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BEIJING MODERATES CRITICISMS SELECTIVELY

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Beijing in this reporting period moderated often shrill rhetoric of the past two years criticizing Joseph Biden administration advances and regional governments cooperating with the US. Emphasizing China's positive contributions to regional economic growth, Beijing stressed its flexibility, said to be different from Washington in not pressing regional states to choose between the US and China, even as it demonstrated ambitions to develop a new regional and global order favorable to itself. Nevertheless, glaring exceptions included egregious pressures to compel deference to China's claims in the South China Sea, harsh criticism of the Philippines and Japan cooperating closely with the United States, as well as authoritative foreign policy statements giving regional governments little choice between two paths forward: cooperation with an avowedly beneficial China or America's purported exploitative, divisive and destructive initiatives. Regarding the Philippines, an unprecedented show of support by the US for the territorial claims of its treaty ally resulted in an equally unprecedented pushback from Beijing.

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Stressing Chinese Beneficence, Beijing Offers Selective Moderation

Beijing's longstanding emphasis on China's beneficial role in Southeast Asia continued to [highlight growing economic ties](#) to attract and create dependencies among regional governments and thereby grow Beijing's strong regional influence. Recent moderation toward the US and some of its allies in Southeast Asia was in line with China's less acrimonious and more [positive treatment of the United States](#) in the lead-up to and the aftermath of Xi Jinping's summit with Biden during the annual APEC leaders meeting in California on Nov. 15. Beijing notably [reversed its earlier strident criticism](#) of Australia, holding out great expectations of improvement from Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's visit to China earlier in November.

In contrast, both [the Philippines](#) and [Japan](#) were subjected to harsh criticism as they cooperated with the United States and Australia in countering Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, [major foreign policy pronouncements](#) included moderate statements regarding the United States but also underlined China's ambitions to develop a new regional and global order favorable to China, replacing US-led governance and pressing Southeast Asian nations to choose China.

ASEAN, East Asian, and Bilateral Summits in Indonesia

Prime Minister Li Qiang represented China and Vice President Kamala Harris represented the United States at the East Asia Summit and related ASEAN meetings in Indonesia. Harris substituted for President Biden, who was preparing to upgrade relations in a trip to Vietnam on Sept. 10. [Beijing media said](#) Biden "snubbed" ASEAN, but overall both Li and Harris adopted more moderate stances on Sino-American differences over regional issues. Highlighting China's economic importance for regional economies, Li and supporting [Chinese commentary](#) tried to counter recent [foreign assessments](#) predicting ever-lower growth rates for China and forecasts of the slowest pace of regional growth since the late 1960s. [Taiwan's Minister of Economic Affairs](#) said that Taiwan's investment in Southeast Asia surpassed that of China and "will only continue" because of US-China trade tensions. Avoiding foreign

assessments emphasizing slowing in 2023, Beijing highlighted a 15% growth in China-ASEAN trade in 2022 to reach \$970 billion.

[Li's remarks](#) at the China-ASEAN summit and the China, Japan, Korea and ASEAN (ASEAN + 3) Summit supported ASEAN playing a greater international role and emphasized [Beijing's flexibility](#) and readiness to exchange views with all parties on major issues and challenges. On his state visit to Indonesia, Li praised the progress the two countries made in recent years, setting an example for other regional countries.

Li Addresses China-ASEAN Expo



Figure 1 Chinese Premier Li Qiang addresses the opening ceremony of the 20th China-ASEAN Expo and China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit in Nanning, the capital of south China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Sept 17, 2023. Photo: Xinhua

Reflecting China's view of economic relations with ASEAN as one of the few bright spots in contemporary Chinese international economic relations, Premier Li attended and gave the [keynote address](#) to the annual China-ASEAN Expo and China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit in Nanning in southern China. Government leaders from Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, and Vietnam also attended. In the recent past, a lower-level official offered the address. During the pandemic in 2020, Xi Jinping spoke to the meeting via video link but did not attend.

