

PACIFIC  FORUM

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

EDITED BY

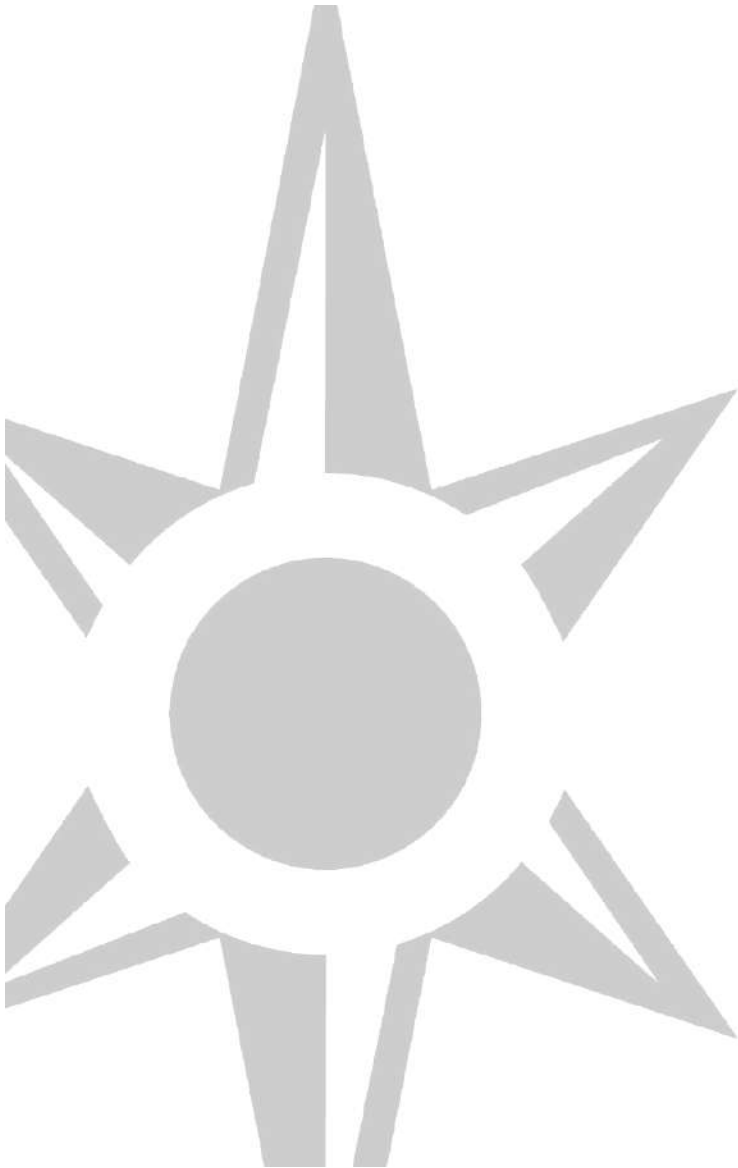
ROB YORK

BRAD GLOSSERMAN

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2023

VOL. 25, NO. 3

JANUARY 2024



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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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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BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN, TAMA UNIVERSITY CRS/PACIFIC FORUM

The US-Japan relationship may well be at its all-time best. Animated by a concordance of vision and interests, the two governments are closely coordinating across a wide range of issues in a variety of venues—bilateral and multilateral, political, economic, and military. Concern about the potential destabilizing effects of regional developments provides considerable motivation for the two to work together. The final reporting period of 2023 provided ample evidence of their convergence. If that past is prologue, the year ahead should be a good one. Unfortunately, however, the tide could be turning. A political funds scandal has ensnared Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and the approval ratings of the government of Prime Minister Kishida Fumio are plummeting as a result. Even if the prime minister survives the scandal—and most indications are that he will—he will be tarred and distracted as the region and the world face new and mounting challenges.

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BY SOURABH GUPTA, INSTITUTE FOR CHINA-AMERICA STUDIES

The “guardrails” that President Biden and President Xi envisaged in Bali in November 2022 began to be emplaced at their November 2023 summit in Woodside, California. In-person, leader-led communication was deepened, reassurances exchanged, and practical—albeit modest—“deliverables” locked down on several fronts, including restarting mil-mil communications, cracking down on fentanyl precursors, addressing the national security harms of artificial intelligence (AI), and increased people-to-people exchanges. The establishment of numerous bilateral working groups will ensure an almost full plate of across-the-board consultations in 2024 as well as the means to troubleshoot irritants on short notice. As stabilizing as the Woodside summit was, it failed to deflect the US-PRC relationship from its larger overall trajectory of “selective decoupling” across a range of advanced technologies and frontier industries (microelectronics; quantum; AI; biomanufacturing; clean energy). Strategic trade controls and other competitive actions were doubled down upon. With a pivotal US presidential election looming in 2024, questions abound on the longer-term durability of a rehabilitating US-PRC relationship.

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

There are many metaphors about using propitious moments to prepare for an inclement future: make hay while the sun shines, the best time to fix the roof is on a clear day, strike while the iron is hot, etc. These all imply the drudgery of work: a farmer baling hay on a sunny day, a slater shingling high on a roof under a blue sky, a forger hammering inside a sweltering workshop on a breezy afternoon. In a third semester continuation of the rest of a tense, yet stable 2023, there is a sense in which both South Korea and North Korea have been following the lesson of these proverbs as they use relative calm on the Korean Peninsula to build out their respective, opposed security and defense capabilities. Another, similar proverb captures an additional element of this dynamic: if you spend your whole life waiting for the storm, you’ll never enjoy the sunshine. Despite the tension on the Korean Peninsula, leaders in both Seoul and Pyongyang appear confident, even buoyant about their security and defense buildups.

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The Comparative Connections chapter on US-India relations covering the period September to December 2022 highlighted the challenge of getting past Cold-War era differences to fully capitalize on Indo-Pacific synergies. In the months between September and December of 2023, Cold War-era differences took center stage in the bilateral partnership. As a sliver of hope that the partnership would transform into a formal alliance emerged earlier in the year, these differences were spoilers. Differences in outlook brought to light the perennial challenges in the relationship and the need to get past the muscle memory of the Cold War for substantial engagement as defense and security allies. Despite these political and security differences, economic and technological cooperation largely expanded with increased cooperation in critical technologies and supply chain diversification initiatives. US industries broke new ground in expanding their footprint in India, and Indian conglomerates invested in the US, capitalizing on the Biden administration's Inflation Reduction Act and other industrial policies.

US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS**WASHINGTON DOUBLES DOWN ON KEY PARTNERS****73****BY CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY**

US relations with Southeast Asia ended on a down note in 2023 with the last-minute failure to finalize the trade pillar of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). This was not a complete loss for ASEAN states that managed to negotiate bilateral supply chain resilience agreements. However, it underscored the fact that broad regional frameworks, particularly for trade, are off the table with Washington, at least until the United States is past the November 2024 elections. Instead, the administration focused on security over trade and on key partners in the region, with Biden skipping the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Jakarta for a visit to Vietnam and the announcement of the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In this period, US relations with the Philippines continued to strengthen, with Washington issuing three statements calling out China for its reckless maneuvers in the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea. But if some Southeast Asians were miffed by the administration's focus on bilateralism over regionalism, most were reassured by Biden's meeting with Xi Jinping on the margins of the APEC meeting in San Francisco.

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

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

Taiwan's election campaign has concluded. Voters went to the polls on Jan. 13. As has been the case in almost every election, cross-Strait relations with China were the central issue, a secondary issue being President Tsai Ing-wen's management of the economy. The outcome of the election will largely dictate the course of Taiwan-China relations over at least the next four years. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate and President Tsai Ing-wen's chosen successor, William Lai Ching-te, the eventual winner, proclaims that Taiwan is already independent as the Republic of China. It should continue to diversify economic linkages away from China, strengthen military deterrence, and hope that China will eventually offer talks without one-China preconditions. The opposition Kuomintang candidate, Hou Yu-ih, called for expanded cross-Strait economic ties and dialogue with China under the one-China banner to reduce tensions while Taiwan also builds its military deterrence. China has deployed economic sticks, gray-zone military intimidation, and fake news to influence the election.

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BY AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

The last third of 2023 was eventful in Korea, especially the two final months. Fall found South Koreans preoccupied with events elsewhere, and their implications for the peninsula. In September, Kim Jong Un's Siberian summit with Vladimir Putin prompted worries as to how closer Pyongyang-Moscow military ties might affect the ROK. In October, Hamas' shocking attack on Israel added a new layer of alarm, warranted or otherwise. President Yoon Suk Yeol was among those expressing fear that the DPRK might launch a similar surprise assault. He soon had less hypothetical concerns. In November, in response to Pyongyang's successful launch (following two earlier failures) of a military reconnaissance satellite, Seoul partially suspended 2018's inter-Korean military accord—whereupon the North predictably scrapped it entirely. Tensions grew as both sides rearmed at the ironically named Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and talked tough—none tougher than Kim Jong Un, who spoke openly of occupying the South. As the year ended, Kim declared a major change in DPRK doctrine. Dropping its longstanding lip service to reunification, the North now regards the peninsular situation as “relations between two belligerent states.” The implications of this shift remain to be seen.

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

Chinese diplomacy toward the Korean Peninsula in late 2023 sputtered forward, driven more by a calendar of bilateral anniversaries with North Korea and multilateral gatherings involving South Korea than any sense of strategic purpose. Both relationships seemed preoccupied with off-stage developments such as the September summit between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin and the momentum of US-Japan-South Korea trilateral relations, rather than any inherent dynamism of their own. Still, regular Sino-North Korean bilateral exchanges ahead of the 75th anniversary of the bilateral relationship and Sino-South Korean bilateral economic dialogues provide opportunities to overcome resistance and sustain progress in the face of deepening major power rivalries. Senior-level dialogues between China and North Korea occurred on North Korea's 75th founding anniversary in September, with the visit of Chinese Vice Premier Liu Guozhong to Pyongyang, a visit that occurred against the backdrop of the second US-South Korea Nuclear Consultative Group meeting, North Korea's first successful indigenous satellite launch, and North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Pak Myong Ho's visit to Beijing.

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BY JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

Several senior-level contacts failed to narrow the gap between Japan and China. Xi Jinping and Kishida Fumio met at APEC for 65 minutes in November to discuss topics including a buoy placed in what Japan regards as its territorial waters, China's lack of cooperation on North Korea's nuclear program, Beijing's resumption of drilling in a disputed section of the East China Sea, and the detention of Japanese nationals on vaguely worded charges. China complained about Japan's enhanced defense relationship with the US and other countries, its chip alliance with the US aimed at excluding China, the continued release of allegedly contaminated water from the disabled Fukushima plant, as well as Japan's support for Taiwan. There was no resolution of any of these issues. Komeito leader Yamauchi Natsuo visited Beijing with a letter from Kishida; its contents have not been publicly disclosed but it had had no discernible results. Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko's meeting with counterpart Wang Yi at a trilateral meeting of foreign ministers in South Korea, also in November, was similarly unproductive. With Kishida seemingly losing support of his own party and likely to be replaced soon, Japan has little leverage in negotiations.

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

The year 2023 was a turning point for Japan-South Korea relations. There was a breakthrough in the issue of compensating forced laborers, which led South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio to meet seven times since their summit in March. Shuttle diplomacy has been fully resumed. By year's end, their cooperation in new areas such as energy, critical and emerging technology, development and humanitarian assistance, space, and cyber is blossoming. Last year will be remembered as the year that began to demonstrate a real potential for Seoul and Tokyo to be like-minded global partners, along with Washington. If the first half of 2023 was a speed chase to get to the finish line—the Camp David trilateral summit meeting—the latter half of 2023 was a coordinated plan to prepare for many more races. As noted in our last issue of Comparative Connections, the Camp David trilateral summit represented a potential harbinger for the future of Japan-Korea relations.

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BY YU BIN, WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY

In the last months of 2023, China and Russia increasingly prioritized economics and geoeconomics in their bilateral interactions. In the post-COVID era and with a virtual standstill in the Russian-Ukraine war, both sides searched for new growth potential in domestic, bilateral, and multilateral domains. In October, Russian President Putin visited Beijing for the 3rd Belt and Road Forum (BRF), which was attended by thousands of participants from 151 countries. It was a convenient occasion for Putin to expand his diplomacy, which had been considerably strained by Western sanctions since early 2022. Putin's lengthy meetings (formal talks, a working lunch, and a "private tea meeting") took almost half a day for the two-day BEF. Ten years after Xi's launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), both sides found it necessary to adjust their policies between the increasingly globalized BRI and Russia's regional grouping, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

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A YEAR OF INDIA EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE

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SATU LIMAYE, VICE PRESIDENT EAST-WEST CENTER

In 2023, the Indo-Pacific was something of a backdrop to India's robust global activities, including the presidency of the Group of Twenty (G20), chairing for the first time the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit, participating in the Group of Seven summit, convening for the first time the Voice of Global South summits, and co-chairing with the United States the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor initiatives launched on the sidelines of the September G20 Summit in Delhi. Comparatively, India's Indo-Pacific engagements were less high-profile and leader-led but still numerous and active. India's low-level but wide-ranging defense diplomacy is particularly noteworthy. Prime Minister Modi and External Affairs Minister Jaishankar, while pre-occupied by India's role in global diplomacy, made important visits in the Indo-Pacific, with the PM making four country stops on two regional trips to the region; the first in May to the G7 Summit in Hiroshima, followed by stops in Papua New Guinea and Australia, and another in September to Jakarta, Indonesia for the annual ASEAN-led summit meetings, including the annual India-ASEAN dialogue.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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REGIONAL OVERVIEW

THE “YEAR OF ELECTIONS” IS UPON US!

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Readers of the Western press would be excused if they missed the APEC “Gathering of Economies” completely, since press coverage focused almost exclusively on the Biden-Xi Summit along its sidelines (its lack of significant outcomes notwithstanding). The few non-Biden-Xi San Francisco headlines centered on the much-anticipated but disappointing gathering of Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) participants, as Washington apparently could not achieve consensus on next steps. The Israeli invasion of Gaza following the horrendous Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel prompted the taking of sides at the ADMM-Plus, where an apparent lack of agreement on who to condemn resulted in no reference to the conflict in the final statement, which focused instead on the issue of women, peace, and security.

As we look forward, 2024 is being called the “Year of Elections” with national leadership up for grabs (in some cases more than others) in seven of the world’s 10 largest countries, all (technically speaking) in the Indo-Pacific region. All told, more than 60 countries representing half the world population—some 4 billion people—will hold regional, legislative, and presidential elections this year. We will be examining the implications and outcomes of many of these elections in coming issues.

EAS: Major Power Tensions Dominate Despite No-Shows

ASEAN’s preoccupation with major power confrontation highlighted in last trimester’s [Regional Overview](#) was very much in evidence during the ASEAN-hosted series of summits that took place in Indonesia on Sept. 4-7. These included the [43rd ASEAN Summit](#), the [26th ASEAN Plus Three Summit](#), the various ASEAN Plus One Summits with ASEAN’s Dialogue Partners, and the main event, the annual East Asia Summit involving the 10 ASEAN states (minus Myanmar, which continues to be excluded as the junta leaders continue to ignore ASEAN’s April 2021 [Five Point Consensus](#)) and its key dialogue partners, Australia, China, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Russia, and the United States.

At the [US-ASEAN](#) meeting, attended by Vice President Harris, the two sides agreed upon a [Statement](#) on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), reaffirming US support for “ASEAN centrality” and the

principle of inclusivity embodied in the AOIP. The statements from the other ASEAN Plus One Summits can be found [here](#).



Figure 1 Vice President Kamala Harris of the United States participates in the 11th ASEAN-U.S. Summit during the 43rd ASEAN Summit in Jakarta, Indonesia, on September 6, 2023. Photo: Yasuyoshi Chiba/Pool via Reuters/Filephoto

The [Chairman’s Statement](#) from the 18th EAS contained the usual boilerplate support for ASEAN centrality, inclusivity, and the peaceful resolution of disputes, etc., etc., while highlighting “the continued importance of constructive dialogue on strategic issues” among and between its members. As regards Ukraine, members “reiterated our national positions,” while noting the UN General Assembly resolution which “deplores in the strongest terms the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine and demands its complete and unconditional withdrawal from the territory of Ukraine,” further noting that “most members strongly condemn the aggression against Ukraine.”

South China Sea: One Small Step Forward?

While the Chairman’s Statements from both the EAS and the [ASEAN Summit](#) merely reiterated time-honored talking points about the need for the long-awaited Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (SCS), the trimester ended with a [surprise](#), namely a rare standalone ASEAN foreign ministers’ [statement](#) on “Maintaining and Promoting Stability in the Maritime Sphere in Southeast Asia.” In a message clearly aimed at Beijing, the ministers reaffirmed the need for claimants to “exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability [and] avoid actions that may further complicate the situation...” This statement may have been

stimulated by (thus far failed) [attempts](#) by Philippine President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr. to promote an ASEAN-only SCS Code of Conduct. While we applaud Marcos’ efforts, there is a long way to go, given that ASEAN claimants themselves have overlapping claims that they have been unable to resolve, plus the fact that the largest landholder of disputed territory in the SCS, Taiwan, has not even been allowed to sit at the discussion table.

A G20 “For the People”

India chaired the G20 in 2023 and Prime Minister Narendra Modi used that opportunity to make the case for Delhi’s leadership of the developing world. He had [said](#) that he wanted the group to be more inclusive and human-oriented, “to focus on the development of the people, by the people and for the people.” He hosted the annual G20 summit in Delhi Sept. 9–10. The [Leaders Declaration](#), “One Earth, One Family, One Future,” is an 83-paragraph, 29-page document (with an additional five-page list of 25 annexed documents). Its contents range from fighting hunger to fighting corruption, with calls to promote the Green economy, ready countries for the technological transformation, prepare multilateral institutions for the 21st century, provide equitable taxation, empower women, and fight terrorism and money laundering. [According](#) to Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, it “focuses on promoting strong, sustainable, balanced and inclusive growth.”



Figure 2 The G20 Summit 2023 held in New Delhi from September 9 to 10. Photo: PTI

A sticking point in the document—like every other that purported to represent multilateral consensus—was Ukraine. Throughout India’s year-long tenure as chair, it was unable to issue any joint statements as there was no agreement on how to assess the Ukraine issue. In what was deemed a diplomatic triumph, the final

statement noted that “All states must refrain from the threat or use of force to seek territorial acquisition against the territorial integrity and sovereignty or political independence of any state” while adding that “The use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible.” It conceded that some members of the group insisted that “the G20 is not a platform to resolve geopolitical and security issues,” but went on to note that “we acknowledge that these issues can have significant consequences for the global economy.” Indeed, the statement highlighted “the human suffering and negative added impacts of the war in Ukraine with regard to global food and energy security, supply chains, macro-financial stability, inflation and growth, which has complicated the policy environment for countries, especially developing and least developed countries.”

Russia [called](#) the agreement “balanced.” Critics pointed out that this language is a retreat from that of the G20 Leaders Declaration of the previous year, which [said](#) the G20 “deplores in the strongest terms the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine and demands its complete and unconditional withdrawal from the territory of Ukraine.”

The other big outcome of the meeting, and keeping with India’s desire for a more inclusive group, was the African Union’s accession to full G20 membership. With 55 members—more than twice the number of G20 states—the AU presence should provide a megaphone for the developing world. The declaration is already leaning in that direction with calls for “better, bigger and more effective” multilateral development banks, as well as billions and trillions of dollars “to rapidly and substantially scale up investment and climate finance.”

San Francisco Sideshow

The substance of the Xi-Biden Summit in San Francisco is covered in detail in this journal’s US-China chapter. No real breakthroughs were anticipated or happened but both leaders tried to set a more positive, cooperative tone, despite media attempts to undermine this effort by fixating on the infamous “Is Xi still a dictator?” [CNN gotcha question](#) to the US president. Biden tried to finesse his answer: “Well, look, he’s a dictator in the sense that he is a guy who runs a country that is a communist country that’s based on a form of government totally different than ours.” Anyway, we made progress.” This

avoided the even worse (politically speaking) headline: “Biden refuses to call Xi a dictator!” It nonetheless resulted in CNN leading with the headline “Biden says he still believes Xi Jinping is a dictator.” The rest of the mainstream [media followed suit](#), drawing the inevitable strong Chinese [protest](#). We understand a reporter’s desire to make headlines, but the media focus on Biden’s forced response (and not on the “we made progress” part), intended or not, helped to undermine the Summit’s main message and intent.

APEC Overshadowed

The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting that the US hosted in San Francisco in November was destined to be overshadowed. APEC has become a forum for broad statements and agreement on technical issues that could make a difference to regional economic cooperation but defy sexy headlines. In addition, this year’s meeting competed with the Xi-Biden summit as well as the anticipated results of a year and a half of discussions to conclude the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF, taken up below). Not surprisingly, [opined](#) Wendy Cutler, vice president of the Asia Society Policy Institute and a former acting deputy US trade representative, the concrete agreed-upon results “could be seen as disappointing.” She described the meeting well, arguing that the US gave up on high-profile results—a smart calculation given the participants, referring to China and Russia—and instead “emphasized the themes of inclusivity, resiliency and sustainability and framed ongoing APEC work within these contexts.”

The [Golden Gate Declaration](#) is a 15-paragraph statement that began by applauding the APEC process, noting that “our steady commitment to APEC’s mission has helped our region become a vanguard of global growth.” It continues with a nod to previous documents that charted the forum’s course, and a reaffirmation of “our determination to deliver a free, open, fair, non-discriminatory, transparent, inclusive, and predictable trade and investment environment.” They promised to support a rules-based international trade system, with reform of the World Trade Organization. They pledged “to advance economic integration in the region in a manner that is market-driven.” There were nods to supply chain resilience, the need to recognize the interests of all stakeholders, along

with the need to address the challenges and impacts of climate change. Women’s empowerment, the fight against corruption, and the need to create an inclusive digital ecosystem were all included.



Figure 3 The 2023 APEC Leaders' Golden Gate Declaration was adopted at the APEC Economic Leaders' Week in San Francisco. Photo: APEC

Supplementing the Golden Gate Declaration was a three-paragraph [Chair's Statement](#) that addressed two issues: the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza. On the first point, it pointed a finger at Russia for its aggression against Ukraine—citing UN General Assembly resolutions that say as much—and called for a “lasting peace based on the principles of the United Nations Charter, including the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and political independence of Ukraine.” It went on to highlight the food security impacts, like the G20 statement. On the second point, the statement explained that “We exchanged views on the ongoing crisis in Gaza. Leaders, including the United States, shared their respective positions. Some leaders also shared the united messages of the Joint Arab-Islamic Summit in Riyadh [last week].” The next paragraph notes the objection of some leaders “to the inclusion of this language in the accompanying 2023 APEC Leaders' Golden Gate Declaration on the basis that they do not believe that APEC is a forum to discuss geopolitical issues.”

Gaza's Long Shadow

Debate continues over whether “security is indivisible,” but there is no missing the long shadow of certain events. In the last trimester, Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel provided proof that distant crises can be deeply entangled with affairs much closer to home. Catherin Dalpino provides an excellent assessment of the way in which that conflict shapes policy in Southeast

Asia in her chapter in this issue. It is a complex influence, with regional governments concerned about nationals that are guest workers in Israel and Gaza, sympathizing for the Palestinian cause in Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, and fearing that it will inflame local jihadist groups in the southern Philippines and Thailand.

The issue was especially challenging for India, which found itself navigating difficult diplomatic terrain when Delhi abstained from a United Nations General Assembly vote in late October calling for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. That position that diverged from that of much of the Global South, which Prime Minister Modi championed over much of last year. While denouncing a “heinous terrorist attack” on Israel, he has also pushed for restraint and a diplomatic resolution to the crisis.

Other leaders face similar dilemmas, although the degree and intensity of the choices differ. While support for Israel remains the centrist position in the United States, President Biden is facing blowback from Palestinian supporters in key constituencies, such as Michigan. If their anger—or that of the many young people who have rallied to the Palestinian cause in the aftermath of the Israeli response—results in them turning their back on the president or even just staying away from the polls next November, then it could affect the outcome of the election.

IPEF: So Close, but yet So Far...

We have long complained about the absence of a meaningful economic component of US Indo-Pacific strategy. Yes, there is the Blue Dot Network, the Quad Investment Network, efforts to support infrastructure here and there, and a slew of supply chain resilience initiatives, but there is no substantive project to promote market access and integration, which the Biden administration had explicitly taken off the table in talks with regional governments. Instead, the US has been pressing the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity to advance a new model of economic engagement, one that sidesteps thorny questions about the “exploitation” of access to the US domestic market and resulting job losses. It was launched in the Spring of 2022 by 14 countries “to advance resilience, sustainability, inclusiveness, economic growth, fairness, and competitiveness for our economies.” In the [Leaders’ Statement](#) released after their two-day meeting as part of

the November 2023 APEC confab, they declared that “In record time, we have delivered on our goals.”

Not quite. Yes, the ministers reached agreement on three of the four IPEF pillars: supply chains, green economy, and the fair economy. A deal on fair and resilient trade, which was hoped to be concluded by the APEC meeting, which would in turn permit the whole megillah to be released to great fanfare at that time, proved elusive, however. Several months ahead of the November deadline, it was clear that no agreement would be reached. To avoid the need for Congressional approval, the trade pillar didn’t address market access and instead focused on accompanying issues like labor, environmental concerns, regulatory practices, and trade facilitation. That troubled many of the IPEF partners. Digital trade, one of the most important issues in 21st century economic relations, also proved to be beyond consensus, reportedly because of objections from US lawmakers. US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen [said](#) that “significant progress” had been made on the trade pillar, but it “looks not to be complete, like something that is likely to require further work.”

Still, there were accomplishments. The meeting produced a “first of its kind” Supply Chain Agreement and substantially concluded negotiations on a “groundbreaking” Clean Economy Agreement and an innovative Fair Economy Agreement. They launched the IPEF Critical Minerals Dialogue to foster “collaboration on strengthening IPEF critical mineral supply chains and boosting regional economic competitiveness.” The group said that it would “explore additional initiatives to advance cooperation and dialogue on areas of mutual interest, such as energy security and technology.” The group [committed](#), in the “green economy” pillar, to economic cooperation to support member transitions “to clean economies by improving and enhancing the regulatory and policy environment, sharing best practices, accelerating the deployment of key technologies and capturing the resulting economic opportunities.” In addition, they agreed to set up a ministerial-level IPEF Council that will meet annually, starting this year, and leaders’ meetings every two years.

The US and its IPEF partners also [announced](#) that they would work with the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGI) and

the private sector “to scale high-standard investments, create more resilient economies, and drive long-term sustainable development.” This will include an annual IPEF Clean Economy Investor Forum, beginning this year, “to catalyze sustainable infrastructure and climate technology investments across IPEF economies that are party to the Clean Economy Agreement.” The US launched a PGI IPEF Investment Accelerator “to scale high-standard project financing to drive sustainable economic growth in IPEF countries.” IPEF partners will establish the IPEF Catalytic Capital Fund to pool resources and expand the pipeline of bankable climate projects in all three pillars of the IPEF agreement. That’s all good, but we continue to believe that trade agreements are critical and failure to close that deal is a blow to IPEF credibility.

ADMM-Plus Avoids Talking about Ongoing Wars

The 17th ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting and 10th ADMM-Plus rightfully drew little international attention, occurring as they did in the shadow of APEC and at the ministerial level; Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin represented the United States at the meeting. Nonetheless, there are a few points worth noting. The ADMM [Joint Declaration](#), as expected, called for “full implementation” of the Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar and “self-restraint” and the “early conclusion” of a SCS Code of Conduct, but made no reference to the wars in Gaza or Ukraine. The ADMM-Plus [Joint Declaration](#) also ignored both wars, focusing instead on the issue of women, peace, and security. The Ministers did adopt the [Concept Paper](#) on the Implementation of the AOIP from a Defense Perspective, which “serves as a guideline for ASEAN to implement the AOIP in the area of defense cooperation.” The Defense Department’s [readout](#) on Secretary Austin’s visit to Indonesia noted that Austin discussed challenges to ASEAN’s vision for peace and security, “including coercive PRC activities in the South China Sea, the ongoing crisis in Myanmar, destabilizing DPRK proliferation activities, and the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East.” The readout highlighted Austin’s meeting with Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, where both ministers signed a “[historic](#)” Defense Cooperation Arrangement, while celebrating the recent upgrade of the bilateral relationship to a [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#). Austin’s growing friendship with Subianto may prove

useful in the future, since he is currently the frontrunner in Indonesia’s upcoming presidential elections.



Figure 4 Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin from the United States participates in the 10th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defense Ministers Meeting. Photo: Willy Kurniawan

2024: The “Biggest Election Year” Ever

[Politico](#) has called 2024 “the biggest election year in history,” noting that “more than 60 countries representing half the world population—some 4 billion people—will hold regional, legislative and presidential elections that look set to shake up political institutions and ramp up geopolitical tensions.” Many of these elections, including those among seven of the world’s 10 largest nations—Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Pakistan, Russia, and the United States—will take place in the broader Indo-Pacific region. Other leadership contests, both inside (Taiwan) and beyond (United Kingdom), could have global consequences.

Allison Meakem, writing in [Foreign Policy](#), provides a comprehensive analysis of some of the most consequential of the more than 50 national contests taking place this year:

Key 2024 Elections

- Jan 7: Bangladesh (Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina re-elected)
- Jan 13: Taiwan
- Feb 8: Pakistan
- Feb 14: Indonesia
- March 1: Iran
- March 15-17: Russia
- April 10: South Korea National Assembly
- April/May: India (date TBD)
- June 2: Mexico
- June 6-9: European Parliament

June (TBD): Indonesia run-off election, if required
Oct (TBD): Japan Liberal Democratic Party leadership election
Nov 5: United States
Nov (T) Singapore—PM Lee Hsien Loong stepping down by then
By Dec 31: United Kingdom

Taiwan

By the time this edition goes to print, the outcome of Taiwan's elections will be known. Regardless of the outcome, new leadership is assured since incumbent President Tsai Ing-Wen from the Democratic Progressive Party cannot run for a third term. [Editor's note: William Lai won.] What remains to be seen is how Beijing reacts to the result. Also to be examined is the extent of Beijing's attempts to influence the outcome and the success or failure of these attempts. See the China-Taiwan chapter for more details.

Indonesia

New leadership is also in the cards for Indonesia, where current Defense Minister Prabowo is currently ahead in the polls. His running mate is Gibran Rakabuming Raka the son of the highly popular incumbent President Joko Widodo (aka Jokowi). Running against them is Ganjar Pranowo from former President Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party (PDIP) and an independent candidate, Anies Baswedan, who stands little chance of winning but could draw enough votes to force a run-off election in June between the two top contenders. Ganjar's main claim to fame (or infamy) was his hard stand, as then-governor of the state of Central Java, against Israel's participation in the 2023 Under-20 FIFA World Cup, which cost Indonesia its chance of hosting the event. This established his bona fides among hardline Islamists and backers of the Palestinian cause (while alienating soccer fans). All three candidates for president of the world's largest Muslim-majority nation have expressed strong support for the Palestinian people and all have vowed to continue Jokowi's economic policies that have led to a 43% rise in Indonesia's GDP under his leadership.

Japan

Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio is on increasingly shaky ground as the approval ratings of his Cabinet and those of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) hit new lows. The political funding scandal is only the latest in a series of blows to the standing of the prime minister, his government, and the ruling party. With an anticipated state visit to Washington in March and little fear that the opposition could come to power in an election, there is however little sense of urgency to replace the beleaguered PM. He can expect a tough fight in the next party presidential election, scheduled for the fall, though.

India

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is expected to win handily in the "world's largest democracy," even though his rightwing Hindu party has been accused of suppressing democracy. Modi has thus far successfully walked the tightrope between improving relations with Washington while restraining itself from being overly critical of its traditional partner (and major arms supplier) Russia. The US love affair with Modi's government may be tested, however, amid reports of government-sponsored hit squads allegedly targeting Sikh separatists in the US (unsuccessfully) and Canada (successfully).

