechanism of the typical military alliance such as NATO's Article 5. Beyond these divergences and convergences, both sides tried to restore normalcy in bilateral interactions. Despite the absence of Putin from both the SCO and BRICS summits, these multilateral forums were able to grow in size amid unprecedented Western sanctions against Russia and China.

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Becoming Normal but Not Quite Yet...

Summer was a busy time for China-Russia interaction as diplomats and senior officials frequented each other's capital and conversed in multilateral settings (SCO, BRICS, ASEAN-plus, Pyongyang, etc.). In late May, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail [Mishustin](#) visited China and met both President Xi Jinping and China's new premier, Li Qiang. Fifteen months into Russia's "special military operations" in Ukraine, both China and Russia were adapting to an increasingly hostile world with more indigenous resources and initiatives. Two-thirds of the record high bilateral trade (\$190 billion) in 2022 was done in local currencies (ruble and yuan). Mishustin was confident that trade volume would hit \$200 billion in 2023, during which Russia's gas exports to China are expected to be up [47%](#). Russia's difficult relations with the West apparently forced country to look East for reliable customers. Russia's gas giant Gazprom, for example, was working hard to launch the [2nd](#) and [3rd](#) gas lines to China.

Perhaps the most notable achievements for Moscow and Beijing were the significant expansion of both the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) group. Iran officially became a full member in early July at the [23rd SCO summit](#) and Belarus was in its final stage of joining. In Johannesburg, South Africa, the 15th BRICS Summit brought into its fold six developing countries (Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates).

All of this was done without the in-person participation of Russian President Vladimir Putin, a first in the history of these multilateral forums. It is difficult to measure the "loss" of the "other" for both China and particularly for President Xi. It is a different world, for better or worse. In this sense, ending the war, or reducing its adverse impact, is key to a normal bilateral relationship between Beijing and Moscow.

Not So Quiet in the West

Ukraine peace remained a [top priority](#) for Beijing in the summer months. The prospect of China's peace initiative, however, remained cloudy for several reasons. On the plus side, the [Zelenskyy-Xi](#) phone conversation on April 26 strengthened China's posture as an honest broker. This was followed by the appointment of Pavel [Ryabikin](#) as Ukraine's ambassador to Beijing. A few days later, Ukrainian Deputy Foreign Minister Andriy [Melnyk](#) was quoted as saying that China could bring about peace through its mediation efforts between Kyiv and Moscow. The situation on the ground, however, continued to deflect any effort for a pause for at least two reasons: the bloody stalemate between the warring parties and the widely shared belief in the West that the long-anticipated counteroffensive by Ukraine would [have to go ahead](#) regardless of Ukraine's logistical [inadequacy](#).

The drone attacks on the [Kremlin](#) in the small hours of May 3, ironically, put extra spin on China's peace-making effort. Russia immediately called the drone attack a "[terrorist action](#)" and "an [assassination attempt](#) on the Russian president" with [US support](#). While a "[proportional response](#)" was imminent, ex-President Dmitry [Medvedev](#), now deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council, went as far as to warn that Russia had no options but to physically eliminate Ukrainian President Zelenskyy "and his clique." Given the fast-moving events and dire consequences, China called for [restraint](#) from all sides to avoid further escalation. Prior to this, US Secretary of State [Blinken](#) publicly expressed his interest in China's [peace initiative](#).

Washington's [sudden interest](#) in Beijing's peace effort apparently alarmed Moscow. TASS, for example, had a quite unusual description of the Lavrov-Qin Gang talks in India on the sidelines of the SCO annual foreign ministerial meeting. "The [negotiations](#) [underline added by author] started without introduction remarks for the press and continued behind closed doors," wrote TASS, suggesting a rather unusual, if not necessarily more difficult, exchange regarding

the drone attack and its fallout. In contrast to the stark and brief wording (77 words) of the Russian media, [Xinhua](#) provided a rather normal and more substantive coverage (440 words) of the meeting by the two senior diplomats. On the Ukraine conflict, [Qjn](#) reportedly told Lavrov that China would “continue to facilitate talks for peace” and was “ready to maintain communication and coordination with Russia” for a political settlement of the crisis. Lavrov, in turn, told Qin that Russia agreed with China's “principled position” and was ready to maintain close communication with China “in a candid manner.”

On May 15, Ambassador Li Hui, China’s special representative for Eurasian affairs and special envoy on the Ukraine crisis, started his five-nation tour with Ukraine as his first stop. According to Xinhua, [Li](#) held talks with a wide range of officials including President Zelenskyy, Head of the Ukrainian President's Office Andriy Yermak, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, and officials of the Ukrainian ministries of Infrastructure, Energy, and Defense. Neither side disclosed details of these talks. A day after Li’s departure, Ukrainian First Deputy Foreign Minister [Emine Dzhaparova](#) was quoted by the Japanese media (*Asahi Shimbun*) that the mediating process for the Ukraine conflict “cannot be done without China.” [TASS](#) did not mention Li’s meeting with Ukrainian energy, defense and infrastructure officials, but cited Li as saying that “there was no universal method for resolving the Ukrainian crisis. China will provide assistance in its own way for handling the problem.”

Russia was the last stop of Li’s multi-nation peace journey. On May 26, [Li](#) held talks with Foreign Minister Lavrov and then deputies Rudenko Andrey Yurevich and Galuzin Mikhail Yuryevich. As China’s ambassador to Moscow for 11 years (2009–2019), Li was “welcomed” in Moscow for “his personal contribution” to strengthening Russia–China relations. Lavrov reportedly “thanked Beijing for its balanced position on the Ukrainian crisis,” according to [TASS](#).



Figure 1 Li Hui meets with Russian FM Lavrov in Moscow, May 26, 2023. Sources: Chinese Foreign Ministry.

China’s peace-searching effort in May, however, was largely neutralized as the drone attack on the Kremlin inflamed both the rhetoric and actions of the combatants. Meanwhile, the demand for Ukraine’s ultimate victory remained [strong in Washington](#) to the point that Ukrainian Ambassador [Vadim Pristavko](#) to London complained, the day after Li left Kiev, about “too much pressure, too much expectations” on Ukraine to “secure victory” for its Western allies. As more weapons systems were readied and/or being transported to Ukraine in the summer months (UK’s [depleted uranium munitions](#) or DUM in March, [cluster bombs](#) in July, [F-16s](#) in August, and US DUMs in September), Russian defense analysts started to deliberate for a quick nuclear “deterrence-escalation” ladder to avoid a bigger and more catastrophic nuclear war. “If we correctly build a strategy of intimidation and deterrence and even use of nuclear weapons, the risk of a ‘retaliatory’ nuclear or any other strike on our territory can be reduced to an absolute minimum,” argued [Sergei Karaganov](#) of Moscow-based Council on Foreign and Defense Policy.

Beijing was [alarmed](#) by the almost casual talk of the nuclear option. [Zhao Huasheng](#), one of the most prominent Russia scholars in Shanghai,

pointed to the near-absence of any institutional mechanism to regulate nuclear arsenals of both sides. In contrast, the Cold War after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis was perhaps the safest time for the world.

Given the dire consequences, China's UN Ambassador Geng Shuang warned repeatedly against sending more lethal weapons to Ukraine, the warring sides should stay away from the [nuclear redline](#), and that a [political solution](#) of the Ukraine war was needed to avoid escalation and expansion of an already brutal war.

China skipped an international conference on Ukraine peace in Copenhagen on June 25. It was unclear if this was because of the 48-hour [Wagner mutiny](#) on June 23-24. The day after the mutiny, Chinese FM [Qin Gang](#) informed visiting Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko in Beijing that [China supported](#) "Russian leadership's effort to stabilize the situation in connection with the June 24 events." Ten days later, China accepted the invitation from Saudi Arabia for a meeting of 43 countries on the Ukraine conflict in the Saudi Arabian city of Jeddah.

Perhaps the only tangible outcome of the Saudi meeting was a pledge to hold more discussions in the future. [Ukraine](#), however, considered China's participation "a breakthrough" and "a historic victory." [Medvedev](#) said that any peace effort had a chance of success only if both sides of the conflict participated, the historical context was considered, and the current realities were taken into account. Russian FM [Lavrov](#) later noted that Saudi's real intention for holding the Jeddah meeting on Ukraine was "to convey to the Western participants and Ukraine itself the idea of the complete futility of any discussions without Russia's participation."

Regardless, Saudi Arabia, a neutral country in the Ukraine conflict as well as one with good relations with Russia and China, played a vital role in bringing together divergent forces and opinions in Jeddah while giving China, as well as the global south, a prominent seat in dealing

with a vital issue of global security. In the closed-door meeting, the seating arrangement for Ambassador Li Hui and US National Security Advisor Jack Sullivan (below) reflected the Saudis' delicate balancing act.



Figure 2 Representatives from China (L) and the United States (R) attended talks on Ukraine in Saudi Arabia over the weekend. Sources: Reuters

Immediately after the Jeddah meeting, Chinese FM Wang Yi talked to Russian counterpart Lavrov over the phone. Wang emphasized that "on any international and multilateral occasion," China would "uphold an independent and impartial position, make objective and rational statements, actively promote peace and talks, and strive to seek a political solution to the Ukraine crisis."

Summer Heat in the East

In contrast to the stagnant Ukraine war and peace efforts, in the East Asia and northern Pacific there were much broadened and deepened Russia-China mil-mil interactions, ranging from joint aerial patrol, joint naval drills and patrols, to the mutual visits by top defense officials.

Unlike previous cases, the sixth joint aerial patrol in 2023 was a two-stage operation. In the first stage on June 6, two Chinese *H-6K* strategic bombers flew over the Tsushima Strait from the East China Sea to meet two Russian *T-95* bombers over the Sea of Japan. The group then headed back to the East China Sea and [landed in a Chinese military airfield](#) in east China. The second stage of the joint aerial patrol was conducted the following day (June 7) as the mixed bomber group took off from [a Chinese airfield](#) for an eight-hour joint patrol of the west Pacific via the Miyako Strait. Throughout the joint patrol, up to 15 [China's jet fighters](#) provided escort for the bombers. Chinese

military analysts hailed the [unprecedented](#) two-stage aerial patrol as a more complicated and more difficult operation, which required closer coordination and interoperability of the two sides.