Li recounted Chinese claims of rapid growth in trade and investment over the past 20 years ending. Combined China-ASEAN GDP amounted to 21.5% of global GDP in 2022. He repeated the above noted trade claims and said two-way cumulative investment surpassed \$380 billion.

[Lower-level Chinese commentary](#) noted in passing that in the first eight months of 2023, China-ASEAN trade grew by 1.6%. For many years Southeast Asian investment in China was more than Chinese investment in Southeast Asia, and [recent Chinese investment](#) flows to ASEAN countries have remained relatively modest compared to those of the United States, European Union, and Japan. Chinese media also emphasized the importance of revived Chinese tourism for Southeast Asia countries, but the revival has been slower than expected. Thailand had an [earlier target](#) of 5-7 million Chinese arrivals in 2023 but [now expects](#) only up to 3.5 million Chinese travelers.



Figure 2 Chinese tourists tour the Grand Palace in Bangkok, Thailand. The country is one of the most favored destinations among tourists from China. Photo: Wang Xeng

Consistent with recent emphasis on the leadership of Xi Jinping in Chinese foreign policy, Li dutifully hailed Xi providing the “fundamental guidelines” of China’s neighborhood diplomacy.

Xi Jinping building a “global community of a shared vision”

Two authoritative documents clarified Xi’s foreign policy ambitions with strong negative implications for the United States and the existing international order as well as consequences for China’s relations with Southeast Asia. A [State Council White Paper](#) on Sept. 26 showed how Xi’s “vision” of a new China-supported world order, a “global community of a shared vision,” would achieve genuine multilateralism, oppose bloc-based confrontation, and boost common prosperity. The vision incorporated Xi’s contributions in his Global Development Initiative (announced in 2021), Global Security Initiative (announced in

2022) and Global Civilization Initiative (announced in 2023) to lay out alternative global governance that contrasts with the purported disruptive and confrontational actions of the United States and its allies and partners in the existing international order. The China-backed new order was said to be much more in the interest of the countries of Southeast Asia and globally than the US-backed order.

“China’s Foreign Policy on Its Neighborhood in the New Era”

This [Foreign Ministry White Paper](#) dealing with Chinese foreign policy in Asia made clearer for Southeast Asian governments the choice Beijing expects them to make regarding alternative China-backed vs. US-backed world orders. The paper was explicit in denouncing allegedly US-caused disasters, showing the dysfunction of the US-led order. Seemingly in contradiction to Chinese pledges that it would not press governments to “choose sides” in the US-China rivalry, the White Paper advised regional governments that they should make “the right choice” in favor of the China-backed order. Along these lines, Xi Jinping reportedly obtained [Vietnam’s endorsement](#) of China’s vision of global governance during his visit to Hanoi in December.

China’s Third Belt and Road (BRI) Forum



Figure 3 President Xi Jinping and his wife, Peng Liyuan (center), pose for a group photo with foreign leaders and their spouses attending the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Tuesday. Xi hosted a welcoming banquet for the foreign guests. Photo: Feng Yongbin

The heads of state or government from five Southeast Asian nations (Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam) attended the Belt

and Road Initiative (BRI) forum in Beijing. Official [Chinese commentary](#) used the BRI to encourage Southeast Asian and other countries to turn away from the purported exploitative, disruptive, and confrontational existing world order and benefit from “deepening global cooperation” under China’s BRI framework. As foreign reports showed a marked [scaling back of Chinese BRI lending](#) on account of growing economic problems at home and many failed investments abroad, Chinese commentary highlighted the positives for Southeast Asian and other countries in less costly BRI projects involving green and digital development and “high quality” cooperation.

Xi Jinping at APEC Leaders Meeting



Figure 4 President Xi Jinping addresses the 30th APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting held at Moscone Center in San Francisco, the United States, Nov 17, 2023. Photo: Xinhua

Emblematic of China’s selective moderation toward foreign challengers, President [Xi’s speech](#) to APEC leaders was a marked contrast with the two above noted White Papers and commentary during the BRI forum condemning the US-led international order. At APEC, Xi was much more positive and cooperative with all countries. He said China remained committed to the path of peaceful development and did not intend to “unseat anyone.” He avowed strong interest in joining advanced industrial economies in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Digital Economic Partnership. Chinese media noted with approval that US efforts to advance the Indo-Pacific Framework Agreement that had been scheduled

to be completed in time for the APEC meeting, had stalled.

Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs



Figure 5 President Xi Jinping addressing the conference in Beijing on December 27-28. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China

Capping a remarkable sequence of high-level pronouncements on China’s regional and global policies in 2023, this [central work conference](#)—the first in five years and attended by all top Chinese leaders—featured instructions from Xi to guide Chinese policy in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Widespread coverage in official outlets avoided texts of speeches in favor of summaries that underlined the overarching influence of Xi Jinping Thought in contemporary Chinese foreign policy. Echoing the State Council White Paper of Sept. 26, the coverage repeatedly averred that China would focus on implementing Xi’s concept of building a “global community of a shared vision,” creating a new world order far superior to existing US-supported global governance. The coverage avoided direct criticism of the United States and its allies and partners in Southeast Asia or elsewhere, but it underlined China’s determination to counter their practices in the regional and global order and to establish governance to the benefit of China and purportedly the vast majority of countries.

South China Sea Frictions

China’s assertive stance and bullying in the South China Sea were very much at odds with

Beijing's avowed path of benign peaceful development, eschewing hegemony. Chinese officials faced large and growing problems with the Philippines, strongly backed by the United States, which are discussed in detail below.

Increased tensions over disputes in the South China Sea in this period started with China in late August abruptly announcing and publishing a new national map detailing China's contested claims to the South China Sea—which prompted [coordinated statements](#) of opposition from the five Southeast Asian states most involved in the South China Sea. They are claimants that recognize their territorial disputes with China—the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei—and Indonesia, which avows that it has no territorial dispute with China even though its claimed territory and resource rights in the South China Sea are repeatedly challenged by Chinese shows of force.

In and over the seas, Chinese Coast Guard ships and Maritime Militia trawlers have maintained a more sustained, assertive, and [larger presence](#) in the disputed South China Sea than ever before. The Chinese forces are aided by ready access to supplies in the seven large military outposts constructed and militarized in recent years, giving Beijing control of the Sea in peacetime. [US officials report](#) that China instigated almost 300 incidents in and over the South China Sea since mid-2021 against ships and aircraft of the US, Australia, the Philippines, Canada, and other security partners.

China's perspective on growing South China Sea tensions came in a long [Global Times report](#) of Foreign Minister Wang Yi's video message to a symposium on Maritime Cooperation and Ocean Governance held on Hainan Island in November. Wang rejected what he called bloc confrontation and pledged cooperation with ASEAN on continued implementation of 2002 the Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea and completion of the stalled Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.



Figure 6 Wu Shicun, China Forum expert Academic Committee Member, CISS, Tsinghua University. Source: Center for International Security and Strategy Tsinghua University

The report offered extensive comments from Wu Shicun and other Chinese South China Sea experts. Wu advised that the overall situation in the South China Sea remains stable and controllable but he pointed to increased military presence by the US and its allies targeting China as particularly disturbing, arguing that “the United States is the biggest negative element” causing instability in the South China Sea. Blaming Canadian forces, he explained earlier [reported harassment](#) of a Canadian reconnaissance helicopter near the Chinese occupied Paracel Islands by a Chinese jet fighter using flares and dangerous maneuvers on Oct. 29 to force the aircraft to leave. He condemned US-led cooperation targeting China by the Quad Security Dialogue members Australia, India, Japan, and the US, the trilateral cooperation of the US, Japan and South Korea, and the AUKUS agreement among the US and its allies, Australia and Great Britain. He noted that the US and the Philippines have become much closer, with new bilateral defense guidelines and launching of their first joint patrols in the South China Sea, as steps in building a mechanism for coordination among the US, the Philippines, Japan, and Australia targeting China in the South China Sea.