United States

Keen observers of the US political scene may have observed that presidential elections are also slated for the United States this coming November. Candidates will officially be anointed at the Republican and Democratic National Conventions in July and August respectively, but to the extent that any suspense still exists, that should be removed after the March 5 "Super Tuesday" primaries. The biggest question surrounds who, if anyone, will emerge as third-party candidates and which of the major party nominees will suffer most if a credible third-party candidate emerges.

Stay tuned for the May 2024 issue of *Comparative Connections*, where we will more deeply examine 2024 elections, past and still to come, and their potential impact on regional security and US foreign policy.

CHRONOLOGY OF REGIONAL OVERVIEW

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2023

Sept. 2, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) missiles over the Yellow Sea in the wake of US–South Korea joint military exercises.

Sept. 3, 2023: Australia [extends](#) its police presence in the Solomon Islands per their request as Canberra becomes increasingly concerned with China–Solomon relations.

Sept. 4, 2023: US Navy destroyer *USS Ralph Johnson* (DDG 114) [conducts](#) a “bilateral sail” with Philippine Navy guided-missile frigate *BRP Jose Rizal* (FF-150) in the South China Sea “to enhance the interoperability between the two navies.”

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.

Sept. 5, 2023: ASEAN leaders [agree](#) to prevent Myanmar from gaining chairing the group in 2026 as previously scheduled.

Sept. 5, 2023: Taiwan government [announces](#) that investments approved for the 18 countries under the New Southbound Policy increased to \$5.3 billion in 2022, up 90% from \$2.8 billion in 2019.

Sept. 5, 2023: Vanuatu’s new Prime Minister Sato Kilman [agrees](#) to review the Vanuatu–Australia Security Pact.

Sept. 6, 2023: US Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) [adds](#) 42 Chinese companies to its Entity List, effective Oct. 6, for supplying US-origin integrated circuits to Russian intermediaries and end-users.

Sept. 7, 2023: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi chairs the 20th ASEAN–India Summit.

Sept. 7, 2023: South Korean Defense Minister Lee Jong-sup [holds](#) a phone call with US and Japanese counterparts to discuss trilateral security cooperation following up on the Camp David Summit, and North Korea’s missile launches.

Sept. 7, 2023: 32nd Korea–Japan Customs Heads’ Meeting is [held](#) in South Korea, the first such meeting between the neighboring countries in seven years.

Sept. 8, 2023: Modi [welcomes](#) President Biden to India, and the leaders reaffirm their commitment to the G20 and express confidence that the outcomes of the G20 Leaders’ Summit in New Delhi will advance their shared goals.

Sept. 8, 2023: India [reduces](#) import tariffs on US poultry which resolves the last of all the US–India trade disputes.

Sept. 9, 2023: President Biden, Prime Minister Modi, and other G20 leaders [unveil](#) the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, which has been seen as a direct competitor to China’s BRI.

Sept. 9–10, 2023: President Biden attends the 18th G20 Summit and [talks](#) to PRC [Premier](#) Li Qiang on the margins of the summit.

Sept. 9, 2023: India and the United States, along with the European Union, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other G20 partners, [sign](#) a memorandum of understanding on the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, or IMEC. Included in the deal is a railway to link Middle Eastern countries and connect them to India by port.

Sept. 9, 2023: G20 [adds](#) the African Union to its membership on the final day of the G20 summit,

making it the G21 and adding a major voice from the Global South.

Sept. 9, 2023: US Navy destroyer *USS Ralph Johnson* (DDG 114) and Royal Canadian Navy frigate *HMCS Ottawa* (FFH 341) [conduct](#) “a routine Taiwan Strait transit...through waters where high-seas freedoms of navigation and overflight apply in accordance with international law.

Sept. 10, 2023: President Biden [visits](#) Hanoi to discuss US-Vietnam relations and semiconductors. During the visit, Vietnam elevates the US to the highest diplomatic status, alongside China and Russia.

Sept. 9, 2023: At the G20 summit, Prime Minister Kishida [explains](#) Japan’s position and responds to criticisms of the three Fukushima water releases on Aug. 24, Oct. 5, and Nov. 20.

Sept. 10–11, 2023: President Joe Biden [travels](#) to Vietnam for a visit hosted by Nguyen Phu Trong, secretary-general of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Washington and Hanoi announce that US-Vietnam relations will be elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The two countries [announce](#) that they will explore possibilities of strengthening semiconductor supply chains with funds from the International Technology Security and Innovation (ITSI) funds created by the CHIPS Act of 2022.

Sept. 12, 2023: Department of Defense [releases](#) its 2023 Cyber Strategy Summary in which the PRC is listed as the first among several state and non-state actors in a “contested cyberspace.”

Sept. 12, 2023: US Navy destroyer *USS Ralph Johnson* (DDG 114) and Royal Canadian Navy frigate *HMCS Ottawa* (FFH 341) [operate](#) in the South China Sea as part of a joint exercise.

Sept. 12, 2023: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [visits](#) to Russia for summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin amid growing concerns over military cooperation between Pyongyang

and Moscow. While there, Kim and Putin [meet](#) at Russia's Vostochny spaceport, Kim [inspects](#) factory producing modern fighter jets in Russia's Far East, Kim [meets](#) Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to inspect Russia's nuclear-capable bombers, and Putin [accepts](#) the invitation to visit Pyongyang.

Sept. 13, 2023: European Commission [starts](#) investigation into whether to impose tariffs to protect the [EU](#) against Chinese electric vehicle imports benefiting from state subsidies.

Sept. 13, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) two short-range ballistic missiles into the East Sea in an apparent show of force ahead of its leader Kim Jong Un's summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Sept. 14, 2023: US, Japan, and South Korean national security advisors [hold](#) a call to discuss the summit between Russian President Putin and North Korean leader Kim.

Sept. 17, 2023: US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [meets](#) Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Malta.

Sept. 18, 2023: Canada [accuses](#) “agents of the government of India” of being behind the death of Sikh community leader in British Columbia.

Sept. 19, 2023: President Biden [holds](#) a summit with five former soviet Central Asian states to discuss regional security and territorial integrity.

Sept. 19–23, 2023: ASEAN [begins](#) a five day joint military exercise in Indonesian waters, amid growing tensions in the South China Sea.

Sept. 22, 2023: Defense officials from the US and the PRC [hold](#) a hybrid in-person and virtual meeting to discuss the Department’s recently released 2023 DOD Cyber Strategy Unclassified Summary and to engage in “substantive discussion on a range of cyber-related topics.”

Sept. 22, 2023: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [meets](#) Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Japanese and Australian counterparts on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York.

Sept. 22, 2023: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, South Korean Foreign Minister Park, and Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa [meet](#) on the sidelines of the UNGA to discuss trilateral cooperation and a [possible](#) North Korean-Russia arms deal.

Sept. 22, 2023: US and China [launch](#) new joint economic working groups in an effort to build cooperation despite growing tensions and competition.

Sept. 25, 2023: Philippines Coast Guard [removes](#) the floating barrier surrounding Scarborough Shoal.

Sept. 25, 2023: South Korea and the US [stage joint naval drills](#) in East Sea amid North Korean threats.

Sept. 25, 2023: Department of Commerce's BIS [adds](#) 11 entities based in China to the Entity List for national security concerns, including implication in "a conspiracy to violate US export controls."

Sept. 25, 2023: North Korea [opens the border](#) to foreigners for first time since COVID-19.

Sept. 26, 2023: A delegation from the US Food and Drug Administration [visits](#) Divi's Laboratories, an Indian manufacturer of artificial pharmaceutical ingredients, in Hyderabad.

Sept. 26, 2023: South Korea [hosts](#) a trilateral meeting with China and Japan.

Sept. 28, 2023: Washington officials [say](#) U.S. soldier Travis King, who crossed the inter-Korean border into North Korea in July, is in US custody after his release by the reclusive regime.

Sept. 28, 2023: United States [holds](#) a summit with 14 Pacific Island States to discuss climate change, regional security, and China.

Sept. 30, 2023: Indian EAM S. Jaishankar [criticizes](#) Canada's "permissive" attitude toward terrorism and violence and allowing a culture of intimidation toward Indian diplomats.

Oct. 2-13, 2023: Philippines and the US [kick off](#) a two-week joint naval exercise, part of efforts to bolster international cooperation amid Beijing's increasingly assertive activity in the South China Sea.

Oct. 3, 2023: India [orders](#) Canada to remove 41 of 62 diplomats from the country as their diplomatic row escalates.

Oct. 4, 2023: China [complains](#) about the "very short" time provided by the European Union to engage in consultations for the bloc's inquiry into subsidies for electric vehicles.

Oct. 5, 2023: China [issues](#) a warning to Philippine vessels involved in mission to supply troops stationed in disputed waters in the South China Sea.

Oct. 6, 2023: Taiwan's government [opens](#) an investigation into four companies named in a media report as conducting business with firms linked to U.S.-sanctioned Huawei in China, and is considering tighter rules on key technologies.

Oct. 6, 2023: Canada [joins](#) India-hosted parliamentary speakers' summit of G20 nations, signaling both countries are keen to cooperate in legislative affairs despite tensions over the killing of a Sikh separatist leader.

Oct. 10, 2023: South Korea's defense minister [pushes](#) to suspend a 2018 inter-Korean military agreement in order to resume front-line surveillance on rival North Korea, as the surprise attack on Israel by Hamas raised concerns in South Korea about similar assaults

by the North.

Oct. 10, 2023: South Korea, the United States, and Japan [stage](#) a trilateral maritime interdiction exercise for the first time in seven years.

Oct. 10, 2023: Canadian diplomats [remain](#) in India as withdrawal deadline passes.

Oct. 11, 2023: EU [launches](#) investigation into overcapacity in China's steel sector, a move that could see a tariff of 25% imposed on imports from the world's second-largest economy.

Oct. 12, 2023: US Navy P-8A *Poseidon* aircraft [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait in international airspace to "demonstrate the United States" commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific."

Oct. 12, 2023: China [sends](#) fighter jets to monitor and warn a US Navy patrol aircraft that flew through the Taiwan Strait.

Oct. 13, 2023: India's stock market [loses](#) momentum as risk-averse investors pull out money amid a diplomatic row with Canada.

Oct. 13, 2023: North Korea [threatens](#) to stage the "most powerful and rapid first strike" against US strategic assets deployed to the Korean Peninsula.

Oct. 13, 2023: Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. [applies](#) for permanent approval to ship US chip equipment to its facility in Nanjing, China, after its one-year license for the plant received a temporary renewal.

Oct. 14, 2023: South Korea military transport plane [help](#) evacuate 163 South Koreans, 51 Japanese, and six Singaporeans from Israel.

Oct. 17, 2023: Chinese President Xi Jinping [outlines](#) his views on the past and future of the Belt and Road Initiative, as Beijing hosts world dignitaries at a forum marking the 10th anniversary of its signature foreign policy strategy.

Oct. 17, 2023: Department of Commerce's BIS [adds](#) 13 Chinese companies to the Entity List for aiding the AI capabilities of China's military and high-tech surveillance sector and, thus, "acting contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States."

Oct. 17-18, 2023: President Putin [visits](#) Beijing to participate in the 3rd Belt-Road-Initiative Forum. He holds talks with President Xi Jinping on Oct. 18.

Oct. 18, 2023: Biden administration [reduces](#) the types of semiconductors that American companies will be able to sell to China, citing the desire to close loopholes in existing regulations announced last year.

Oct. 22, 2023: Philippines [accuses](#) China's coast guard of colliding with a Filipino supply boat in the South China Sea.

Oct. 22, 2023: US, South Korea, and Japan [conduct](#) the first trilateral aerial exercise to strengthen their joint response capabilities against North Korea.

Oct. 22, 2023: California Gov. Gavin Newsom [visits](#) China to reinforce his state's role as a global leader on climate change.

Oct. 25, 2023: California Gov. Gavin Newsom [meets Chinese President](#) Xi in Beijing. Newsom, joined by US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns, also meets China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Vice President Han Zheng and [signs](#) a new climate-focused Memorandum of Understanding with National Development and Reform Commission Chairman Zheng Shanjie.

Oct. 26, 2023: President Biden [warns](#) China that the US will defend the Philippines in case of any attack in the disputed South China Sea.

Oct. 26, 2023: China [says](#) that the US does not have the right to get involved in problems between China and the Philippines.

Oct. 26, 2023: US Secretary of State Blinken [meets](#) China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Department of State.

Oct. 27, 2023: South Korean and U.S. troops [conduct](#) live-fire exercises to hone their ability to respond to potential " Hamas-style surprise artillery attacks" by North Korea.

Oct. 28, 2023: President Biden [has](#) a one-hour meeting with China's top diplomat, Wang Yi, at the White House, where he highlighted the importance of maintaining open lines of communication with Beijing.

Oct. 28, 2023: UN expert panel overseeing sanctions against Pyongyang [estimates](#) North Korea's state-sponsored cyber theft last year at \$1.7 billion.

Oct. 31, 2023: United States [imposes sanctions](#) on the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), the country's most lucrative state-owned enterprise. Washington also adds the names of three entities and five individuals to the sanctions list, for their involvement with the Tatmadaw.

Nov. 1, 2023: Destroyer from the US Navy 7th Fleet and a frigate from the Royal Canadian Navy jointly [conduct](#) a "routine Taiwan Strait transit through waters where high-seas freedoms of navigation and overflight apply in accordance with international law."

Nov. 1-2, 2023: 27th US-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue is [conducted](#) in Washington. Ongoing since normalization of US-Vietnam relations in 1995, the Dialogue has been incorporated as a key feature of the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership announced in September.

Nov. 3, 2023: US Navy destroyer USS Dewey [conducts](#) a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea near the Spratly Islands.

Nov. 4, 2023: Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [says](#) his country, the Philippines, and the US are cooperating to protect the freedom of the

South China Sea as he commits to help enhance Manila's security capabilities.

Nov. 4-7, 2023: US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate Kerry and [China's](#) Special Envoy for Climate Change Xie Zhenhua [meet](#) at Sunnylands, California, where they sign the Sunnylands Agreement on "Enhancing Cooperation to Address the Climate Crisis."

Nov. 5, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida and Malaysian counterpart Anwar Ibrahim [agree](#) to promote bilateral defense and maritime security cooperation amid China's increasing military assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region.

Nov. 7, 2023: Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese [calls](#) for the "full resumption of free and unimpeded trade" with China in a meeting with counterpart Li Qiang that marked the return of talks after a four-year hiatus.

Nov. 7-8, 2023: Group of Seven (G7) wealthy nations - Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the US - as well as the EU, [meet](#) in Tokyo to discuss issues including Russia's war in Ukraine and the Israel-Gaza crisis.

Nov. 9, 2023: President Ishmael Toroama, who represents the Autonomous Region of Bougainville within Papua New Guinea, [travels](#) to Washington, D.C.

Nov. 10, 2023: India and the US [underline](#) their commitment to boosting security ties as their top diplomats and defense chiefs discuss regional security, China and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

Nov. 11-17, 2023: Leaders from the 21-member Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum [gather](#) in San Francisco for the 30th APEC summit.

Nov. 13, 2023: US and South Korea [update](#) their strategy on deterring North Korea for the first time in a decade.

Nov. 13, 2023: President Biden and Indonesian counterpart, Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, [meet](#) at the White House, agreeing to elevate ties and cooperate in fields ranging from climate and energy to digital connectivity and defense.

Nov. 13-15, 2023: Cabinet officials from the 14 Indo-Pacific Economic Framework members [kick off](#) two-day meeting.

Nov. 15, 2023: Defense ministers in ASEAN [call](#) for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and a durable solution to the crisis in Myanmar during the opening of a regional meeting in Jakarta.

Nov. 15, 2023: President Biden and President Xi [begin](#) a high-profile summit in San Francisco in a renewed attempt to stabilize US-China relations.

Nov. 15, 2023: North Korea [tests](#) newly developed solid-fuel engines for new-type for a new type of intermediate-range ballistic missile.

Nov. 16, 2023: After meeting President Xi, [Biden tells the media](#): "I reiterate what I've said since I've become president and what every previous president of late has said—that we—we maintain an agreement that there is a one-China policy and that—and I'm not going to change that. That's not going to change."

Nov. 16, 2023: United States and the Philippines [announce](#) that they will explore opportunities to collaborate on semiconductor supply chains with funds from the CHIPS Act of 2022.

Nov. 16, 2023: Japanese Trade Minister Nishimura Yasutoshi and Chinese Commerce Minister Wang Wentao [agree](#) to create a new framework to discuss export controls on key minerals and other trade issues.

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.

Nov. 16-17, 2023: President Biden [chairs](#) the APEC Economic Leaders Meeting in San Francisco.

Nov. 17, 2023: United States and the Philippines [sign](#) a landmark deal that would allow Washington to export nuclear technology and material to Manila, which is exploring the use of nuclear power to decarbonize and boost energy independence.

Nov. 17, 2023: Japanese Prime Minister [Kishida Fumio stresses](#) the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait during a meeting with President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the APEC summit.

Nov. 19, 2023: Taiwan [reports](#) renewed Chinese military activity around the island, with nine aircraft crossing the sensitive median line of the Taiwan Strait and warships carrying out "combat readiness patrols."

Nov. 19, 2023: Maldives new President Mohamed Muizzu, who campaigned on altering the tiny Indian Ocean archipelago's "India first" policy, [requests](#) India withdraw its military from the country.

Nov. 20, 2023: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [heads](#) to Britain for a state visit, hoping to boost economic ties and security partnerships as his country faces what it sees as growing danger from a nuclear-armed North Korea.

Nov. 20, 2023: Philippines [approaches](#) neighbors Malaysia and Vietnam to discuss a separate code of conduct regarding the South China Sea, citing limited progress toward a broader regional pact with China.

Nov. 20, 2023: India and Australia [hold](#) their 2nd 2 + 2 Defense and Foreign Ministers Dialogue.

Nov. 21, 2023: US and the Philippines [start](#) joint air and sea patrols in the South China Sea.

Nov. 21, 2023: North Korea [notifies](#) Japan it plans to launch a rocket carrying a space satellite between Nov. 22 and Dec. 1 in the

direction of the Yellow Sea and East China Sea, Japan's Coast Guard said on Tuesday.

Nov. 22, 2023: South Korea [suspends](#) part of a 2018 inter-Korean military tension reduction agreement in response to North Korea's latest launch of a military spy satellite. The US, South Korea, and Japan's nuclear envoys also [hold](#) phone calls and "strongly" condemn North Korea's space launch. South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [reports](#) the three countries have shared information regarding the launch.

Nov. 22, 2023: United States authorities [thwarted](#) a plot to kill a Sikh separatist in the United States and issued a warning to India over concerns the government in New Delhi was involved, according to a senior Biden administration official.

Nov. 23, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) ballistic missile toward East Sea, but launch apparently failed.

Nov. 23, 2023: A South Korean appeals court, the Seoul High Court [rules](#) in favor of a group of 16 former "comfort women" (survivors of Imperial Japan's wartime sexual slavery) ordering the Japanese government to provide 200 million won (about \$150,000) in compensation to each victim, overruling a lower court ruling in 2021. Foreign Minister Kamikawa issues a statement [calling](#) the ruling "extremely regrettable and absolutely unacceptable."

Nov. 25, 2023: Philippines and Australia [begin](#) their first joint sea and air patrols in the South China Sea.

Nov. 25, 2023: US Navy destroyer *USS Hopper* [conducts](#) a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea near the Paracel Islands.

Nov. 26, 2023: China, Japan, and South Korea [agree](#) to restart cooperation and pave the way for a summit in the latest move to ease tensions between the Asian neighbors.

Nov. 26, 2023: US, South Korea, and Japan [conduct](#) naval drills to strengthen their joint defense posture.

Nov. 27, 2023: Japan and Vietnam [agree](#) to strengthen their security and economic ties in the face of China's growing influence in the region.

Nov. 27, 2023: UN Security Council [holds](#) a briefing on North Korea's satellite launch.

Nov. 27, 2023: Taiwan High Prosecutors Office [indicts 10 people](#), including several active-duty military personnel, for allegedly spying for China.

Nov. 29, 2023: Chief minister of the western Indian state of Gujarat [calls](#) on Japanese semiconductor companies to invest in the hometown of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Dec. 1, 2023: Malaysia [invites](#) China's President Xi to visit, as the Southeast Asian country also seeks to boost the number of Chinese tourists to 5 million a year to fuel economic growth.

Dec. 1, 2023: Philippines [builds](#) a new coast guard station on the contested island of Thitu in the South China Sea, boosting its ability to monitor movements of Chinese vessels and aircraft in the busy disputed waterway.

Dec. 1, 2023: US [keeps](#) North Korea on its list of state sponsors of terrorism in 2022 report.

Dec. 2, 2023: South Korea successfully [launches](#) its first indigenous military spy satellite into orbit.

Dec. 3, 2023: Philippines' coast guard [says](#) more than 135 Chinese "maritime militia" vessels are "swarming" around the disputed Whitsun Reef in the South China Sea.

Dec. 4, 2023: South Korea [successfully conducts](#) third test flight of solid-fuel space rocket.

Dec. 6, 2023: Leaders of the Group of Seven (G7) [meet](#) virtually and release a Leaders' Statement which says the G7 "stand prepared to build constructive and stable relations with China" but remain committed to "push for a level playing field" for workers and companies and remain "seriously concerned" about the situation in the East and South China Seas.

Dec. 7, 2023: Two Chinese naval vessels [become](#) the first ships to dock at a new pier at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base.

Dec. 7, 2023: At their first in-person summit for four years, China and the EU [agree](#) that their trade relationship should be more balanced, but gave no sign of resolving differences on a range of issues.

Dec. 9, 2023: Japan [does not](#) appeal a South Korean appeals court's Nov. 23 ruling which was in favor of a group of former "comfort women."

Dec. 11, 2023: Philippines [condemns](#) China's recent actions in the South China Sea, urging restraint to preserve regional stability following a spike in tensions over the weekend.

Dec. 14, 2023: Japan and ASEAN [intend](#) to work together on cybersecurity and systems for managing and operating artificial intelligence.

Dec. 14, 2023: China [condemns](#) Canada's support for the Philippines over what it said were violations of China's sovereignty in the South China Sea.

Dec. 14, 2023: Defense ministers of Japan, Britain, and Italy [sign](#) an agreement to establish a joint organization to develop a new advanced jet fighter, as their countries push to strengthen cooperation in the face of growing threats from China, Russia and North Korea.

Dec. 14, 2023: Russia and China [conduct](#) 7th joint air patrol over the Sea of Japan and East China Sea with Russia's Tupolev-95MS strategic bombers and China's Hong-6K strategic bombers.

Dec. 15, 2023: Chinese leader Xi [arrives](#) in Vietnam seeking to deepen ties with the Southeast Asian neighbor, weeks after Hanoi elevated diplomatic relations with the US and Japan.

Dec. 15, 2023: Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese [hails](#) US Congress for authorizing the sale of nuclear submarines to another country for the first time, allowing the AUKUS defense partnership of Australia, the US, and Britain to go ahead.

Dec. 17, 2023: US [condemns](#) the prosecution of "pro-democracy advocate and media owner Jimmy Lai in Hong Kong under the PRC-imposed National Security Law."

Dec. 17, 2023: East Timor [plans](#) to choose partners for the Greater Sunrise offshore natural gas project that will bring it benefits, signaling that it will not rule out participation by Chinese companies.

Dec. 18, 2023: Two Chinese balloons [fly](#) north of Taiwan, according to the island's Defense Ministry.

Dec. 18, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) an intercontinental ballistic missile that has a range to hit anywhere in the continental US, marking its second launch in hours as Pyongyang condemned a US-led show of force as "war" moves.

Dec. 19, 2023: United States [imposes sanctions](#) on a network of 10 entities and four individuals based in Iran, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Indonesia for facilitating Iran's procurement of sensitive goods for the production of attack drones.

Dec. 19, 2023: South Korea, the US, and Japan [launch](#) a system to share North Korean missile warning data in real time.

Dec. 19-20, 2023: Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin [visits](#) Beijing for the 28th

regular prime ministerial meeting with his Chinese counterpart Li Qiang. President Xi [meets](#) Mishustin after the joint session of prime ministers on Dec. 20.

Dec. 20, 2023: Philippines defense minister [rebukes](#) China for accusing his country of provoking tension and stirring trouble in the South China Sea.

Dec. 20, 2023: Top diplomats of the US, South Korea, and Japan [condemn](#) North Korea's recent ballistic missile launches and urge Pyongyang to engage in "substantive dialogue without preconditions."

Dec. 21, 2023: Taiwan [accuses](#) China of economic coercion and election interference after Beijing announced the end of tariff cuts on some chemical imports from the island, saying Taipei violated a trade agreement, just ahead of Taiwanese elections.

Dec. 21, 2023: South Korea and Japan [hold](#) high-level economic talks for the first time in eight years.

Dec. 21, 2023: Department of Commerce [announces](#) the launch of an industrial base survey of the US semiconductor supply chain to "bolster the semiconductor supply chain, promote a level playing field for legacy chip production, and reduce national security risks posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC)."

Dec. 21, 2023: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [says](#) Pyongyang would not hesitate to launch a nuclear attack if an enemy provokes it with nuclear weapons.

Dec. 21, 2023: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [warns](#) the Philippines that any miscalculation in their escalating dispute in the South China Sea would bring a resolute response, and urges dialogue to address "serious difficulties" between the two neighbors.

Dec. 22, 2023: China [resumes](#) imports of grouper from Taiwan, a day after angering

Taipei with the ending of tariff cuts on some chemical imports less than a month before Taiwanese elections.

Dec. 22, 2023: Japan [says](#) it will send *Patriot* air defense missiles to the US after changing its arms export rules, in a shift away from its pacifist policies.

Dec. 22, 2023: Federation of Korean Industries [proposes](#) regular business summits to promote cooperation with its US and Japanese counterparts.

Dec. 24, 2023: Eight Chinese fighter jets [cross](#) the median line of the Taiwan Strait, as well as one Chinese balloon, according to Taiwan's defense ministry.

Dec. 25, 2023: Chinese state media [accuses](#) the Philippines of repeatedly infringing on China's territory in the South China Sea, spreading false information and colluding with extraterritorial forces to cause trouble.

Dec. 27, 2023: South Korea [signs](#) a contract with the US government to buy 20 additional F-35A stealth fighter jets amid efforts to bolster response capabilities against North Korean military threats.

Dec. 27, 2023: Unification of Taiwan with mainland China "will surely be realized," Chinese President Xi [declares](#) at a speech in Beijing to commemorate the 130th anniversary of Mao Zedong's birth.

Dec. 27, 2023: Russia and India [discuss](#) plans and make progress in talks toward jointly producing military equipment.

Dec. 27, 2023: Chinese government [threatens](#) to place further trade sanctions on Taiwan if the ruling party "stubbornly" adheres to supporting independence, in a further escalation of the war of words as Taiwanese elections approach next month.

Dec. 27, 2023: Russia [tells](#) South Korea not to be surprised if Moscow retaliates against Seoul for expanding the list of goods which cannot be exported from the East Asian nation to Russia without special permission.

Dec. 27, 2023: South Korea [imposes](#) sanctions on eight North Koreans linked to nuclear and missile development through arms trade, cyberattacks and other illicit activities.

Dec. 28, 2023: KCNA [reports](#) that North Korean leader Kim is calling for stepped-up efforts to prepare for war.

Dec. 28, 2023: China's defense ministry [accuses](#) Taiwan's government of deliberately "hying up" a military threat from China for electoral gain ahead of elections on the island in just over two weeks' time, but again sent warplanes into the Taiwan Strait.

Dec. 30, 2023: Foreign ministers of Southeast Asia's regional bloc ASEAN [express](#) concern over growing tensions in the South China Sea.

Dec. 30, 2023: Japan [says](#) it lodged a protest with South Korea over military drills conducted in waters near South Korean-controlled, Japanese-claimed islets in the Sea of Japan.

Dec. 31, 2023: North Korea [vows](#) to launch three new spy satellites, build military drones, and boost its nuclear arsenal in 2024 as leader Kim Jong Un said US policy is making war inevitable.

Dec. 31, 2023: China's "reunification" with Taiwan is inevitable, President Xi [says](#) in his New Year's address, striking a stronger tone than he did last year with less than two weeks to go before the Chinese-claimed island elects a new leader.

PACIFIC  FORUM

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

US-JAPAN RELATIONS

AS GOOD AS IT GETS?

BRAD GLOSSERMAN, PACIFIC FORUM

The US-Japan relationship may well be at its all-time best. Animated by a concordance of vision and interests, the two governments are closely coordinating across a wide range of issues in a variety of venues—bilateral and multilateral, political, economic, and military. Concern about the potential destabilizing effects of regional developments provides considerable motivation for the two to work together. The final reporting period of 2023 provided ample evidence of their convergence. If that past is prologue, the year ahead should be a good one. Unfortunately, however, the tide could be turning. A political funds scandal has ensnared Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and the approval ratings of the government of Prime Minister Kishida Fumio are plummeting as a result. Even if the prime minister survives the scandal—and most indications are that he will—he will be tarred and distracted as the region and the world face new and mounting challenges.

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The Usual Stuff is Very Good

As befits a partnership critical to both nations' interests and national security, the last four months of 2023 were chock full of meetings at all levels of government. The chronology provides details, but topping the list was the encounter between the two leaders, President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Kishida, at the APEC Leaders Meeting that the US hosted in San Francisco in November, which [yielded](#) an invitation for the Japanese prime minister to make a state visit to the US in early 2024. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko met or talked on the phone repeatedly throughout the reporting period, proof that the relationship can be maintained despite changes in personnel, as Kamikawa replaced Hayashi Yoshimasa at the foreign ministry after Kishida shuffled his Cabinet in early September to boost flagging approval ratings (an effort that largely failed).



Figure 1 The second session of the APEC Leaders' Meeting. Photo: Cabinet Public Affairs Office

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan discussed issues with his counterpart on Japan's National Security Council, Secretary General Akiba Takeo, often in a trilateral format. In another indication of the expanding list of issues that generate cooperation, the two governments at the end of the year [signed](#) a Memorandum of Cooperation on countering foreign information manipulation.

The 2023 Defense of Japan White Paper, released last summer, [warned](#) that Japan faces "the most severe and complex security situation since the end of [World War II]." Consistent with that outlook, Japan strives to upgrade its defense capabilities and modernize the alliance with the US. That has resulted in, among other things, a stream of senior US military officials visiting Tokyo for meetings with senior Japanese

political, military, and diplomatic personnel; again, the chronology provides a detailed list. The September visit to Tokyo of Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command Adm. John Aquilino and his meetings with Kishida and Foreign Minister Kamikawa likely top the list, although November meetings between Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Charles Brown and Kishida and Kamikawa are a close second. There were many others. Of course, the central role that the alliance has played in Japanese national security has meant that such meetings aren't new. The publicity and attention given to those discussions is, however. This is a sign of both the need to engage in discussions and the need to be *seen* having those discussions. The Japanese government continues to shape public opinion in the country in preparation for what may be testing times.



Figure 2 Admiral John C. Aquilino and Foreign Minister Kamikawa. Photo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan

Also of note was the Oct. 4 meeting of US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Japanese Minister of Defense Kiharu Minoru, at which they [discussed](#) regional affairs, highlighting that they "would not accept any unilateral changes to the status quo by force and such attempts in any parts of the world including the Indo-Pacific region and confirmed that they need to strengthen the Alliance capabilities to deter and respond to that end." As always, they underscored "the importance of the US stating its commitment that Article V of the Japan-US Security Treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands." They took up alliance modernization as well, and "confirmed to steadily progress efforts to strengthen Alliance capabilities to deter and respond under the new strategies." They also agreed "to accelerated discussions on roles, missions and capabilities of the Alliance

including effective operation of counterstrike capabilities under Japan-US cooperation.”