While the annual joint aerial patrol scored many “firsts,” China-Russia naval cooperation in the summer months was far more extensive in terms of both scheduled and ad hoc items. On July 3, Russian Navy Commander Adm. Nikolai [Yevmenov](#) arrived in Beijing and met China’s defense minister. Li told his Russian guest that China hoped for increased exchanges, joint exercises and other forms of cooperation that would take defense ties to “reach a new level.”



Figure 3 Russian navy chief Nikolai Yevmenov meeting Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu in Beijing, July 3, 2023. Photo: Weibo

A submarine expert who became Russia’s top naval officer in 2019, Yevmenov’s busy schedule in China included meeting the commander of the Chinese Navy, Dong Jun, visiting naval ports, training facilities, and shipyards in Qingdao and Shanghai. Many of these facilities were open to Russian counterparts for the first time. A key item of Yevmenov’s visit was seeing the PLAN’s latest and most powerful warship [Type 055](#) (a displacement of 11,000 tons) stealth guided-missile cruiser (the PLAN defines it as a “large destroyer” or 大驱). By early 2022, [Type 055s](#) were reportedly armed with [YJ-21](#) hypersonic (Mach 10) anti-ship ballistic missiles with a [range](#) of 1,000 to 1,500 km. Yevmenov also joined sailors of [two Russian missile corvettes](#) (Project-20380 *Steregushchiy* class) the *Gromkiy* (335) and *Sovershenniy* (333).

Their week-long port call (June 5-11) at Shanghai was the first visit for the Russian navy to China after the three-year Covid restrictions. Russian and [Chinese media](#) described the ship call as either a “[friendly](#)” or “[business](#)” visit. While their arrival was greeted by PLAN’s full military band, Chinese analyst Wang Shichun (王世纯) depicted the Russian ship call as a “somewhat surprise visit” ([有些意外的访问](#)), which was announced by Russia’s Pacific Fleet on the same day (July 5) the two ships began their week-long visit in Shanghai. Prior to this, the Russian squadron participated Indonesia’s multinational naval Exercise [Komodo-2023](#) (June 5-8). Unlike the two PLAN destroyers (a [Type-052D](#) and a [Type-054A](#)) returning home on [June 14](#) after *Komodo-2023*, the Russian ships were sighted sailing just 26 nautical miles [east of Taiwan](#) in late June, then [around Japan’s Yonaguni Island](#) and transited the Miyako Strait on June 30. Wang also noted that on July 1-3, the Russian ships were found [anchored](#) 50 miles northeast of Miyako Island, which lies 185 miles southwest of Okinawa. He wondered if these ships were plagued by mechanical problems. Whatever the case, this “surprise visit” by the Russian vessels to Shanghai may serve as a precedent for reciprocity between the two navies whenever needed, noted Wang.

The Russian naval vessels’ week-long visit turned out to be a precursor for a series of operations by the two navies in the next five weeks. [Four days](#) after the corvettes left China’s most prosperous city, a flotilla of five PLAN ships—two [Type 052D](#) destroyers *Qiqihar* and *Guiyang*, two [Type 054A](#) frigates *Zaozhuang* and *Rizhao*, plus [Type 903](#) supply ship *Taihu*—departed from Qingdao to the Sea of Japan for the “[Northern/Interaction-2023](#)” joint drill (July 20-23). They were to be joined by four Russian warships in the middle of the Sea of Japan (the large anti-submarine ships *Admiral Tribunts* and *Admiral Panteleev* as well as the corvettes *Gremyashy* and *Hero of the Russian Federation Aldar Tsydenzhapov*). A Chinese Y-20 military cargo plane (equivalent to the US C-17) [flew](#) to a Russian airfield near Vladivostok with a forward detachment of the PLAAF, to be

followed by J-16 fighter-bombers, KJ-500 AWACS, and Z-20 helicopters.



Figure 4 PLAN Type-052Ds (front) and Type-054As for “Northern/Interaction-2023” and the following joint patrol of northern Pacific. Sources: Chinese online media.

The theme of the four-day “[Northern/Interaction-2023](#)” was to “safeguard the safety of strategic maritime passages,” presumably the Tsushima Strait and Tsugaru Strait. The Chinese and Russian warships conducted about [20 combat maneuvers](#) including joint maritime and air escort, deterrence and expulsion, anchorage defense, and joint artillery firing at various types of targets. In the closing ceremony, Rear Adm. [Qiu Wensheng](#), commander of the Chinese forces, pointed out that the exercise was “a major combat-style operation ([重大实战行动](#))” for the security of the strategic maritime passages and “a multidimensional test of the Chinese-Russian combat interoperability in high seas.”

Despite its location (the Sea of Japan) and PLAAF use of Russian airfield, “Northern/Interaction-2023” was said, at least according to [Chinese media](#), to be largely organized and commanded by the PLA with a [joint command](#) in the PLAN’s *Qiqihar* destroyer (Type-052D). Until this point, all joint drills in the Sea of Japan were organized by the Russian side. The Russian role in the “Northern/Interaction-2023,” however, was more basic and even fundamental as the PLAAF planes operated from the Russian airfield for the first time in history. Following the four-day joint exercise in the Sea of Japan, the PLAN flotilla paid a [five-day port call](#) at Vladivostok for resupply before heading out for the third

annual joint patrol of the northern Pacific by the two navies since 2021.

Between July 28 and Aug. 21 a total of [11 Russian and Chinese warships](#)—the same eighth Russian and Chinese warships and two oilers participating in “Northern/Interaction-2023,” plus a PLAN surveillance ship *Kaiyangxing*—sailed through the La Perouse Strait from the Sea of Japan to the Sea of Okhotsk toward the Aleutian Islands, and then reached international waters near Alaska by Aug. 5. The 25 days of voyage (6,500 nautical miles) ended as the joint flotilla entered the Chinese naval port Qingdao via the Miyako Strait on Aug. 21. A [news release](#) by the Chinese defense ministry said that the patrols “are not directed against third parties and have nothing to do with the current international and regional situation.”

The US reaction, however, was far more substantial than that of a year before when the second Russia-China joint patrol of seven warships, including a Type-055 Chinese destroyer *Nanchang*, attracted only a lone [US Coast Guard cutter](#) on the scene near the Aleutians. This time, [four US warships](#) and a P-8 surveillance aircraft were dispatched to shadow the Russian-Chinese flotilla. The US never specified the [precise location](#) of the Chinese-Russian combined fleet. This “historical first” voyage to the waters near Alaska, however, was “highly provocative,” according to a [WSJ commentary](#).

Beijing, however, saw this as a reciprocity for intensified US “freedom of navigation” operations to the SCS and the Taiwan Straits. [Wu Dahui](#), a prominent Russia scholar in Beijing, noticed the increasing frequency of US surveillance operations near the Chinese and Russian coastlines and SCS areas. “In the future, the Chinese Navy could conduct more far sea patrols like this...The Americans should get used to it,” commented [Fu Qianshao](#), a military expert in Beijing.

The routinized, albeit enhanced, joint patrol of the northern Pacific was not a typical tit-for-tat response to US tactics, but an asymmetrical move to highlight the least defended area of the US homeland via the shortest route (northern Pacific). [Chinese media](#), for example, pointed to the fact that all US destroyers dispatched to the Alaska waters were from distant areas: *USS John S. McCain* from Hawaii and the *USS Benfold*, the *USS John Finn* and the *USS Chung-Hoon* all the way [from Yokosuka](#), Japan.

Beyond and behind the regional implications, the joint Pacific patrol was the end of a much larger joint air-naval operation/exercises starting from the sixth joint aerial patrol by strategic bombers in early June and through “*Northern/Interaction-2023*” in late July. An almost ubiquitous feature of all these aerial and naval operations was utilizing each other’s airfields and naval ports by various aircrafts and warships either as part of the operation/drill or under any *ad hoc* circumstances as was the case of the “business call” by the two Russian corvettes to Shanghai in early July. Another case in point was that at the end of the third Pacific patrol, the Russian ships did not split the formation in the East China Sea for their home port of Vladivostok but entered Qingdao port for a few days of resupply.

The two militaries were apparently testing and perfecting a joint command-operational interface ([联合指挥作战体系](#)) not only for seamless communication between Chinese and Russian languages but also interoperability between various weapon platforms of their forces. In the “*Northern/Interaction-2023*” drill, for example, PLAAF KJ-500 AWACS were said to guide Russia’s *MIG-31* interceptors; PLAN’s shipborne radar commanded Russian ship-to-air missiles; and Russian ships coordinated naval artillery firing. To this, a Chinese commentator remarked that a *de facto* joint fleet was in the making, which was not the case even when China and the Soviet Union were allies.

The Japan Factor for Russia and China

Behind the much extended and more integrated summer drills and joint patrols was a growing sense of alarm between Moscow and Beijing regarding a rapid hardening of the US-led alliance mechanism in Indo-Pacific. On May 20, Ukraine President [Zelenskyy](#) was in Japan for the annual G7 meeting, while a [NATO liaison office](#) in Japan was proposed. The alliance-building effort culminated in the Aug. 18 three-way summit (Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul) at Camp David, traditionally a place for peace and reconciliation. Now it assumed a new mission to institutionalize the three countries’ security cooperation against Beijing and Moscow, a “double containment” according to Lavrov.

To the dismay and alarm of Russia whose forces were largely bogged down in the west, Tokyo and Seoul were perhaps more eager and capable than most NATO members to contribute to Ukraine’s war operations. In early summer, Seoul appeared ready to send a [half million 155mm rounds](#) of artillery shells to Ukraine, albeit indirectly via the US. [Japanese aid](#) to Ukraine topped \$7.6 billion by late summer and [more](#) is in the pipeline including “[military aid](#).” For Beijing, its “principled neutrality” in the Ukraine war was [repeatedly countered](#) by Japan’s Ukraine - today - could - be - East - Asia - tomorrow rhetoric, which was seen as a fast and convenient track to revitalize the “[Taiwan-problems-means-Japan’s-problem](#)” claim (Dec. 1, 2021) by late Japanese PM Abe Shinzo. Moreover, Japanese helicopter carrier [Izumo](#) made the first port call to Manila in late August following a [joint naval exercise](#) with the US, Australia, and the Philippines in the SCS.