Chinese complaints also involved the Japanese government providing ships to the Philippine Coast Guard, and Vietnam stepping up its land reclamation in the South China Sea. Frictions showed when a Chinese jet fighter [maneuvered dangerously close](#) to a US B-52 bomber over the South China Sea in late October. Adm. John

Aquilino, head of US Indo-Pacific Command, [told reporters](#) on Dec. 18 that Beijing cut back on dangerous fighter jet intercepts against US aircraft after the Xi-Biden summit in November.

Philippines-China Confrontations on South China Sea Disputes

Backed by unprecedented US and broader international support, Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos has pushed back against Chinese expansionism at the expense of Philippines claims in the South China Sea with equally unprecedented resolve.



Figure 7 VISIT. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. walks alongside US Indo-Pacific Command commander Admiral John C. Aquilino during an honors ceremony in Honolulu on November 19, 2023. Source: INDOPACOM

Bilateral relations have reached their lowest point since diplomatic relations were established in 1975. The main focus of rising tension involved repeated clashes with Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia vessels using intimidating shows of force, water cannons, and ramming in violent encounters with Philippine Coast Guard and contracted government ships seeking to supply the Philippine outpost on disputed Second Thomas Shoal.



Figure 8 A Philippine vessel approaches a China Coast Guard vessel in a dangerous manner and leads to a bump in waters off China's Ren'ai Reef in the Nansha Islands in the South China Sea on October 22, 2023. Photo: Screenshot from a video released by China Coast Guard

The US government has strongly sided with its ally. After a serious clash of Chinese and Philippines forces on Oct. 22, [President Biden](#) appearing at a joint news conference with visiting Australian Prime Minister Albanese on Oct. 25, said “I want to be very clear...any attack on the Filipino aircraft, vessels or armed forces will invoke our Mutual Defence Treaty with the Philippines.”



Figure 9 Joe Biden speaks at a news conference with Anthony Albanese during a state visit in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington, DC, on Oct. 25. Photo: Al Drago/Bloomberg

[Chinese media](#) said the Philippines “provocations” leading to clashes on Oct. 22 were encouraged by US Aircraft Carrier Strike Group Ronald Reagan exercising in the South China Sea on Oct. 21. Beijing in September [condemned](#) the US beginning joint naval drills with Philippine forces in disputed South China Sea. Statements supporting Manila against Chinese coercion came from US allies and partners notably Japan, Australia, South Korea,

the European Union, Great Britain, France, Canada, and other Western-aligned governments. Emblematic of such support, on Oct. 23 warships from Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States participated in a [military exercise](#) in the South China Sea which the Japanese government said showed international resolve to oppose “unilateral changes to the status quo by force.” Beijing [viewed](#) with anger the beginning in late November of US-Philippines joint naval and air patrols in waters near Taiwan as well as the disputed South China Sea and in December it [condemned](#) the US deployment of a US Navy littoral combat warship to patrol near Second Thomas Shoal.

Official Chinese commentary has increasingly portrayed President Marcos and his government as determined to confront China in the South China Sea, seeking advantage in [working ever more closely](#) with the United States in its efforts to contain China. Important developments in Philippines-China relations during this reporting period involve the following:

Marcos strongly condemned and promised a [response](#) to the release in late August of the national map detailing China’s contested claims to the South China Sea.

[China criticized](#) joint US-Philippines naval drills in contested South China Sea areas in early September.

[Beijing rebuked](#) the Philippines in late September for removing barriers used by Chinese forces to prevent Filipino fishing boats from entering disputed Scarborough Shoal.

On Oct. 10, the Chinese Coast Guard [announced](#) that it had expelled a Philippine naval gunboat from waters adjacent to Scarborough Shoal. In a sign of increasing efforts by Philippines security forces to challenge Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea, the announcement said that in the previous two months the Philippines had sent official vessels and warships to “trespass” in waters near Second Thomas Shoal four times and Scarborough Shoal two times.