In December, the two sides held a meeting of the [Extended Deterrence Dialogue](#) in Tokyo, at which they agreed “that it is necessary to continue strengthening deterrence and response capabilities of the Japan-US alliance” given the worsening security environment. They exchanged views on how to enhance bilateral deterrence dialogues and ways to improve bilateral cooperation. They shared assessments of the regional security environment, and reviewed alliance conventional and US nuclear capabilities contributing to regional deterrence, with emphasis on ways the two countries, individually and together, can bolster deterrence. They also took up strategic arms control and risk reduction approaches. As always, the US reiterated its commitment to the defense of Japan under the mutual security treaty.

At the end of the reporting period, there were three other events of note, two positive, the other negative with implications for the alliance. The first was the Nov. 29 crash of a US Air Force CV-22 Osprey offshore Yakushima Island during a training mission. All eight crew members were killed in the accident and Tokyo grounded the 14 tilt-rotor aircraft it operates the day after the incident, and [asked](#) the US to do the same. The Ospreys have been controversial since their deployment, with critics arguing that they are accident prone, a charge that the US and Japanese governments, and the manufacturer, deny. The tragedy resurrected those concerns.



Figure 3 A blue sheet covers what is believed to be a part of a crashed U.S. military Osprey aircraft on a U.S. salvage boat off Yakushima, Kagoshima prefecture, southern Japan, on December 27, 2023. Photo: Associated Press

Two Important Steps Forward

Concerns that the accident would cast a pall over the alliance were (somewhat) alleviated by two Japanese government decisions in the weeks to follow. In December, the Cabinet [agreed](#) “to add a new rule” to regulations on defense equipment exports, that will allow Japan “to export arms which were domestically produced under license of a foreign company to the licensing country.” In other words, Japan will send *Patriot* (PAC3) surface-to-air missile defense systems, which it produces by paying a license fee to Lockheed Martin, back to the United States. This is both a historic step—it marks Japan’s first export of lethal arms since the end of World War II—and a bit of headscratcher since Lockheed Martin is a US company. In fact, however, US stocks of *Patriots* have been depleted by the Ukraine conflict and this is a stopgap to replenish them.

The second Japanese government decision (and the third event for those trying to keep score) came at the very end of the year, when Minister of Land and Infrastructure Saito Tetsuo signed a document to allow construction on the Futenma Replacement Facility (FRF) to proceed. Agreement to move Marine Corps Air Station Futenma was reached in 1999; the residential buildup around the facility made it [“the most dangerous base in the world.”](#) necessitating its relocation. Popular opposition to the move, typically spearheaded by the Okinawa government, slowed progress.



Figure 4 Construction work is currently in progress on Wednesday in Oura Bay, Okinawa Prefecture, the designated site for the coastal airfield intended to replace Marine Corps Air Station Futenma. Photo: Kyodo

The land at the relocation site—offshore in Oura Bay, in Henoko—was discovered to be too soft and additional construction measures were

required. That necessitated a change in the plans, and the Okinawa prefectural government refused to sign off, despite court decisions requiring it to do so. At the end of December, Saito for the first time ever invoked central government authority under the Local Autonomy Act to override the opposition. The work then started in early January. The move was originally scheduled to have been completed in 2022; now it is expected to be finished around 2035, if there are no more substantive delays.

Ever More Economics

Given the increasingly prominent role that economics plays in geopolitics, and the presence of both the US and Japan on the frontiers of high-technology, the ever-larger amounts of time and effort that the two governments devote to economic concerns as an alliance concern should come as no surprise. In this reporting period, the two governments held the second ministerial meeting of the US-Japan Economic Policy Consultative Committee (Economic “2+2”) on the sidelines of the APEC confab in San Francisco. It brought together the US and Japanese secretaries/ministers of State and Commerce/Industry (METI on the Japan side) for security-focused discussions that mirror those of the more traditional Security Consultative Committee (the original “2+2”). Their [joint statement](#) pledged to “strategically promote coordination to address rising threats to our economic and national security, and to enhance communication with other like-minded partners to achieve this objective.” It then identified 16 areas for cooperation to strengthen the rules-based economic order in the Indo-Pacific and enhance resilience and promote and protect critical and emerging technologies.

The ministerial-level meeting was preceded by a virtual vice-ministerial get-together, and US Trade Representative Katherine Tai had several phone calls and meetings with Japanese trade, economic, and diplomatic officials throughout the reporting period. Interaction between the Japanese government and the bilateral business community was also frequent, with Kishida and Kamikawa both addressing the 60th Japan-US Business Conference that was held in Tokyo. The prime minister also met Semiconductor Industry Association President and CEO John Neuffer in San Francisco, where they no doubt discussed the Tokyo government’s efforts to

nurture and expand semiconductor production in Japan.

Those talks also likely assessed October updates to US export controls that tightened restrictions introduced the year before. The new rules further cut access to advanced computing semiconductors and semiconductor producing equipment, as well as items that support supercomputing applications and end-uses, to arms-embargoed countries, including the PRC, and put additional related entities in the PRC on the Entity List. [According](#) to US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo, the new controls “will increase effectiveness of our controls and further shut off pathways to evade our restrictions.” The new regulations were the latest attempt to ensure that US restrictions aligned with those of other key countries, Japan and the Netherlands in this case. Export controls by one country make no sense if targets can acquire the same components or knowhow from another source. Coordinating the three governments’ efforts has been a priority, and the result has been a tango: The US first introduced its rules in October 2022, proceeding unilaterally after months of negotiations with Tokyo and the Hague couldn’t yield joint action. Those two partners followed with their own restrictions some months later. The second US move in October 2023 reflected Washington’s [desire](#) to harmonize the three sets of rules and eliminate suspicion that American companies would exploit commercial opportunities created by Japanese regulations that went farther than those of the US.



Figure 5 Prime Minister Kishida receiving a courtesy call. Photo: Cabinet Public Affairs Office

A Partnership for Larger Things

Bilateral cooperation between Washington and Tokyo helps lead broader engagement in the

region. The US and Japan are working together in a variety of multilateral formats. The most prominent trilateral includes the US, Japan, and South Korea, and it has been building on the outcomes of the trilateral Camp David leaders meeting in August. The three leaders met again, briefly, at the APEC meeting. While that was mostly a photo-op, it is nevertheless important as a signal that top leaders expect continuing progress in trilateralism. The three foreign ministers met every month to discuss issues of concern, and they paced lower-level work, such as the US-Japan-Korea Trilateral Development and Humanitarian Assistance Policy Dialogue that convened in October, the trilateral space security dialogue less than two weeks later, and the inaugural meeting of the Japan-US-Korea Trilateral Diplomacy Working Group for Foreign Ministry Cooperation on North Korea's Cyber Threats in December, as well as consultations among the three countries' representatives for North Korean affairs. That paved the way for the December joint statement [released](#) by Secretary Blinken, Foreign Minister Kamikawa, and Foreign Minister Park Jin condemning North Korea's ballistic missile launches.

Gaining prominence are trilateral conversations between the US, Japan, and the Philippines, a group that has been consolidating since it emerged earlier this year. Following separate conversations among national security advisors and foreign ministers of the three countries last summer, Prime Minister Kishida, Vice President Kamala Harris, and Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos [met](#) while attending ASEAN-related summit meetings in Indonesia in September. (Harris was stepping in for President Biden, who traveled to the region two months later.) They exchanged views on the current situation in the South China Sea and agreed to jointly tackle unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force. They confirmed that their three governments would promote the strengthening of coordination "in various ways." The foreign ministers of the three countries met a few weeks later in New York on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly where they [pledged](#) to "uphold our shared values of freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights, and reaffirmed our shared vision, as equal and sovereign partners, for a free and open Indo-Pacific region that upholds international law." They said they would "continue to call out behavior that is inconsistent with international law, including the PRC's recent actions near Second Thomas

Shoal that interfered with the Philippines' lawful exercise of high seas freedom of navigation." They also "discussed ways to support economic resiliency and deepen trilateral cooperation on energy, infrastructure, and digital economy issues, and to enhance trilateral security cooperation, including on maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief efforts."

Washington and Tokyo are an axis for cooperation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad"), and the reporting period had plenty of those meetings as well. Foreign ministers met in New York in September on the sidelines of the UNGA. The Quad Senior Cyber Group met in Tokyo in early December, where they [reaffirmed](#) "our steadfast commitment to an Indo-Pacific that is resilient and equipped to detect and deter cyber-attacks." Since Quad countries' status are among the world's leaders in advancing digital technology, connectivity, and resilience, they pledged to provide capacity building in the Indo-Pacific region to strengthen the ability to protect government networks and critical infrastructure from cyber disruptions. Less than two weeks later, the Quad Counterterrorism Working Group met in Honolulu, where they [discussed](#) terrorism threats, developing regional coordination mechanisms, and countering terrorist use of emerging technologies, along with ways the Quad might coordinate to build capacity in Indo-Pacific countries.

While Japan's year as chair of the Group of Seven (G7) came to an end, it was an exemplary performance. Tokyo provided real leadership and may have revived a forum once dismissed as well past its sell-by date. In conversations in Washington, the applause for Prime Minister Kishida's performance—and that of the entire Japanese diplomatic bureaucracy—was sustained, with one person even calling the bilateral partnership "a G2 for the G7."

This enthusiasm was reflected in public views of the alliance in the United States. A December [report](#) from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs showed that US perceptions of Japan's global influence are on the rise for the first time in nearly a decade. Respondents ranked Japan fourth in global influence, trailing the United States, China, and Russia but besting other US allies such as the UK, Germany, Israel, and South Korea. Prime Minister Kishida was second among world leaders, with 66% giving him a "favorable" rating, trailing only Ukrainian

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy who had 68% favorable views. Three-quarters of Americans (77%) say that the US-Japan security relationship strengthens US national security and a strong majority (62%) have a great deal or fair amount of confidence in Japan to deal responsibly with world problems. Just under two-thirds (63%) support US bases in Japan, the second-highest recorded level of support since 2002. If there is a worrying indicator in the results, it is the finding that most Americans (55%) oppose the use of US troops if China were to launch a military conflict with Japan over disputed islands.

And Yet.....

The new year began with the government of Japan moving quickly to begin work at Henoko. (Construction commenced a couple of days ahead of schedule to thwart anticipated protests.) The Supreme Court is to review the lower court decision to allow the central government to use the Local Authority Act, but absent a ruling to halt construction, work will continue. Since the law allows Tokyo to act when leaving the matter unaddressed would “seriously harm the public interest,” and given the reluctance of the courts to interfere in foreign policy matters, there is little chance of judicial action to stop progress.

A much bigger concern is the political funds scandal that surfaced in 2023 and threatens to ensnare the LDP. Allegedly, many members of the party, including some of its most senior figures, failed to declare millions of dollars in income. While the practice purportedly occurred among all party factions, prosecutors are focused on two of the largest and most powerful groups within the LDP which have been instrumental in Kishida’s rise to prime minister and are key to keeping him in office. As a result, the prime minister’s popularity, and that of the ruling LDP, is flashing red, with Cabinet’s approval ratings falling below 20% in some polls and that of the LDP dropping beneath 30%.

There is little indication that Kishida will be forced from office. There is no urgency to replace him as the opposition remains unpopular and the LDP doesn’t want to engage in the internal debates to select a successor. The prospect of a state visit to the US also helps him because a change in leadership would undercut the rationale for such a meeting. Summits are

for work, they are not “getting to know you” opportunities.

For our purposes, this scandal matters for two reasons. First, Kishida will be distracted by domestic concerns and unlikely to focus on foreign affairs. The prime minister at the end of December canceled one diplomatic tour to concentrate on matters at home. He has capable deputies and an excellent foreign minister, but a visit by the head of state is a different sort of beast. Second, the alleged involvement of the Abe faction weakens one of the most powerful forces driving internationalism in Japanese policy. Kishida himself was thought to be agnostic about the forward-leaning diplomatic agenda that he inherited, although he disabused many observers of that belief during his term in office. That could reflect a belief that international activism is a good way to look like a leader and win public support. Unfortunately, the limited bounce in approval ratings that followed the May G7 summit he hosted may have undermined this argument. With Taiwan’s national elections in early January—decided by the time you read this—Japan may well need focused and energetic leadership to deal with an outcome that angers Beijing. Japan’s national security bureaucracy can address the challenges that result, but top-level leadership will be needed as well. We will soon see whether Kishida can provide it.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-JAPAN RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2023

Sept. 1, 2023: Commander of US Strategic Command General Anthony Cotton and Minister for Foreign Affairs Hayashi [meet](#) in Tokyo.

Sept. 6, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, Vice President Kamala Harris, and Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos [meet](#) while attending the ASEAN-related Summit Meetings in Indonesia.

Sept. 11, 2023: Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa and Assistant Commandant of the US Marine Corps General Eric Smith [meet](#) in Tokyo.

Sept. 11, 2023: Hayashi [meets](#) with a delegation of four governors (Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb, Kansas Governor Laura Kelly, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, and Nebraska Governor Jim Pillen) and two lieutenant governors (Illinois Lieutenant Governor Julia Stratton and Minnesota Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan) in Tokyo.

Sept. 14, 2023: Hayashi and Secretary of State Antony Blinken [speak](#) by telephone.

Sept. 14, 2023: Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko and Secretary of State Blinken [speak](#) by telephone.

Sept. 18, 2023: Blinken and Kamikawa [meet](#) in New York.

Sept. 18, 2023: Blinken and Kamikawa [attend](#) a G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in New York.

Sept. 19, 2023: Kishida [delivers](#) an address at the UN General Assembly Meeting in New York.

Sept. 20, 2023: Kishida [receives](#) the Atlantic Council's Global Citizen Award in New York.

Sept. 20, 2023: Kishida [receives](#) the 2023 Global Goalkeepers Award from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in New York.

Sept. 21, 2023: Kishida [delivers](#) remarks at the Economic Club of New York.

Sept. 22, 2023: Blinken, Kamikawa, and Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Park Jin [meet](#) in New York.

Sept. 22, 2023: Blinken, Kamikawa, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong, and Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar [hold](#) a Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting in New York.

Sept. 22, 2023: Blinken, Kamikawa, and Philippines Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo [meet](#) in New York.

Sept. 27, 2023: Kishida [meets](#) with Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command Admiral John Aquilino in Tokyo.

Sept. 27, 2023: Kamikawa [meets](#) with Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Aquilino in Tokyo.

Oct. 3, 2023: Kamikawa [meets](#) with a delegation of the US Chamber of Commerce and the US-Japan Business Council, led by President and CEO of the US Chamber of Commerce Suzanne Clark and Chairman of the US-Japan Business Council Douglas Peterson, in Tokyo.

Oct. 3, 2023: Kishida [delivers](#) remarks at the opening ceremony of the 60th Japan-US Business Conference in Tokyo.

Oct. 3, 2023: Kamikawa [delivers](#) remarks at the opening ceremony of the 60th Japan-US Business Conference in Tokyo.

Oct. 4, 2023: Kishida [meets](#) with the delegation from the US Chamber of Commerce and the US-Japan Business Council.

Oct. 5, 2023: US Trade Representative Katherine Tai and Kamikawa [speak](#) by telephone.

Oct. 12, 2023: Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Masahiro Komura and Secretary of the State of Florida Cord Byrd [sign](#) a Memorandum of Cooperation on Economic and Trade Relations between Japan and Florida.

Oct. 16-18, 2023: US and Japan [hold](#) the second annual Japan-US Security Dialogue in Palo Alto, California.

Oct. 17, 2023: Kishida [meets](#) with New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy in Tokyo.

Oct. 17, 2023: Kamikawa [meets](#) with New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy in Tokyo.

Oct. 17, 2023: Kamikawa [meets](#) with Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Tokyo.

Oct. 19, 2023: Senior Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Keiichi Ono, METI Vice-Minister for International Affairs Shin Hosaka, Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Jose Fernandez, and Under Secretary of Commerce for International Trade Marisa Lago [hold](#) a vice-ministerial meeting of the Japan-US Economic Policy Consultative Committee (Economic “2+2”) online.

Oct. 25, 2023: Blinken, Kamikawa, and Korean Minister for Foreign Affairs Park [release](#) a joint statement condemning North Korean arms transfers to Russia.

Oct. 26, 2023: Kamikawa [meets](#) with Commander of the United Nations Command/Combined Forces Command/United States Forces Korea General Paul LaCamera in Tokyo.

Oct. 29, 2023: Kamikawa [meets](#) with US Trade Representative Tai in Tokyo.

Oct. 29-30, 2023: US-Japan-Korea Trilateral Development and Humanitarian Assistance Policy Dialogue is [held](#) in Honolulu.

Nov. 7, 2023: Kishida [meets](#) with Blinken in Tokyo.

Nov. 7, 2023: Kamikawa [meets](#) with Blinken in Tokyo.

Nov. 8, 2023: Japan-US-Korea Trilateral Dialogue on Space Security is [held](#) in Seoul.

Nov. 8, 2023: Blinken [participates](#) in an interview conducted by NHK’s Yusaku Ishii.

Nov. 10, 2023: Kishida [meets](#) with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Charles Brown in Tokyo.

Nov. 10, 2023: Kamikawa [meets](#) with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Brown in Tokyo.

Nov. 11-17, 2023: 2023 APEC Leaders’ Week is [held](#) in San Francisco.

Nov. 13, 2023: Tai, Kamikawa, and Minister for Economy, Trade and Industry Nishimura Yasutoshi [meet](#) in San Francisco.

Nov. 13, 2023: Kamikawa [meets](#) with Japanese American leaders in San Francisco.

Nov. 14, 2023: Blinken, Kamikawa, and Park [meet](#) in San Francisco.

Nov. 14, 2023: Blinken, Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, Kamikawa, and METI Minister Nishimura [hold](#) the second ministerial meeting of the US-Japan Economic Policy Consultative Committee (Economic “2+2”) meeting in San Francisco.

Nov. 15, 2023: Kishida [meets](#) with Semiconductor Industry Association President and CEO John Neuffer in San Francisco.

Nov. 16, 2023: Biden and Kishida [meet](#) in San Francisco.

Nov. 16, 2023: Biden and Kishida [attend](#) the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity Leaders' Meeting in San Francisco.

Nov. 16, 2023: Kishida [meets](#) with Google President and CEO Sundar Pichai in San Francisco.

Nov. 17, 2023: Kishida and Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol attend a Japan-Korea event at Stanford University.

Nov. 25, 2023: Kamikawa, Blinken, and Park [speak](#) by telephone.

Nov. 29, 2023: A US Air Force CV-22 Osprey [crashes](#) off the shore of Yakushima Island during a training mission.

Nov. 30, 2023: Foreign Minister Kamikawa [meets](#) with Ambassador Rahm Emanuel in Tokyo.

Dec. 5-6, 2023: Third Meeting of Principles of the Quad Senior Cyber Group is [held](#) in Tokyo.

Dec. 5-7, 2023: Japan and the US [hold](#) an Extended Deterrence Dialogue in Tokyo.

Dec. 6, 2023: State Minister for Foreign Affairs Iwao Horii [meets](#) with Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Elizabeth Allen in Tokyo.

Dec. 6, 2023: Assistant Minister for Press and Public Diplomacy Kobayashi Maki and Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Allen [sign](#) a Memorandum of Cooperation on countering foreign information manipulation.

Dec. 7, 2023: First Japan-US-Korea Trilateral Diplomacy Working Group for Foreign Ministry Cooperation on North Korea's Cyber Threats is [held](#) in Tokyo.

Dec. 12, 2023: State Minister for Foreign Affairs Tsuji Kiyoto [meets](#) with Commanding General of the US Army Pacific Gen. Charles Flynn in Tokyo.

Dec. 19, 2023: Deputy Special Representative for North Korea Jung Pak, Foreign Affairs Director General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Namazu Hiyouki, and Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Kim Gun [speak](#) by telephone.

Dec. 20, 2023: Blinken, Kamikawa, and Park [release](#) a joint statement condemning North Korea's ballistic missile launches.

Dec. 22, 2023: Kishida [meets](#) with Japan Chair of the Japan-US Conference on Cultural and Educational Interchange (CULCON) Kenichiro Sasae in Tokyo.

Dec. 22, 2023: US, Japan, Australia, and India [hold](#) a Quad Counterterrorism Working Group meeting in Honolulu.



COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

US-CHINA RELATIONS

BIDEN-XI WOODSIDE SUMMIT AND THE SLOW REHABILITATION OF US-PRC TIES

SOURABH GUPTA, INSTITUTE FOR CHINA-AMERICA STUDIES

The “guardrails” that President Biden and President Xi envisaged in Bali in November 2022 began to be emplaced at their November 2023 summit in Woodside, California. In-person, leader-led communication was deepened, reassurances exchanged, and practical—albeit modest—“deliverables” locked down on several fronts, including restarting mil-mil communications, cracking down on fentanyl precursors, addressing the national security harms of artificial intelligence (AI), and increased people-to-people exchanges. The establishment of numerous bilateral working groups will ensure an almost full plate of across-the-board consultations in 2024 as well as the means to troubleshoot irritants on short notice. As stabilizing as the Woodside summit was, it failed to deflect the US-PRC relationship from its larger overall trajectory of “selective decoupling” across a range of advanced technologies and frontier industries (microelectronics; quantum; AI; biomanufacturing; clean energy). Strategic trade controls and other competitive actions were doubled down upon. With a pivotal US presidential election looming in 2024, questions abound on the longer-term durability of a rehabilitating US-PRC relationship.

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Starting in early September 2023, the signs were unmistakable—the US and Chinese governments were angling to set up an in-person meeting of their presidents on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders' meeting slated for mid-November in San Francisco. Though the two presidents had last met in-person on the sidelines of the G20 Leaders' Summit in November 2022 in Bali, President Xi Jinping chose to forego the G20 Summit in New Delhi on Sept. 9–10. On Sept. 12, Xi replied to a letter from veterans of the World War II-vintage American Volunteers Group of the Chinese Air Force, better known as the Flying Tigers, extolling the virtues of people-to-people exchanges. It was his third instance of [“letter diplomacy”](#) within a month with friendly US citizens, the earlier letters being addressed to the grandson of Joseph Stilwell, the World War II-era US general, and to the Washington state-based US-China Youth and Student Exchange Association. The president and CEO of the Philadelphia Orchestra, the [first American orchestra to perform](#) on the mainland after the founding of the People's Republic, was also the lucky recipient of a Xi-signed letter in November.

On Sept. 16–17, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met his counterpart CPC Central Foreign Affairs Commission director Wang Yi [in Malta](#). The Sullivan-Wang channel, seen as a trusted one in Beijing, is credited with having restarted ties after the February balloon incident, following a meeting between the two in Vienna in May. A day later, on Sept. 18, Secretary of State Antony Blinken met PRC Vice President Han Zheng on the [margins of the 78th UN General Assembly](#) in New York City. Earlier this summer, Blinken traveled to Beijing as had the Treasury and Commerce secretaries as well as special climate envoy, John Kerry. On Oct. 9, a delegation of six US senators led by Majority Leader Charles Schumer held a detailed and [“gratifying” 80-minute meeting](#) with President Xi. The first congressional delegation in four years to pay a visit, its bipartisan composition had the added virtue of softening the political ground for Biden's anticipated engagement of Xi in San Francisco. On Oct. 27, Foreign Minister Wang paid a return visit to Washington, meeting Secretary Blinken and NSA Sullivan as well as [dropping by the White House](#) to greet Biden. In the days prior to and after the Wang visit, a slew of working group meetings and consultations

were conducted, either virtually or in Washington.



Figure 1 US President Joe Biden receives Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the White House on October 27. Photo: Xinhua

On Oct. 23 and 25, the first meetings of the US Treasury Department and China's Ministry of Finance-led [Economic Working Group \(EWG\)](#) and [Financial Working Group \(FWG\)](#) took place. On Oct. 30, the US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim and the Chinese Special Representatives on Korean Peninsula Affairs Liu Xiaoming [exchanged views](#) on the situation on the peninsula. On Nov. 3, Director-General of the foreign ministry's Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs Hong Liang and US State Department China Coordinator Mark Lambert met to discuss maritime issues. On Nov. 7, US Assistant Secretary of State Mallory Stewart met Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General of Arms Control Sun Xiaobo to discuss nuclear arms control. A proposal to [exchange missile launch notifications](#) was broached during the meeting. The proposal comes against the backdrop of the US' forthcoming regional [deployment of new ground-based launch system](#) capable of firing intermediate range missiles as well as the People's Republic's [faster-than-anticipated build-up](#) of its nuclear arsenal. The Pentagon has [sought a moratorium](#) on fissile material production or, at a minimum, transparency in this regard from China.

On Nov. 10, Vice Premier He Lifeng met US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen to discuss bilateral as well as global financial and development challenges (the [two sides co-chair](#) the G20 Sustainable Finance Working Group). On Nov. 14, Chinese and US climate envoys Xie Zhenhua and John Kerry [released a \(rare\) joint statement](#) committing both countries to deeper cooperation on methane reductions, in time for

the upcoming COP28 Summit in Dubai. It bears remembering that an earlier Obama-Xi joint announcement on climate change cooperation in November 2014 was a key lubricant to the adoption of the landmark Paris Agreement in December 2015. Earlier, on Oct. 25, the PRC's National Development and Reform Commission and the State of California [signed an MoU](#) on strengthening cooperation on low-carbon development during Gov. [Gavin Newsom's trip](#) to Beijing. Finally, on Nov. 16, a day after the Biden-Xi meeting, China's Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao and US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo [reviewed the progress](#) made under their commercial issues working group established in August.

For a relationship lacking basic communication—much less trust—at the senior officials' level for much of the first two-and-a-half years of the Biden presidency, the past six months have been a veritable gabfest by comparison.

Advancing Cooperation, Emplacing “Guardrails,” Managing Competition

On Nov. 15, 2023, at the Filoli Estate, a grand country house and garden set on rolling green grounds in Woodside, California just north of the Stanford University campus, President Biden and President Xi held their second in-person and seventh meeting of the past three years. Per Biden, it was the [most constructive of his seven meetings](#). The Chinese side was just as pleased, with Foreign Minister Wang characterizing the meeting as [“very good, comprehensive and in-depth.”](#) The meeting was notable on four counts.



Figure 2 President Joe Biden hosts a lunch for President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping on Nov. 15, 2023, at the Filoli Estate in Woodside, California. Photo: Adam Schultz

First, the Woodside meeting consolidated the “guardrails”-building process that was [initiated by the two leaders in Bali](#) in November 2022. In Bali, the two sides re-established a baseline of in-person, leader-led communication and provided a measure of strategic reassurance that lowered their respective levels of mistrust. In Woodside, both sides reaffirmed their Bali assurances. [President Biden reemphasized](#) that the US does not seek a new Cold War; does not seek to change China's system; the revitalization of its alliances is not directed at China; does not support Taiwan independence; and does not seek conflict with China. For his part, [Xi reiterated](#) that China does not seek hegemony with its growing strength or seek to change the existing international order; does not interfere in America's internal affairs or export its ideology; and has no plans to surpass or unseat the US. However incredulous some of these assurances might appear, they offer a steady framework for future-oriented ties.

Second, President Biden won a commitment from Xi that if “either one of us...pick[s] up the phone, [and] call[s] directly...[we'd be heard immediately.](#)” In the immediate aftermath of the balloon incident in February, Xi [had refused to entertain](#) a call from the US president. More to the point, the US and China lack high-level, civilian-led crisis management channels and there is little mutual familiarity among senior leadership on talking down and defusing a crisis. A direct presidential line of communication could be a precursor to a broader civilian-led US-PRC crisis management framework.

Third, in Woodside, neither side pulled their punches on matters of fundamental discord. From the get-go, Biden emphasized that the two nations [were engaged in competition](#) and that it was a bilateral responsibility to “prevent [competition] from veering into conflict, confrontation, or a new Cold War.” Xi was equally adamant in rejecting the negative overarching framing of the relationship, pointing out that the US side needed to develop the “right perception” and “carefully think about the fundamental question of whether [the two sides] are partners or rivals, and [make the right historical choice.](#)” Xi was just as pointed in his criticism of US export controls, investment screening and unilateral sanctions which he likened to “nothing but a move to contain China...and [deprive the Chinese people](#) of their right to development.” The US tariffs and discriminatory environment for Chinese

businesses, rather than “de-risking” supply chains, had “ensu[ed] uncertainty ... [and had itself] [become the biggest risk](#).” Biden flatly rejected this characterization, noting that while the US does not seek to decouple from China or suppress its development, Beijing’s unfair economic practices, from non-market tools to barriers to access for foreign firms to coercive actions against US companies, had “[disadvantaged American businesses and workers](#).” Preventing advanced technologies [from being used to undermine](#) US national security was non-negotiable, too. On the Taiwan question, Biden stressed the world’s interest in the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and respect for the self-governing island’s electoral processes while Xi retorted that while keeping the peace was “all well and good...at some point we [need to move towards resolution](#) [by supporting peaceful reunification] more generally.”

Finally, the two sides seized the “window of opportunity” that had opened late-summer following the visits to Beijing by a number of Cabinet secretaries to lock down a couple of practical, albeit modest, outcomes on a number of fronts.

Restarting Mil-Mil Communications

In Woodside, China agreed to [drop its suspension of high-level mil-mil contacts](#) at the defense ministers’ level and across some of the institutionalized dialogue mechanisms. These include the Defense Policy Coordination Talks (DPCT), an annual deputy assistant secretary level policy dialogue and the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) talks, an operational safety dialogue between US INDOPACOM and PLA naval and air forces. Until the MMCA’s suspension by Beijing in August 2022 to protest Speaker Pelosi’s visit to Taipei, the two sides [had met regularly](#) since 1998. The fate of the Asia-Pacific Security Dialogue (APSD), an assistant secretary-level policy dialogue suspended since 2020, and the Crisis Communications Working Group (CCWG) meeting, a working-level policy dialogue established in 2020 to advance crisis prevention and management mechanisms, remain unclear.

Trendlines on engagement are positive. In late-October, the China country director in the DoD undersecretary’s office [attended the Xiangshan Forum](#) in Beijing, [followed by a meeting](#) between Deputy Assistant Secretary of

Defense for China Michael Chase and the Chinese defense attaché in Washington Liu Zhan. On Dec. 21, in the wake of the Biden-Xi summit, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Charles Q. Brown Jr. [spoke over video call](#) with his counterpart Gen. Liu Zhenli. It is only a matter of time before the two defense ministers speak now that Beijing has newly [appointed a non-US sanctioned veteran](#), ex-Navy chief Adm. Dong Jun, as its new defense minister. The expectation is that the PLA’s [risky and unsafe operational behavior](#) against US and allied aircraft will also now be progressively reined in. These include lasing (i.e., the use of military-grade lasers against a target), reckless maneuvers (i.e., maritime bow crossings and barrel rolls and acrobatics close to aircraft), close approaches in the air or at sea, high rates of closure (i.e., rapid approaches), and discharging objects (i.e., chaff or flares) in front of or close to aircraft, etc. As per US Indo-Pacific Command head Adm. John Aquilino, the early signs on the unsafe encounters front [are already promising](#).



Figure 3 President Biden hosts a bilateral meeting with President of PRC Xi Jinping, Nov. 15, 2023, at the Filoli Estate in Woodside, California. Photo: White House

Counternarcotics Cooperation

In Woodside, the US agreed to delist the Chinese Ministry of Public Security’s Institute of Forensic Science (IFS) from its Entity List, as part of an arrangement to establish a counternarcotics working group and effectuate concrete actions to stem the flow of fentanyl precursor chemicals into the US. In June, Secretary Blinken had been given an earful in Beijing on his demand for action against Chinese suppliers of fentanyl precursors. This, his hosts claimed, amounted to “[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 US has yet to do so despite being the largest consumer of the opioid. For now, both sides appear to be keeping to their obligations. On Nov. 16, in the rarest-of-rare case of an adversary state entity [being delisted](#) without any change in the underlying reasons for its blacklisting, the US Commerce Department [removed the IFS](#) from the Entity List (IFS was blacklisted in 2020 [for DNA dataset-based mass surveillance](#) and social control campaigns against Uyghur and other ethnic minorities). For its part, China has [taken concrete action](#) against synthetic drug and chemical precursor suppliers, as per the Commerce Department's Assistant Secretary for Export Enforcement Matthew Axelrod. For the first time in nearly three years, Beijing is also reporting incidents to the International Narcotics Control Board database, used by law enforcement authorities to track down and intercept shipments. Separately, in early October, the US Justice Department and the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) had [announced measures against China-based networks](#) of illicit drug producers.