An increasingly proactive, and presumably more independent, Japan in the Asia-Pacific security context was a profoundly disturbing development for Moscow and Beijing. On Dec. 16, 2022, the Kishida administration approved three new, and “[controversial](#),” strategic documents: the [National Security Strategy](#), the [National Defense Strategy](#), and [Defense Buildup](#)

[Program](#), which identify China as “the greatest strategic challenge” for Japan and the “international community,” followed by North Korea and Russia. Accordingly, Japan will sharply increase its defense spending from 1% to 2% in the next five years (a [56.5% increase](#) from the current five-year plan of 2019–23), acquire “counterstrike capabilities” (1,500 US *Tomahawk* cruise missiles, indigenous missiles such as Type-12, etc.) and develop new capabilities (hypersonic missiles, etc.). Such a “[dramatic transformation](#)” of Japanese post-WWII national security policy may even imply that Japan takes “[primary responsibility](#) to disrupt and defeat an invasion” with or without a US security guarantee. This occurs as US forces in western Pacific are in the process of redeployment to “[more defensible position](#)” such as Guam because of an “[evolving threat](#)” from China’s increasingly advanced systems including the new hypersonic weapons.

Japan’s new national security strategy is meant to “return to rampant militarization,” said Russia’s temporary charge d’affaires in Japan [Gennady Ovechko](#) in early May. [Chen Hongbin](#), a veteran Japan observer in Shanghai, pointed to the historical parallel between the three documents to the three 1907 defense outlines published in 1907—the Imperial Defense Policy (帝国国防方针), Force Utilization Outlines (用兵纲领), and Force Requirements (所需兵力). Despite the vast historical span of time, both the 1907 and 2022 defense documents were passed by the Cabinet without any legislative deliberation, said Chen. The 1907 documents eventually militarized Japan to the point of no return till 1945 when it found itself simultaneously fighting three continental powers (China, the US, and Russia), noted Chen.

Given a tenuous strategic environment in northeastern Asia in general and a more assertive Japan in particular, Russian and Chinese sources indicated that more integrated operations and exercises by the two militaries would continue [in the future](#). The two continental powers, however, had different needs for these joint operations. For Russia,

whose forces were primarily deployed in the West, China’s growing conventional capability would be a useful counterbalance to the US-led alliance and a more proactive Japan. For Chinese military strategists, Russia’s vast strategic forces, though dated, served as a useful deterrent in any security contingency including Taiwan. At a tactical level, PLA’s access to Russian airfields and naval ports along Russia’s northern Pacific coast would significantly expand PLA’s operational scope. [Fu Qianshao](#), a prominent military commentator in Beijing, noted that use of Russian airfields by the PLAAF’s tactical aircraft such as the multipurpose J-16s “greatly” enhanced operational capability regarding “threats in the Sea of Japan.”

Fu did not specify the sources of these “threats.” Nor did the announcement of the annual “Northern/Interaction” by the Chinese Defense Ministry. Previously, almost all joint exercises with Russia were defined as not targeting any third party. This nearly ubiquitous statement was, however, [missing](#) for *Northern/Interaction-2023*. Five days later, Japan’s [2023 defense white paper](#) warned that Russia, China and North Korea contributed to “the most severe and complex security environment since the end of World War II.”

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The stage was, therefore, set for a far less predictable and perhaps more dangerous future for Northeast Asia. Major powers may not just return to the 1950 Sino-Soviet treaty of alliance with the sole designated target of a possible rebirth of “Japanese militarism.” Nor would it be a further throwback to the turn of the 19th–20th century when a Westernized and militarized Japan defeated the two continental powers (1895 and 1905).

For Japan, the switch from [chrysanthemum to sword](#) by the Meiji samurai-turn-reformers gave rise to a rapid and ambitious military ascendance for half a century (1895–1945), only to be capped by the combined forces of Russia, the US and China, plus US nuclear weapons in

1945. A 21st-century showdown between continental and maritime powers in this part of the world will make the Ukraine war, for all of its destruction and despair, child's play if they, and the rest of the world, survive such a catastrophic clash.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

MAY—AUGUST 2023

May 4, 2023: Chinese FM Qin Gang and Russian FM Lavrov meet on sidelines of the SCO annual foreign ministerial meeting in New Delhi, India.

May 16–17, 2023: China’s Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs Li Hui [visits](#) Ukraine, the first stop of his five-nation tour (Poland, France, Germany, and Russia) to discuss a peaceful end to the Ukraine conflict. Li holds talks with President Zelenskyy and other senior officials. In late February, China publishes its 12-point “position paper on the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis.”

May 18–19, 2023: First 5+1 summit between China and five central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) [is held](#) in Xi’an, China. President Xi Jinping chairs the summit and gives a keynote speech calling for more practical and institutionalized cooperation. The heads of the six nations issue the Xi’an Declaration and six other documents. More than 100 cooperation deals are inked during the two-day summit. A Chinese diplomat is quoted as saying that the newly elevated China-Central Asian platform does not target any third party. Nor does it intend to compete with any other mechanisms.

May 19, 2023: China’s Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs Li Hui [visits](#) Poland and exchanges views with Polish officials on the Ukraine issue.

May 23–24, 2023: Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin visits China. He starts his trip in Shanghai where he holds talks with President Xi and Premier Li Qing. The two prime ministers [sign](#) five agreements in the areas of investment, customs phytosanitary requirements, patent rights, sports, etc. In Beijing, Mishustin visits Qinghua University and lays a wreath at the Monument to the People’s Heroes in Tiananmen Square. In Shanghai, he meets the Russian

business community, joins a Russia-Chinese business forum, meets BRICS New Development Bank President Dilma Rousseff, and visits Shanghai Research Institute of Petrochemical Technology.

May 21–28, 2023: Chen Wenqing, head of the Commission for Political and Legal Affairs of the CPC Central Committee, [travels](#) to Moscow for the 11th International Meeting of High Representatives for Security Issues. Chen gives a speech on May 24. On May 22, Chen and Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev co-chair the eighth meeting of the China-Russia law-enforcement and security cooperation mechanism. Chen holds separate meetings, on the sidelines of the Security Conference, with Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Director Sergei Naryshkin, heads of the SCO and BRICS delegations.

May 24, 2023: President Xi [is invited](#) to deliver a speech to the second Eurasian Economic Forum of the Eurasian Economic Union via video. The forum is held online and offline in Moscow.

May 26, 2023: China’s Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs Li Hui [visits](#) Russia as the last stop of his five-nation tour (Ukraine, Poland, France, and Germany) to discuss a peaceful ending of the Ukraine conflict. Li held talks with FM Lavrov and Deputy Foreign Ministers Rudenko Andrey Yurevich and Galuzin Mikhail Yuryevich.

June 6–7, 2023: Two Russian Tu-96 and two Chinese H-6K strategic bombers [conduct](#) the [sixth](#) joint patrols of the Sea of Japan, East China Sea and Western Pacific. Russian bombers landed and took off from a Chinese military airfield.

June 15, 2023: President Putin [sends](#) a message for President Xi’s 70th birthday. This is

reciprocity for Xi's greeting message to Putin's 70th birthday on Oct. 7, 2022.

June 16, 2023: In his speech to the plenary session of the 26th St Petersburg International Economic Forum, President Putin [says](#) that over 80% of Russian trade with China is in the ruble or the yuan.

June 20, 2023: Ukraine's new ambassador to China Pavlo Riabikin presents copies of letters of credence. His appointment was made immediately after the Xi-Zelenskyy telephone talks on April 26. Riabikin is the former Ukraine Minister for Strategic Industries. His arrival fills a position that has been vacant since his predecessor died in February 2021.

June 23, 2023: China's UN Ambassador Geng Shuang [warns](#) that warring sides should stay away from the nuclear redline.

June 25, 2023: Foreign Minister Qin Gang [holds](#) meeting with Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Rudenko. The meeting is a day after the Wagner mutiny (June 23-24). Rudenko also holds separate meetings with Deputy FM Ma Zhaoxu and Special Representative of the Chinese Government on Korean Peninsula Affairs Liu Xiaoming. He also participates in the 8th international conference "Russia and China: Cooperation in a New Era" on June 27.

June 25, 2023: China [supports](#) the Russian government in its effort to stabilize the country following the Wagner "events."

June 26-27, 2023: Beijing [hosts](#) the Eighth International Conference "Russia and China: Cooperation in the New Era" jointly chaired by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Russian FM Lavrov and Chinese counterpart Qin Gang greeted participants during the conference opening in a video message.

July 3, 2023: Russian Navy Commander Adm. Nikolay Yevmenov [begins](#) eight-day visit to

China. After meeting Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu in Beijing, Yevmenov traveled to Qingdao and Shanghai where he visited naval facilities, submarine training centers, and naval shipyards.

July 4, 2023: 23rd SCO summit is held online, despite the lift of COVID restrictions. Iran formally becomes a full member state of the SCO. The 2,400-word New Delhi Declaration calls for "a more representative, just, democratic and multipolar world order" as opposed to "bloc, ideological, and confrontational approaches," "interference in the internal affairs of other countries under the pretext of combating terrorism and extremism," "global anti-missile systems," and "weaponization of outer space." It also calls for an early settlement of the Afghan issue and supports the Belt and Road Initiative (with the exception of India).

July 5-11, 2023: Russian missile corvettes (Project-20380 *Steregushchiy* class) *Gromkiy* (335) and *Sovershenniy* (333) [call](#) at Shanghai for a week-long (June 5-11) "business visit." Both vessels belong to Russia's Pacific Fleet, headquartered in Vladivostok. Their port call follows a six-week deployment to and back from Indonesia. Upon departure from Shanghai, the two ships conducted communication, maneuvering, and search and rescue exercises with Chinese naval vessels.