Figure 10 Collision between a China Coast Guard vessel and BRP Cabra. Photo: AFP

The [Oct. 22 clash](#) of Philippine and Chinese forces near Second Thomas Shoal resulted in the collision of a Chinese Coast Guard vessel with a Philippine government contracted supply ship and the ramming of a Philippine Coast Guard vessel by a Chinese Maritime Militia vessel. The Philippines followed recent practice and released pictures and video recordings of the violent encounters for widespread distribution on social media. [Chinese authorities](#) did the same to buttress their account of the incidents. Chinese foreign and defense ministry spokespersons [criticized](#) President Biden’s strong statement of support for the Philippines on Oct. 25.

On Oct. 27, the Philippines government terminated three proposed railway projects with China worth more than \$5 billion. The announcement was widely interpreted as [marking](#) the country’s withdrawal from China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

On Nov, 16, the *South China Morning Post*, owned by the prominent Chinese firm Alibaba, [signaled](#) concern over Philippines forces exercising with US Marines and elite forces from Japan, South Korea, and Britain in early November to develop capacity to employ dispersed shore-based batteries to defend Philippine islands and to interdict adversary transit in the Bashi Channel separating the Philippines and Taiwan

[Beijing media](#) on Nov. 21 promptly rebuked President Marcos’ announcement while visiting with US military leaders in Hawaii of Manila’s outreach to Vietnam and Malaysia proposing a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea separate from the current code stalled by differences with China.

[Dec. 9-10](#) saw Chinese Coast Guard ships using water cannons against Philippine Fishing

Agency vessels nearing Scarborough Shoal on Dec. 9 and Chinese Coast Guard ships using water cannons and ramming Philippine supply ships and an accompanying Philippine Coast Guard ship attempting to reach the outpost at Second Thomas Shoal on Dec. 10.

Official Chinese [editorials](#) warned that Philippine actions risked pushing the relationship “over the precipice into conflict,” while Philippine leaders [told interviewers](#) they expected no let up in confrontation.

On Dec. 20, the Chinese and Philippines foreign ministers held a [phone conversation](#) and agreed to talks “at an early date” in a meeting of a “bilateral consultative mechanism on the South China Sea issue.” Nevertheless, China’s foreign ministry spokespersons and official commentary continued [sharp criticism](#) of purported Philippine efforts to construct a permanent outpost on Second Thomas Shoal while seeking stronger support from the United States and Japan.

China-Vietnam Summit

Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Hanoi and met Vietnamese counterpart Nguyen Phu Trong in December 2023. The two leaders declared that Vietnam would support China’s vision of [building](#) a “community with a shared future.” In the 16-page joint declaration, the two sides also [inked](#) nearly three dozen agreements on rail links, infrastructure development, and cross-border trade. Some of the highlights included the decision to build a new bridge across the Red River to connect Vietnam’s Lao Cai province to China’s Yunnan province, and a commitment to enhance development cooperation and the implementation of the Global Development Initiative, China’s initiative to promote global economic growth.

The high-profile summit reflected Vietnam’s “[bamboo diplomacy](#),” by which it has stepped up engagement efforts since 2021 to promote pragmatic dialogue with two of its former arch-rivals, the United States and China. Vietnam’s Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong used the imagery of “strong roots, stout trunk, and flexible branches” of bamboos to describe Vietnam’s foreign policy approach of having “more friends, fewer foes.” In September, Hanoi elevated relations with Washington to one of “Comprehensive Strategic

Partnership,” the highest level in Vietnam’s ranking, and announced closer cooperation on semiconductors during President Biden’s state visit.

Xi’s summit in December saw the elevation of China-Vietnam relations as well. The two sides agreed to build a “shared future,” given their close geographic proximity and increasingly connected economic ties. China is Vietnam’s largest trading partner and an important source of imports for its manufacturing sector. Chinese investments in Vietnam expanded in 2023, as Vietnam becomes a major assembling hub in global supply chains that rely on Chinese components and US consumers. According to data from Vietnam’s customs and trade bureaus, registered investment from China and Hong Kong combined [rose](#) to \$8.2 billion in the first 11 months in 2023, twice as much as last year and making China the biggest foreign investors in Vietnam. On the other hand, US registered investment in Vietnam fell to \$500 million this year from \$700 million in 2022.