Cooperative Rulemaking on AI

Biden and Xi agreed to convene a US-China working group to [address the risks](#) of advanced AI systems to national security. The working group's aim is to [establish certain rules-of-the-road](#) to ensure that unsupervised AI is not allowed to dictate command-and-control of critical weapon systems, particularly those related to the use of a nuclear weapon. Regulating the use of AI in fully autonomous weaponry is another proposed focus area. The cooperative effort coincides with the activist effort by both governments to control the potential national security, economic security, and public health dangers of AI. On Oct. 30, the administration [issued an extensive executive order](#) which, both tasks the Defense Department to flesh out the role of—and harms from—AI for US national security as well as compels businesses developing AI models that pose security risks to notify the government when training these systems and to share their safety test results. The PRC government too has proposed stringent rules to control the technology, starting with a December 2021 [Position Paper on Regulating Military Applications of AI](#). Both countries were among a handful of countries attending the [AI](#)

[Safety Summit](#) convened by the UK government Nov. 1–2 in Bletchley Park (the top-secret home of allied World War II codebreakers) to confront the technology's existential risks.



Figure 4 Attendees at the AI Safety Summit in Bletchley Park, Milton Keynes, England, Wednesday, November 1, 2023. Photo: Alastair Grant

Expanded People-to-People Exchanges

Both countries committed to work toward a [doubling of scheduled passenger flights](#) in early 2024. In April 2023, the number of direct flights per week between the US and China stood at a mere 12; on Oct. 29, it doubled to 24, and currently is 70—a far cry from the 345 direct flights per week pre-COVID, three-and-a-half years ago. No US carrier flies from the East Coast directly to Beijing yet. The key stumbling block to doubling the number of direct flights is the US Department of Transportation's proviso that any increase in Chinese passenger flights must [abide by](#) reciprocity and level playing field considerations—meaning that Chinese carriers' flight paths, like their US counterparts, must avoid overflying Russian airspace. On a separate note, President Xi pledged to [invite 50,000 young Americans](#) to China on exchange and study programs over the next five years during a dinner speech in San Francisco. The promise of gifting a panda, that furry envoy of friendship, was also [implicitly dangled](#) to the San Diego Zoo.

Measures and Countermeasures Strew the Pathway to “Selective Decoupling”

The Biden-Xi meeting in Woodside, two dozen-or-so miles southeast of San Francisco, was the dominating headline of US-PRC relations in 2023. It failed to deflect the relationship from its dominant underlying strain—the steady selective decoupling of the two economies across a range of advanced

technologies and frontier industries (microelectronics; quantum; AI; biomanufacturing; clean energy). Both sides enforced strategic trade controls during the final trimester of 2023, with Beijing—having digested tidal wave upon tidal wave of US technology denial measures—imposing countermeasures at a rapid clip, too.

On Sept. 6, the US Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) [added 42 Chinese companies](#) to its Entity List for supplying US-origin integrated circuits, including those used in precision guidance systems for missiles and drones to Russian intermediaries for use in Ukraine. Placement of an “adversary” country party on the Entity List subjects that party, more-or-less, to a (license) presumption of denial for purchases of US origin or US-content items or equipment. On Oct. 17, key Chinese AI companies, including fabless chip design company Biren Technology and GPU-maker Biren Threads were added to the Entity List for [aiding the AI capabilities](#) of China's military and high-tech surveillance sector. Also on Oct. 17, BIS [updated and strengthened](#) its already-expansive Oct. 2022 *Advanced Computing and Semiconductor Manufacturing Items Rule* to include additional types of semiconductor manufacturing equipment within the controls, introduce new technical parameters to prevent workarounds from prior chip performance-related thresholds, and widen the scope of destination controls. The Oct. 2022 rule had targeted semiconductor fabrication technologies beyond the cutting edge as well as radically expanded controls over US content embedded in foreign-produced equipment destined for China, such as in lithography equipment. The updated and strengthened October 2023 *Advanced Computing Rule* came with a [sting in the tail](#): it was to take effect immediately. Typically, BIS export control orders come with a 30-day grace period, enabling rush deliveries of certain prized items from previously placed orders.

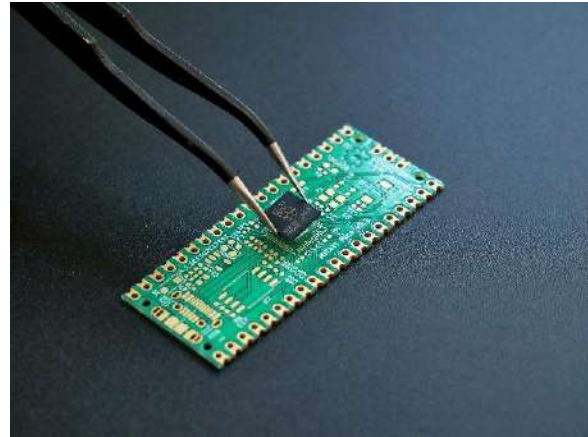


Figure 5 An RP2040 microcontroller held with a tweezer above a printed circuit board. Credit:: UnSplash, CC4.0

On Dec. 8, three Chinese companies were added to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) Entity List for [recruitment and labor transfers of persecuted minorities](#) from Xinjiang (an updated Xinjiang supply chain [business advisory](#) and scathing Uyghur [human rights report](#) were issued too). And on Dec. 19, a dozen Chinese companies were [added to the Unverified List \(UVL\)](#), which catalogues entities where BIS has been unable to conduct end-use checks and verify that an exported US technology or good is being put to its legitimate use. Looking ahead, it is anticipated that tariffs will be imposed on legacy chips imported from China in 2024, now that the Commerce Department has [announced the launch](#) of an industrial base survey of the US semiconductor supply chain. The aim is to preempt China's overproduction and supply dominance of the lower reaches of the US semiconductor market. The industrial base survey follows an [initial survey of the capabilities and challenges](#) faced by the domestic industry.

China did not sit still during this period either. On Oct.10, China's [Ministry of Commerce announced restrictions](#) on the export of several categories of high-purity natural and synthetic graphite materials vital to the clean tech and electric vehicle (EV) industries, starting Dec. 1. In late-December, [a ban](#) was issued on the export of technologies used in rare earth extraction and separation too. The restrictions on graphite have past form. In 2020, Beijing stopped approving export licenses for synthetic graphite to Swedish companies, making it difficult for them to build up graphite anode production needed for the local battery supply

chain. To [fill the ensuing vacuum](#), a Chinese battery-materials supplier, Putailai New Energy Technology, announced plans in May 2023 to build Europe's largest anode factory in Sweden. Beijing's strategy in this era of supply chain resilience and selective decoupling appears to be two-fold: leverage its market power to incentive/coerce (via the export controls route) local production of high value-added elements on Chinese soil; or failing which, greenlight the production overseas of goods embodying these technologies on condition that production is carried out by Chinese subsidiaries that retain effective control over these technologies. The omission of several manufacturing technologies for solar cells from the latest [Catalogue of Technologies Prohibited and Restricted from Export](#) so as not to preclude the planned capacity expansions overseas by a number of Chinese solar firms, falls within the latter typology.

Turning to the PRC's Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law, Beijing sanctioned a data analytics firm, Kharon, and two researchers in late-December for providing "[so-called evidence](#)" for America's [Xinjiang-based Uyghur minorities-related] sanctions. Under the sanctions, all assets in China are to be frozen, entry banned, and organizations and individuals in China forbidden to transact with these banned entities or persons. The [Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law of June 2021](#) has increasingly become the workhorse of the PRC's sanctions policy, utilized to express (mostly hollow) displeasure with US-based entities or individuals ranging from the Hudson Institute and the Reagan Presidential Library to Congresspersons Nancy Pelosi and Michael McCaul to ex-administration appointees Michael Pompeo and Steve Bannon to the researchers, now, at Kharon. And earlier this September, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, the permanent body of China's national legislature, adopted a new [Foreign Sovereign Immunity Law](#) that [does away with absolute state immunity](#) from local jurisdiction in favor of a more limited version in certain instances (while engaging in business activities; obtaining labor services; or contributing to personal injury, death or property loss on Chinese soil).

That said, it was not all downhill on the export controls and tech denials front. Both, the US and China bowed to the market mechanism during their respective economic rulemaking, even as

they tried to nudge its workings via the discretionary hand of the state.

On Dec. 1, the US Energy Department released its proposed "foreign entity of concern" guidance regarding critical minerals and battery components, as part of rulemaking for the Inflation Reduction Act's EV subsidy provisions. The interpretation was curiously lax. As per the [proposed rule](#), a US company will be able to enter into a contractual relationship, including an IP licensing relationship, with a "foreign entity of concern" (read: Chinese entity) so long as the "foreign entity of concern" does not exert "effective control" over the US licensee or principal's production of particular critical minerals, battery components, or battery materials. The provision is a bow to the reality of China's dominant position within EV critical minerals and battery components supply chains. As written, Ford Motors should handily be able to contractually license Chinese battery giant CATL's technology for its EV plant in Michigan (an arrangement that has [drawn anger](#) on Capitol Hill) and maintain access to the IRA subsidy money pot.

On Sept. 22, two-and-a-half months earlier by contrast, the Commerce Department issued its [final rule](#) to prevent the improper use of CHIPS Act funding that could directly or indirectly benefit adversary countries as well as foreign entities of concern. As per the rule's guardrails, US and foreign (Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese) chip companies that receive CHIPS Act subsidies are prohibited from engaging in "significant transactions" involving the "material expansion" of their semiconductor facilities in "foreign countries of concern" (China) for 10 years as well as are prohibited from entering any meaningful joint research or technology licensing arrangements with "foreign entities of concern" (Chinese entities). Reflecting the US' overwhelming upstream dominance within semiconductor supply chains, the bar for "significant transactions" (valued at \$100,000) and "material expansion" (by anything more than 5% for advanced chips and 10% for legacy chips) was deliberately kept low, and meaningful technology licensing barred altogether.

China was just as attentive too, to considerations of leverage and market power, [lifting some of the curbs](#) that it had imposed earlier this summer on the export of gallium and germanium, minerals key to the production of

semiconductors, following the lack of significant movement in the prices of these minerals. In the afterglow of the Biden-Xi summit, its anti-trust regulator, the State Administration for Market Regulation (SAMR), [greenlighted](#) US tech giant Broadcom's acquisition of cloud software company VMware, subject to standard mitigation requirements. It bears remembering that just this August, when US-PRC relations were unhappier, SAMR had let the clock expire on Intel's bid to acquire the Israeli chip manufacturer, Tower Semiconductor.

Looming Shadow of the US Presidential Contest

The consensus that was forged in Bali and the progress consolidated in Woodside may yet come to be seen as an inflection point in US-China relations. Should Biden secure re-election in 2024, the consolidation of ties could serve as a useful jumping-off point to construct a durable architecture of candid but constructive coexistence in the mid-2020s in this "new normal" era of US-PRC strategic competition. At minimum, the establishment of the numerous working groups, including the Economic Working Group, the Financial Working Group, the Commerce Working Group, the Counternarcotics Working Group, the Working Group on AI as well as the restart of the institutionalized defense dialogue mechanisms, should ensure an almost full plate of across-the-board consultations in 2024 (the lack of engagement on the tit-for-tat tariff hikes is the glaring exception). These lines of communication could come in handy to troubleshoot irritants that will likely crop up in what is expected to be a raucous US election year. Both sides are also due to [commence negotiations](#) on their bilateral [Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement \(STA\)](#) in early-2024. Last renewed in 2018 and [temporarily extended](#) for six months in August 2023, there are no illusions that the STA can be modernized and renewed prior to its end-February 2024 deadline. There are reasons to believe though that the agreement will be temporarily extended for six-month intervals through 2024 while negotiations continue. Even in this age of decoupling, Beijing and Washington are [each other's top scientific partners](#), and collaborative research between Chinese and US nationals remains a standout feature among the [most-cited academic papers](#).

Looming over the rehabilitation of US-PRC ties is the US presidential election. China policy remains that rare issue area which commands bipartisan consensus within the Beltway and beyond (although there are differences in nuance between the parties). The test of the "guardrails" that Biden and Xi have assiduously emplaced over the past six months is whether they will survive bruising contact with US election-year polemics in 2024.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-CHINA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2023

Sept. 3, 2023: US President Joe Biden [says](#) he is “disappointed” that Chinese President Xi Jinping will not attend the 18th G20 Summit, but said that he is “going to get to see” the Chinese president, presumably, later in the year.

Sept. 4, 2023: US Navy destroyer *USS Ralph Johnson* (DDG 114) [conducts](#) a “bilateral sail” with Philippine Navy guided-missile frigate *BRP Jose Rizal* (FF-150) in the South China Sea “to enhance the interoperability between the two navies.”

Sept. 6, 2023: US Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) [adds](#) 42 Chinese companies to its Entity List, effective Oct. 6, for supplying US-origin integrated circuits to Russian intermediaries and end-users.

Sept. 7, 2023: US Vice President Kamala Harris [attends](#) the East Asia Summit in Jakarta, Indonesia, where she “emphasized that freedom of navigation and overflight must be respected in the East China Sea and South China Sea” and “reaffirmed US support for the 2016 UN arbitral tribunal ruling and noted this ruling is final and legally binding.”

Sept. 9, 2023: US Navy destroyer *USS Ralph Johnson* (DDG 114) and Royal Canadian Navy frigate *HMCS Ottawa* (FFH 341) [conduct](#) “a routine Taiwan Strait transit...through waters where high-seas freedoms of navigation and overflight apply in accordance with international law.”

Sept. 9–10, 2023: President Biden attends the 18th G20 Summit and [talks](#) to PRC [Premier](#) Li Qiang on the margins of the summit.

Sept. 12, 2023: Department of Defense [releases](#) its 2023 Cyber Strategy Summary in which the

PRC is listed as the first among several state and non-state actors in a “contested cyberspace.”

Sept. 12, 2023: US Navy destroyer *USS Ralph Johnson* (DDG 114) and Royal Canadian Navy frigate *HMCS Ottawa* (FFH 341) [operate](#) in the South China Sea as part of a joint exercise.

Sept. 17, 2023: US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [meets](#) Chinese Communist Party Politburo Member, Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission, and Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#) in Malta.

Sept. 18, 2023: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets PRC Vice President Han Zheng on the sidelines of the 78th United Nations General Assembly in New York City.

Sept. 19, 2023: President Biden [delivers](#) remarks to the 78th session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), and reiterates that the US seeks to “responsibly manage the competition between our countries so it does not tip into conflict” and seeks “de-risking, not decoupling with China.”

Sept. 19, 2023: US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry [meets](#) PRC Vice President Han Zheng on the margins of the 78th UNGA, where the two sides “discussed the critical importance of bilateral and multilateral efforts to address the climate crisis, including to promote a successful COP 28.”

Sept. 21, 2023: US Assistant Secretary of Defense Ely Ratner [tells](#) the House Armed Services Committee that the Department of Defense is working with other US agencies and US “allies and friends” to “strengthen deterrence across the Taiwan Strait.”

Sept. 22, 2023: US and [China](#) [launch](#) an Economic Working Group and a Financial Working Group that will report directly to

Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen and Vice Premier He Lifeng.

Sept. 22, 2023: Defense officials from the US and the PRC [hold](#) a hybrid in-person and virtual meeting to discuss the Department's recently released 2023 DOD Cyber Strategy Unclassified Summary and to engage in "substantive discussion on a range of cyber-related topics."

Sept. 22, 2023: US Department of Commerce [releases](#) the final rule implementing the national security guardrails of the CHIPS and Science Act, including the rules that prohibit recipients of CHIPS funds from materially expanding semiconductor manufacturing capacity in China.

Sept. 25, 2023: Department of Commerce's BIS [adds](#) 11 entities based in China to the Entity List for national security concerns, including implication in "a conspiracy to violate US export controls."

Sept. 26, 2023: Department of State, together with the departments of the Treasury, Commerce, Homeland Security, and Labor and the Office of the US Trade Representative, [issues](#) an Addendum to the 2021 Updated Xinjiang Supply Chain Business Advisory to "call attention to the People's Republic of China's (PRC) ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and the evidence of widespread use of forced labor there."

Sept. 27, 2023: US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, National Security Agency, and Federal Bureau of Investigation, joined by Japan National Police Agency and Japan National Center of Incident Readiness and Strategy for Cybersecurity, [publish](#) a "Joint Cybersecurity Advisory" about "malicious activity by People's Republic of China (PRC)-linked cyber actors known as BlackTech."

Sept. 28, 2023: Department of State's Global Engagement Center [releases](#) a special report on

"How the People's Republic of China Seeks to Reshape the Global Information Environment."

Sept. 29, 2023: Department of State [introduces](#) new China Coordinator and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for China and Taiwan, Mark Lambert, who is to "oversee the Office of China Coordination and the Office of Taiwan Coordination in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs."

Oct. 3, 2023: Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [sanctions](#) 28 individuals and entities involved with the manufacture and distribution of fentanyl, methamphetamine, and MDMA precursors. Alongside, the Department of Justice [announces](#) eight indictments charging China-based companies and their employees with "crimes relating to fentanyl and methamphetamine production, distribution of synthetic opioids, and sales resulting from precursor chemicals."

Oct. 9, 2023: [US](#) Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, leading a bipartisan Senate delegation team, meets [Chinese](#) President Xi Jinping in Beijing.

Oct. 10, 2023: China's Ministry of Commerce [announces](#) restrictions, starting Dec. 1, on the export of several categories of high-purity natural and synthetic graphite materials vital to the clean tech and electric vehicle (EV) industries.

Oct. 12, 2023: US Navy P-8A *Poseidon* aircraft [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait in international airspace to "demonstrate the United States" commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific."

Oct. 17, 2023: Department of Commerce's BIS [adds](#) 13 Chinese companies to the Entity List for aiding the AI capabilities of China's military and high-tech surveillance sector and, thus, "acting contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States."

Oct. 17, 2023: Department of Commerce's BIS [tightens](#) export controls on advanced semiconductor and manufacturing equipment as well as supercomputing items to China.

Oct. 17, 2023: Department of Defense [releases](#) "a collection of declassified images and videos depicting 15 recent cases of coercive and risky operational behavior by the PLA against US aircraft operating lawfully in international airspace in the East and South China Sea regions."

Oct. 19, 2023: Department of Defense [releases](#) its annual report on "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China."

Oct. 22, 2023: Department of State [releases](#) a statement on "US Support for our Philippine Allies in the Face of Repeated PRC Harassment in the South China Sea."

Oct. 23, 2023: US and PRC [hold](#) first meeting of the Economic Working Group, "which serves as an ongoing channel to discuss and facilitate progress on bilateral economic policy matters."

Oct. 25, 2023: US and PRC [hold](#) first meeting of the Financial Working Group, "which serves as an ongoing channel for both countries to discuss financial policy matters and cooperation on common challenges."

Oct. 25, 2023: California Gov. Gavin Newsom [meets Chinese President](#) Xi in Beijing. Newsom, joined by US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns, also meets China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Vice President Han Zheng and [signs](#) a new climate-focused Memorandum of Understanding with National Development and Reform Commission Chairman Zheng Shanjie.

Oct. 26, 2023: US Indo-Pacific Command [releases](#) a statement saying that "a People's Republic of China J-11 pilot executed an unsafe intercept of a US Air Force B-52 aircraft" on Oct. 24, 2023 while the latter was "lawfully

conducting routine operations over the South China Sea in international airspace."

Oct. 26-27, 2023: Secretary of State Blinken [meets PRC](#) Foreign Minister Wang in Washington "as part of ongoing efforts to maintain open lines of communication on a full range of issues."

Oct. 27, 2023: President Biden [meets China's](#) Foreign Minister Wang Yi in the White House, and conveys his condolences on the passing of former Premier Li Keqiang.

Oct. 29, 2023: Department of Defense's principal director for China, Taiwan, and Mongolia Xanthi Carras [attends](#) the 10th Xiangshan Forum in Beijing, with a view to restarting direct military-to-military contact between the US and PRC.

Nov. 1, 2023: Destroyer from the US Navy 7th Fleet and a frigate from the Royal Canadian Navy jointly [conduct](#) a "routine Taiwan Strait transit through waters where high-seas freedoms of navigation and overflight apply in accordance with international law."

Nov. 1-2, 2023: Government representatives from the US and China [attend](#) the AI Safety Summit convened by the UK in Bletchley Park and are listed as participants who adhere to The Bletchley Declaration.

Nov. 2, 2023: Speaking at an Asia Society event, Secretary of the Treasury Yellen [delivers](#) remarks on the "Biden Administration's Economic Approach Toward the Indo-Pacific" in which she reiterated how "the United States does not seek to decouple from China."

Nov. 3, 2023: [US](#) Department of State China Coordinator and Deputy Assistant Secretary for China and Taiwan Mark Lambert holds "substantive, constructive, and candid discussions on a range of maritime issues" with [China's](#) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General for Boundary and Ocean Affairs Hong Liang.

Nov. 3, 2023: US Navy destroyer USS Dewey [conducts](#) a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea near the Spratly Islands.

Nov. 4-7, 2023: US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate Kerry and [China's](#) Special Envoy for Climate Change Xie Zhenhua [meet](#) at Sunnylands, California, where they sign the Sunnylands Agreement on “Enhancing Cooperation to Address the Climate Crisis.” (The statement was released by the US on Nov. 14, 2023, local time and by China on Nov. 15, 2023, local time.)

Nov. 6, 2023: Special Advisor on International Disability Rights Sara Minkara and Department of Labor Assistant Secretary for Disability Employment Policy Taryn Williams [meet](#) the China Disabled Persons’ Federation (CDPF) to resume the US-China Coordination Meeting on Disability.

Nov. 6, 2023: Ambassador to the PRC Nicholas Burns [leads](#) the first official US representation at the China International Import Expo in Shanghai.

Nov. 7, 2023: Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance Mallory Stewart [meets PRC](#) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General of Arms Control Sun Xiaobo and holds “a candid and in-depth discussion on issues related to arms control and nonproliferation.”

Nov. 7, 2023: It is [reported](#) that the office of Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin made a formal request to meet with Austin’s Chinese counterpart on the sidelines of the upcoming ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM+) in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Nov. 9-10, 2023: Secretary of the Treasury Yellen and PR [China](#) Vice Premier He [meet](#) in San Francisco where they hold “candid, direct, and productive discussions on the US-China bilateral economic relationship and a wide range of issues.”

Nov. 12, 2023: In a news [interview](#) with CBS’ “Face the Nation,” White House National Security Adviser Sullivan says that reestablishing US-China military ties “has been a priority for President Biden” so as to reduce “miscalculations” and secure US national security interests.

Nov. 14, 2023: US Presidential Climate Envoy Kerry and Chinese counterpart Xie Zhenhua jointly [release](#) the “Sunnylands Statement on Enhancing Cooperation to Address the Climate Crisis,” committing both countries to deeper cooperation on methane reductions.

Nov. 15, 2023: President Biden and [Chinese](#) President Xi [have](#) a “candid,” “in-depth,” and “constructive” conversation on the bilateral relationship and a range of global issues in Woodside, CA. They agree to promote and strengthen bilateral dialogue and cooperation in areas AI and counternarcotics; resume high-level communication between the two militaries; and work toward a significant further increase in scheduled passenger flights, among others.

Nov. 16, 2023: President Biden provides remarks and [holds](#) a press conference following the conclusion of meetings with President Xi in which he details the main accomplishments and outcomes of the “candid,” “constructive and productive” bilateral meetings.

Nov. 16, 2023: President Xi [delivers](#) a speech at a welcome dinner by friendly organizations in the US, where he champions people-to-people ties as the foundation of China-US relations.

Nov. 16, 2023: China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi [gives](#) a readout on the significance and features of the Xi-Biden meeting to the press, in which he describes the meeting as strategic and historic as well as one that provides stewardship.

Nov. 16, 2023: Secretary of Commerce Raimondo and [China's](#) Minister of Commerce

Wang Wentao [hold](#) first ministerial meeting following the Xi-Biden meeting in California and conduct “pragmatic, constructive and fruitful communication on China-US economic and trade relations and economic and trade issues of common concern.”

Nov. 16, 2023: US Vice-President Kamala Harris [meets](#) President Marcos of the Philippines during which she “reiterated the United States stands shoulder-to-shoulder in defending the Philippines’ sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the South China Sea” and reaffirmed the United States’ defense commitment under the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty.

Nov. 17, 2023: President Biden [states](#) in his remarks at the APEC Leaders Retreat Meeting in San Francisco how he and President Xi had a brief discussion during their in-person meeting a few days before about the “impact of artificial intelligence and how we have to work on it.”

Nov. 17, 2023: Department of Commerce’s BIS [announces](#) that it has removed the Ministry of Public Security’s Institute of Forensic Science of China from the Entity List.

Nov. 21, 2023: Broadcom and VMware [announce](#) that they intend to close the former’s acquisition of the latter after receiving all required regulatory approvals, including the final one outstanding from China’s anti-trust regulator, the State Administration for Market Regulation.

Nov. 25, 2023: US Navy destroyer *USS Hopper* [conducts](#) a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea near the Paracel Islands.

Nov. 29, 2023: In a press briefing for the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC (COP28), US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate Kerry [highlights](#) the importance of the US-China partnership to fight the climate crisis and deliver progress at COP28.

Dec. 1, 2023: Department of Commerce [releases](#)

two [proposed](#) guidance on electric vehicle tax credits under the US Inflation Reduction Act to prohibit tax credit recipients from manufacturing battery components or extracting critical minerals in China.

Dec. 5, 2023: China’s Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#) goes to the [US](#) Embassy in China to mourn the passing of former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Dec. 6, 2023: US Navy *P-8A Poseidon* [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait in international airspace.

Dec. 6, 2023: Leaders of the Group of Seven (G7) [meet](#) virtually and release a Leaders’ Statement which says the G7 “stand prepared to build constructive and stable relations with China” but remain committed to “push for a level playing field” for workers and companies and remain “seriously concerned” about the situation in the East and South China Seas.

Dec. 6, 2023: [US](#) Secretary of State Blinken and [China’s](#) Foreign Minister Wang Yi have a phone call at the former’s request.

Dec. 8, 2023: Department of Homeland Security [designates](#) three additional PRC-based companies to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act Entity List.

Dec. 8, 2023: Department of State’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor [releases](#) a report to Congress on the Imposition of Sanctions Pursuant to the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, as is required by Section 6(a) of the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020.

Dec. 10, 2023: Noting that Chinese ships “employed water cannons and reckless maneuvers” near Second Thomas Shoal, the Department of State [releases](#) a press statement to show “support for the Philippines in the South China Sea.”

Dec. 13, 2023: *Financial Times* releases an article [reporting](#) that Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Chase “recently” met Maj.

Gen. Liu Zhan, the PRC's defense attaché in Washington, which took place prior to the Biden-Xi summit.

Dec. 14, 2023: Secretary of the Treasury Yellen [delivers](#) remarks on the US-China economic relationship at the US-China Business Council's 50th Anniversary Dinner, and discusses the plans for the Biden administration's economic approach to China.

Dec. 15, 2023: Department of Commerce's BIS [removes](#) four Chinese companies from the Unverified List "because BIS was able to verify their bona fides."

Dec. 15, 2023: US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns [delivers](#) public remarks on US-China relations at the Brookings Institution in which he mentions, among other topics, a mutual commitment to double scheduled passenger flights between the US and China in early 2024.

Dec. 17, 2023: US [condemns](#) the prosecution of "pro-democracy advocate and media owner Jimmy Lai in Hong Kong under the PRC-imposed National Security Law."

Dec. 17, 2023: President Biden [delivers](#) a statement on the 80th Anniversary of the Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act to remember the harms resulting from the act and honor the people of Chinese heritage and their contributions to the US.

Dec. 18, 2023: Head of US Indo-Pacific Command Adm. John Aquilino [tells](#) reporters in Tokyo that, "[s]ince the [Biden-Xi] summit, those [risky and coercive plane maneuvers] seem to have stopped," also noting that "would be an incredibly positive outcome if that were to continue."

Dec. 19, 2023: Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) [adds](#) 13 PRC companies to the Unverified List "on the basis that BIS was unable to verify their bona fides."

Dec. 21, 2023: Gen. Charles Q. Brown, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, [holds](#) a video meeting with [Gen. Liu Zhenli](#), a member of the China's Central Military Commission (CMC) and chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department at the invitation, as part of the efforts to maintain open lines of military-to-military communications.

Dec. 21, 2023: Department of Commerce [announces](#) the launch of an industrial base survey of the US semiconductor supply chain to "bolster the semiconductor supply chain, promote a level playing field for legacy chip production, and reduce national security risks posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC)." The announcement follows the release of an [initial](#) survey of the capabilities and challenges faced by the US semiconductor industry in which China is readily mentioned.

Dec. 22, 2023: Department of Commerce's Assistant Secretary for Export Enforcement [testifies](#) that China has taken concrete steps to stem the flow of fentanyl precursor chemicals into the US during a House Foreign Affairs Oversight and Accountability Sub-committee hearing to review the Bureau of Industry and Security's policies and practices.

Dec. 26, 2023: Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) [extends](#) COVID-related exclusions on the Section 301 tariffs on certain Chinese imports through May 31, 2024 to "enable the[ir] orderly review," and effectively thereby pushing out further the date of conclusion of its ongoing four-year review of the Section 301 tariffs that began in May 2022.

Dec. 26, 2023: China's foreign ministry spokesperson [announces](#) Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law-based countermeasures against a US intelligence data company Kharon and two researchers for providing "so-called evidence for America's illegal sanctions related to Xinjiang," during her regular press conference.

Dec. 29, 2023: China opens the door to a conversation among defense chiefs by

[appointing](#) a non-US sanctioned former Navy commander, Adm. Dong Jun, as its new defense minister, two months after his predecessor Gen. Li Shangfu was officially sacked.



COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

US-KOREA RELATIONS

CALM IN THE STORM

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There are many metaphors about using propitious moments to prepare for an inclement future: make hay while the sun shines, the best time to fix the roof is on a clear day, strike while the iron is hot, etc. These all imply the drudgery of work: a farmer baling hay on a sunny day, a slater shingling high on a roof under a blue sky, a forger hammering inside a sweltering workshop on a breezy afternoon. In a third semester continuation of the rest of a tense, yet stable 2023, there is a sense in which both South Korea and North Korea have been following the lesson of these proverbs as they use relative calm on the Korean Peninsula to build out their respective, opposed security and defense capabilities. Another, similar proverb captures an additional element of this dynamic: if you spend your whole life waiting for the storm, you'll never enjoy the sunshine. Despite the tension on the Korean Peninsula, leaders in both Seoul and Pyongyang appear confident, even buoyant about their security and defense buildups.

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The US, as the senior partner in the US-South Korea alliance and primary antagonist for North Korea, usually focuses on the grim dynamic on the Korean Peninsula, but both South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un are seemingly *enjoying* the moments of opportunity to prepare for the coming storm, both in the sense of taking advantage of defense preparation possibilities afforded by relative calm, and in the sense of using them for domestic political benefit.

Yoon's belief in peace-through-strength, increasing domestic military capabilities, and swaggering alliance relations with the US is his primary source of political capital, given that the National Assembly is held by an opposition majority blocking most of his domestic initiatives. Foreign, defense, and security policy are even more crucial for Yoon as 2024 marks legislative general elections. If Yoon's People Power Party fails to win a majority, then he will spend his entire presidency with a hostile National Assembly actively undermining his domestic priorities. For Kim Jong Un's part, North Korea's rapidly growing military capabilities (including solid-fuel ICBM and military reconnaissance satellite successes) are developing in a favorable international context: the Russia-Ukraine war has led to upgraded Moscow-Pyongyang economic and military relations, great power competition with the US continues to incentivize Chinese economic and diplomatic support for North Korea, and the Israel-Hamas war distracts world attention from malign North Korean behavior. All this aids Kim with his most fundamental interest—maintaining a domestic system that will keep him and his family in power in perpetuity.