July 12, 2023: Russian FM Lavrov, Chinese FM Wang Yi and Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi [hold](#) trilateral talks during the 56th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM) with dialogue partners in Jakarta. Besides China and Russia, ASEAN's other dialogue partners include India, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, South Korea, the European Union, the UK, Canada, and the US. Lavrov and Wang Yi express support for ASEAN centrality in regional affairs.

July 13, 2023: Russian FM Lavrov and Chinese FM Wang Yi [hold](#) talks in Jakarta on sidelines of the annual AMM events. They discussed

bilateral, regional, and global issues, as well as SCO and BRICS affairs.

July 19-21, 2023: Ukraine's Deputy Economy Minister Taras Kachka [visits](#) China and holds talks with China's vice commerce minister where the two chair the 7th session of the China-Ukraine commission of economic and trade cooperation. China expresses interest in “importing quality products from Ukraine.” Kachka is quoted as saying that as an important partner of China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), Ukraine will “step up efforts to protect the safety of Chinese-funded enterprises in Ukraine.” Kachka is the first high-level visit by a Ukraine official to the country. The visit is apparently worked out by new Ukraine ambassador Pavlo Riabikin, who began his posting a month before.

July 20-23, 2023: Russia and China [conduct](#) joint naval drill “North/Interaction-2023” in the Sea of Japan. Five Russian and five Chinese naval ships participate. The Chinese ships pay a “friendly visit” to the port of Vladivostok after the drill. In total, about 20 combat maneuvers were conducted, including joint artillery firing at various types of targets.

July 21, 2023: Chinese UN Ambassador Geng Shuang [calls](#) in a UNSC session for the earliest resumption of grain and fertilizer export by Ukraine and Russia. The key for the Ukraine conflict is its political resolution, says Geng.

July 24, 2023: FM Wang Yi [meets](#) Secretary of the Russian Federation Security Council Nikolai Patrushev on the sidelines of the annual session of BRICS security officials in Johannesburg, South Africa. The two exchange views on bilateral and multilateral issues. Seven non-BRICS nations (Belarus, Burundi, Cuba, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) are invited and join the conference.

July 27, 2023: Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chinese Politburo member Li Hongzhong [join](#) celebration in Pyongyang,

DPRK for the 70th anniversary of the armistice agreement ending fighting in the Korean War. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un separately meets Li and Shoigu.

July 28-Aug. 21, 2023: Chinese and Russian navies [conduct](#) the third joint patrol of the western and northern Pacific.

Aug. 4, 2023: Chinese Embassy in Russia [lodges](#) representations over Russian border officers' “obstruction” of the entry of five Chinese citizens. The Russian side is said to have “brutal and excessive law enforcement conduct” toward the five on July 29 when they tried to enter Russia by car from Kazakhstan through Karauzek port in Astrakhan Oblast. The Russian side says it is an isolated incident and “is out of the political context,” and Russia holds no discriminatory policies or actions against Chinese citizens. Russia's initial investigation shows that “the destination of their visa application is not consistent with the actual destination, which is in violation of relevant Russian laws and regulations.”

Aug. 5-6, 2023: Ambassador Li Hui, Chinese special envoy for the Ukraine conflict, [participates](#) in international conference on the Ukraine-Russian conflict in Saudi Arabia.

Aug. 7, 2023: Chinese FM Wang Yi calls Russian counterpart Lavrov and told him that “on any international and multilateral occasion,” China would “uphold an independent and impartial position, make objective and rational statements, actively promote peace and talks, and strive to seek a political solution to the Ukraine crisis.”

Aug. 10, 2023: Russian Ambassador to South Korea Andrey Kuli [meets](#) Chinese Ambassador to South Korea Xing Haiming at the Chinese Embassy. They discussed Russia-China relations and issues surrounding the Korean Peninsula “in a warm, friendly mood.” This is eight days before the trilateral summit in Camp David between US President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol.

Aug. 12, 2023: Chinese Ambassador to North Korea Wang Yajun [invites](#) and meets Russian counterpart Ambassador Alexander Matsegora, his wife, and other Russian diplomats at the Chinese diplomatic mission in Pyongyang. “The sides exchanged opinions on a wide range of issues and agreed to continue close working contacts and friendly cooperation,” according to China. Chinese media also reports that the first secretary of the Russian Embassy in Beijing Kravchenko (Кравченко) also joined the meeting.

Aug. 14-19, 2023: Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu [attends](#) 11th Moscow Conference on International Security in Russia on Aug. 14-16 and pays a visit to Belarus on Aug. 16-19. In Moscow, Li delivers a speech at the conference, and meets with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and defense heads from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan, Vietnam and others. In Belarus, Li meets President Alexander Lukashenko and Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin.

Aug. 22-24, 2023: 15th BRICS Summit is held in Johannesburg, South Africa and invites six countries (Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) to join the group, from Jan. 1, 2024. BRICS' New Development Bank, headquartered in Shanghai, has provided more than \$35 billion for about 100 projects of its member states since 2015.

Aug. 23, 2023: Russia and China [react](#) strongly to the pending release of nuclear wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear power plant beginning Aug. 24. China lodges a strong diplomatic protest. Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told *Moskva-24* television that Japan should allow interested countries to take samples of wastewater from the nuclear power plant.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

AUSTRALIA-US/EAST ASIA
RELATIONS

STABILIZING CHINA TRADE AND SEEKING INDO-PACIFIC BALANCE

GRAEME DOBELL, AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC POLICY INSTITUTE

Australia has peeled back China trade coercion as it ramps-up the alliance with the United States to balance China. The Labor government, elected in May 2022, claims a diplomatic thaw with China as a key achievement. The major defense step was agreeing for Australia to get nuclear submarines under the AUKUS agreement with Britain and the United States. The government's [2023 National Defense Statement](#) describes “an intense contest of values” in the Indo-Pacific, with growing “risks of military escalation or miscalculation.” Because of the worsening strategic environment, the Australian Defense Force is judged “not fully fit for purpose” as the government seeks greater long-range strike capability. The era of alliance integration will see more US troops, planes, and ships in Australia, and the creation of a US-Australia combined intelligence center in Canberra. The contest with China in the South Pacific frames a new Australian aid policy and a greater US role in the islands.

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End China's trade pressure, stabilize the relationship

A stable relationship between Australia and China is in the interests of both countries and the broader region. Australia will continue to cooperate with China where we can, disagree where we must, manage our differences wisely, and, above all else, engage in and vigorously pursue our own national interest.

- [Australia's 2023 National Defense Statement](#)

“Stabilize” is the word of the year in the Labor government’s dealings with China (although, of course, Australia spells it “stabilise”). The stability effort had a threshold condition—Beijing must cease trade coercion. And Beijing is meeting this condition. The trade bans China [imposed](#) on Australia three years ago are being revoked, opening the chance for a Beijing visit by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese later this year. The pressure China applied to Australia failed. Canberra did not bow and Australia’s economy did not falter. The *Economist* [judged](#) “Australia has faced down China’s trade bans and emerged stronger,” while the *Australian Financial Review* [boasted](#) “China’s sanctions against Australia have been a spectacular failure.”

Canberra’s offense three years ago was to speak hard truth at the moment China’s leader, Xi Jinping, faced his greatest peril from the pandemic. When Australia [called](#) in April 2020 for an international inquiry into the origins of the COVID-19 in Wuhan, China’s ambassador to Canberra attacked Australia as “hostile” and [predicted](#) trade retaliation. China [imposed](#) tariffs and unofficial customs bans on coal, barley, beef, wine, timber, lobsters, and cotton.

Australian exporters shifted to other markets. And China could not do without Australia’s iron ore, so Australia’s trade surplus with China kept surging, despite the bans. A [study](#) by the government’s Productivity Commission found that China failed to “impose significant economy-wide costs on Australia” although individual businesses were hit. The Commission said “alternative markets were readily found for

many exports” and exports “proved to be mostly resilient against these [Chinese] trade measures.” Barley and coal exporters found other markets, the study said, and the value of beef and wheat exports to China did not fall significantly because the partial bans targeted certain abattoirs and shipments.

After Labor won office in Australia’s federal election in May 2022, China’s first move was to end the freeze on ministerial meetings. Then China started peeling back sanctions. Beijing lifted its barrier to Australian coal in January 2023, allowing customs clearance for coal shipments for the first time since 2020. In May 2023, Australia’s trade minister and China’s commerce minister co-chaired a Beijing meeting of the Joint Ministerial Economic Commission, the first time the commission had convened since 2017. It was the first in-person meeting of Australian and Chinese trade ministers since 2019. Canberra described the talks as “an important [further step](#) towards the stabilization of Australia’s bilateral relationship with China.” Following the meeting, China said it would resume imports of Australian timber.

In August 2023, China announced it would [remove](#) 80.5% of anti-dumping and countervailing duties on Australian barley. The barrier had blocked all Australian barley exports from May 2020. With the removal of the duties, Australia dropped legal action at the World Trade Organisation. Canberra welcomed the action as “another [positive step](#) towards the stabilization of our relationship.” Beijing reinstated Australia as an Approved Destination for group travel by Chinese tourists. Prior to the pandemic, China was the [largest](#) and most valuable market for travelers coming to Australia; in 2019, more than 1.4 million Chinese tourists visited.

Australia’s Trade Minister, Don Farrell, described the [progress](#) in a speech in June: “One of our biggest priorities has been to work to stabilize our relationship with China—by far our largest trading partner. We’ve been clear on our position with China from day one. We want a stable and prosperous trading relationship, and

the full resumption of trade. Since the day I took on the job as Australia's Trade and Tourism Minister, it has been the biggest test of our commitment to stability, to pursue discussion over dispute, and dialogue over bluster.”

The experience taught Australia that “overreliance on any single trading partner comes with risks,” Farrell said. “Any business that relied on a single client, would be destined for failure, so too for global trading economies. We've learnt valuable lessons over the last few years.” Australia's wine makers hope their stabilization turn comes quickly. China's ban has caused a wine glut. Australia has an oversupply equivalent to [more than 2.8 billion bottles](#), because China was previously the biggest buyer of Australian wine. In July, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong met China's top diplomat Wang Yi for the fourth time in a year, at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting in Jakarta. Wong aimed to refine the terms for Albanese to visit China, telling reporters: “The prime minister has been [invited to Beijing](#). We would hope for the most positive circumstances for such a visit.”