Notwithstanding increasingly close trade ties between China and Vietnam, there remains some underlying tension in bilateral relations, especially with the ongoing conflict in the South China Sea. While side-stepping the sensitive issue of sovereignty, the summit saw attempts to build trust and pragmatic cooperation. Both sides agreed to keep all channels of diplomatic and security communication open, ensuring that there is a working hotline between the two countries’ coastguards for handling unexpected incidents in the high seas. There were also agreements to conduct joint search and rescue operations at sea and a commitment to boosting security and intelligence cooperation.

Uncertainty in Border Security in China-Myanmar Relations

Continued clashes between Myanmar’s military junta and armed resistance groups affected security relations with China, with Beijing taking incremental steps to intervene and ensure stability along the China-Myanmar border region. In October 2023, armed ethnic groups took over key military junta outposts in the Shan state and shut down the Chinshwehaw border gate, the country’s second largest transit point for China-Myanmar trade, affecting the junta’s access to border trade with China.

The unrest in Myanmar has prompted military-readiness activities from China. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) announced in late November that it would [begin](#) "combat training activities" on its side of the border with Myanmar. The training would "test the rapid maneuverability, border sealing and fire strike capabilities of theater troops," the PLA's Southern Theater Command, announced. It would take place near Manghai, Manling, and Qingshuihe villages in China's Yunnan province, with the PLA asserting that its forces are "ready for any emergency." At the same time, three Chinese navy ships—a guided-missile destroyer, a guided missile frigate and a supply ship—arrived in Myanmar on a goodwill visit as part of renewed Chinese defense engagement.

In December, China and Myanmar confirmed that talks have been [held](#) over the conflict in the Shan state. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson said that "China is happy to see the parties to the conflict in northern Myanmar hold peace talks and achieve positive results," adding that Beijing would "continue to provide support and facilitation to this end." There were limited details on China's involvement although it was understood that the meeting was convened with China's assistance and intervention and ended with an agreement for a temporary ceasefire.

Separately, in Myanmar's Kokang region where a separate armed ethnic group is also battling the military regime, a number of attacks occurred in late December, prompting China's embassy in Myanmar to [urge](#) its nationals to leave the Laukkai area in the Kokang region of northern Myanmar as soon as possible, citing growing unrest and security risks. The surge in fighting across Myanmar has displaced more than 2 million people in Myanmar, according to the United Nations. The conflicts have also destabilized border security and disrupted trade relations between China and Myanmar. Whether China will engage in further diplomatic mediation and take additional steps to protect its nationals and border security warrant closer observation in the next reporting period.

Beijing Positive toward Australia, Negative toward Japan

Beijing's recent selective moderation was on display in contrasting Chinese commentary regarding Australia vs Japan and their actions in

Southeast Asia. US efforts to counter Chinese challenges in the Indo-Pacific have relied more on Japan and Australia than any other countries in the region. Rather than treating both as accomplices in US efforts to counter China, and despite both allies playing increasingly prominent roles in assisting the United States in competition with China in Southeast Asia and the region more broadly, Beijing has been remarkably moderate and forthcoming with Australia while consistently hard toward Japan.

Beijing's positive treatment of Australian Prime Minister Albanese's visit to China in early November featured [extraordinary publicity](#) in the months leading up to the trip emphasizing the positive while encouraging Canberra to chart a foreign policy less aligned with US competition with and alleged containment of China. Against this background, Chinese commentary voiced little criticism of a number of heretofore sensitive matters for Beijing. [Albanese visited](#) the Philippines in September to deepen strategic cooperation at a time of growing acrimony with China. As noted, Australia joined other US allies in voicing strong opposition to harsh Chinese measures against Manila in the South China Sea; the prime minister supported the United States and coordinated Indo-Pacific strategy in a visit with President Biden in October, where Biden strongly affirmed the US alliance commitment to the Philippines against Chinese coercion; Australian forces participated in various military exercises in the disputed South China Sea; and Australia [conducted](#) a warship transit through the Taiwan Strait.