There is another, less sanguine interpretation of the current dynamic on the Korean Peninsula: South and North Korea are using current stability to drive forward a security dilemma, notably via an arms race likely to result in crisis. This is in no one's interest, but that is precisely the tragedy of security dilemmas. For its part, the US may understand the grim dynamic on the Korean Peninsula, but its diplomatic options for off-ramps are precluded by the behavior and nature of the Kim regime, and so Washington has moved forward with a robust development of US-South Korea allied deterrence vis-à-vis North Korea. Hence the security dilemma spiral takes yet another turn toward a stormy reckoning.

US-South Korea Relations: Shelter from the (Oncoming) Storm

The first two reporting periods of 2023 in US-South Korea relations were marked by historic events: (a) the May Biden-Yoon summit in Washington celebrating the 70th year of the alliance and deepening it via the Washington Declaration, which both modernized US extended deterrence for South Korea and expanded the alliance's scope; (b) the trilateral US-South Korea-Japan summit at Camp David in August, in which the three states formed a sort of quasi-trilateral alliance featuring a shared "commitment to consult" in case of crisis and the institution of regular joint military exercises and cooperation, *inter alia*. Much of the last four months of 2023 in US-South Korea relations was dedicated to transforming the alliance's recent commitments into concrete action.



Figure 1 President Yoon Suk Yeol of the Republic of Korea and President Joseph R. Biden Jr. of the United States met in Washington to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the U.S.-ROK Alliance. Photo: U.S. Mission Korea

In this regard, military exercises are the most visible deliverable. In September, the US and South Korea [held combined](#) naval drills, which had added urgency as they took place within the context of North Korean threats following a Russia-North Korea leader summit, as well as the earlier unveiling of a North Korean [tactical nuclear-armed submarine](#) (see the US-North Korea section). This was followed in October by US-South Korea [anti-submarine](#) exercises with advanced naval assets—part of a larger set of major combined maritime exercises—and the first-ever landing of a [US nuclear-capable B-52](#) on South Korean territory. November continued the elevated rhythm of Washington-Seoul military exercises, as [combined air drills](#) integrated B-52s with other assets around the Korean Peninsula. Also in November—shortly after North Korea apparently successfully [placed](#)

a [rudimentary](#) military reconnaissance satellite in space—the US engaged in a show of force highlighting integrated deterrence assets with a [port call](#) of the USS Carl Vinson accompanied to the region by its carrier strike group, including a nuclear-powered attack submarine that docked at the Jeju-do naval base. Finally, the US and South Korea carried out [combined air maneuvers featuring a B-1B Lancer](#) strategic (non-nuclear) bomber in mid-December as a response Pyongyang’s [launch](#) of a HWASONG-18 solid-fuel ICBM, and followed that with [live-fire army maneuvers](#) including K1 tank and Stryker brigades to end the year (even spilling over into the first week of January 2024).

Following the direction of the Washington Declaration in May, all these exercises were in addition to the normal cycle of US-South Korea combined training, which typically leads to a dyspeptic North Korean response. Indeed, the additional third trimester exercises to buttress deterrence on the Korean Peninsula gave Pyongyang the occasion to riposte with the normal fiery rhetoric threatening crisis and annihilation of the Kim regime’s adversaries. What was out of the norm was the degree to which US-South Korea military drills were augmented by trilateral US-South Korea-Japan military exercises (some of which were add-ons to the US-South Korea bilateral maneuvers). This effort—a programmatic realization of the intent outlined at the Camp David summit in August—began in early October with US-South Korea-Japan naval exercises for [interdicting North Korean](#) illicit maritime activity. Late October raised the stakes with the first ever US-South Korea-Japan [joint air exercise](#) held near the Korean Peninsula. Late November saw a [third round of trilateral exercises](#)—these once more naval in nature and including the Carl Vinson—in the wake of Pyongyang’s satellite launch vehicle (SLV) and placing of a military reconnaissance satellite in orbit (see US-North Korea section).



Figure 2 On October 22, 2023, fighter aircraft from the U.S., Japan, and the Republic of Korea conducted a trilateral escort flight accompanying a U.S. B-52H Stratofortress Bomber operating in the Indo-Pacific. Photo: U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Public Affairs

Trilateral military training is the tip of the iceberg in terms of augmenting deterrence against North Korean plans and capabilities. US-South Korea-Japan military cooperation is also evolving rapidly in the intelligence space. On Oct. 17 Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo announced the establishment of a [trilateral communication hotline](#) to deal with North Korean threats and Chinese regional assertiveness. Then in November the three states [shared information](#) on North Korea’s SLV. Finally, and potentially most importantly in the medium-term, the US, South Korea, and Japan have taken the first steps for real-time sharing of sensing data on North Korean missiles. This was already announced earlier in 2023, and [reiterated](#) in November, before finally [reaching operational status](#) in December. Washington and Seoul reported the operation of the trilateral real-time missile data sharing on Dec. 19, one day after North Korea successfully fired a solid-fuel HWASONG-18 ICBM. It is unclear if this data sharing network was utilized to track the December ICBM launch, but North Korea should worry that such shared tracking capability could, over time, lead to trilateral missile defense cooperation that would better shelter the three allies from North Korean attack, degrading the strategic value of Pyongyang’s nuclear arsenal.

The operational military level is only one part of alliance deterrence vis-à-vis North Korea—strategy and diplomacy are also crucial elements. Washington and Seoul naturally emphasized these alliance activities throughout the last part of 2023 as they built on the renewed foundations laid at the Washington and Camp David summits. Leader-level engagement to

this end was noteworthy, with Biden and Yoon meeting on multiple occasions during the September-December period, including at the [September G20](#) and [United Nations General Assembly](#) (UNGA) meetings, as well as in November at the [Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation](#) (APEC) Leaders Meeting in San Francisco.

One level down, at the senior official rank, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [visited Seoul](#) in November for talks with his counterpart, Park Jin, on US-South Korea cooperation on handling North Korea (especially in the context of greater Moscow-Pyongyang cooperation), the Russia-Ukraine war, the Israel-Hamas conflict, and other issues. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [traveled to Seoul](#) for discussions in early December, as did (with no publicity) CIA Director William Burns. The most substantive of high-level US-South Korea alliance maintenance activities during the third trimester of 2023 were the meetings of US and South Korean defense ministers and joint chiefs of staff. Already in September the allies were signaling significant updates to their joint deterrence strategy, and this came to fruition in November with the annual [Security Consultative Meeting](#) (between defense ministers) and [Military Committee Meeting](#) (between joint chiefs of staff). The readouts of these meetings mention an updated [tailored deterrence strategy](#) and a new alliance “[Defense Vision](#).” At the level of deputy national security advisor, the US and South Korea [continued to develop](#) the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), established as part of the Washington Declaration to get more buy-in and input from South Korea regarding US extended nuclear strategy for the Korean Peninsula. If the schedule holds up, the US and South Korea will establish guidelines for the planning and operation of a [shared nuclear deterrence strategy](#) by mid-2024. This NCG output was in addition to ongoing, regular meetings of the [Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation and Group](#) at the assistant secretary/deputy minister level.



Figure 3 U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, accompanied by South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin, addresses the media during a joint news conference at the foreign ministry in Seoul on Thursday, November 9, 2023. Photo: Jung Yeon-je/Pool Photo via AP

More prosaically, US officials approved a raft of military equipment procurement agreements and plans, including South Korean [purchases of additional F-35 fighter aircraft](#) (and related equipment) and [SM-6 interceptors](#), joint military [use of 5G](#), and prioritization of coordination on [production of defense goods/equipment](#). Following Pyongyang’s SLV launch, Seoul’s [partial suspension](#) of the Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA) providing stability along the military demarcation line met with approval from Washington, which qualified the response as “[prudent](#)” and “[restrained](#)” in light of North Korea’s advancing capabilities.

Beyond deterrence, warfighting, and military cooperation, alliance maintenance in other areas also gained in importance during the September-December period, as Washington-Seoul relations grew in comprehensiveness along with both the commitments of the Washington Declaration and greater global/regional political disorder. In addition to discussion at the leader and ministerial levels, US and South Korean lower-ranking senior officials crisscrossed the Pacific Ocean to discuss [economics/trade and supply chains](#), protection of [cutting-edge technology](#), the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas wars, emerging issues such as [cyber](#) and [space](#), and global challenges like [human rights](#), [climate change](#), and [HADR](#).

Arguably the two most significant topics among this list are the Russia-Ukraine war and the confluence of trade/economics and high-technology. Regarding the former, North Korea’s apparently [massive delivery](#) of

ammunition and artillery (shells and rockets) to Russia resulted in (likely) significant [Russian assistance to North Korea](#), including possibly in know-how and technology supporting the Kim regime's military satellite program. For its part, South Korea has become a major supplier of [artillery shells to Ukraine](#) (albeit via indirect pathways). As for the latter issue, Washington and Seoul worked at various official levels to overcome confusion and unease on economics/trade and technology, notably through [coordinating on IPEF](#), clarifying rules-of-origin for critical components of technology potentially qualifying for [IRA subsidies](#), and reaching an understanding on rules for technology transfers to China while providing South Korean high-tech industry predictability going forward and time to adjust its business model.

That said, the overlap of international trade, supply chains, and rules-based order within the context of US-China great power competition continues to produce friction between the US and South Korea. Washington's "de-risking" strategy vis-à-vis Beijing is spilling over as an imperative to allies and partners—such as South Korea—who have both a different trade profile with China and different assessments of the relative risks of growing or curtailing trade with China in sensitive areas (e.g., semiconductors, batteries, high-tech minerals). And there is some frustration that the US's "small garden, high wall" masks problematic protectionism of US industry. Put differently, when South Korea's incoming trade minister Cheong In-kyo [pledged to address](#) supply chain risks for certain technology goods, it is hard to avoid reckoning that, in addition to China, the US also falls into the risk column.

The final trend in US-South Korea diplomacy was its incorporation of the trilateral ethos of cooperation with Japan. Washington-Seoul coordination on important issues during the September-December period often included Japan, a reflection of both the Camp David summit commitments and the reality that a world in increasing disarray requires minilateral solutions. To this end, Biden and Yoon met Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at the [San Francisco APEC summit](#) to follow up on shared geopolitical/geostrategic priorities. Trilateral ministerial level meetings also occurred throughout the trimester. The three states' [foreign ministers](#) met in September (on the sidelines of the UNGA) and November

(sidelines of APEC) to coordinate on North Korea, the Russia-Ukraine war, and geoeconomics and technology. The November meeting allowed the Biden administration to brief counterparts on the planned Biden-Xi summit. US, South Korean, and Japanese defense ministers met in Seoul in November to discuss deepening real-time military intelligence sharing, especially for North Korean missile launches. They also established a [multiyear trilateral military exercise plan](#), taking steps to institutionalize this aspect of the trilateral relationship. In December, the three states' [national security advisors met](#) in Seoul for exchanges on geopolitical issues and North Korea. Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo officials also made the [usual condemnations](#) of North Korean malfeasance through their North Korean nuclear envoys, [assessed and criticized](#) growing Russia-North Korea arms transfers, established a [working group](#) on North Korea cyber issues, and [signed](#) a trilateral scientific research framework.

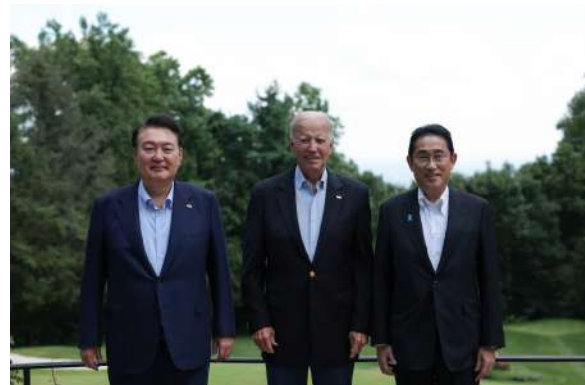


Figure 4 South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol (left) poses for a photo with U.S. President Joe Biden (center) and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida during a luncheon following a trilateral summit meeting at the Camp David presidential retreat in Maryland. Photo: Yonhap

US-North Korea Relations: Thunder Rolls

Although North Korea continued re-opening post-COVID, none of that change has redounded to the benefit of Washington-Pyongyang ties. Instead, the lack of contact and mutual recriminations that have defined the Biden administration's relations with North Korea continued in the final reporting period of 2023, but with a new emphasis: namely, concerns over growing ties between North Korea and Russia. While Pyongyang finds much fault in growing ties between the US, South Korea, and Japan, it

has been quite proactive in forging a trilateral of its own with Moscow and Beijing, and evidence of its materiel aid to Russia's war effort in Ukraine is mounting. This has caused much consternation for the Biden administration. On the one hand, at a time when US support for Ukraine has been stymied by internal political divisions, North Korean arms to Russia are apparently making a meaningful contribution to Russia's war aims. On the other hand, the US (and South Korea) is worried about what North Korea might be receiving in return (e.g., financial, food, energy, and military assistance of various kinds).

Early in the reporting period, the generally reclusive North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [traveled](#) to Moscow for a summit (focusing on both diplomatic and arms cooperation), the first between the two countries in four years. While there, he [inspected](#) a factory producing modern fighter jets in Russia's Far East, and [met](#) with Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to inspect Russia's nuclear-capable bombers. He also extended an invitation to Vladimir Putin to visit North Korea at a time "convenient" for the Russian leader. Putin accepted the offer, though the timing of the visit has not yet been confirmed.



Figure 5 North Korean leader Kim Jong Un visits an aircraft manufacturing plant in the city of Komsomolsk-on-Amur in the Khabarovsk region, Russia. Photo: Governor of Russia's Khabarovsk Krai Mikhail Degtyarev Telegram Channel via Reuters

The US responded by [warning](#) the North that it would "pay a price" for any arms deal with Russia—an ominous but vague threat, one National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said would take place "in the international community," as the North had chosen to place itself on the side of a country waging a war of aggression against a neighbor. Days later, the US

and South Korea offered a similar warning during a meeting of the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group, and noted that such cooperation constitutes a violation of UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. They also said they would discuss means of countering their cooperation on Ukraine, as well as how Russia assists the North in its development of nuclear and missile programs.

If Pyongyang was chastened by these warnings it gave no sign, [slamming](#) criticism from South Korea as "hysterical." Indeed, throughout the reporting period reports of cooperation continued to trickle out. In October, CBS [reported](#) that North Korea was sending arms to Russia following the Kim-Putin summit. That same month, the Royal United Services Institute [reported](#) that Moscow has begun large-scale shipments of ammunition via a new supply route from the North Korean port of Rajin to a Russian military facility on the Dunai, and *The Washington Post* [reported](#) that two Russian ships had made at least five round-trips between North Korea and Russia since mid-August, suggesting that arms transfers could be underway (evidence supports the belief that these transfers have continued). South Korea's intelligence service in September revealed that Moscow had suggested three-way naval exercises among Russia, North Korea, and China. Later in the reporting period, South Korean officials [said](#) North Korea might have provided Russia with short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) and portable anti-aircraft missiles, with its military later saying South Korea had [detected](#) signs of North Korea supplying ballistic missiles to Russia. Both [US](#) and open source intelligence have now confirmed that North Korean ballistic missiles (likely *Iskander*-clone SRBMs) have been used on the battlefield in Ukraine, a first for these North Korean missiles.

In response, South Korea's unification minister said that South Korea would [consider](#) "powerful" sanctions against Russia, but that these would be implemented in cooperation with the US and its partners, rather than unilaterally.

Such developments might suggest a seismic shift in the relationship between the Korean Peninsula and Russia, which has since the early days of Putin's rule sought an even-handed approach between the North and South. Whereas the Yeltsin government had shown

favoritism toward South Korea and—in Putin’s eyes, at least—lost influence because South Korea no longer had to work for their support and North Korea no longer trusted Moscow, Putin’s government had sought to “stand on two legs” in the Korean Peninsula. Hence it sought to work with both governments, endorsing sanctions on North Korea for its nuclear testing and—as many reports have noted with irony as its cooperation with the North has come to light—supporting bans on weapons trades with the rogue state. Even so, Russia—along with China—came under fire for shielding the North from the most stringent sanctions at the UNSC through its permanent member veto.

Recent interactions suggest the end of that comparative even-handedness, and increasing impunity for North Korea at the UN level. Still, one must note that North Korea has gone more than six years without testing a nuclear device; while that could end at any time, the North may not feel the need to put its partners in the awkward position of choosing between past votes on North Korean nuclear testing and the currently flourishing relationship, at least while aid continues to flow. Kim Jong Un has [said](#) that a “forward-looking” and “far-reaching” relationship with Russia will continue. Options for reining in such interactions are limited, which is why—with the US and China seemingly having built a floor for their tumultuous relationship—President Biden has been [expressing](#) concern over the North while meeting with Xi Jinping.

Other malfeasance during this time—China’s [repatriation](#) of North Koreans (who likely face torture upon their return), Pyongyang’s continued [official enshrinement](#) of its nuclear program, the new launch of an [ICBM](#), the unveiling of tactical nuclear attack submarine, suspicious activity involving the long-delayed functioning of a new [light-water reactor](#)—is worrisome, but represents mostly developments that have been telegraphed over the last few years.

Another potential watershed during the reporting period revolved around North Korean satellite launches. In late November, after [issuing](#) a sudden notice to Japan, the North [conducted](#) the launch of a spy satellite, which it had previously [defended](#) as an “indispensable strategic option” to counter the United States. Not long after the launch, the North [said](#) its spy

satellite had taken photos of US military facilities in San Diego and Japan (the quality and use value of which are highly questionable). In addition to ostensible intelligence-gathering purposes of the launch, it has been [speculated](#) that Kim Jong Un pushed ahead with the launch because of two failed attempts earlier in 2023, suggesting he worried about signaling weakness. It may also have been an opportunity to put to use the information North Korea has gotten in return for its arms transfers to Moscow; as reported in September, Putin and Kim met at a [spaceport](#) and a Russian military plane [traveled](#) to the North two weeks later. Also, when South Korea successfully [launched](#) its own satellite in early December, the lack of US criticism gave Pyongyang the chance to [hit out](#) at Washington’s supposed double-standards.

For now, considering that the North continues to [reject](#) the possibility of dialogue with the US, and says it [regards](#) the South as an enemy to confront rather than compatriots with whom to reunify (as Kim proclaimed at the end of year KWP party plenum), such activity will continue. The only foreseeable changes to the escalatory cycle would seem to be a change of government in South Korea or the US, or—much as one might not want to contemplate it—a testing miscalculation.

Conclusion: Riders on the Storm in 2024

Looking forward to 2024, South Korean relations with the US are likely to stay on the same trajectory, although there will be new personnel implementing President Yoon’s policies, as the defense minister, foreign minister, trade minister, national security advisor, and chief of the National Intelligence Service were all reshuffled during the final 2023 reporting period. Political conditions may make some policies tougher to enact, as the US (national general elections) and South Korea (National Assembly election) are holding national elections within a highly polarized political spectrum. One new area of US–South Korea cooperation will be at the UNSC, where Seoul will occupy a nonpermanent seat for the next two years (of which one year overlaps with Japan). This will afford the Yoon administration new pathways for pressuring Pyongyang by increasing scrutiny of its sanctions evasion and human rights abuses. A North–South war of words at the UN is highly likely, and one can only hope that fiery rhetoric will not turn into

kinetic firing, as Pyongyang has abrogated the entire North-South Comprehensive Military Agreement and the Northern Limit Line buffer zone, opening potential friction points between the North and the US-South Korea alliance.

Much hinges on the upcoming elections. If the South Korean opposition continues to maintain healthy majorities in the National Assembly it will not necessarily change North Korea's view of the South—the North's treatment of Moon Jae-in after the 2019 Hanoi fiasco suggests it sees Seoul as little more than a conduit to obtaining sanctions relief via Washington—but it will cast a pall over Yoon's efforts at trilateralism with the US and Japan and raise hopes for progressives to return to the Blue House in 2027.

There is a US election as well, which will determine if the Biden administration (or another Democratic Party administration) stays in power and will continue (relative to a possible Trump administration redux) a more traditional, risk-averse diplomatic approach. This distinction promises to have a significant long-/medium-term impact on US-North Korea relations, although perhaps not as immediately as one might think: Kim Jong Un surely remembers that Biden's [likely opponent](#) is the one that left him at the altar in Hanoi.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2023

Sept. 2, 2023: South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff [reports](#) that North Korea has fired several cruise missiles into the Yellow Sea.

Sept. 3, 2023: *Korean Central News Agency* [announces](#) that North Korea has conducted a drill for "simulated tactical nuclear attack."

Sept. 4, 2023: South Korea reports Russia [proposing](#) three-way naval exercises with North Korea and China.

Sept. 5, 2023: *New York Times* [reports](#) that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un may soon visit Russia for talks with Putin on an arms deal.

Sept. 5, 2023: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [arrives](#) in Indonesia to attend ASEAN summits.

Sept. 6, 2023: US [warns](#) North Korea would "pay a price" for any arms deal with Russia.

Sept. 8, 2023: North Korea [unveils](#) a new "tactical nuclear attack submarine" [designed](#) to carry out "both preemptive and retaliatory strikes" and intended to counter US and South Korean "invasion fleets."

Sept. 8, 2023: FBI [says](#) that the North Korea-linked hacking group Lazarus is responsible for the theft of \$41 million in cryptocurrency from online casino and betting platform Stake.com.

Sept. 8, 2023: President Yoon [arrives](#) in India to attend G20 summit.

Sept. 9, 2023: North Korea [holds](#) paramilitary parade to mark the 75th anniversary of the regime's founding.

Sept. 9, 2023: President Yoon and US President Joe Biden [meet](#) on margins of G20 summit.

Sept. 11, 2023: US assistant secretary of state for economic affairs to [visit](#) South Korea and Japan for talks on ways to deepen economic cooperation.

Sept. 11, 2023: South Korea [attends](#) the fifth round of negotiations on the United States-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) in Thailand.

Sept. 12, 2023: White House [urges](#) North Korea not to provide weapons to Russia.

Sept. 12, 2023: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [heads](#) to Russia for a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin amid growing concerns over military cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow.

Sept. 13, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) two short-range ballistic missiles into the East Sea in an apparent show of force ahead of its leader Kim Jong Un's summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Sept. 13, 2023: North Korean leader Kim and President Putin [meet](#) at Russia's Vostochny spaceport ahead of the summit.

Sept. 14, 2023: President Putin [accepts](#) invitation of North Korean leader Kim to visit Pyongyang.

Sept. 14, 2023: US Department of State [approves](#) a possible sale to South Korea of up to 25 F-35A radar-evading fighters and related equipment to help the East Asian ally maintain a "credible" defense capability.

Sept. 14, 2023: US [expresses](#) concern about growing defense cooperation between North Korea and Russia.

Sept. 15, 2023: North Korean leader Kim [inspects](#) factory producing modern fighter jets in Russia's Far East.

Sept. 15, 2023: South Korea and the United States [warn](#) that military cooperation between North Korea and Russia is a violation of UN Security Council resolutions.

Sept. 15, 2023: South Korea and the United States [agree](#) to cooperate in using 5G in joint military operations.

Sept. 15, 2023: South Korea and the US [hold](#) deterrence talks on North Korean nuclear threats following Kim-Putin summit.

Sept. 16, 2023: North Korean leader Kim [meets](#) Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to inspect Russia's nuclear-capable bombers.

Sept. 18, 2023: South Korea and the United States [near completion](#) of work to revise their joint deterrence strategy against evolving military threats from North Korea.

Sept. 19, 2023: President Biden [expresses](#) his appreciation to South Korea and other countries for their assistance in the return of five US citizens detained in Iran.

Sept. 19, 2023: US district court [dismisses a lawsuit](#) that a US energy firm filed to stop two South Korean state-run companies (KEPCO and KHNP) from exporting nuclear power plants, determining it is not qualified to take the move.

Sept. 20, 2023: President Yoon [meets](#) UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to discuss North Korea and Ukraine.

Sept. 20, 2023: President Biden [condemns](#) North Korea's continued violation of UNSC resolutions, but reaffirms his commitment to diplomacy to achieve the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

Sept. 20, 2023: President Yoon [meets](#) world leaders in New York for 2nd day to promote

South Korea's bid to host the 2030 World Expo in Busan.

Sept. 20, 2023: US energy firm to [appeal](#) court decision in favor of South Korean state-run companies KEPCO and KHNP over nuclear reactor exports.

Sept. 20, 2023: United States Forces Korea (USFK) service member, a South Korean, and a Filipino are [arrested](#) on charges of [smuggling drugs](#) from the US via military mail.

Sept. 20, 2023: US official [expresses](#) concerns over North Korean detainees in China who are at the risk of torture if repatriated.

Sept. 20, 2023: South Korean and US defense officials [discuss](#) possible space cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow in tabletop exercise.

Sept. 23, 2023: Top diplomats from South Korea, the United States and Japan [agree](#) to take stern measures against a potential arms deal between Russia and North Korea.

Sept. 23, 2023: US Department of Commerce [announces](#) final rule to restrict semiconductor subsidy recipients from expanding their manufacturing capacity in China.

Sept. 24, 2023: South Korean foreign minister [holds](#) a series of meetings with his counterparts from the Netherlands and others for discussions on bolstering cooperation.

Sept. 24, 2023: South Korean companies [urge](#) the US to clarify from which foreign companies they are not required to import critical electric vehicle battery minerals under the US Inflation Reduction Act.

Sept. 25, 2023: South Korea and the US [stage](#) joint naval drills in East Sea amid North Korean threats.

Sept. 25, 2023: North Korea [slams](#) President Yoon's warning against Pyongyang-Moscow military cooperation as "hysterical remarks."

Sept. 25, 2023: US wireless chipmaker Broadcom Inc plans to [seek an appeal](#) against the South Korean regulator's decision to slap a 19.1 billion won (\$14.3 million) fine for unfair business practices against Samsung Electronics Co.

Sept. 25, 2023: North Korea [opens the border](#) to foreigners for first time since COVID-19.

Sept. 26, 2023: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [says](#) military cooperation between North Korea and Russia undermines global peace.

Sept. 26, 2023: US senator [calls](#) for cooperation from South Korea in pushing for Washington's technology export and investment curbs against China.

Sept. 26, 2023: President Yoon [says](#) the US-ROK alliance will end North Korean regime in event of nuclear weapons use.

Sept. 27, 2023: North Korea's ambassador [vows](#) stronger self-defense capabilities, claiming the Korean Peninsula faces the "immediate danger of nuclear war breakout."

Sept. 27, 2023: Defense Minister-nominee Shin Won-sik [vows](#) to "firmly punish" North Korea in event of provocation.

Sept. 28, 2023: North Korea [stipulates](#) nuclear force-building policy in constitution.

Sept. 28, 2023: Top nuclear envoys of South Korea, the United States, and Japan [denounce](#) North Korea's constitutional amendment to enshrine its policy on nuclear force.

Sept. 28, 2023: Washington officials [say](#) U.S. soldier Travis King, who crossed the inter-Korean border into North Korea in July, is in US custody after his release by the reclusive regime.

Sept. 29, 2023: US Department of Defense [labels](#) North Korea as a "persistent" threat.

Sept. 30, 2023: North Korean Foreign Minister [slams](#) UNSC meeting over Pyongyang's nuclear force-building policy in constitution.

Oct. 2, 2023: North Korea [slams](#) IAEA's adoption of resolution on Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program.

Oct. 2, 2023: North Korea [accuses](#) US of concealing role in bombing of Russia's Nord Stream.

Oct. 5, 2023: LG Energy Solution to [invest](#) 4 trillion won (\$3 billion) in Michigan plant to supply Toyota with batteries.

Oct. 6, 2023: 2023 *Chicago Council Survey* conducted by Ipsos [shows](#) that US citizens are divided over troop mobilization to defend South Korea in case of North Korean invasion.

Oct. 6, 2023: North Korea [denounces](#) France for its plan to monitor North Korea's illicit maritime activities.

Oct. 6, 2023: CBS [reports](#) North Korea is sending arms to Russia following Kim-Putin summit.

Oct. 6, 2023: Korea Institute for National Unification, a South Korean state-run think tank, [suggests](#) that North Korea may launch its military spy satellite between Oct. 10 and 26.

Oct. 6, 2023: South Korea to [participate](#) in a new round of the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) talks in Malaysia.

Oct. 6, 2023: South Korea [seeks](#) 68 billion won (\$50.42 million) in combined fines against Google and Apple for their violation of the country's in-app payment laws.

Oct. 7, 2023: US [suspects](#) North Korea in orchestrating the September hack of a decentralized finance project.

Oct. 9, 2023: US [eases export controls](#) on chip equipment for Samsung and SK factories in China.

Oct. 9, 2023: South Korea's top nuclear envoy [meets](#) Sweden's special envoy for the Korean Peninsula to discuss the recent release of a US soldier from North Korean custody.

Oct. 10, 2023: South Korea, the United States, and Japan [stage](#) a trilateral maritime interdiction exercise for the first time in seven years.

Oct. 10, 2023: North Korea [defends](#) its military spy satellite as “indispensable strategic option” to counter the United States.

Oct. 10, 2023: ROK, Japan, and US advanced assets [join](#) naval exercise to intercept DPRK weapons.

Oct. 11, 2023: President Yoon and US senators [condemn](#) Hamas attack on Israel.

Oct. 13, 2023: Congressional report [shows](#) that North Korea is "on pace" to deploy sufficient nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) to overcome the US missile defense.

Oct. 13, 2023: Unification ministry [says](#) many North Koreans have been repatriated from China.

Oct. 13, 2023: North Korea [threatens](#) to strike US aircraft carrier.

Oct. 13, 2023: US [brushes aside](#) concerns about potential impact of Middle East conflict on Korean Peninsula security.

Oct. 13, 2023: Pyongyang [dismisses](#) speculation over Hamas' use of North Korean weapons against Israel.

Oct. 13, 2023: Policymakers of South Korea and the US [discuss](#) economic and geopolitical uncertainties.

Oct. 14, 2023: A White House official [says](#) North Korea has delivered more than 1,000 containers of military equipment and munitions to Russia for use in Ukraine.

Oct. 16, 2023: North Korea [condemns](#) Japan's move to accelerate its planned acquisition of Tomahawk cruise missiles from the United States as an "arrogant choice."

Oct. 16, 2023: Royal United Services Institute [reports](#) that Moscow has begun large-scale shipments of ammunition from the North Korean port of Rajin to a Russian military facility on the Dunai.

Oct. 16, 2023: South Korea [cracks down](#) on firms building Taiwan navy submarines amid growing concerns over China's possible economic retaliation.

Oct. 17, 2023: *Washington Post* [reports](#) that two Russian ships have made at least five round trips between North Korea and Russia since mid-August, in what could be arms transfers.

Oct. 17, 2023: Seoul [opens](#) its largest-ever International Aerospace & Defense Exhibition (ADEX), [designed](#) to help South Korea to reach its goal of becoming the world's fourth-largest arms exporter.

Oct. 17, 2023: Top nuclear envoys of South Korea, the US, and Japan to [hold talks](#) over suspected DPRK-Russia arms transfer.

Oct. 17, 2023: South Korea, the US, and Japan [install](#) a trilateral communication hotline amid North Korea's evolving military threats and China's increasing assertiveness.

Oct. 17, 2023: South Korean diplomat [discusses](#) North Korean human rights with US envoy.

Oct. 17, 2023: United States [expresses](#) deep concerns about what North Korea will get in return for its suspected delivery of military equipment to Russia.

Oct. 17, 2023: US strategic bomber B-52 [lands](#) at South Korean air base for the first time.

Oct. 17, 2023: US envoy [hopes](#) to work with South Korea on efforts to hold North Korean human rights abusers accountable.

Oct. 18, 2023: Department of Commerce [toughens](#) rules on exports of advanced computing chips to China.

Oct. 18, 2023: South Korea's Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy [says](#) that new export controls on chips by the United States will not have a significant impact on local businesses.

Oct. 18, 2023: Chief of US Indo-Pacific Command [expresses](#) concern over North Korea-Russia military ties.