With progress on trade, attention turns to two Australian citizens held hostage by China: Cheng Lei and Yang Jun (also known Yang Hengjun). Yang, a writer and blogger, has been [detained](#) for more than four years. Yang migrated to Australia in 1999 and gained citizenship. Prior to his [arrest](#), he was based in New York and was a visiting scholar at Columbia University. Journalist Cheng Lei is a Chinese-born Australian who was a reporter and presenter for China's English-language TV news channel from 2012 to 2020. In August 2020, Australia was notified that she had been detained for endangering China's national security. Cheng Lei's first public statement since her arrest came in August in what she called a "[love letter](#)" to Australia, dictated to consular staff during a visit:

“I relive every bushwalk, river, lake, beach with swims and picnics and psychedelic sunsets, sky that is lit up with stars, and the silent and secret symphony of the bush. I secretly mouth the names of places I've visited and driven through.

I miss the Australian people...I miss the sun. In my cell, the sunlight shines through the window but I can stand in it for only 10 hours a year. Every year the bedding is taken into the sun for two hours to air. When it came back last time, I wrapped myself in the doona and pretended I was being hugged by my family under the sun.”

Albanese [says](#) the government pushes for release of its citizens “whenever Australia meets with China.” Canberra has been careful not to use the term “hostage” in official comments, and the prime minister says the release of the two Australians is not a condition for his Beijing visit. Beijing's view of stabilization was given in a *China Daily* editorial in August on a “[good reboot](#)” with Australia based on “a tacit consensus” to “let the past be past.” The Chinese Communist Party's English-language paper observed that Canberra and Beijing had met half-way: “However, although China remains consistent in its policy toward Australia, Beijing has no reasons not to remain aware of the fact that Australia exists in almost all anti-China cliques of the United States, ranging from AUKUS and the (“Quadrilateral Security Dialogue”) to the so-called Five Eyes intelligence alliance. This is also something that does not change no matter who becomes the leader of the country. Yet something else that has not changed is that China has been and will continue to be Australia's largest export market.” The irony of stabilization is that China is set to deliver significant trade hits to Australia, even if these are unintentional rather than policy. The economic ailments afflicting China mean Australia's top customer will pass on some of its pain.

Balancing China and Defense Strategy

Surveying the “[regional balance of power](#)” in April, Foreign Minister Wong said Australia started with “the reality that China is going to keep being China” and Canberra would not “waste energy with shock or outrage at China seeking to maximise its advantage.” Australia must focus on its interest in “rules, standards and norms—where a larger country does not determine the fate of a smaller country.” The competition in the Indo-Pacific, Wong said, “is

more than great power rivalry and is in fact nothing less than a contest over the way our region and our world work.”

Australia’s stabilize effort has a mantra used in government statements and interviews. Wong hit every note in her balance-of-power speech: “Cooperate where we can, disagree where we must, manage our differences wisely, and above all else, engage in and vigorously pursue our own national interest.”

In April, the Albanese government released a [Defense Strategic Review](#) (DSR) to set the agenda “for ambitious, but necessary, reform” to the posture and structure of Australia’s defense. The DSR was prepared by a former Labor foreign and defense minister, Stephen Smith, now Australia’s ambassador to London, and Sir Angus Houston, a former chief of the Australian Defense Force (ADF). A striking element of their report was the government’s adoption of its tough judgment about the inadequate state of the ADF. The Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Richard Marles wrote: “Due to the significant changes in Australia’s strategic circumstances, the Government agrees with the Review’s finding that the ADF as currently constituted and equipped is not fully fit for purpose.”

The government accepted the review recommendations, and identified six [priorities](#):

- Acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines through AUKUS to improve deterrence;
- Developing the Australian Defense Force’s (ADF) ability to precisely strike targets at longer-range and manufacture munitions in Australia;
- Improving the ADF’s ability to operate from Australia’s northern bases;
- Initiatives to improve the growth and retention of a highly skilled Defense workforce;
- Rapidly translate disruptive new technologies into ADF capability, in close partnership with Australian industry; and

- Deepening of our diplomatic and defense partnerships with key partners in the Indo-Pacific.

To enhance the ADF’s [strike capability](#) “and hold an adversary at risk at longer ranges,” the government in August announced the purchase of 200 Tomahawk cruise missiles and 60 extended-range missiles to target enemy radar systems. The number of High Mobility Artillery Rocket System ([HIMARS](#)) launchers being acquired for the ADF will be doubled to a total of 42. The review by Smith and Houston described a radical shift in the Indo-Pacific: “Intense China-United States competition is the defining feature of our region and our time.” For the first time in the 80 years since World War 2, Australia faced the highest level of strategic risk: “the prospect of major conflict in the region that directly threatens our national interest.”

In the government’s National Defense Statement issued along with the DSR, Marles blamed China’s build-up for the contest: “Australia’s region, the Indo-Pacific, faces increasing competition that operates on multiple levels -- economic, military, strategic and diplomatic—all interwoven and all framed by an intense contest of values and narratives. A large-scale conventional and non-conventional military build-up without strategic reassurance is contributing to the most challenging circumstances in our region for decades. Combined with rising tensions and reduced warning time for conflict, the risks of military escalation or miscalculation are rising.”

The DSR said China’s military surge was the largest and most ambitious of any country since the end of the Second World War “This build-up is occurring without transparency or reassurance to the Indo-Pacific region of China’s strategic intent.” The review said China “threatens the global rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific in a way that adversely impacts Australia’s national interests.” For students of Australian defense epistemology, the DSR offered a new map of “Our Strategic Environment.” It was the only map in the 110-page report; given how much the military

love maps, that sparked much discussion in the officer caste and strategic class. The review said Australia's adoption of an Indo-Pacific strategy since 2013 was a "deeply significant change to the basis of Australian defense planning." This is the DSR's map of the Indo-Pacific, which it calls "the most important geostrategic region in the world."

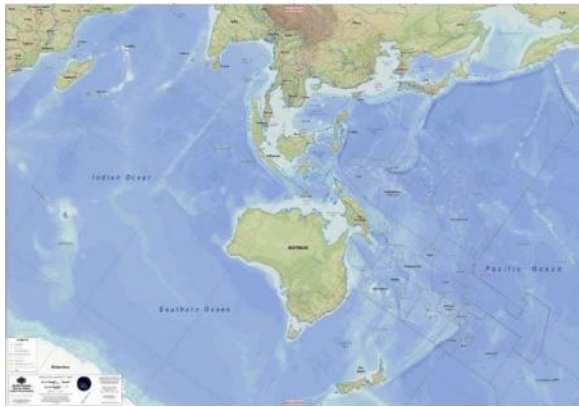


Figure 1 Australian government, Defense Strategic Review

The map grabbed the attention of Kim Beazley, former Labor leader, defense minister and Australia's ambassador to Washington from 2010 to 2016. Beazley wrote that the map "superbly situates us" and explains why the US seeking a major role in the Indo-Pacific "would consider Australia to be critical. Australia points straight into the archipelago that connects the Indian and Pacific oceans. Our land mass is immense, even alongside Asia. It suggests that Australia is a potent piece of real estate and a valuable US ally."

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin welcomed the DSR as demonstrating Australia's commitment to meet regional and global challenges, and to "our Unbreakable Alliance, which has never been stronger." He said the review showed "the pivotal role Australia plays in preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific, including through participation in AUKUS and the Quad."

A DSR commentary from the International Institute for Strategic studies noted that the ADF will remain relatively small in numbers, limiting its operations and sustainment. In a crisis over

Taiwan or conflict involving Japan or South Korea, IISS judged, Australia's "preferred option" would be rear-guard operations further afield from the main theatre of operations. Such a planning assumption could be "too optimistic, given that the US may expect more from the ADF as part of an allied response in the event of a full-scale Chinese invasion of Taiwan."

AUKUS and Nuclear Submarines



Figure 2 <https://www.asa.gov.au/aukus>

On March 13, 2023, the leaders of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States marked the end of 18 months of consultation by announcing the plan for Australia to acquire conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS security partnership. Anthony Albanese, Rishi Sunak and Joseph Biden met in San Diego to set the pathway to build nuclear-powered submarines that will be named SSN-AUKUS (SSN stands for Submersible Ship Nuclear).



Figure 3 Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, US President Joseph Biden, and UK Prime Minister

Rishi Sunak at the AUKUS announcement in San Diego. Image: Anthony Albanese/Twitter.

The cost of Australia's submarines is A\$368 billion (US\$245 billion) over the three decades to 2052-53, according to figures given to the Parliamentary Budget Office. Australia's annual defense [budget](#) this year is A\$52.5 billion (US\$35 billion), the first time annual funding has exceeded A\$50 billion. Defense Minister Marles says the best estimate of the cost of the boats is 0.15% of Australia's gross domestic product over the life of the program. SSN-AUKUS will be a common platform operated by both the UK and Australia, with two production lines--one at Barrow-in-Furness in the UK, and one at Osborne in South Australia. Nuclear reactors for the Australia's AUKUS submarines will be built in the UK.

In the late 2030s, the UK should deliver its first SSN-AUKUS boats to the Royal Navy. Australia aims to deliver the first SSN-AUKUS built in Australia to the Royal Australian Navy in the early 2040s. Australian navy and civilian personnel have started to embed with the US Navy and Royal Navy. From 2027, the UK and US will rotate nuclear submarines to HMAS Stirling naval base, near Perth in Western Australia. The rotation will ultimately comprise one UK Astute-class submarine and up to four US Virginia-class submarines. The US has promised that in the early 2030s it will sell Australia three Virginia-class submarines, with the potential to sell up to two more if needed. The "if needed" hedge for two extra Virginia boats is in case Australia is not producing its own AUKUS boats by the 2040s. Getting three Virginias in the 2030s would bridge the capability gap as Australia retires its Collins-class diesel-electric submarines from 2038.