[Chinese commentary](#) did strongly rebut Australian complaints in November that a Chinese warship's sonar pulse hurt Australian divers performing a mission off the coast of Japan in support of UN sanctions enforcement.

Japan in contrast was subjected to unrelenting criticism for actions in line with those of Australia in building strategic ties in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific in the face of Chinese expansionism. Unlike Albanese's visit to Manila, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio [Kishida's visit](#) in early November to discuss defense cooperation and a possible Reciprocal Access Agreement allowing Japanese troops access to the Philippines prompted heavy Chinese criticism. Australia has had such an agreement for a decade and routinely trains and exercises with Philippine forces. Kishida also committed to providing 12 ships for the

Philippines Coast Guard. Meanwhile, Kishida's visits to Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, and the Japanese foreign minister's visits to Brunei, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam set the background for a [summit with ASEAN leaders](#) in December which Chinese media viewed as Tokyo's attempt to drag ASEAN into a US-led clique targeting China.

Outlook

The Xi Jinping administration's determination to counter US-led regional and global governance faces growing activism by the United States and its allies and partners to compete with China in Southeast Asia. The mix seems most volatile in the US-backed Philippines dispute with China in the South China Sea, where confrontation and military conflict could occur. It remains to be seen whether China's selective moderation toward the United States, Australia, and others will grow, decline, or coexist with what appears to be ever stronger Chinese resolve to have its way in Southeast Asia.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2023

Sept. 4-7, 2023: Regional leaders [convene](#) in Indonesia for a number of high-level meetings, including the 43rd ASEAN Summit and the 18th East Asia Summit. Discussions focus on strengthening regional trade, developments in the Myanmar crisis, as well as on the code of conduct negotiations on the South China Sea. Southeast Asian leaders agree on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, an Indonesia-led initiative that outlines the group's position on regional cooperation and security, and its stance on not taking sides with any major powers competing for influence in the region.

Sept. 17, 2023: Chinese Premier Li Qiang [meets](#) Malaysian counterpart Anwar Ibrahim in Nanning on the sidelines of the 20th China-ASEAN Expo. They agree to maintain open communication over differences in the South China Sea conflict, and sign three memoranda of understanding on trade, business, and economic initiatives worth over \$3 billion.

Nov. 16, 2023: ASEAN defense chiefs and counterparts from regional partners like the United States, China, and Russia, [meet](#) in Jakarta for the 10th ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus. The security dialogue provides a forum to exchange views and identify areas of cooperation on such security issues as the South China Sea, Myanmar, and the Korean Peninsula, as well as the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza.

Nov. 23, 2023: Chinese ambassador to Myanmar Chen Hai [meets](#) U Than Swe, deputy prime minister and foreign minister of Myanmar, in Naypyitaw. The meeting convenes amid intense fighting between Myanmar's troops and armed ethnic groups in the areas bordering China.

Dec. 5-8, 2023: Senior Chinese and Singapore officials [meet](#) in Tianjin for the 19th Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation. The two sides agree to upgrade their bilateral free trade agreement and to initiate a visa-free program. More than 20 memoranda of understanding are

signed to deepen two-way trade and people-to-people exchanges.

Dec. 7, 2023: Two Chinese naval vessels [become](#) the first ships to dock at a new pier at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base. The docking coincides with an official visit to Cambodia by China's Vice Chair of the Central Military Commission He Weidong.

Dec. 12-13, 2023: Chinese President Xi Jinping [makes](#) a state visit to Vietnam to strengthen bilateral ties. During the meeting with Vietnamese counterpart Nguyen Phu Trong and senior Vietnamese officials, the two sides declare that Hanoi would support China's vision of building a "community with a shared future," and promote collaboration on joint infrastructure projects and investment in the green economy.