Oct. 18, 2023: South Korean defense firm Huneed Technologies [reaches](#) a preliminary agreement with US-based General Atomics Aeronautical Systems to develop an advanced radar for drones carrying out observation missions at high altitudes.

Oct. 19, 2023: South Korea [nulls](#) sanctions amid suspected North Korea-Russia arms deal.

Oct. 19, 2023: South Korea's Navy [holds](#) regular multinational mine warfare drills.

Oct. 19, 2023: Anne Neuberger, deputy national security advisor for cyber and emerging technologies, [says](#) North Korea tries to use artificial intelligence to accelerate writing malicious software.

Oct. 19, 2023: South Korea [proposes](#) top-level diplomatic talks with Japan and China in late November.

Oct. 20, 2023: FBI [says](#) thousands of remote IT workers contracting with U.S. companies have for years secretly sent millions of dollars of their wages to North Korea for use in its ballistic missile program.

Oct. 20, 2023: South Korea and the US [discuss](#) efforts to deter North Korea's nuclear and missile threats.

Oct. 20, 2023: North Korean leader Kim [vows](#) to build a "forward-looking" and "far-reaching" relationship with Russia.

Oct. 20, 2023: State Department [says](#) the US will take "whatever steps" it can to hold to account those involved in arms transfers between North Korean and Russia.

Oct. 22, 2023: Navies of South Korea and the United States [stage](#) joint anti-submarine drills near Guam.

Oct. 22, 2023: South Korea, the US, and Japan [stage](#) joint air exercise for the first time near the Korean Peninsula.

Oct. 26, 2023: South Korea and the US [conduct](#) a large-scale maritime exercise in the Yellow Sea.

Oct. 28, 2023: UN expert panel overseeing sanctions against Pyongyang [estimates](#) North Korea's state-sponsored cyber theft last year at \$1.7 billion.

Nov. 1, 2023: FBI says North Korea, China, and Russia [engage](#) in cyber operations to target US research.

Nov. 2, 2023: Chinese President Xi Jinping [tells](#) North Korean leader Kim Jong Un that he is "willing to make bigger contributions" to "defend the region's peace, stability, development and prosperity."

Nov. 2, 2023: Joint Chiefs of Staff [says](#) North Korea might have provided Russia with short-range ballistic missiles and portable anti-aircraft missiles.

Nov. 2, 2023: South Korean military [detects](#) signs of North Korea supplying ballistic missiles to Russia.

Nov. 4, 2023: Report from the Institute for National Security Strategy [says](#) North Korea is trying to diversify its cybercrimes to offset the declining value of cryptocurrencies it steals to fund its nuclear and missile programs.

Nov. 5, 2023: Hyundai and Kia [announce](#) that combined sales of their electric vehicles using their electric-only dedicated platform top 100,000 in the United States in the past two years.

Nov. 8, 2023: Pentagon [declines to comment](#) on a growing debate in South Korea over whether a 2018 inter-Korean military accord aimed at reducing border tensions should be suspended.

Nov. 8, 2023: South Korea and the United States [announce](#) a push for a "wide range of actions" to prevent North Korea's cryptocurrency theft and cyber espionage.

Nov. 8, 2023: North Korea [threatens](#) to "pour a shower of shells" into South Korea over anti-Pyongyang propaganda leaflets.

Nov. 8, 2023: Defense ministers of South Korea, the US, and Japan to [hold](#) a trilateral meeting in Seoul.

Nov. 8, 2023: North Korea [denounces](#) upcoming visits to Seoul by top US officials.

Nov. 8, 2023: G7 Foreign Ministers [condemn](#) North Korea's arms transfer to Russia.

Nov. 9, 2023: US envoy [calls](#) for human rights dialogue with North Korea.

Nov. 9, 2023: Top diplomats of South Korea and the US to [hold talks](#) amid tightening North Korea-Russia military ties.

Nov. 10, 2023: South Korea's spy agency [signs an agreement](#) with the US Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) to strengthen bilateral cooperation in cybersecurity.

Nov. 13, 2023: Defense chiefs of South Korea and the United States [hold](#) annual security talks as the two countries seek to update joint military strategies on North Korea.

Nov. 13, 2023: Defense chiefs of South Korea and the US [revise](#) "tailored deterrence strategy" on North Korea.

Nov. 13, 2023: North Korea [slams](#) South Korea-UN Command defense chief meeting as attempt for "new war of aggression."

Nov. 13, 2023: South Korea and the US [issue](#) joint communique after the 55th Security Consultative Meeting.

Nov. 13, 2023: South Korea and the United States [issue](#) the Defense Vision of the South Korea-US Alliance.

Nov. 14, 2023: UN Command member states [vow](#) united response if South Korea is attacked.

Nov. 15, 2023: US [approves](#) possible sale of SM-6 missile interceptors to South Korea amid North Korea threats.

Nov. 15, 2023: North Korea [tests](#) newly developed solid-fuel engines for new-type for a new type of intermediate-range ballistic missile.

Nov. 15, 2023: President Yoon [departs](#) for San Francisco to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders meeting.

Nov. 15, 2023: Top diplomats of South Korea, the US, and Japan [hold](#) three-way talks on the sidelines of the APEC meeting in San Francisco.

Nov. 15, 2023: US envoy [travels](#) to Brussels to discuss North Korean human rights.

Nov. 15, 2023: South Korea and the US [stage](#) joint air drills with B-52H bombers over Yellow Sea.

Nov. 16, 2023: President Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [hold](#) bilateral summit in San Francisco.

Nov. 16, 2023: North Korea [threatens](#) to take more "visible and strategic" military actions after South Korea and the United States updated their joint deterrence strategies.

Nov. 16, 2023: North Korea and Russia [sign](#) a protocol on expanding cooperation following bilateral talks on economy, science and technology.

Nov. 17, 2023: South Korea and the US [discuss](#) ways to expand bilateral cooperation in the energy and supply chain sectors.

Nov. 17, 2023: South Korea and the US [sign](#) an arrangement for prioritized supply of defense products.

Nov. 17, 2023: Leaders of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework [agree](#) to launch "critical minerals dialogue."

Nov. 17, 2023: President Biden [expresses](#) worries about North Korea's "illicit" nuclear and missile programs during his summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Nov. 17, 2023: Seoul and Washington [agree](#) to deepen cooperation in disaster and climate change response.

Nov. 20, 2023: President Yoon [says](#) that China would not benefit from trilateral cooperation with North Korea and Russia.

Nov. 21, 2023: North Korea [notifies](#) Japan of a plan to launch satellite by Dec. 1.

Nov. 21, 2023: USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier [arrives](#) in Busan in show of force.

Nov. 22, 2023: North Korea [claims](#) it has successfully placed a spy satellite into orbit and will launch more.

Nov. 22, 2023: Nuclear envoys of South Korea, the US, and Japan [condemn](#) North Korea's satellite launch.

Nov. 22, 2023: South Korea [suspends](#) part of a 2018 inter-Korean military tension reduction agreement.

Nov. 22, 2023: US nuclear-powered submarine [arrives](#) in South Korea after North Korea's satellite launch.

Nov. 22, 2023: South Korea, the US, and Japan [share](#) information on North Korea's spy satellite launch.

Nov. 23, 2023: IAEA chief [reports](#) a "strong" water outflow from a reactor's cooling system at North Korea's key nuclear complex in Yongbyon.

Nov. 23, 2023: North Korea [vows](#) to restore all military measures halted under inter-Korean military accord.

Nov. 23, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) ballistic missile toward East Sea, but launch apparently failed.

Nov. 23, 2023: US [regards](#) South Korea's partial suspension of a 2018 inter-Korean military tension reduction agreement a "prudent" and "restrained" move.

Nov. 23, 2023: North Korea [scraps military deal](#) with South and vows to deploy weapons to border.

Nov. 26, 2023: South Korea, the US, and Japan [stage](#) joint naval drills involving aircraft carrier.

Nov. 28, 2023: North Korea [says](#) its spy satellite has taken photos of the White House, the Pentagon and nuclear aircraft carriers docked at a US naval base.

Nov. 29, 2023: South Korea's Busan [comes up short](#) in World Expo bid.

Nov. 30, 2023: US [sanctions](#) a cryptocurrency mixer for serving as a "key money-laundering tool" of a North Korea-linked hacking group.

Nov. 30, 2023: North Korea [says](#) its spy satellite has taken photos of US military facilities in San Diego and Japan.

Nov. 30, 2023: Biden [visits](#) a Colorado-based factory of a South Korean wind tower maker in a trip meant to highlight his economic agenda.

Nov. 30, 2023: North Korea [dismisses](#) the possibility of resuming dialogue with the United States.

Nov. 30, 2023: US and South Korea [hold talks](#) on lingering uncertainties regarding the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and chips subsidy rules.

Dec. 1, 2023: South Korea [imposes sanctions](#) on 11 North Korean individuals after spy satellite launch.

Dec. 1, 2023: US [slaps](#) additional sanctions against North Korea in response to spy satellite launch.

Dec. 1, 2023: US [keeps](#) North Korea on its list of state sponsors of terrorism in 2022 report.

Dec. 2, 2023: North Korea [bristles](#) at US over comments about possible disabling of its spy satellite.

Dec. 2, 2023: US [approves a potential sale](#) to South Korea of munitions for the operation of F-35 radar-evading fighter jets and related equipment.

Dec. 2, 2023: South Korea successfully [launches](#) its first indigenous military spy satellite into orbit.

Dec. 4, 2023: South Korea [successfully conducts](#) third test flight of solid-fuel space rocket.

Dec. 4, 2023: North Korea [denounces](#) Washington for having a "double standard" over South Korea's spy satellite launch.

Dec. 5, 2023: *Washington Post* [reports](#) that South Korea has indirectly supplied more 155-mm shells for Ukraine than all European countries combined.

Dec. 5, 2023: Security advisers of South Korea, the US, and Japan to [discuss](#) joint responses to regional geopolitical risks, including North Korean threats.

Dec. 7, 2023: South Korea, the US, and Japan hold [1st trilateral working-level talks](#) on North Korea cyber threats.

Dec. 8, 2023: US defense policy bill [calls](#) for maintaining 28,500 US troops in Korea.

Dec. 8, 2023: North Korea [slams](#) UN resolutions condemning its nuclear program.

Dec. 8, 2023: South Korea, the US, and Japan [sign framework agreement](#) on research cooperation.

Dec. 9, 2023: South Korea and the US [agree](#) to strengthen cooperation in semiconductors.

Dec. 9, 2023: South Korea, the US, and Japan [vow](#) to strengthen cooperation against North Korea's nuclear and missile threats.

Dec. 10, 2023: North Korea [increases activities](#) in the truce village of Panmunjom after effectively scrapping an inter-Korean military tension reduction agreement.

Dec. 11, 2023: North Korea [lambasts](#) South Korea-US joint military drills.

Dec. 13, 2023: Defense Minister Shin Won-sik [meets](#) eight NATO representatives to expand security and defense industry cooperation.

Dec. 13, 2023: Air Koryo, North Korea's national carrier, [operates](#) first commercial flights connecting Pyongyang and Shenyang after a hiatus of nearly four years prompted by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Dec. 16, 2023: South Korea and the US [agree](#) to complete establishment of guidelines on the planning and operation of a shared nuclear strategy by mid-2024.

Dec. 17, 2023: US nuclear-powered submarine [arrives](#) in South Korea amid the possibility of a North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile launch.

Dec. 17, 2023: Industry data [shows](#) that combined vehicle sales of Hyundai and Kia in the US surpass 1.5 million units in 2023.

Dec. 18, 2023: North Korea [fires](#) one short-range [ballistic missile](#) toward the East Sea.

Dec. 18, 2023: Nuclear envoys of South Korea, the US, and Japan [condemn](#) North Korea's missile provocations.

Dec. 19, 2023: South Korea, the US, and Japan [launch](#) a system to share North Korean missile warning data in real time.

Dec. 19, 2023: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [says](#) the ICBM launch shows what option he has if the US makes the wrong decision.

Dec. 19, 2023: North Korea [confirms](#) test-launch of a *HWASONG-18* solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile.

Dec. 19, 2023: President Yoon [appoints](#) Cho Tae-yong as new director of the National Intelligence Service and Cho Tae-yul as foreign minister.

Dec. 19, 2023: South Korea, the US, and Japan [share information](#) on North Korea's cryptocurrency theft and other malicious cyber activities.

Dec. 20, 2023: LG Chem Ltd., South Korea's leading chemical firm, [begins construction](#) of cathode plant in the United States.

Dec. 20, 2023: UNSC [ends](#) meeting on North Korea's latest test-firing of an ICBM without a united response.

Dec. 20, 2023: US [deploys](#) B-1B bombers near Korean Peninsula after North Korean ICBM launch.

Dec. 21, 2023: North Korean leader Kim [says](#) the launch of an ICBM shows he won't hesitate to launch a nuclear attack in event of enemy's nuclear provocations

Dec. 21, 2023: Sister of North Korean leader Kim [denounces](#) UNSC meeting on Pyongyang's ICBM launch.

Dec. 24, 2023: US [expresses](#) serious concern over North Korea showing signs of starting the operation of a new light-water nuclear reactor.

Dec. 27, 2023: South Korea [signs](#) a contract with the US government to buy 20 additional F-35A stealth fighter jets amid efforts to bolster response capabilities against North Korean military threats.

Dec. 27, 2023: North Korea [convenes](#) a key year-end meeting of the ruling Workers' Party with leader Kim Jong-un in attendance to discuss next year's policy direction.

Dec. 28, 2023: KCNA [reports](#) that North Korean leader Kim is calling for stepped-up efforts to prepare for war.

Dec. 28, 2023: President Yoon [names](#) First Vice Foreign Minister Chang Ho-jin as new national security adviser and Lee Kwan-sup, the director of national policy at the presidential office, as his new chief of staff.



COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

US-INDIA RELATIONS

ONE STEP FORWARD AND TWO STEPS BACK

AKHIL RAMESH, PACIFIC FORUM

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The *Comparative Connections* chapter on US-India relations covering the period September to December 2022 [highlighted](#) the challenge of getting past Cold-War era differences to fully capitalize on Indo-Pacific synergies. In the months between September and December of 2023, Cold War-era differences took center stage in the bilateral partnership. As a sliver of hope that the partnership would transform into a formal alliance emerged earlier in the year, these differences were spoilers. Differences in outlook brought to light the perennial challenges in the relationship and the need to get past the muscle memory of the Cold War for substantial engagement as defense and security allies. Despite these political and security differences, economic and technological cooperation largely expanded with increased cooperation in critical technologies and supply chain diversification initiatives. US industries broke new ground in expanding their footprint in India, and Indian conglomerates invested in the US, capitalizing on the Biden administration's Inflation Reduction Act and other industrial policies.

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While technological advancements in the fourth industrial revolution and the rapidly evolving global macroeconomic landscape warrant new partnerships and alliances, political differences hold bilateral partnerships as prisoners of the past—such as the one between New Delhi and Washington.

The last four months suggest that the perennial challenge boils down to the clash of a values-led approach vs. an interest-led approach to foreign affairs. Washington's vacillation regarding India's, and of note, the Modi administration's fit as a partner of shared values continues to hamper realizing the true potential of the "indispensable partnership." India, for its part continues to conduct its statecraft using an interest-based and in a value-agnostic way—establishing partnerships with nations that serve its long-term economic, political, and technological interests. Despite both democracies working toward stabilizing relations with China, interests were aligned on broader strategic concerns vis-à-vis China and in keeping the Indo-Pacific a safe and secure region. That said, divergences in ideological values remained. This mismatch in values was profound in the domestic political sphere.

To the Polls

Both India and the US go to the polls in 2024. Adding a layer of complexity to the democratic exercise are flash-in-the-pan issues the parties use to boost their political capital. In India, [several such issues](#) have been blown out of proportion to whip up support for parties running for office. While the controversy surrounding the [suggested name change](#) of India to Bharat lost steam toward the end of the summer, a more significant development on the domestic front were state-level elections in five Indian states of Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Chhattisgarh, Mizoram, and Rajasthan.

While analysts and pollsters predicted a thumping comeback for the opposition Congress party, it proved to be a shocker with the largest opposition party losing all but one race. Even though Congress surprised many with its victory in the central/southern state of Telangana, the bigger shock was its [loss to the Bharatiya Janata Party \(BJP\)](#) in the Hindi heartland, squashing hopes of a revival in parliamentary elections scheduled for the summer of 2024. The BJP's victory in the state-level elections will aid in implementing structural and macroeconomic

reforms both at the federal and local level, assisting US businesses through stable governance.

In US politics, while India did not feature directly in the GOP primary debates, references to Biden administration's policies toward China in the primary debates have an impact on US-India relations. The Biden administration's first few years in office were largely an extension of the Trump administration's hardline or hawkish position on China. However, over the last year, US-China relations have begun to slowly stabilize to the extent that the two are back to dialogue and regular interactions. Given that shared concerns over a rising China have transformed the bilateral US-India partnership, a lowering of US-China tensions could, consequently, dial back or at the least slow progress in US-India relations.

While most polls indicate a third term for the BJP, in the US the result is not predictable at this stage given the Republican primaries are not complete. Nonetheless, any extension of the Biden administration's policies of the last year toward China will negate the urgency for increased cooperation between the US and India across security and defense spheres.

Furthermore, in an election year in India, it is commonplace for politicians to make bombastic statements, including on foreign policy. As the BJP celebrates the successful delivery of one of its electoral promises of building the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, any violence or religious conflict that ensues as a result could affect the bilateral relationship.

The partnership cannot rely on political and security cooperation as its pillars. As has been the case over the last two decades and very much so over the last two years, the partnership is increasingly built on a dynamic technological and economic foundation.

After all, for all the divergences, the Modi administration's steady march away from the socialist policies of the Nehruvian era is welcomed by both Washington and Wall Street. The penchant for the Modi administration to choose industrial policy for targeted efforts to support private enterprise to compete with Chinese state-owned enterprises is not viewed in the same light or as a "License Raj 2.0". While it is a far cry from laissez-faire market economics, it is the most capitalist government

in the nation's history. As a matter of fact, former Finance Minister P. Chidambaram [chided](#) the incumbent finance chief Nirmala Sitharaman's announced budget in as the most capitalist budget ever to have been presented to Parliament. What the former minister meant as a criticism is more of a badge of honor for the current administration and precisely what the doctor ordered to capitalize on the China+1 strategies of global conglomerates.

From License Raj 2.0 to Capitalism 1.0

In a sign of its pivot to capitalism, all outstanding US-India trade disputes were resolved with the [final reduction](#) in import tariffs on US poultry exports. It was not long ago when then President Trump [characterized](#) the Indian prime minister as "tariff king" for his administration's high tariffs on a range of goods imported from the US. Fast forward to 2024, all trade disputes between the US and India have been resolved and India is absorbing several manufacturing and assembly units moving out of China.

In mid-December, Indian Ambassador to US Taranjit Singh Sandhu attended the event launching the first tranche of "Made in India" bicycles for Walmart. The Walmart story is suggestive of a larger shift. In 2018 the world's largest retailers sourced over 80% of its goods from China. In 2020, that figure dropped to 60% while [imports](#) from India rose significantly. The company has a target of sourcing \$10 billion worth of goods from India by 2027. Such initiatives are part of the supply chain diversification initiative coupled with increased cross-border investments increase economic interlinkages between the two economies. Indian companies are investing in the US, capitalizing on the Inflation Reduction Act. In October, Epsilon Materials announced a \$650 million investment in North Carolina to battery materials for EV batteries.



Figure 1 Indian Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu posing with a bicycle made in India in the United States. Photo:Sandhu TaranjitS

India successfully convened the G20 meeting. At the outset of the 2+2 ministerial meeting, Indian External Affairs Minister Subramanyam Jaishankar [thanked](#) the US administration for its unwavering support. As the [chapter](#) covering May to September highlighted, New Delhi has a unique role to play in bridging the Western world and the Global South. Between September and December, New Delhi capitalized on every opportunity to voice the concerns of the Global South, while the US led the G7 nations in different theaters such as the Israel-Palestine and the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

President Biden, Prime Minister Modi, and other G20 leaders unveiled the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor as a direct competitor to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Adding to the existing I2U2 (Israel, India, United States and United Arab Emirates) partnership, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic corridor [opened another channel](#) for expanded cooperation among India's largest trading partners (besides China) of the US and UAE. Moreover, these initiatives not only take on China's BRI but also increase Washington's engagement with the developing world.

In early September, the Indian Ministry of Defense (MoD) held the [first virtual meeting](#) of the India-US Defense Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X) Senior Advisory Group with the US Department of Defense (DoD). While it has a long way to go toward increased joint production capabilities as New Delhi has with Moscow, it is a step in the right direction. Another strategic endeavor was the [jet engine deal](#). In a surprising turn of events, the US Congress approved the joint production of jet engines with India in August 2023. India's Hindustan Aeronautics Limited is slated to jointly produce jet engines with General Electric.

These partnerships and developments in supply chain diversification initiatives would have been unfathomable a decade ago.

While economic and commercial engagement moved largely in the right direction, political, intelligence and security ties were a mixed bag.

An Old Friend Better than Two New Friends?

In late September, the US and Indian armies [co-hosted events](#) in New Delhi: the Indo-Pacific Armies Chiefs Conference (IPACC), the Indo-Pacific Armies Management Seminar (IPAMS), and the Senior Enlisted Leaders Forum (SELF) 2023 over three days. Two months later, Special Forces personnel from the Indian East Command joined personnel from the 1st Special Forces Group (SFG) of the US Special Forces for the 13th Vajra Prahar Joint Exercise in Umroi, Meghalaya in northeast India.



Figure 2 A three-day convergence of military leaders from the Indo-Pacific region, comprising IPACC, IPAMS, and SELF-2023, is jointly organized by the Indian Army and the US Army. Photo: IANS

The military of both nations are engaged in activities improving their interoperability and coordination. However, as the Ukraine crisis has shown, Cold War partnerships can spoil flourishing US-India ties. This time, it was a separatist movement with [links](#) to Pakistani intelligence that paralyzed the partnership for a few weeks.

In the first half of 2023, Indian missions in the US, UK, Australia and Canada came under [vicious attacks](#) by Sikh separatist groups that want to carve out Punjab and other northern states of India to create a nation called Khalistan. This violent separatist movement seeks to carve out a separate theocratic Sikh state in India, and has been tied to bombings, assassinations, kidnappings and the selective killing and massacres of civilians. This has

resulted in [nearly 22,000 deaths](#) of Indian Sikhs and Hindus since the 1980s. The violence took on an international angle when Canada-based Khalistani militants blew up an [Air India flight](#) in 1985, killing all 329 people on board.



Figure 3 A Khalistan Referendum Event organized in Canada by the pro-khalistani group Sikhs for Justice (SFJ). Source: ANI file photo

This violent movement lost steam in the late '80s after the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh security guards. Over the last few decades, there have been isolated incidents, but the movement has found no resurgence in India but only in cities of the Five Eyes security group in the last few years. Over the last year, Indian consulates in the US, Canada, UK, and Australia were attacked by armed members of the separatist group. At the Indian Consulate General in San Francisco, Khalistan separatists [set the neighboring building on fire](#) -- luckily no one was hurt. In the UK, the Indian flag was [pulled down](#) and in Australia, temples and consulate property were vandalized. While these events did not make the headlines in Western press, a drama unfolded, starting with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's airplane having [issues](#) at the G20 in New Delhi which was followed by the Canadian leader [accusing](#) the Indian government of undertaking an assassination on Canadian soil. While it was [reported](#) later that a Five Eyes ally had shared intelligence of this alleged plot by Indian government agents and back-channel discussions were ongoing, the discussions did not prevent the crisis from getting media scrutiny, at least in the Western world. This issue flowed into US discourse when the US government accused India of plotting to assassinate dual Canadian-American citizen ([labeled](#) a terrorist in India). The lower district court of Manhattan [charged](#) Indian national Nikhil Gupta with murder for hire and conspiracy to commit to murder for hire. The

indictment set back US-India relations, with Washington publicly accusing New Delhi of orchestrating a plot to assassinate a US citizen. The Indian government denied any involvement in the plot and instituted a committee to probe the accusations.

Subsequently, there were several high-level visits to New Delhi, including the directors of the [FBI](#) and [CIA](#). Several reports have indicated the separatist movements [links](#) to Pakistan's intelligence agency the ISI. The US continuing to take a nonconfrontational approach with its former partner in the "war on terror" is turning out to be a thorn in the US-India bilateral partnership.

Weeks after this ordeal, the Oval Office rejected the Indian government's invitation to be the chief guest of the Indian Republic Day celebrations on Jan. 26. Initially, the plan was Japan, Australia, and the US would attend the event, allowing the four nations of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad") to stand together at the Republic Day celebrations. That did not pan out. While analysts such as Bruno Maçães [predicted](#) embarrassment and isolation for India without a chief guest, a product of its alleged activities abroad—India extended an invitation to French President Emmanuel Macron, who [accepted](#) the invitation on X, saying "thank you for your invitation, my dear friend. India, on your [Republic Day](#), I'll be here to celebrate with you!"

With these events, the US-India partnership was again held hostage to Henry Kissinger's legacy—a foreign policy that pitted and prioritized relations with Pakistan and China vs India. New Delhi in response returned to its old friends, France and Russia.

Walking Down Memory Lane

In September 2023, India successfully convened the G20, its calls for including the Africa Union materialized and it hosted leaders from Sub-Saharan Africa for a dialogue led by the external affairs minister a month later. Media [drew parallels](#) to the assembly of leaders at the G20 with the non-alignment summit convened by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi—the only difference being the leaders that made the cover. There is an old saying often used in Indian foreign policy discourse that goes, "an old friend is better than two new friends." This has been quoted by the Indian prime minister

himself speaking alongside Russian President Vladimir Putin as far back as 2016 to emphasize that the bilateral relationship is not limited to politics or trade but a friendship that lasts the test of time and geopolitical currents. Indian External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar, reminiscing over the supposed heydays of India-Soviet Union ties in 1962, while on a trip to Moscow [shared](#) on X an invitation letter to visit Moscow his father received while he was India's foreign secretary. In an [interview](#) with ANI News, editor Smita Prakash asked Jaishankar about giving conflicting messages by posting from his Moscow trip as sort of a "mind game"; he responded that his mind games were working.

His trip to Russia came at the backdrop of the commotion surrounding the plot to assassinate a Khalistan separatist. A movement supported by Pakistan and indirectly by the US at the height of the Cold War was once again proving that the muscle memory of the Cold War was more formidable than imagined.



Figure 4 Invitation letter EAM S. Jaishankar's father received to visit Moscow. Source: S. Jaishankur via X

While the US and its allies continue to [engage](#) Pakistan and refrain from adopting a zero-tolerance policy toward its support of separatist activity that threatens India's national security, India has continued to emphasize its friendship with its Cold-War era partner.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Acting Deputy Secretary Victoria Nuland met Pakistani Chief of Army Staff Asim Munir weeks prior to the EAM's trip to Moscow. These maneuvers are not healthy for bilateral US-India relations as they foster tit-for-tat diplomacy—a challenge to making any headway in bilateral relations. The US-India partnership remains caught in this vicious cycle.

Complicating matters, two major events were slowly unfolding in the background with potential large-scale and long-term implications for the bilateral partnership. One is the expansion of the BRICS group, once dismissed as a flash-in-the-pan initiative borne out of a [banker's analysis](#) of emerging markets that has proven to be much more. On Jan. 1 the group [expanded](#) to include Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Iran, Ethiopia, and Egypt. The group, while not explicitly anti-Western, seeks increased representation in what they perceive as largely a multipolar world. As the group expands and gains broader significance, India's role could further distance it from the Western nations and, of note, the US.

The second is the steps the Biden administration taken to [stabilize ties](#) with Beijing. It has reopened talks at the highest levels, including military-to-military dialogue and presidential-level meetings such as the one on the sidelines of the APEC meeting in San Francisco. Beijing has responded in proportion and eased visas for US travelers and called for engagement. Coupled with subnational diplomacy undertaken by governors such as [Gavin Newsom](#) of California and [J.B. Pritzker](#) of Illinois, and business leaders remaining enthusiastic about the Chinese market, Washington's approach to Beijing could undercut increased cooperation with New Delhi.

India, while not as overt and forward-leaning as Washington, has, for its part, reopened dialogue with China, at least at the track-two level. A delegation from Fudan university visited a think tank in New Delhi for a dialogue and shortly after another [delegation](#) of senior-level diplomats made a trip out to the ideological brains of the BJP, the Rastriya Swayam Sevak Sangh's Smruti Mandir. In a surprising turn of events, the Chinese nationalist tabloid *Global Times* ran an article [praising](#) the Modi administration's suggested name change to Bharat. Nonetheless, between Washington and New Delhi, only one (New Delhi) has lost men and according to some sources, territory, to China making stabilizing or dialing back relations much harder and unlikely. Furthermore, engagement between Delhi and Beijing has so far been limited to track-two discussions and military-to-military dialogues to settle the border dispute. The Wuhan and Mammallapuram Xi-Modi [summit](#) in 2019, was the last leader-level dialogue between India and

China. Post Doklam and Galwan valley clashes, there have been no high-level state visits nor dialogues between the two nations. The same cannot be said of the United States. From subnational to track-two dialogues, the US has taken every measure to stabilize relations with China.

From New Delhi's standpoint, the US has therefore not been a reliable partner vis-a-vis China and Pakistan. However, from Washington's standpoint, New Delhi was not upholding the supposed shared values and not acting like a reliable partner by engaging Russia.

Despite domestic politics taking center stage due to elections in 2024, cooperation in the economic and technological sphere will continue to be led as political and security cooperation between the US and India appears to lag. Furthermore, with new multilateral platforms, the divergence in understanding of the state of the world, i.e. multipolarity vs bipolarity, will limit the understanding of each other's strategic affairs.

Conclusion

Within the values-interest paradigm, values gain salience when aligned with interests, which could lead to foreign policy congruence. US-India cooperation in addressing the belligerence of China in the Indo-Pacific is one possibility. Categorizing Russia-India joint production of defense equipment as a betrayal of shared values misses the forest for the trees. Joint production of defense goods not only secures India's borders but through exports of equipment such as the Brahmos supersonic missile to Indo-Pacific nations such as Philippines and possibly Vietnam and Indonesia, overall deterrence measures are strengthened in the wider Indo-Pacific region. As noted in previous chapters, the marked expansion of relations between US and India across spheres sits on the foundation of a perceived China threat. Any strategic decision that addresses the threat is a point of convergence.

Washington's recent acts to stabilize relations with China and New Delhi's interest in having dialogue with Beijing reveal cracks in that foundation. Widening the cracks are Washington's lack of attention to separatist movements on Indian soil that Delhi considers a threat to its national security. These events undercut progress made on the political front,

such as attempts at courting India and, on the other end, bringing the US [into the Global South](#). These events reinforce the perception of the US as part of an elite club of Western nations in groups such as Five Eyes and the G7 while India continues to form and become part of new groups that represent the Global South.

Still, a combination of macroeconomic and geopolitical factors has influenced commercial, technological, and trade decisions. In 2024, a lot will rest on US-India cooperation in technological domains and supply chain diversification initiatives to sustain the upward momentum in relations.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-INDIA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2023

Sept. 4, 2023: President Biden, Prime Minister Modi, and other G20 leaders [unveil](#) the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor ,which is seen as a direct competitor to China’s BRI.

Sept. 5, 2023: Indian Ministry of Defence (MoD) [holds](#) first virtual meeting of the India-US Defense Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X) Senior Advisory Group with the US Department of Defense (DoD).

Sept. 8, 2023: Prime Minister Modi [welcomes](#) Biden to India. They reaffirmed their commitment to the G20 and expressed confidence that the outcomes of the G20 Leaders’ Summit in New Delhi will advance their shared goals.

Sept. 8, 2023: Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman [meets](#) US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen while both attended the G20 Leaders’ Summit.

Sept. 8, 2023: India [reduces](#) import tariffs on US poultry, which resolves the last US–India trade dispute.