Australia plans to buy two serving *Virginia* boats from the US Navy while the third boat will be a new *Virginia* off the US production line. The US has never before transferred a nuclear-powered submarine to another navy. Australia wants the two serving boats from the US Navy to have a further 20 years of life (the *Virginias* have a service life of 33 years). In June, the US House of Representatives referred to committees draft

[legislation for the sale](#) to Australia of two *Virginia*-class submarines from the inventory of the US Navy. Evidence to [Senate hearings](#) in Canberra is that the Australia aims to have eight nuclear SSNs in the 2050s: three *Virginia*-class and five AUKUS.

In July, Canberra [created](#) the Australian Submarine Agency to acquire, construct, deliver, technically govern, sustain, and eventually dispose of Australia's nuclear submarines. In a major speech on foreign policy and defense, Albanese used his [keynote address to the Singapore's Shangri-La Dialogue](#) to argue that AUKUS would give fresh support to Australia's long engagement in Asia and the South Pacific: "Before I stood alongside President Biden and Prime Minister Sunak to announce Australia's pathway to acquiring conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines, I ensured that my government spoke with every ASEAN and Pacific partner and many other nations. More than 60 phone calls, being open and transparent with the region about our intentions."

Albanese quoted Indonesia's President Joko Widodo's view that the Quad and AUKUS should work as "[partners and not competitors](#)" in making the region stable and peaceful. Albanese said: "The submarines we are acquiring—the single biggest leap in Australia's defense capability in our history—reflect our determination to live up to those expectations. To be a stronger partner and a more effective contributor to stability in our region."

As well as making the case to the region, Albanese had to persuade his own party. AUKUS was a controversial focus of the national conference of the Australian Labor Party, the peak meeting every three years when Labor adopts its formal policy platform. Prior to the August conference, party members and union leaders campaigned to sink the deal for nuclear subs. The strongest anti-AUKUS argument was from former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating. In a speech to the National Press Club, Keating called AUKUS "the [worst international decision](#) by an Australian Labor government" in 100 years.

Keating said Australian interests were being subsumed to its allies, with “defense policy substituting for foreign policy.” Despite the enormous cost, Keating said, the AUKUS boats did not “offer a solution to the challenge of great power competition in the region or to the security of the Australian people and its continent.” The Albanese government wanted the submarines for deep and joint operations against China, Keating said: “No mealy-mouthed talk of ‘stabilization’ in our China relationship or resort to softer or polite language will disguise from the Chinese the extent and intent of our commitment to US strategic hegemony in East Asia with all its deadly portents.”

At the national conference, Albanese and his ministers repelled the effort to strip AUKUS from Labor’s policy platform. The prime minister told the conference: “AUKUS is the [choice](#) of a mature nation, an honest global player taking our rightful place on the world stage.” Heading off any party revolt, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Richard Marles had the conference adopt a 32-paragraph statement on the importance of AUKUS. The statement said AUKUS is needed for “strategic equilibrium” and to “play our part in collective deterrence of aggression.” Building the submarines in Australia would create around 20,000 direct jobs and see \$30 billion invested in the nation’s industrial base. “Australia will always make sovereign, independent decision” on the use of the submarines,” the policy statement said, and AUKUS “does not involve any *ante facto* commitment to participate in, or be directed in accordance with, the military operations of any other country.”

The Marles motion was passed on the voices, with no vote demanded, and became Labor policy. Writing AUKUS into the platform confirms the nuclear submarine consensus between Australia’s parties of government, Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition. The nuclear allergy that defined Australian politics for decades has been remade with extraordinary speed. The Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison unveiled AUKUS in September

2021—canceling the contract for a French-designed conventionally-powered boat—and giving Labor leader Albanese only 24-hours notice to back the switch to a nuclear-powered boat. Albanese dodged Morrison’s political “wedge” and endorsed AUKUS, a position that is now formal Labor policy.

The view from Washington is that Australia must prove worthy of US nuclear “crown jewels.” That’s the perspective of Arthur Sinodinos, who completed his term as Australia’s ambassador to the US in March, as the AUKUS details were being announced in San Diego. Sinodinos, a former Liberal senator and government minister, describes the nuclear submarine project as a “moonshot” for Australia. Sinodinos told The Australian newspaper (Feb. 25-26) that the US was handing over sovereign capability so Australia could build its ability to project power into the region: “We’ve got the Americans to sign off on giving us access to the crown jewels of their nuclear technology. And they’re prepared to trust us based on verification—trust but verify—on our capacity for nuclear stewardship. So, it’s a very big effort we’re embarked on. It will test us as a nation.”

US Alliance

President Biden will [host](#) Prime Minister Albanese for an official visit to the US and a state dinner on Oct. 25. The White House said the visit “will underscore the deep and enduring alliance” and their “shared commitment to supporting an open, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific.” Albanese said his first visit to Washington as prime minister would strengthen a relationship that is “[unique](#) in scale, scope and significance, reflecting more than 100 years of partnership.” While AUKUS expresses the alliance’s ambition for coming decades, today’s action is an alliance coming home to Australia. The US military commitment is being expressed on Australian soil.

The Labor government maintains that the use of Australia by US military planes, ships and troops are “rotations,” thus denying that the US

is establishing “bases” on Australian soil. The rotation-vs-bases distinction points to the politically sensitive balance between alliance commitment and national sovereignty. Australia has become used to hosting permanent intelligence bases. The intelligence model is the [Pine Gap base](#) near Alice Springs. The Pine Gap “joint defense facility” is a satellite surveillance station operated by the Central Intelligence Agency, commissioned in 1967. Next year the Australian and US militaries will go a step further to create their own combined intelligence center.

Using force “rotations,” Australia’s intimate involvement with US intelligence is being replicated in the military realm. The Labor government set its alliance template with the annual AUSMIN defense and foreign policy talks [held in Washington](#) in December 2022 and [in Brisbane](#) in July 2023. The rotation of US Marines through Australia agreed in 2011 is being emulated by the other arms of the US military. The approach was designed by the previous Liberal-National Coalition government and Labor is building the detail.

In 2020, the Coalition government signed a statement of principles on alliance cooperation and [force posture priorities](#) in the Indo-Pacific, and in 2021 Australia and the US announced a program of “force posture [cooperation and alliance integration](#).” The era of integration, as defined by the [2021 AUSMIN communiqué](#), focuses on what more the US military will do in Australia through “the rotational deployment of US aircraft of all types,” increased support for US ships and submarines, and combined logistics, sustainment, and maintenance for “highend warfighting and combined military operations in the region.”

Serving integration, the Labor government last year agreed that the US will “[preposition](#) stores, munitions, and fuel” in Australia, in support of US capabilities. To strengthen the US land presence, Australia will “expand locations for US Army and US Marine Corps” to use for exercises and regional engagement.

To help the US Air Force, more infrastructure will be built in northern Australia at what are termed “bare bases.” Australia and the US will co-develop the bare bases “to support more responsive and resilient rotations of US aircraft.” The major airbases in the Northern Territory, Darwin and Tindal (near Katherine), are already being upgraded. Tindal’s [improvements](#) will allow it to house up to six US B-52 bombers for “[squadron operations](#).”

The Brisbane AUSMIN in July [announced agreement](#) on the creation of “Combined Intelligence Center–Australia,” to start operation next year. The joint center will be within Australia’s Defense Intelligence Organisation to enhance cooperation with the US Defense Intelligence Agency, focused on “issues of shared strategic concern in the Indo-Pacific.” Defense Minister Marles said the new intelligence center is a “significant step forward” toward “[seamless](#)” intelligence ties with the US: “You’ll get an American perspective into the American system seen from Australia. And that is not insignificant.” During his first visit to Washington as defense minister last year, Marles said he aimed to “operationalize” the US presence in Australia, to move from “[interoperability to interchangeability](#)” so the two militaries could “operate seamlessly together at speed.” From air bases in northern Australia to Canberra’s new combined intelligence center, the coming together in Australia of the US and Australian militaries is, indeed, happening “at speed.”

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

Canberra describes its Quad partnership with India, Japan and the US as “a [key pillar](#) in Australia’s foreign policy.” The new pillar—or [Quad 2.0](#)—is still in the early-build stage. The Labor Party has gone from being negative about Quad 1.0 to positive about Quad 2.0, reflecting the shift in Australia’s view of China. Australia was set to hold only the third in-person Quad leaders’ meeting in Sydney (following the [first face-to-face summit in Washington](#) in 2021 and the [second in Tokyo](#) in 2022). Everything was arranged for that third in-person Quad on [May](#)

24. The stationery, media banners and accreditation lanyards were [ready](#). The draft vision statement was written, along with the draft communiqué. Plus one of Australia's greatest photo opportunities was prepared—the leaders would stand in front of the magnificent white sails of the Sydney Opera House, looking across Sydney Harbour. After the Quad, President Biden would go to Canberra to address the Australian Parliament.

Then, just days out, the Sydney summit was no more. The prime minister got an early-morning [phone call](#) from the president. Biden told Albanese he could not make the Sydney date. Instead, Biden was needed in Washington for crucial negotiations on the [US debt ceiling](#). Much scrambling followed. Biden was still going to the G7 summit in Japan (and the leaders of India and Australia would be G7 guests). So the statement that Biden and Albanese had been due to release in Canberra proclaiming "[An alliance for our times](#)" was actually issued in Hiroshima after a meeting on the sidelines of the G7.

In the same way, the third in-person Quad leaders' meeting took place in Hiroshima, even though Albanese was credited as host. Getting the leaders together was a hasty fix, but their [vision statement](#) was another deliberate step in proclaiming what the Quad promises to protect.

As ever with Quad-speak, China is not named. But the Quad vision is defined by how the four partners stare at Beijing, and how they describe the future they want to see. The central Quad-speak hymn is to "a free and open Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilient." The vision is for a region that is "free from intimidation and coercion, and where disputes are settled in accordance with international law." When Australia ticked/inserted that phrase about "free from intimidation and coercion" in the vision draft, it was thinking about three years of trade pressure from China. Canberra's description of the Quad as a new foreign policy pillar points to its uses as a protection against China. The Quad offers mutual reassurance to the four members—and assurance to the rest of the Indo-Pacific about a

future where China's importance does not have to mean Beijing's total dominance.

After the improvised Quad summit in Hiroshima, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi flew to Australia, as had been scheduled. His talks with Albanese were the [sixth time](#) the two leaders had met in the first year of Albanese's prime ministership. The growth of Australia's bilateral relationship with India is feeding into the Quad partnership, just as two decades ago Australia's bilateral ties with Japan nurtured the trilateral with the US and then the Quad. Next year, India will host the annual in-person Quad summit. India's status as the new but demanding great friend that must be courted—as opposed to Australia as an old ally, reliable and understanding—makes India's Quad meeting a "must" for the US president, whatever the state of play in Washington (even in an election year).

Australia and the US in the South Pacific

When President Biden cancelled his trip to Australia in May, he also cancelled another leg—a visit to Papua New Guinea to meet PNG's prime minister and other leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum. It was a stutter in Washington's "[renewed partnership with the Pacific Islands](#)." The South Pacific has become part of the great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific. The island states detest the power elements of the new reality, while enjoying the increased attention. The South Pacific worry is that the Indo-Pacific subsumes or [marginalizes](#) their islander identity in a much larger Asian construct, and ties the peace of the islands to a dangerous Asian contest. Echoing Southeast Asia, the South Pacific pleads that it must not be forced to choose between China and the US.

Competition with China means the US is back in the South Pacific to help Australia's effort to retain the major regional role. Development joins diplomacy and defense in the way the US and Australia draw together. The US can no longer leave the region to Australia as it has for the last 50 years. As the colonial era ended and the modern South Pacific of independent states arrived in the 1960s and 1970s, the US handed

significant regional responsibility to Australia and New Zealand. Washington advised that Canberra and Wellington should “shoulder the main burden.” The US would do the duties of the big external power in Micronesia while Australia and New Zealand would have that role in Melanesia and Polynesia. Australia’s immediate geographic focus is Melanesia while these days New Zealand ponders the idea of Polynesia shaping its international understanding with a “[Maori foreign policy](#).”

To see how that original allocation of responsibility was agreed, turn to Australian Cabinet documents. In a March 1977 Cabinet submission on Australian [diplomatic representation in the South Pacific](#), Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock stressed the “urgent need for Australia to extend its official presence in the South Pacific,” because of efforts by the Soviet Union and China to increase their roles in the islands. Peacock wrote that Washington expected Canberra and Wellington to carry the South Pacific load: “In discussions on Soviet and Chinese motives in the region, the United States Government has made it clear that, while it stands ready to play a supporting role, it looks to Australia and New Zealand to shoulder the main burden of ensuring the stability of the region and of developing close relations with the Island countries. The United States also looks to Australia and New Zealand to provide most of the basic reporting and intelligence on the countries of the region.”

Peacock repeated the message of South Pacific responsibility—and the complications involved—in a Cabinet submission on US relations in December 1978: “The Americans have looked to Australia and New Zealand to take the lead in the South Pacific, but have accepted Australian encouragement to take a more active role in the region. In view of Island sensitivities, Australia will need to exercise care in interposing itself between South Pacific countries and the US.”

The effect of the division of responsibilities over the five decades was most evident in the diplomatic, political, and intelligence realms. A negative read would be that Washington went

[absent](#) for long periods in Melanesia and Polynesia. A kinder read is that Washington expected its allies to take more responsibility and had confidence in Australia and New Zealand to serve their own interests and their own region. The strategic division established in the 1970s has run its course. Both Canberra and Washington agree: the US has to get back in the game in the South Pacific because China has changed the game. What holds for the Indo-Pacific is equally true for the South Pacific.

The US has to address “[long years of relative neglect](#),” observed former Australian diplomat Richard Maude, arguing “US interests are largely defined by China’s gains.” The first US summit with South Pacific leaders in September last year can be read as a simple statement: “We’re back!” The White House said the [Washington meeting with island leaders](#) reflected a “broadening and deepening” of the US role. The summit’s [declaration](#) promised Washington would “recommit” to working with the South Pacific to deal with “a worsening climate crisis and an increasingly complex geopolitical environment.”

The substance of that deeper role must be a US that is constantly present in the South Pacific and delivers for islanders. Hear that from the doyen of Solomon Islands journalism, Dorothy Wickham, in a [New York Times op-ed](#). She offers a simple lesson for the US as it vies with China:

“You have got to show up. [And the United States has not](#). We get it. The Solomon Islands is small, remote and economically insignificant. But if all countries like us are dismissed as such, China will pick us off one by one with its promises of business projects and development aid...There is a creeping sense today that we are being ignored, if not forgotten. So who can blame us if we open the door to new friends who can help with our needs? And those needs are great.”

In the South Pacific, foreign policy is often aid policy. Washington and Canberra last year agreed on regular consultations on their aid work in the islands. Australia’s Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Pat Conroy, who also serves as minister for defense

industry, had talks in Washington in October 2022 with the administrator of USAID, Samantha Power. After the meeting, Power pointed to the “[strong need](#)” for the two aid agencies “to work even more closely together” to deal with complex geopolitical challenges.

In August, USAID [reopened](#) a Pacific Islands mission in Fiji to oversee regional aid programs in Micronesia and Polynesia. At the same time, USAID’s office in Papua New Guinea was elevated to have a broader Melanesian focus, with Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. After opening the Suva mission, Power told the US Indo-Pacific Command Chiefs of Defense Conference, held in Fiji, that “as the United States deepens our commitment to security in the Pacific, we are expanding our investments across all these lines of effort—[diplomacy, defense, and development](#).”

Canberra’s effort to align its development effort with strategic policy was the release in August of a new [international aid framework](#). Australia wants to maintain its top spot as the [largest aid giver](#) in the South Pacific, seeking to be the region’s “partner of choice.” Australia joins its development to its diplomatic and defense policies because of what the aid policy described in its first two sentences: “Our region is under pressure. We face the most challenging strategic circumstances in the post-war period.”

The name “China” does not appear in the aid framework. But the frame defines itself in important ways by the contrasts it offers with China. One example is Australia’s implied swipe at how China delivers aid by building the debt of island states: “Public debt in the Pacific is expected to almost double by 2025, compared to 2019. The increase in the debt servicing burden will exacerbate challenges and impact critical health, education, and social services.” Australia promises to deliver aid that is “transparent, effective, and accountable.” And in a related shaft at Chinese projects built by Chinese companies and workers, Australia’s promise is to “support local actors.”

The US and Australia embraced the Pacific Island Forum’s [“Strategy for the Blue Pacific](#)

[Continent”](#) as a means to deliver what the South Pacific needs by working with the “Pacific way.” In September 2022, the [Partners in the Blue Pacific](#) had their first meeting, drawing together the US, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, for talks with Forum members. Observers at the first meeting were Canada, France, Germany, India, South Korea and the European Union. The promise is of a “genuine partnership” that will be “led and guided by the Pacific islands.”

The Quad is playing its part in the South Pacific with the creation last year of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness ([IPMDA](#)). The partnership uses commercial satellites to provide “real time” data on what ships are doing in national waters. The work targets illegal fishing. Chinese fishing boats often [turn off](#) their automatic identification transponders to evade detection. Under IPMDA, Australia in July awarded a satellite contract to provide space-based radio frequency [data and analytics](#) to the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA). Based in Solomon Islands, the FFA helps 17 island states manage tuna fisheries within their 200 mile Exclusive Economic Zones.

Kevin Rudd Goes to Washington

Australia’s new ambassador to the US is [Kevin Rudd](#), who was Australia’s 26th prime minister (from 2007 to 2010, and after a caucus coup returned as PM for three months before losing the 2013 election). Rudd presented his credentials to President Biden in April 2023. Australia has sent plenty of former politicians to head the Washington embassy, but never a previous prime minister. Rudd is the 11th Australian politician to serve as ambassador in Washington since the post was established in 1940 (the other 12 ambassadors during the period were public servants). Most Australia ambassadors around the world are career diplomats, but in Washington the politicians are tightening their hold—Rudd’s three predecessors as ambassador to the US were former members of federal Parliament.

The only Australian precedent for an ex-PM becoming an ambassador is with Britain.

Australia's fifth prime minister, Andrew Fisher, resigned as PM in October 1915 to become high commissioner to the UK, serving for the rest of WW1 and on until 1921. The eighth prime minister, Stanley Bruce, later became high commissioner to the UK from 1933 to 1945, serving through the depression and WWII. The lesson seems to be that Australia's former leaders do diplomatic service with the key international partner (and protector) when times are tough. Since losing office in 2013, Rudd has spent most of his time in the US, going first to Harvard's Kennedy School. In 2015, he became inaugural president of the [Asia Society Policy Institute](#) in New York. In 2020, he was appointed President and CEO of the Asia Society globally.



Figure 4 Ambassador Kevin Rudd presents his credentials to President Joe Biden at the White House, alongside wife Thérèse Rein, April 19, 2023. Picture: Kevin Rudd/Twitter

Announcing Rudd's [appointment](#), Prime Minister Albanese and Foreign Minister Wong described Rudd as one of "the world's most eminent and sought-after experts on China and US-China relations. At a time when our region is being reshaped by strategic competition, our interests are well served with a representative of Dr Rudd's standing." Rudd received a PhD from Oxford University last year for a thesis on "[significant change in China's ideological worldview](#) under Xi Jinping." Rudd summarized Xi's approach as a new form of "Marxist-Leninist Nationalism" or "Marxist Nationalism." One consular case that sits on Rudd's desk is the negotiations between the US and Australia over the fate Australian citizen

Julian Assange, the founder of Wikileaks. The US seeks to extradite Assange from the United Kingdom on 18 charges related to the publication of thousands of military and diplomatic documents. Assange has been in prison in London for more than four years, fighting the UK's extradition decision.