Sept. 9, 2023: President Biden [joins](#) Prime Minister Modi and leaders of Argentina, Brazil, Italy, Mauritius, and the United Arab Emirates to launch the Global Biofuels Alliance on the sidelines of the G20 Leaders’ Summit.

Sept. 9, 2023: India and the US, along with the European Union, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other G20 partners, [sign](#) a memorandum of understanding on the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, or IMEC. Included in the deal is a railway to link Middle Eastern countries and connect them to India by port.

Sept. 10, 2023: President Biden [visits](#) the Raj Ghat memorial with Prime Minister Modi and other G20 leaders.

Sept. 21, 2023: I2U2 group, comprising of the US, India, Israel, and the UAE, [launches](#) a new website for project proposals.

Sept. 22, 2023: Secretary of State Antony Blinken [meets](#) Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Japanese and Australian counterparts on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York.

Sept. 26, 2023: Representatives from the Indian Ministry of Tourism [meet](#) Brian Beall, director of the US National Travel and Tourism Office (NTTO), and other NTTO representatives in New Delhi.

Sept. 26, 2023: Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner [co-chairs](#) the US–India 2+2 Intersessional Dialogue with US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu, Indian Ministry of External Affairs Additional Secretary Vani Rao, and Indian Ministry of Defense Joint Secretary Vishwesh Negi in Washington, DC.

Sept. 26, 2023: Delegation from the US Food and Drug Administration [visits](#) Divi’s Laboratories, an Indian manufacturer of artificial pharmaceutical ingredients, in Hyderabad.

Sept. 27, 2023: US and Indian Armies [conclude](#) a three-day series of co-hosted events in New Delhi: Indo-Pacific Armies Chiefs Conference (IPACC), the Indo-Pacific Armies Management Seminar (IPAMS), and the Senior Enlisted Leaders Forum (SELF)– 2023.

Sept. 28, 2023: US Trade Representative Katherine Tai [meets](#) EAM S. Jaishankar.

Sept. 28, 2023: EAM Jaishankar [meets](#) US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Secretary Blinken in Washington, DC.

Sept. 28, 2023: US Mission to India [meets](#) goal to process 1 million visa applications from Indians wishing to come to the US.

Sept. 29, 2023: US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin [receives](#) EAM Jaishankar at the Pentagon.

Sept. 29, 2023: EAM Jaishankar [meets](#) US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo.

Oct. 5, 2023: Indian Ambassador to the US Taranjit Singh Sandhu [visits](#) Fort Wainwright, Alaska to observe some of *Exercise Yudh Abhyas*, a joint exercise of the US and Indian armies.

Oct. 14, 2023: Prime Minister Modi [inaugurates](#) the 141st International Olympic Committee (IOC) session in Mumbai.

Oct. 20, 2023: US National Science Foundation (NSF) [announces](#) that earlier that week, NSF Director Sethuraman Panchanathan met Ambassador Sripriya Ranganathan, deputy chief of mission of the Embassy of India, at NSF headquarters.

Oct. 23, 2023: EAM Jaishankar [delivers](#) an address to US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti and other international representatives attending the G20 tree planting ceremony at Nehru Park.

Oct. 24, 2023: President Biden [awards](#) the National Medal of Technology and Innovation to Indian-Americans Ashok Gadgil and Subra Suresh for their contributions to science and technology.

Oct. 25, 2023: Food and Drug Administration [publishes](#) article by Commissioner Robert Califf outlining his trip to India a few weeks prior, where he met health officials and experts in the public and private sector.

Oct. 27, 2023: US Ambassador to India Garcetti [visits](#) the Next Generation Sequencing (NGS) laboratory at North Goa District Hospital with members of the Goa Health Department and officials of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) India.

Oct. 28, 2023: Indian Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal [meets](#) USTR Tai in Osaka ahead of the G7 Trade Ministers' Meeting.

Nov. 2, 2023: US Ambassador to India Garcetti [speaks](#) at the Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet (GEAPP)'s Energy Transition Dialogues in New Delhi.

Nov. 9, 2023: Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh [receives](#) Secretary of Defense Austin at the airport in New Delhi.

Nov. 9, 2023: EAM Jaishankar [meets](#) Secretary of State Blinken.

Nov. 10, 2023: Secretary of Defense Austin [meets](#) Minister of Defense Singh, EAM Jaishankar, and Prime Minister Modi after co-chairing the fifth US-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue with Secretary of State Blinken, Minister Singh, and Minister Jaishankar.

Nov. 12, 2023: US President Biden and his wife [celebrate](#) Diwali at the White House.

Nov. 14, 2023: Secretary of Commerce Raimondo and Indian Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal [launch](#) the "Innovation Handshake" agenda, fortifying the countries' partnership in technology.

Nov. 14, 2023: Minister of Commerce and Industry Goyal [meets](#) USTR Tai while attending the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework ministerial in San Francisco.

Nov. 15, 2023: Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) Chairman and Department of Space (DOS) Secretary Shri Somanath S [meets](#) Dr. Laurie Leshin, director of NASA's Jet

Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) at ISRO Headquarters.

Nov. 16, 2023: Indian Minister of Commerce and Industry Goyal, Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, Textiles, and Leader of the House, Rajya Sabha, [meets](#) President Biden at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) welcome reception.

Nov. 17, 2023: US Ambassador to India Garcetti [attends](#) Nexus' annual Alumni Celebration Event, engaging with dignitaries from Indian government agencies Startup India and iDEX as well as startup personnel from several businesses affiliated with Nexus.

Nov. 17, 2023: INDUS-X [closes](#) its first two challenges: iDEX Maritime Intelligence, Surveillance, and Recognizance (ISR) Challenge, seeking oil spill detection and tracking technologies, and the iDEX Underwater Communication Challenge, seeking new hardware and software technologies that can support high-bandwidth underwater communication.

Nov. 20, 2023: USAID Deputy Assistant Administrator of the Bureau for Asia Ānjali Kaur [begins](#) a six-day official visit to Dharamshala and New Delhi.

Nov. 21, 2023: Special Forces personnel from the Indian East Command [join](#) personnel from the 1st Special Forces Group (SFG) of the US Special Forces for the 13th *Vajra Prahar Joint Exercise* in Umroi, Meghalaya.

Nov. 22, 2023: Prime Minister Modi [opens](#) the Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit.

Nov. 23, 2023: US Embassy in India [announces](#) that it has processed more visa applications in 2023 than in any other year to date.

Nov. 26, 2023: US Ambassador to India Garcetti [pays](#) tribute to the victims of the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai on their 15th anniversary, pledging

continued cooperation between the US and India in counterterrorism efforts.

Nov. 28, 2023: Indian Union Minister for Science and Technology Dr. Jitendra Singh [meets](#) NASA Administrator Bill Nelson.

Nov. 28, 2023: USAID Assistant Administrator of the Bureau for Asia Michael Schiffer [speaks](#) at the Global Summit on LiFE Economy: From Principles to Action in New Delhi.

Nov. 29, 2023: NASA Administrator Nelson [announces](#) at an event in Bengaluru that NASA will train an Indian astronaut for a voyage to the International Space Station (ISS) that could take place as early as 2024.

Nov. 29, 2023: Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu [inaugurates](#) The Hump WWII Museum in Pasighat with US Ambassador to India Garcetti.

Nov. 30, 2023: Indian Ambassador to the US Taranjit Singh Sandhu [meets](#) Rep. Mike Rogers, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Dec. 4, 2023: US Deputy National Security Advisor Jonathan Finer [meets](#) EAM Jaishankar and Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval.

Dec. 7, 2023: Indian Joint Secretary of Disarmament and International Security Affairs Muanpuii Saiawi [leads](#) the meeting of the Monitoring Mechanism of the India-US Strategic Trade Dialogue (IUSSTD) with Thea Rozman Kendlar, US assistant secretary of Commerce for Export Administration.

Dec. 7, 2023: Department of State [names](#) Indian activist Nikhil Dey an International Anti-Corruption Champion.

Dec. 7, 2023: Inaugural Indian Consul General Prakash Gupta [attends](#) a welcome reception honoring his arrival in anticipation of the opening of a new Indian consulate in Seattle,

hosted by the RoundGlass India Center of Seattle University.

Dec. 11, 2023: Former Indian national cybersecurity coordinator Lt. Gen. Rajesh Pant [co-hosts](#) the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) Workshop on Collaboration on Cybersecurity with US Ambassador to India Garcetti, Taiwanese Representative to India Baushuan Ger, and the United Service Institution of India.

Dec. 14, 2023: Indian Ambassador to the US Sandhu [attends](#) launch of the first made-in-India bicycles to be sold at Walmart.

Dec. 19, 2023: Indian Ambassador to the US Sandhu [meets](#) Secretary of State Blinken at the State Department's end of the year event.

Dec. 19, 2023: US State Department [hosts](#) representatives from India, Japan, and Australia at the Quad Counterterrorism Working Group meeting in Honolulu, Hawaii.



COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

WASHINGTON DOUBLES DOWN ON KEY PARTNERS

CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

US relations with Southeast Asia ended on a down note in 2023 with the last-minute failure to finalize the trade pillar of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). This was not a complete loss for ASEAN states that managed to negotiate bilateral supply chain resilience agreements. However, it underscored the fact that broad regional frameworks, particularly for trade, are off the table with Washington, at least until the United States is past the November 2024 elections. Instead, the administration focused on security over trade and on key partners in the region, with Biden skipping the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Jakarta for a visit to Vietnam and the announcement of the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In this period, US relations with the Philippines continued to strengthen, with Washington [issuing](#) three statements calling out China for its reckless maneuvers in the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea. But if some Southeast Asians were miffed by the administration's focus on bilateralism over regionalism, most were reassured by Biden's [meeting](#) with Xi Jinping on the margins of the APEC meeting in San Francisco.

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In a statement issued by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers at year's end, the meeting was cited as an encouraging step, although the overall tone of the statement was one of concern over threats to the "Southeast Asian maritime sphere."

Worldwide, the final months of 2023 were marked by reaction to the war between Israel and Hamas, but the conflict had a measurable impact on Southeast Asia; this was particularly the case with Indonesia and Malaysia, both of which have Muslim-majority populations. A protracted war in the Middle East will return counterterrorism to the front burner of US relations with the maritime states of the region in 2024. Closer to home, the internal conflict in Myanmar worsened. Washington [announced sanctions](#) on the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), the military's most lucrative source of funds, but by year's end there was no sign of a drop in the violence or of prospects for negotiations among the parties.

Strengthening Partnerships

As the target of the bulk of China's harassment in the South China Sea in late 2024, the Philippines has reclaimed its more activist status on maritime issues that former President Rodrigo Duterte forfeited in exchange for expected economic bounty from Beijing. That reward did not materialize, and Duterte's lowest ratings in public opinion polls were for his willful disregard of the growing threat from Chinese vessels in the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Current President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr.'s public embrace of the US-Philippine alliance and his agreement to expand the number of "flexible basing" sites under the US-Philippines Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) left little doubt of where Manila stood on maritime issues, although Marcos has been careful to keep lines of communication with Beijing open.

In return, Washington has been quick to respond to conflict in the Philippines' EEZ with statements criticizing China's behavior. After the Oct. 22 incident in which Chinese vessels [collided](#) with Philippine boats near the Second Thomas Shoal, the US moved ships and aircraft closer to the Philippines. On Oct. 28 the USS Ronald Reagan, the US Navy's only forward-deployed aircraft carrier, [arrived](#) in Manila on a port call. On Nov. 3 the guided-missile destroyer USS Dewey [carried out](#)

freedom of navigation operations near the Spratly Islands. As a sign of Manila's own commitment to the stronger alliance, on Nov. 19 President Marcos and Philippine Armed Forces Chief Gen. Romeo Brawner, Jr., [visited](#) the Indo-Pacific Command in Honolulu. It is unusual for a head of state to visit the Command, and Marcos was the first Philippine president to do so.



Figure 1 Adm. John C. Aquilino, the commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, is seen on the right, standing alongside Gen. Romeo Brawner, Jr., Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, during an honors ceremony at the USINDOPACOM headquarters in Camp H.M. Smith, Honolulu, on November 17, 2023. Photo: John Bellino

Marcos has also made efforts to expand security relations with other like-minded countries, particularly Japan. Manila was the first recipient of Japanese Official Security Assistance (OSA) after Tokyo announced the new program in April 2023, and expects to receive the transfer of an air radar system. Moreover, the Philippines and Japan are in the process of negotiating a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), which would enable Filipino and Japanese troops to enter one another's territory for training exercises.

Marcos also stirred interest in November when he proposed that the other Southeast Asian claimants to the Spratly Islands—Vietnam and Malaysia—craft a separate code-of-conduct in the absence of progress on the larger China-ASEAN Code of Conduct on the South China. Hanoi and Kuala Lumpur appear lukewarm at best to the proposal, but it recalls Manila's activism on maritime issues last seen during the presidency of Benigno Aquino.

Public debate in the Philippines points to growing nervousness that Manila's and Washington's strategic aims may not always be

aligned, particularly over Taiwan. The most northern point of the Philippines is 100 miles from Taiwan, and Filipinos on the northern islands worry that the new EDCA sites could be a magnet for Chinese aggression if conflict breaks out in the Taiwan Strait. Administration officials in Manila publicly downplay these fears, pointing out that the sites would enable the US and Philippine militaries to respond more quickly to natural disasters in the north and, more to the point, could evacuate the more than 150,000 Filipino workers in Taiwan if conflict did erupt. However, the Philippine Congress has opened debate on the limits of the alliance with the United States, spearheaded by the president's sister, Sen. Imree Marcos.

Vietnam

Velocity was also a dynamic in Washington's relations with Hanoi in late 2023. When President Biden [arrived](#) in Hanoi on Sept. 9, it was widely expected that the United States and Vietnam would elevate relations from a Comprehensive Partnership to a Strategic one; instead, in a surprising leap the two leaders announced that a full Comprehensive Strategic Partnership had been agreed upon. This put the United States on the same level with China, Russia, India, and South Korea. (Hanoi subsequently added Japan to its list of Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships and intends to do with Australia as well.)

It was important to Hanoi that Biden's co-signer on the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the host for his visit was Vietnamese Communist Party Secretary-General Ngyuen Phu Trong, rather than President Vo Van Thuong or Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh. A US president is both head of state and head of government, and therefore both Thuong and Chinh are Biden's counterparts. However, the symbolism of the Biden-Trong pairing was an acknowledgment of the VCP's political role in Vietnam. Biden's visit was the follow-on next step to Trong's visit to Washington in 2016, the first time a Vietnamese party chief had ever made an official trip to the United States.



Figure 2 US President Joe Biden addresses a press conference in Hanoi on Sept. 10, 2023. Photo: Evan Vucci

Washington's overall aim for the visit was to strengthen US-Vietnam relations through as many avenues as possible. However, the joint statement detailing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership did not address security; given their sensitivities, advances in this area were likely to be discussed and negotiated away from the spotlight of a presidential visit. This began a week later in Washington at the [annual US-Vietnam Defense Policy Dialogue](#), in which enhanced cooperation on defense industry and trade, maritime security, information sharing, cybersecurity, and humanitarian missions.

More under the radar are discussions on US arms transfers to Vietnam, the prohibition of which was lifted by President Barack Obama in 2016. Since then, however, sales have been a modest \$365 million, a small fraction of Russia's weapons sales to Vietnam. The pace of Hanoi's purchase of US arms is affected in part by the need to avoid riling China with a dramatic expansion. Political concerns still come into play on the US side, although the transfer of lethal arms to Vietnam is allowed under US law if the president deems them important to "the free and open navigation of the South China Sea."

Without doubt, Vietnam's immediate interest in negotiating the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was economic. Hanoi is determined to expand US investment in Vietnam and exports to the United States, but Washington [endeavors](#) to pull Vietnam into its supply chains, particularly in semiconductors and critical minerals. South Korean investment in Vietnam is lagging; moreover, Hanoi is attempting to attract foreign technology companies that are amenable to arrangements that will transfer technology to Vietnamese companies. US

companies are in their sights, and early deliverables in the new partnership reflected that: the US-Vietnam Semiconductor Partnership to Support Resilient Semiconductor Supply Chains; the Workforce Initiative To Support Semiconductor Capacity; and the Developing Electronics and Leading Technology Advancement (DELTA) Partnerships.

Since normalization in 1995, the US-Vietnam relationship has depended on implied linkages between areas of cooperation. Progress in the security relationship accelerated when the United States included more war legacy issues, particularly remediation of dioxin, in the policy mix. In its own right, investment in Vietnam is a priority for US companies as they continue to redirect manufacturing away from China. That said, an increase in US investment in Vietnam will likely lead to gains on the security side, although those will always be cautious and incremental.

Regional Steps

As great power competition rises in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN endeavors to develop regime mechanisms, particularly in maritime security. On Sept. 19–23, the 10 ASEAN nations, with East Timor participating as an observer, [conducted](#) the group's first-ever joint military exercises. Led by Indonesia, the 2023 ASEAN chair, the exercises were maritime-based with a focus on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The venue was chosen to avoid contested areas; after some controversy, a course was designed beginning in the southern area of the Natuna Sea and concluding near the island of Batam, south of Singapore.



Figure 3 Military personnel participate in the opening ceremony of the ASEAN Solidarity Exercise joint-military drills at Batu Ampar port on Batam island, Indonesia, on September 19, 2023. Photo: Antara Foto

The momentum behind these exercises clearly came from the maritime states, and it was doubtful that they would have been launched without Jakarta's chairmanship this year. Although ASEAN has conducted military exercises as a group with external powers, particularly the United States, ASEX 23 was ASEAN's first stand-alone exercises in that they were restricted to ASEAN itself.

Beyond the obvious threat posed by Chinese incursions into ASEAN EEZs, there were several reasons to develop greater regional capacity. Foremost are natural disasters, which are almost certain to increase in number and severity. As well, the need to evacuate civilians in a security crisis; the benefits of acculturation among the ASEAN militaries; and the likely need for greater cooperation in counterterrorism are all served by joint exercises. However, development in this area is unlikely to be an easy trajectory: the annual rotation of ASEAN chairs, some of which will be more reluctant than others, will slow the process down.

Jakarta's final act as the 2023 chair was ASEAN's [release](#) of a joint statement by the foreign ministers on Dec. 30, expressing concern over events in the South China Sea in the past year and expressing the need for greater focus on the Southeast Asian "maritime sphere." This was an implicit expression of ASEAN solidarity with the Philippines' position, at least on Chinese attempts to disrupt the navigation of Southeast Asian vessels in their countries' own EEZ's. However, whether Laos as the 2024 ASEAN chair will actively take up this issue, much less maintain the momentum created in 2023, is doubtful.

Myanmar Sinks Further

Throughout 2023 the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus Plan, forged in April 2021 two months after the military coup against the newly elected civilian government, remained the policy of record for both ASEAN and the West. However, Jakarta was able to do little to move the plan forward. Although Myanmar remains an ASEAN member, and is likely to do so, Naypyidaw was not invited to the group summits in 2023, although it continued to participate in ASEAN events at the working level, including the September joint military exercises. The group refrained from officially recognizing either the junta or the opposition,

the National Unity Government (NUG), although Jakarta made attempts to increase contact with the NUG. Western governments, including the United States, followed ASEAN's lead in that regard. With continued tensions in the Taiwan Strait; the conflict in Ukraine; and the eruption of war in the Middle East, no one was eager to spark a proxy war in Myanmar.

However, in October Washington [tightened sanctions](#) on Myanmar and designated the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) for restrictions. MOGE is Myanmar's most lucrative state-owned enterprise and provides the junta with much-needed revenue. This builds upon recent US sanctions which targeted individuals and entities providing jet fuel to the military in an attempt to prevent airstrikes on civilian populations. Overseas Burmese opposition groups had long pressed the United States to sanction MOGE. Washington's hesitation in this regard was based on two risks: that Thailand, which continues to rely upon Myanmar for some of its natural gas supply, will oppose it, and that the move will push the junta closer to Moscow, which provides energy to the military at bargain rates.



Figure 4 A group of activists in Tokyo call on the US government to sanction the Myanmar Gas and Oil Enterprise. Photo: Philip Fong/AFP/Getty Images

In 2023 the internal conflict in Myanmar spread, and the United Nations estimates that it now ranges over two-thirds of the country. In October, the People's Defense Force (PDF), the military arm of the opposition, allied with anti-junta ethnic groups in northern Shan State to push the military out of some enclaves. This places Beijing in a dilemma. Security along the border in Shan State is important for the export of critical minerals from Myanmar into China. At the same time, military clashes with the PDF and a surge in drug trafficking and other transnational crime threaten the steady flow of

this cross-border trade. China's interests are best served by allying with whoever controls northern Shan State, whether it is the military or the opposition. However, in the western Rakhine State, its interests are clearly with the military, to protect the Chinese oil and gas pipelines and for the planned construction of a deep seaport on the Bay of Bengal.

In the meantime, living conditions and the economy continue to deteriorate in Myanmar and the delivery of humanitarian assistance is impeded by both the military and the opposition. The October surge of fighting in Shan State displaced nearly half a million civilians, bringing the total of IDPs to roughly 2 million since the 2021 coup. The World Bank measures current inflation in Myanmar at 20% and predicts economic growth for 2024 at 1% at best. In contrast to other ASEAN states, whose economies have recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic, Myanmar's economy is 10% below 2019 levels.

Distant Wars, Local Impact

To protect its security and its economic growth, Southeast Asia endeavors to remain neutral in most conflicts outside the region—"ASEAN centrality" is as much a geographic expression as a political one. Despite continued pressure from the West, particularly the United States, ASEAN sidesteps attempts to take a common position against Russia on the war in Ukraine. With global energy and food prices high—and likely to rise further with the war in the Middle East—Southeast Asian countries continue to import Russian energy and grain, often at discounted prices. This will continue in 2024 as the region moves closer to a crisis in food security, brought on by high prices but also by the impact on rice production during an "El Niño year."

The outbreak of war in October between Israel and Hamas presents a different problem for Southeast Asia. ASEAN does not take a common position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and there is no outside pressure to do so. As with the war in Ukraine, a spectrum of positions has opened in ASEAN on the crisis. Singapore is the most forward-leaning country in supporting Israel and deploring the Oct. 7 attacks. It has a long and close relationship with Israel, which was the first country to offer Singapore diplomatic recognition after independence.

Thailand and the Philippines have several common problems in the Middle East conflict. Both have significant groups of guest workers in Israel and, to a lesser degree, in Gaza; and both have Muslim minority populations in their southern regions which are tied to separatist movements. Thai and Filipino workers suffered casualties on Oct. 7 and several were taken hostage. Both countries have been able to secure the release of some of their hostages, working through Egypt, but are under increasing domestic pressure to free the remainder.

The conflict will be felt more strongly in Muslim Mindanao in the southern Philippines, where there is more international involvement with local *jihadi* movements, than in southern Thailand, where the separatist movement is more locally based. The [terrorist attack](#) on Mindanao State University in Marawi on Dec. 3 likely signals a return to pre-pandemic violence. These factors require Bangkok and Manila to walk a fine line in public statements on the crisis. Bangkok has declared itself “neutral,” claiming that it does not take sides; in Manila, President Marcos issued a statement that deplored the attack on Israel but also urged Tel Aviv to lift the siege on Gaza.

The war in the Middle East has particular resonance in the domestic politics of Indonesia and Malaysia, both of which are Muslim-majority countries and neither of which recognizes Israel. As Indonesia prepares for elections in February and the ruling coalition in Malaysia attempts to hold onto power, candidates and leaders are attempting to maintain political equilibrium while the count rises of Palestinian civilians killed in bombings in Gaza.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo and Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim have come out firmly on the Palestinian side, although they have been careful not to sanction the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas. In statements, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur have alluded to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories as a cause of the current crisis. Anwar echoed Jordan’s Queen Rania when he accused the United States and other Western countries of applying a double standard and valuing the lost lives of Israelis more than those of Palestinians. Indonesia and Malaysia also signed the Oct. 18 statement by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) condemning Israel for its assault on Gaza following the Oct. 7 attack.

These positions track with previous statements from Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, but the Israel-Hamas war has particular resonance with the Indonesian and Malaysian populations at this time. Indonesia will hold elections in February and faces the transition to a new president; in Malaysia, Anwar is attempting to tamp down a surge in the political popularity of PAS, the longstanding fundamentalist opposition party. Pro-Palestinian demonstrations have been widespread across Indonesia, and security forces are tracking heightened terrorist threats— the Israeli siege of the Indonesian hospital in northern Gaza in November was particularly inflammatory.



Figure 5 Protesters shout slogans and wave Palestinian flags during a rally in support of the Palestinians in Gaza, at the National Monument in Jakarta on Nov. 5, 2023. Photo: Dita Alangkara via AP

But the greater risks for Indonesia, Malaysia and the southern Philippines lie in the possibility of a protracted and expanded war in the Middle East. Apart from greater public anger in domestic populations, an expanded war will prompt Middle Eastern terrorist groups to seek recruits from Southeast Asia, as ISIS did during the Iraq War. Most of the overseas fighters from that war have returned to Southeast Asia and been reintegrated, but there will be ample fodder in the region for a new recruitment, particularly if it is accompanied by economic inducements.

Continuation and expansion of the conflict will be problematic for US relations with Southeast Asia, particularly with Washington’s strong identification with Israel at this time. An enhanced terrorist threat in Southeast Asia will call for stronger counterterrorism cooperation with the United States, particularly in the Philippines and Indonesia. Counterterrorism is woven into the US-Philippines alliance and

although it is more *ad hoc* in US-Indonesian relations it nevertheless is an important element in the bilateral security relationship. Counter-terrorism cooperation with Malaysia is focused more on intelligence-sharing than military response but that too will rise with a wider conflict.

The shadow of Iran will also lengthen over US relations with Southeast Asia if the war expands. Hezbollah cells have been detected in the region in the past, usually attempting to attack Western companies or tourists. However, some Southeast Asia companies can be caught up in US sanctions aimed at Tehran. On Dec. 19 Washington [imposed sanctions](#) on 10 entities and four individuals based in Indonesia, Iran, Hong Kong, and Malaysia for facilitating Iran's procurement of sensitive materials used in the production of attack drones.

Over the Horizon

In 2024 three elections in the Asia-Pacific will have an impact, directly or indirectly, on Southeast Asia: in Taiwan on Jan. 13; in Indonesia on Feb. 14; and in the United States on Nov. 5. The Taiwanese elections will only impact Southeast Asia if the outcome, most likely a victory for the Democratic Progressive Party, worsens the security environment in the Strait and more broadly the South China Sea.

At this point, Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto has the lead in public opinion surveys on the February polls in Indonesia. Elections in that country are an elongated process: the inauguration of the new president will not take place until October. If Prabowo prevails, given past frictions with Washington over human rights issues, relations with the United States will initially focus on some fence-mending and confidence-building, as they did with the Philippines when Marcos was elected in 2022. However, that will be a more uncertain process if the Israel-Hamas war is ongoing. That is likely, as Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu was said that he expects operations in Gaza to continue through the year.

The greatest impact on Washington's relations with Southeast Asia will be the outcome of the United States' own elections in November. Southeast Asian leaders are reconciled to the fact that a regional trade agreement is off the table with either a Democratic or Republican president. However, signals from the camp of

former President Donald Trump of stronger trade protectionism in a second term are worrisome, particularly since Trump applied punitive measures to countries that had trade surpluses with the United States in his first term. In Southeast Asia, only Singapore has a trade deficit with the United States—even Myanmar has a surplus that is four times the size of its imports from the US.

Trump's "America First" approach to security alliances is also worrisome to Southeast Asians, particularly the Philippines. They fear that the United States will abandon its "pivot" to the Indo-Pacific, if only temporarily during the election campaign, and that US distraction will invite further Chinese adventurism in the South China Sea. Historically, Southeast Asians have tended to favor Republican US presidents, because they were viewed as more attendant to security issues, but the pendulum has swung to the Democrats in the 2024 elections. With the expectation that Washington will be more distant, or even absent, in regional affairs, Southeast Asians will focus on expanding security relations with other powers, particularly Japan.

These fears are exacerbated by the fact that ASEAN itself will be distracted and to some degree disunited in 2024. There is scant hope for a resolution to the conflict in Myanmar, and Vientiane is unlikely to make stringent efforts to implement the Five-Point Consensus Plan. Continuing the ASEAN move toward regional maritime security cooperation will require freelance efforts from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. However, with Malaysia taking the ASEAN chair in 2025 and the Philippines in 2026, Kuala Lumpur and Manila will be particularly vigilant on security in ASEAN affairs in 2024.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2023

Sept. 6, 2023: At the 2023 US–ASEAN Summit in Jakarta, on the margins of the East Asia Summit, Vice President Kamala Harris and ASEAN leaders [announce](#) that they will establish a US–ASEAN Center in Washington. Working with Arizona State University, the Center will promote economic and cultural engagement between Southeast Asia and the United States.

Sept. 10–11, 2023: President Joe Biden [travels](#) to Vietnam for a visit hosted by Nguyen Phu Trong, secretary-general of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Washington and Hanoi announce that US–Vietnam relations will be elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

Sept. 11, 2023: United States and Vietnam [announce](#) that they will explore possibilities of strengthening semiconductor supply chains with funds from the International Technology Security and Innovation (ITSI) funds created by the CHIPS Act of 2022.

Sept. 19, 2023: In the wake of Biden’s visit to Vietnam, Prime Minister Chinh [visits](#) Washington. In a speech at Georgetown University, he says that the two most important themes in Biden’s visit were economics and politics, and clarifies that by “politics” he means good governance.

Sept. 19, 2023: The United States and Vietnam [hold](#) the annual Defense Policy Dialogue in Washington, discussing enhanced cooperation on defense industry and trade, maritime security, information sharing, cyber security, and humanitarian missions.

Sept. 19–23, 2023: 10 ASEAN nations, with East Timor participating as an observer, [conduct](#) the group’s first-ever joint military exercises. Led

by Indonesia, the exercises were maritime based with a focus on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Activities included joint maritime patrols, a simulated medical evacuation, search and rescue missions, and disaster relief efforts.

Sept. 21, 2023: The United States [announces](#) that it will provide an additional \$116 million in human assistance to support vulnerable populations in Myanmar and Bangladesh, including \$74 million to support Rohingya refugees and their host communities.

Sept. 22, 2023: Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko and Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo [hold](#) a trilateral meeting in New York during the United Nations General Assembly High Level Week. The discussion centers on deepening cooperation on energy, infrastructure, and digital economy issues.

Sept. 28, 2023: State Department [issues](#) a statement of concern regarding the conviction and sentencing of prominent Vietnamese environmental activist and NGL leader Hoang Thi Minh Hong by the Vietnamese courts.

Oct. 10, 2023: State Department [issues](#) a statement of concern over reports of a military attack on an internally displaced persons camp in Kachin State in Myanmar.

Oct. 12, 2023: United States and Singapore [hold](#) first bilateral Space Dialogue in Washington, DC and discuss the use of satellites to monitor climate change; prepare and respond to disasters; and improve natural resource use.

Oct. 19, 2023: United States and Indonesia [co-chaired](#) 4th ASEAN–US Cyber Policy Dialogue. The two sides discuss strengthening

regional cooperation by expanding cyber capacity through the US-Singapore Third Country Training Program on Cyber-Technology and other mechanisms.

Oct. 22, 2023: State Department [issues](#) a statement in support of the Philippines after the PRC Coast Guard and marine militia interferes with a Philippine resupply mission to Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea.

Oct. 23, 2023: United States and Indonesia [hold](#) first-ever US-Indonesia Senior Officials Foreign Policy and Defense Dialogue in Washington. The two sides discuss plans to expand the bilateral partnership in the context of the recently launched US-Indonesia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

Oct. 28, 2023: *USS Ronald Reagan*, the US Navy's only forward-deployed aircraft carrier, [arrives](#) in Manila on a scheduled port call.

Oct. 31, 2023: United States [imposes sanctions](#) on the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), the country's most lucrative state-owned enterprise. Washington also adds the names of 3 entities and 5 individuals to the sanctions list, for their involvement with the Tatmadaw.