A multi-party delegation of Australian federal MPs and senators will travel to Washington on Sept. 20 to [urge](#) the US to drop charges against Assange. Among the delegation is a former Coalition deputy prime minister, Barnaby Joyce, who says the US prosecution sets a dangerous precedent, that a citizen can be sent to a third country for an offence they did not commit in that country. Albanese says his government is [pushing against](#) the US over the case. "This has gone on for too long. Enough is enough," the prime minister said. The US ambassador to Australia, Caroline Kennedy, said in August that a [plea deal](#) could end the pursuit of the Australian citizen. Kennedy said the case was "not really a diplomatic issue, but I think there absolutely could be a resolution." Surveying his tasks as ambassador in Washington, Rudd used an [interview](#) in June to list priorities:

Geopolitics, guardrails and strategic stability: "How do we preserve the peace between the United States and China and what is the role of allies in the process?"

Taiwan: How to deter China from "resort to unilateral force to take Taiwan? That's a complex equation. It's not just a simple military equation. It's a broader equation than that."

Trade and economics: To help Australian industry in the US, in areas from biotechnology to energy and critical minerals. On biotechnology, Rudd notes that 11% of the world's clinical trials are done in Australia, even though the country has only 0.3% of the world's population. "So in bio there's a huge and new dynamic industry." The aim of AUKUS is "to create a seamless defense, science, and technology industry," Rudd said, and the joining of Australian, US and UK industry "is

potentially even more revolutionary than the submarine project in itself.”

Climate: Along with security and economic engagement, Rudd said, climate policy becomes “the third pillar of our relationship.” Climate action would become “the flipside to energy security.”

Rudd has written a 420-page handbook to help in his new job. Last year he released [*The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China*](#). Henry Kissinger distilled Rudd’s book to one question: “Can the US and China avoid sleepwalking into a conflict?” Rudd warns that “a war between China and the US would be catastrophic, deadly and destructive. Unfortunately, it is no longer unthinkable.” He concludes that “armed conflict between China and the US over the next decade, while not yet probable, has become a real possibility.” Rudd’s answer to the “unfolding crisis” is what he calls “managed strategic competition.” The managed competition between the US and China, he writes, would aim for “strategic stability,” to allow “new levels of trust” to emerge through experience, and eventually “new modes of thinking about each other.” Ambassador Rudd is now in place in Washington to do what he can for managed strategic competition.

CHRONOLOGY OF AUSTRALIA-US/EAST ASIA RELATIONS

MAY—AUGUST 2023

Sept. 7, 2022: Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and President Dr. Jose Ramos-Horta of Timor-Leste [sign](#) a Defense Cooperation Agreement.

Sept. 23, 2022: Foreign Minister Penny Wong tells the UN General Assembly that Australia will [seek a seat](#) on the UN Security Council for 2029-2030.

Sept. 23, 2022: On the margins of the UN in New York, FM Wong meets China's Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi to discuss "[stabilizing](#)" the Australia-China relationship.

Sept. 24, 2022: Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US mark one-year anniversary of the AUKUS trilateral agreement, saying "significant progress" has been made toward Australia acquiring nuclear-powered submarines.

Sept. 27, 2022: PM Albanese [attends funeral](#) of former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, accompanied by former Australian prime ministers John Howard, Malcolm Turnbull, and Tony Abbott.

Oct. 6, 2022: Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare visits Canberra for talks with PM Albanese, [reaffirming](#) "mutual security commitments."

Oct. 10, 2022: The annual Australia-India Foreign Ministers' Framework Dialogue is [held](#) in Canberra, the second visit to Australia in the year by India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar.

Oct. 18, 2022: Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and PM Albanese hold 7th Australia-Singapore Annual Leaders' Meeting in Canberra.

Oct. 22, 2022: Japan's Prime Minister Kishida Fumio and PM Albanese [sign a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation](#).

Nov. 13, 2022: ASEAN, Australia and New Zealand [announce](#) the "substantial conclusion" of negotiations to upgrade the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement.

Nov. 15, 2022: PM Albanese [meets](#) China's President Xi Jinping on the margins of the G20 Summit.

Nov. 18, 2022: Professor Sean Turnell [returns](#) to Australia, following what Canberra describes as "more than 21 months of unjust detention in Myanmar."

Nov. 28, 2022: Australia lowers its terrorism threat level from [Probable to Possible](#). The level had been set at Probable for eight years.

Dec. 6, 2022: The annual [AUSMIN ministerial meeting](#) is held in Washington. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin host FM Wong and Deputy PM and Defense Minister Marles.

Dec. 7, 2022: [AUKUS partnership](#) is discussed at Washington talks involving Deputy PM and Defense Minister Marles, British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin.

Dec. 10, 2022: Australia [announces](#) Magnitsky-style sanctions on 13 individuals and two entities "involved in egregious human rights violations and abuses" in Iran and Russia.

Dec. 10, 2022: Australia [hosts](#) first negotiating round of the US-proposed Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. Other founding members of the IPEF attending the Brisbane conference are Brunei, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan,

Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, the US, and Vietnam.

Dec. 13, 2022: Vanuatu and Australia [sign](#) a bilateral security agreement.

Dec. 20, 2022: Previous Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd [is appointed](#) to as Australia's next ambassador to the United States.

Dec. 21, 2022: FM Penny Wong [travels](#) to Beijing to meet China's State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi for the 6th Australia-China Foreign and Strategic Dialogue—the first time the dialogue has been held since 2018. The meeting coincides with the [50th anniversary](#) of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Australia and China. Opening the dialogue, Wong [says](#) Australia and China can “navigate our differences wisely.”

Dec. 29, 2022: Australia-India Economic Cooperation Trade Agreement [enters into force](#).

Jan. 5, 2023: Australia's [stock market](#) surges following reports that Chinese officials are discussing [resuming imports of Australian coal](#), ending a two-year ban.

Jan. 12, 2023: At the Papua New Guinea-Australia Leadership Dialogue in Port Moresby, PM Albanese and PNG Prime Minister James Marape [agree](#) to a timeline for negotiations on a new security treaty.

Jan. 19, 2023: FM Wong [notes](#) the fourth anniversary of Dr. Yang Jun's detention in China, stating Australia “is deeply troubled by the ongoing delays in his case” and that Yang “still awaits a verdict.”

Jan. 30, 2023: Second [Australia-France](#) Foreign and Defense Ministerial Consultations are held to “restore” the relationship following the 2021 row when Australia abandoned a French-designed submarine in favor of AUKUS. The Paris meeting agrees to joint supply of 155-millimeter ammunition to Ukraine.

Feb. 16, 2023: A new [Pacific Engagement Visa](#) will allow up to 3,000 nationals from Pacific

island countries and Timor-Leste to migrate to Australia as permanent residents each year.

Feb. 24, 2023: Marking the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Australia [announces](#) more military aid to Ukraine and further sanctions against Russia.

March 8, 2023: PM Albanese makes first [visit to India](#) by an Australian prime minister since 2017.

March 13, 2023: President Biden, PM Albanese, and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak meet in San Diego to [announce](#) plans to build the [AUKUS](#) nuclear submarine.

March 15, 2023: Flying back from the AUKUS announcement in the US, PM Albanese [calls](#) in Suva to address the concerns of Fiji's about the nuclear submarine program.

April 11, 2023: Australia announces temporary suspension of its action against China in the World Trade Organization over export duties blocking barley sales to China. Canberra says it “has [reached an agreement](#) with China” on a pathway to end the dispute.

April 24, 2023: [Defence Strategic Review](#) and [National Defence Statement](#) are released.

May 19, 2023: PM Albanese travels to Hiroshima to attend the G7 summit.

May 20, 2023: On sidelines of the G7, PM Albanese hosts third in-person [Quad](#) leaders' summit.

May 22, 2023: India's PM Narendra Modi [travels](#) to Australia following the G7 summit and Quad Leaders' meeting in Japan.

May 22, 2023: Minister for International Development and the Pacific Pat Conroy [travels](#) to Papua New Guinea to represent Australia at the United States-Pacific Island Dialogue, which is co-hosted by PNG Prime Minister James Marape and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

May 31, 2023: Australia-United Kingdom Free Trade Agreement [enters into force](#).

June 3, 2023: PM Albanese [delivers](#) keynote address to Shangri-La defense dialogue.

June 4, 2023: PM Albanese [visits](#) Hanoi to mark 50th year of diplomatic relations with Vietnam.

July 1, 2023: Australian Submarine Agency [established](#) to “acquire, construct, deliver, technically govern, sustain and dispose” of Australia’s nuclear-powered submarines, AUKUS.

July 4, 2023: Indonesia’s President Joko Widodo visits Sydney for annual talks, [welcoming](#) “substantial progress” in the strategic partnership with Australia.

July 10, 2023: PM Albanese has talks in Berlin with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

July 11, 2023: PM Albanese attends the [NATO Leaders’ Summit](#) in Vilnius, Lithuania.

July 22, 2023: *USS Canberra* is [commissioned](#) in Sydney.

July 26, 2023: PM Albanese meets New Zealand Prime Minister Chris Hipkins in Wellington for annual talks on the bilateral relationship that “is unlike any other.”

July 28, 2023: During *Exercise Talisman Sabre*, four Australian soldiers are killed when a helicopter [crashes](#) in waters off Queensland’s Whitsunday Islands.

July 29, 2023: 33rd Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations ([AUSMIN](#)) is held in Brisbane, involving FM Wong and Deputy PM and Defense Minister Marles, with US Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of Defense Austin.

Aug. 8, 2023: Australia’s new International Development Policy is [announced](#).

Aug. 10, 2023: Australia’s military for first time [hosts](#) “key partners” India, Japan and the United States for *Exercise Malabar*.

Aug. 10, 2023: Deputy PM Marles [addresses](#) the Australian American Leadership Dialogue.

Aug. 11, 2023: FM Wong [notes](#) that it has been three years since Australian citizen Cheng Lei was detained in China.

Aug. 18, 2023: [National conference](#) of Australian Labor Party meets to decide policy platform.

Aug. 27, 2023: Three US marines killed when an Osprey aircraft [crashes](#) near Darwin during an exercise.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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