Nov. 1-2, 2023: 27th US-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue is [conducted](#) in Washington. Ongoing since normalization of US-Vietnam relations in 1995, the Dialogue has been incorporated as a key feature of the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership announced in September.

Nov. 3, 2023: Guided-missile destroyer *USS Dewey* [carries out](#) freedom of navigation operations near the Spratly Islands.

Nov. 10, 2023: State Department [issues](#) a general statement that it “stands shoulder-to-shoulder” with the Philippines in the face of repeated PRC harassment of Philippine vessels in the South China Sea.

Nov. 13, 2023: United States and Indonesia [announce](#) that they will explore opportunities to

collaborate on semiconductor supply chains under the CHIPS Act of 2022.

Nov. 16, 2023: United States and the Philippines [sign](#) a civil nuclear cooperation agreement, commonly known as a “123 Agreement” on the margins of APEC.

Nov. 16, 2023: United States and the Philippines [announce](#) that they will explore opportunities to collaborate on semiconductor supply chains with funds from the CHIPS Act of 2022.

Nov. 15-16, 2023: Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin [participates](#) in the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus in Indonesia. On Nov. 16, he and Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto sign a US-Indonesian Defense Cooperation Agreement, building on the US-Indonesia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

Nov. 16-17, 2023: President Biden [chairs](#) the APEC Economic Leaders Meeting in San Francisco. The leaders endorse the Golden Gate Declaration to advance the group's economic aims in sustainability and inclusion and the Digital Pacific Agenda that would “shape rules, norms and standards that govern the digital economy.”

Nov. 19, 2023: Philippine President Marcos and Philippine Armed Forces Chief Romeo Brawner, Jr., [visit](#) the US Indo-Pacific Command to discuss regional security cooperation. Marcos is the first Philippine president to visit the Command.

Dec. 3, 2023: State Department [releases](#) a statement condemning a terrorist attack at Mindanao State University in Marawi, Mindanao in the southern Philippines, during a Catholic service.

Dec. 5-6, 2023: United States and Singapore [enter](#) a non-binding Security of Supply Arrangement (SOSA) to ease acquisition of industrial resources and promote supply chain resilience.

Dec. 6, 2023: Defense Secretary Austin [meets](#) Singaporean Minister of Defense Ng Eng Hen in Washington.

Dec. 10, 2023: State Department [issues](#) a statement calling out “reckless maneuvers” by the PRC outside Scarborough Reef on December 9 and Second Thomas Shoal on Dec. 10, including one that forced a collision with a Philippine vessel.

Dec. 13, 2023: Secretary of Defense Austin and Philippines Secretary of Defense Gilberto Teodoro [speak by telephone](#) to discuss unlawful actions by the PRC in the Philippines’ Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea.

Dec. 14, 2023: US-ASEAN Center [opens](#) in Washington, DC.

Dec. 19, 2023: United States [imposes sanctions](#) on a network of 10 entities and four individuals based in Iran, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Indonesia for facilitating Iran’s procurement of sensitive goods for the production of attack drones.

Dec. 30, 2023: ASEAN Foreign Ministers [issued](#) a “Statement on Maintaining and Promoting Stability in the Maritime Sphere in Southeast Asia,” which expressed growing concern for recent developments in the South China Sea.



COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA
RELATIONS

BEIJING MODERATES CRITICISMS SELECTIVELY

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CHIN-HAO HUANG, YALE-NUS COLLEGE

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

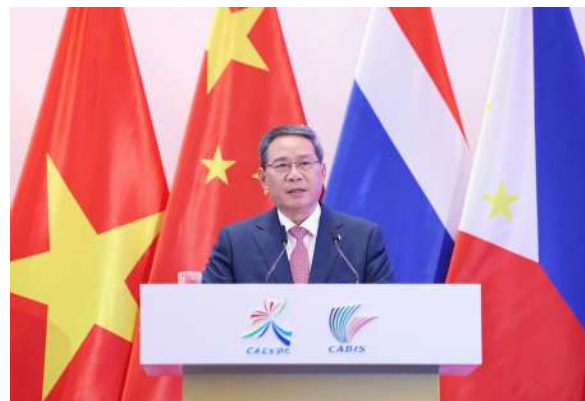


Figure 1 Chinese Premier Li Qiang addresses the opening ceremony of the 20th China-ASEAN Expo and China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit in Nanning, the capital of south China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Sept 17, 2023. Photo: Xinhua

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.



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

CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

TAIWAN VOTERS CHOOSE INDEPENDENCE

DAVID KEEGAN, JOHN HOPKINS SCHOOL OF ADVANCED INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
KYLE CHURCHMAN, DIRECTOR OF GLOBAL STRATEGY & ANALYSIS AT ADVAMED

Taiwan's election campaign has concluded. Voters went to the polls on Jan. 13. As has been the case in almost every election, cross-strait relations with China were the central issue, a secondary issue being President Tsai Ing-wen's management of the economy. The outcome of the election will largely dictate the course of Taiwan-China relations over at least the next four years. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate and President Tsai Ing-wen's chosen successor, William Lai Ching-te, the eventual winner, proclaims that Taiwan is already independent as the Republic of China. It should continue to diversify economic linkages away from China, strengthen military deterrence, and hope that China will eventually offer talks without one-China preconditions. The opposition Kuomintang candidate, Hou Yu-ih, called for expanded cross-strait economic ties and dialogue with China under the one-China banner to reduce tensions while Taiwan also builds its military deterrence. China has deployed economic sticks, gray-zone military intimidation, and fake news to influence the election.

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Washington has expanded its support for Taiwan's self-defense, though less vigorously than Republican critics in Congress would like. Taiwan and the US have continued to expand trade ties in ways that will benefit Taiwan businesses though without tariff concessions that Taiwan eagerly wants. Now that Taiwan voters have elected William Lai, as the polls predicted, China will likely respond with increasing coercion. Had Hou Yu-ih been victorious, his challenge would have been to navigate between Beijing's pressure for cross-Straits concessions and Washington's suspicions of any such steps by Taiwan.

Let The Race Begin

As September's cooler weather signaled that Taiwan's election campaign was heating up, some polls suggested the race might be over. Taiwan's Vice President and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate William Lai Ching-te held a double-digit lead over his likely opponents. Hou You-ih, New Taipei City mayor and Nationalist (Kuomintang or KMT) Party candidate, was struggling to find his footing. Ko Wen-je, who rose to prominence as the independent Taipei City mayor and founded a third party, the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), was competing neck-and-neck with Hou for second place in opinion polls. Billionaire Terry Guo, or Kuo Tai-ming, the founder of Foxconn, which assembles Apple products in China, had lost his bid for the KMT but was organizing an independent run for president.

Lai Offers a Reliable Face

By September, the DPP and Lai had essentially completed presenting their campaign platform. Lai had already made the obligatory trip to the US made by all Taiwan presidential candidates in the form of a transit through the US to Paraguay in August. Lai made it clear that he would continue the policies of incumbent President Tsai Ing-wen—domestic, international, and cross-Straits. At a diplomatic reception on Oct. 26, [Lai assured his listeners](#) that Taiwan would remain open to dialogue with China while strengthening the island's military deterrence and economic resilience. He continued to insist that his longstanding commitment to Taiwan independence was consistent with the cross-Straits status quo because the Republic of China is independent, sovereign, and not subordinate to the People's Republic of China.



Figure 1 DPP presidential candidate and Vice President Lai Ching-te. Photo: Lai Ching-te

The one unfinished piece of the DPP campaign was selecting a vice-presidential candidate. For months, Bi-khim Hsiao, Taiwan's representative in Washington, had been rumored to be Lai's choice, and on Nov. 20, [Lai made the decision official](#) in a Facebook post. Hsiao quickly announced, "I am back." Hsiao first emerged in Taiwan politics as an English interpreter to DPP presidential candidate Chen Shui-bian in 2000, subsequently winning election herself to the Legislative Yuan in Taipei and then in the KMT stronghold of Hualien. Describing her tenure as Taiwan representative in Washington, [The New York Times praised](#) Hsiao's "powerful insider access" despite Taiwan's "peculiar outsider status." Hsiao's selection gave Lai an experienced electoral politician as his partner and signaled to Washington that, like Hsiao, he would work with the US. [China's Taiwan Affairs Office labeled her](#) immediately as part of "a double toxic duo."

Hou Appeals to Divergent Camps

KMT candidate Hou You-ih began September by making his visit to the United States to strengthen his foreign policy credentials, meeting with a series of think tanks and Congressional offices. The Biden administration chose not to meet with Hou to maintain balance with its decision, in line with the long-standing US one-China Policy, not to meet with Vice President Lai during his August transit. Hou did meet with the chair of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), Laura Rosenberger, until recently a senior director at the National Security Council, which provided a de-facto administration meeting.

During his visit, [Foreign Affairs magazine published](#) an article under Hou's name laying

out his foreign and cross-Strait policy. Hou promised “proactive pragmatism...increasing dialogue and...peace through strength.” He said that he had “no unrealistic expectations about Beijing’s intentions of seeking unification, and if necessary, by force.” At the same time, he warned that DPP policies “are pushing Taiwan to the brink of war.” Hou promised a cross-Strait policy of “deterrence, dialogue, and de-escalation.” In this article, as in other campaign statements, Hou sought to satisfy two divergent wings of the KMT—the more China-friendly KMT old-line deep Blue politicians, such as former President Ma Ying-jeou, who emphasized Taiwan’s China identity and economic ties to the mainland, encapsulated in the “1992 Consensus,” and the younger, more China-skeptical KMT officials who, like most of Taiwan’s voters, have been antagonized by China’s increasing number of gray-zone incursions into the waters and airspace immediately around Taiwan.

Two KMT candidate selections suggest that the elder statesmen have prevailed. On Nov. 19, the KMT announced that Han Kuo-yu, its defeated 2020 presidential candidate and deep Blue favorite would lead its list of at-large candidates for the Legislative Yuan elections to be held concurrently with the presidential elections on Jan. 13. On Nov. 24, [Hou Yu-ih announced](#) that Jaw Shau-kong, chairman of Taiwan's Broadcasting Corporation of China, a popular deep Blue talk show host, would be his vice-presidential running mate. [Jaw promptly announced](#) that he would take charge of campaigning in northern Taiwan where the preponderance of the population and of KMT voters resides. There was no indication whether that approach had been coordinated with Hou. Together, these two nominations suggest that the KMT and Hou have decided that their best chance of victory lies in mobilizing their base. Although it is difficult to assign a cause and effect relationship, polls shortly after these nominations suggested that [the KMT ticket had surged](#) to within striking distance of the DPP ticket of Lai and Hsiao.

Fewer than three weeks later, on Dec. 14, KMT Vice-chairman [Andrew Hsia traveled](#) to mainland China, the most recent in a series of visits to meet with Taiwan businesses and Chinese officials, further solidifying the image of the KMT as the party of cross-Strait relations and business.

The Ko Wen-je Wild Card

Recognizing that neither Hou nor Taiwan People’s Party candidate Ko Wen-je seemed able to match Lai’s poll numbers alone, Ma Ying-jeou sought to bring the two of them together to run on a single ticket. Although the idea seemed plausible, the devil in the details was who would be the presidential candidate and who would take the second spot. After a series of awkward encounters in front of local media, [Ko walked away](#), leaving Ma and the KMT looking politically inept. Later, [Ko told a TV interviewer](#) that “in my heart I am deep Green” (i.e., sharing the ideology of the DPP) and that he would continue President Tsai’s security and cross-Strait policies.

As Ko’s poll numbers faded following the collapsed talks with the KMT, speculation has arisen whether Ko supporters might engage in “strategic voting.” Normally, “strategic voting” sees voters switching their vote from a third-place candidate to a second-place candidate to defeat the first-place candidate, in this case switching their votes from Ko to Hou to defeat Lai. However, if Ko’s supporters have the same Green blood he claims, will they choose instead to change their vote from Ko to Lai to ensure that the KMT is defeated?

National Day Rancor



Figure 2 Emblem for Taiwan National Day 2023.
Photo: Taiwan News

Amidst all the political contention and maneuvering of the past few months, Taiwan’s National Day on Oct. 10 might have seemed an opportunity for national unity and a respite from partisan rancor. However, Hou Yu-ih and [Ma Ying-jeou boycotted the event](#). Casting themselves as defenders of the Republic of China against advocates of Taiwan independence, they protested that the logo for

the celebration suggested that it was celebrating Taiwan's national day rather than the Republic of China's.

President Tsai's national day address offered her an opportunity on a Taiwan-wide stage to persuade voters that her policies had benefited them and that they should elect Lai Ching-te to continue them. In familiar terms, [Tsai said](#) that "peace is the only option across the Taiwan Strait," that maintaining the status quo is the key to peace, and that Taiwan is willing to work out "a path to peaceful coexistence" with China. While Tsai's words might have seemed conciliatory, China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) rejected Tsai's appeal, saying that she was "playing a double game" by urging dialogue without accepting China's one-China principle and the "1992 consensus," which it insists is the prerequisite for dialogue.



Figure 3 President Tsai Ing-wen at the 112th Double Tenth National Day Celebration of the Republic of China in the plaza in front of the Presidential Office Building. Photo: Wang Yu Ching

Beijing Wields Economic Stick Against Terry Gou

The fourth candidate to throw his hat in the presidential ring was Terry Gou (Kuo Tai-ming), who had failed in the spring to win the KMT presidential nod. In mid-September [Gou announced](#) that he would collect the 289,667 signatures, or 1.5% of eligible 2020 voters, to qualify for the ballot. By early November, Gou announced he had secured over 1 million signatures. Just before the Nov. 24 deadline to file as a candidate, Gou announced he was ending his presidential bid. Many suggested that Gou was simply acknowledging the obvious—that he was dead last in all the polls.

Others pointed to an announcement on Oct. 22 that four Chinese provinces were [launching investigations](#) into tax and land use irregularities by Foxconn, the contract manufacturing company founded by Gou with a huge presence in China. Some analysts suggested this was a calculated move by Beijing to pressure Gou out of the presidential race, which would help consolidate the opposition camp. If so, it was also an unmistakable warning to all Taiwan businesses in China that the authorities would not hesitate to punish economically anyone involved, even indirectly, in Taiwan politics in ways contrary to China's interests.

Beijing's Sticks and Carrots Abound

In mid-December, China's Ministry of Commerce concluded an investigation, which it had begun in April 2023, into trade restrictions imposed by "DPP authorities." In a transparent ploy, MOFCOM had set a deadline of Jan. 12, just one day before Taiwan's January 2024 presidential election, to wrap up its findings. Citing difficulties facing Mainland exporters across 2,509 agricultural and merchandise products, MOFCOM's [report](#) claimed Taiwan has erected unfair "trade barriers" in violation of WTO rules and the 2010 cross-strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement.

On the heels of MOFCOM's report, Beijing on Dec. 21 announced it had reimposed import duties on a dozen Taiwan products, mostly chemicals, which it had removed as part of the 2010 ECFA with Taiwan. The economic impact on Taiwan is expected to be limited because this basket of products covers around 1% of Taiwan's exports to China, and the tariff changes are small. Nevertheless, the Tsai government announced a \$577 million fund to aid affected petrochemical companies with export diversification initiatives. Taipei also appealed for third-party arbitration at the WTO, but China's TAO said cross-strait trade disputes must only be resolved through bilateral channels rooted in the "1992 Consensus."

Beijing could also reactivate higher MFN tariffs on up to 527 Taiwan products on the ECFA's early harvest list, with duties reaching as high as 25–30% in some product categories. In any case, Beijing may seek to avoid withdrawing from the ECFA completely, because doing so would undermine a foundational pillar on which future cross-strait economic agreements could rest.

As a carrot, Beijing in late December permitted grouper from “registered” Taiwan fisheries to be sold again in the mainland. China imposed a complete ban on grouper from Taiwan in June 2022, ostensibly on health safety grounds. In announcing the ban’s relaxation, China’s TAO credited KMT officials with helping to connect affected Taiwan fisheries with the appropriate mainland authorities. Taiwan’s Ministry of Agriculture called the decision “politically motivated” because multiple attempts to resolve the issue at the governmental level had been rebuffed.

China’s Military and Cyber Interventions

China has reinforced economic efforts to influence Taiwan voters through military and cyber initiatives. In contrast to 2020, when Beijing dialed back People’s Liberation Army (PLA) activity before the election, PLA activity around Taiwan has continued at an elevated pace, with the PLA launching its highest ever number of sorties in the Taiwan Strait on Sept. 18 (104) as well as the most intrusions across the midline of the Strait (40). In addition Chinese balloons have been seen periodically sailing near the island. This is done intentionally to remind voters that re-electing a DPP government will increase Taiwan’s military threat, as if to buttress their line, also used by the KMT, that the election is a choice between war and peace.

In the cyber domain, [troll groups have circulated rumors](#) through social media according to Taiwan AI Labs, that a vote for the DPP might endanger the survival of Taiwan’s ECFA signed under the KMT administration of Ma Ying-jeou and risk the island’s prosperity. Taiwan National Security Bureau Director-General [Tsai Ming-yen told Taiwan’s Legislative Yuan](#) that China has been able to deploy fake news to create a false choice between “war or peace” in the election, seeking to frighten voters. Sandra Oudkirk, Taipei-based director of the American Institute in Taiwan, [warned in a speech](#) on Dec. 4 that unnamed “foreign actors seek to use social media and emerging technologies to manipulate public discourse, divide the public, sow discord, influence our elections, and essentially undermine confidence in our democratic institutions.”

Washington Grapples with Taiwan’s Expanding Defense Needs

US President Joseph Biden delivered an Oval Office [address](#) on Oct. 19 where he linked the threats posed by Putin and Hamas but did not mention the PRC and its coercion of Taiwan. The next day, the White House submitted a supplemental budget [request](#) to Congress with the lion’s share of the funding earmarked for Ukraine, Israel, and securing the US-Mexico border. A public narrative soon developed describing Taiwan as a key component of the supplemental when, in fact, there is no budget item exclusively for Taiwan. Instead, the request asks for \$2 billion in Foreign Military Financing for Indo-Pacific partners, a portion of which could go to Taiwan.

Describing the supplemental’s funding for the Indo-Pacific as “wholly inadequate,” Chairman Mike Gallagher and six additional members of the House Select Committee on the CCP urged funding specifically for Taiwan. In particular, the group’s Nov. 20 [letter](#) to the House and Senate leadership proposed \$2.65 billion in weapons transfers to Taiwan from US stockpiles using presidential drawdown authority. However, the appropriations [bill](#) put before the Senate in early December closely aligned with the White House’s request and did not have any special funding for Taiwan. With Republicans and Democrats deadlocked on funding measures for the US southern border, Congress will revisit the supplemental request in January 2024.

On Dec. 22, President Biden signed into law the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) with some Taiwan-friendly provisions. Most notably, the [law](#) instructs the Pentagon to establish a comprehensive program to advise and train Taiwan’s armed forces on asymmetric defense concepts and battlefield tactics. Currently, Taiwan’s F-16 pilots receive training at a US Air Force base in Arizona, and a small number of US military trainers make rotations on the island. The 2024 NDAA further requires the Pentagon to report to Congress on the practical steps it is undertaking to address the nine broad elements of the comprehensive training program outlined in the NDAA.

Also in December, the Biden administration authorized a \$300 million [sale](#) of equipment and services to upgrade systems used by Taiwan’s military for battlefield communications and domain awareness. To some [observers](#), this

notification is notable for its timing, coming just one month before Taiwan's 2024 presidential election and signals Washington's desire for Taiwan to continue apace its military modernization efforts irrespective of internal political dynamics.

Taiwan Unveils Locally Manufactured Submarine

Taiwan's crash program to develop a diesel submarine achieved a milestone in late September with the public unveiling of a prototype. Taiwan's navy currently operates just two Dutch-made submarines from the 1980s. The United States ceased diesel submarine production in the late 1950s, but it has provided several technologies enabling Taiwan to complete this project. The first *Hai Kun*, or *Narwhal*, class submarine will undergo sea trials in May 2024 and is slated to become operational in 2025. A second submarine is expected to be completed in 2027.

At the unveiling ceremony in Kaohsiung, President Tsai lauded the submarine program as a boon to Taiwan's "asymmetric fighting power." Defense experts differ over the utility of undersea capabilities in repelling a PLA invasion, however. Submarines can stealthily launch torpedoes against PLA surface ships, but land-based anti-ship missiles spread across Taiwan could achieve similar objectives and are much less expensive. The cost to build one *Hai Kun*-class submarine is \$1.53 billion, and Taipei wants to build eight boats within the coming decade. Some strategists view a fleet of submarines as not the best use of Taiwan's constrained resources.



Figure 4 Taiwan's first domestically-made submarine is called Hai Kun. Photo: Wang Yu Ching

Taipei Advances Economic Agreements with the US, Canada, and the UK

The brisk pace of trade negotiations under the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade slowed in the fall as the United States Trade Representative (USTR) sought to conclude the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) trade pillar before November's APEC gathering in San Francisco. Bowing to pressure from progressive Democrats suspicious of big tech, USTR removed the digital trade chapter from the IPEF and withdrew US proposals on digital trade at the WTO. Such moves do not bode well for the digital trade component envisioned in the next phase of the US-Taiwan trade initiative.

In early December, Taiwan's top trade official John Deng sought to inject fresh momentum into US-Taiwan trade talks, saying Taipei is eager to build on the initial agreement reached in June 2023. A few days later, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai touted the "excellent progress" in current negotiations covering agriculture, labor, and environment, but again shot down any suggestion of tariff liberalization. The four-month interregnum between Taiwan's January election and May presidential inauguration could provide a window for US and Taiwan trade negotiators to make sustained progress, but the government changeover and a new Legislative Yuan could induce caution.

In October, Taiwan concluded negotiations with Canada on a robust investment protection agreement containing 70 provisions. In November, Taiwan and the United Kingdom signed a more basic roadmap, the [Enhanced Trade Partnership](#) (ETP), which envisions agreements on digital trade, green technologies, and investment promotion. ETP will function as a living agreement and is likely to expand into other areas. Taipei prioritized economic agreements with the UK and Canada because both are members of the CPTPP trade bloc that Taiwan is eager to join.

Looking Ahead—The Consequences of Choices

On Jan. 13, Taiwan's voters elected a new president and vice president, as well as the entirety of the Legislative Yuan (LY). Had either the DPP or the KMT won both the presidency and control of the LY, that party would have had a mandate to move forward with the cross-Straits policies as well as the domestic

economic policies it presented to the voters during the campaign. However, given the contradictory poll indications of support for Lai and dissatisfaction with eight years of President Tsai's government, the outcome of a DPP president constrained by a legislature controlled by the KMT and TPP came as little surprise. The last time a DPP president faced this situation, between 2000 and 2008 during President Chen Shui-bian's administration, it led to DPP-KMT confrontation and an ugly political paralysis. As Ko Wen-je has lost the presidential race, this scenario may offer his TPP a second chance at political power by siding with either the KMT or the DPP on certain issues in the LY as their interests dictate.

The Lai Choice

Now that Lai Ching-te and Hsiao Bi-khim have won the election, they have promised a continuation of President Tsai's disciplined adherence to the status quo of Taiwan as the Republic of China. Lai may become more forceful in insisting that this is the "independence" he has long sought. Since the DPP no longer controls the LY, they may struggle to continue Tsai's gradual increase in the defense budget and expansion of conscription. The KMT controls the LY if it can cooperate with the TPP, it may choose to press for reductions in defense spending, describing it as a distraction from needed social spending and a provocation to China. There will be no cross-Strait honeymoon. The KMT will likely continue and even intensify the series of mainland visits by senior KMT representatives, and China will offer to meet with the KMT at increasingly senior levels as a part of its divide-and-conquer "united front" campaign. Beijing will immediately intensify its gray-zone military intimidation of Taiwan. If the DPP controls both the presidency and the legislature, Beijing may decide it needs to send some dramatic signal, such as a large-scale exercise circling the island.

Lai will likely keep his public rhetoric much along the lines of Tsai's playbook, emphasizing openness to cross-Strait dialogue with mutual respect and without preconditions. At the same time, Hsiao will reach out through AIT and directly to the US National Security Council and appeal for US diplomatic support and accelerated delivery of armaments already committed. Lai's first challenge will come in his May 20 inaugural address. Will he choose to

offer some at least rhetorical softening of the DPP opposition to the 1992 consensus to appeal to Beijing? Will Washington press Lai to make such a gesture, and if he does, will Washington overcome its aversion to carrying cross-Strait messages to encourage Beijing to be responsive, perhaps reaching out even before the inauguration on May 20?

The DPP presidential victory combined with the KMT and TPP chance to control the LY could mean Taiwan will face confrontational domestic politics and turbulent cross-Strait seas.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-CHINA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2023

Sept. 3, 2023: US President Joe Biden [says](#) he is “disappointed” that Chinese President Xi Jinping will not attend the 18th G20 Summit, but said that he is “going to get to see” the Chinese president, presumably, later in the year.

Sept. 4, 2023: US Navy destroyer *USS Ralph Johnson* (DDG 114) [conducts](#) a “bilateral sail” with Philippine Navy guided-missile frigate *BRP Jose Rizal* (FF-150) in the South China Sea “to enhance the interoperability between the two navies.”

Sept. 6, 2023: US Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) [adds](#) 42 Chinese companies to its Entity List, effective Oct. 6, for supplying US-origin integrated circuits to Russian intermediaries and end-users.

Sept. 7, 2023: US Vice President Kamala Harris [attends](#) the East Asia Summit in Jakarta, Indonesia, where she “emphasized that freedom of navigation and overflight must be respected in the East China Sea and South China Sea” and “reaffirmed US support for the 2016 UN arbitral tribunal ruling and noted this ruling is final and legally binding.”

Sept. 9, 2023: US Navy destroyer *USS Ralph Johnson* (DDG 114) and Royal Canadian Navy frigate *HMCS Ottawa* (FFH 341) [conduct](#) “a routine Taiwan Strait transit...through waters where high-seas freedoms of navigation and overflight apply in accordance with international law.”

Sept. 9–10, 2023: President Biden attends the 18th G20 Summit and [talks](#) to PRC [Premier](#) Li Qiang on the margins of the summit.

Sept. 12, 2023: Department of Defense [releases](#) its 2023 Cyber Strategy Summary in which the

PRC is listed as the first among several state and non-state actors in a “contested cyberspace.”

Sept. 12, 2023: US Navy destroyer *USS Ralph Johnson* (DDG 114) and Royal Canadian Navy frigate *HMCS Ottawa* (FFH 341) [operate](#) in the South China Sea as part of a joint exercise.

Sept. 17, 2023: US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [meets](#) Chinese Communist Party Politburo Member, Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission, and Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#) in Malta.

Sept. 18, 2023: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets PRC Vice President Han Zheng on the sidelines of the 78th United Nations General Assembly in New York City.

Sept. 19, 2023: President Biden [delivers](#) remarks to the 78th session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), and reiterates that the US seeks to “responsibly manage the competition between our countries so it does not tip into conflict” and seeks “de-risking, not decoupling with China.”

Sept. 19, 2023: US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry [meets](#) PRC Vice President Han Zheng on the margins of the 78th UNGA, where the two sides “discussed the critical importance of bilateral and multilateral efforts to address the climate crisis, including to promote a successful COP 28.”

Sept. 21, 2023: US Assistant Secretary of Defense Ely Ratner [tells](#) the House Armed Services Committee that the Department of Defense is working with other US agencies and US “allies and friends” to “strengthen deterrence across the Taiwan Strait.”

Sept. 22, 2023: US and [China](#) [launch](#) an Economic Working Group and a Financial Working Group that will report directly to

Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen and Vice Premier He Lifeng.

Sept. 22, 2023: Defense officials from the US and the PRC [hold](#) a hybrid in-person and virtual meeting to discuss the Department's recently released 2023 DOD Cyber Strategy Unclassified Summary and to engage in "substantive discussion on a range of cyber-related topics."

Sept. 22, 2023: US Department of Commerce [releases](#) the final rule implementing the national security guardrails of the CHIPS and Science Act, including the rules that prohibit recipients of CHIPS funds from materially expanding semiconductor manufacturing capacity in China.

Sept. 25, 2023: Department of Commerce's BIS [adds](#) 11 entities based in China to the Entity List for national security concerns, including implication in "a conspiracy to violate US export controls."

Sept. 26, 2023: Department of State, together with the departments of the Treasury, Commerce, Homeland Security, and Labor and the Office of the US Trade Representative, [issues](#) an Addendum to the 2021 Updated Xinjiang Supply Chain Business Advisory to "call attention to the People's Republic of China's (PRC) ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and the evidence of widespread use of forced labor there."

Sept. 27, 2023: US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, National Security Agency, and Federal Bureau of Investigation, joined by Japan National Police Agency and Japan National Center of Incident Readiness and Strategy for Cybersecurity, [publish](#) a "Joint Cybersecurity Advisory" about "malicious activity by People's Republic of China (PRC)-linked cyber actors known as BlackTech."

Sept. 28, 2023: Department of State's Global Engagement Center [releases](#) a special report on

"How the People's Republic of China Seeks to Reshape the Global Information Environment."

Sept. 29, 2023: Department of State [introduces](#) new China Coordinator and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for China and Taiwan, Mark Lambert, who is to "oversee the Office of China Coordination and the Office of Taiwan Coordination in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs."

Oct. 3, 2023: Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [sanctions](#) 28 individuals and entities involved with the manufacture and distribution of fentanyl, methamphetamine, and MDMA precursors. Alongside, the Department of Justice [announces](#) eight indictments charging China-based companies and their employees with "crimes relating to fentanyl and methamphetamine production, distribution of synthetic opioids, and sales resulting from precursor chemicals."

Oct. 9, 2023: [US](#) Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, leading a bipartisan Senate delegation team, meets [Chinese](#) President Xi Jinping in Beijing.

Oct. 10, 2023: China's Ministry of Commerce [announces](#) restrictions, starting Dec. 1, on the export of several categories of high-purity natural and synthetic graphite materials vital to the clean tech and electric vehicle (EV) industries.

Oct. 12, 2023: US Navy P-8A *Poseidon* aircraft [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait in international airspace to "demonstrate the United States" commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific."

Oct. 17, 2023: Department of Commerce's BIS [adds](#) 13 Chinese companies to the Entity List for aiding the AI capabilities of China's military and high-tech surveillance sector and, thus, "acting contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States."

Oct. 17, 2023: Department of Commerce's BIS [tightens](#) export controls on advanced semiconductor and manufacturing equipment as well as supercomputing items to China.

Oct. 17, 2023: Department of Defense [releases](#) "a collection of declassified images and videos depicting 15 recent cases of coercive and risky operational behavior by the PLA against US aircraft operating lawfully in international airspace in the East and South China Sea regions."

Oct. 19, 2023: Department of Defense [releases](#) its annual report on "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China."

Oct. 22, 2023: Department of State [releases](#) a statement on "US Support for our Philippine Allies in the Face of Repeated PRC Harassment in the South China Sea."

Oct. 23, 2023: US and PRC [hold](#) first meeting of the Economic Working Group, "which serves as an ongoing channel to discuss and facilitate progress on bilateral economic policy matters."

Oct. 25, 2023: US and PRC [hold](#) first meeting of the Financial Working Group, "which serves as an ongoing channel for both countries to discuss financial policy matters and cooperation on common challenges."

Oct. 25, 2023: California Gov. Gavin Newsom [meets Chinese President](#) Xi in Beijing. Newsom, joined by US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns, also meets China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Vice President Han Zheng and [signs](#) a new climate-focused Memorandum of Understanding with National Development and Reform Commission Chairman Zheng Shanjie.

Oct. 26, 2023: US Indo-Pacific Command [releases](#) a statement saying that "a People's Republic of China J-11 pilot executed an unsafe intercept of a US Air Force B-52 aircraft" on Oct. 24, 2023 while the latter was "lawfully

conducting routine operations over the South China Sea in international airspace."

Oct. 26-27, 2023: Secretary of State Blinken [meets PRC](#) Foreign Minister Wang in Washington "as part of ongoing efforts to maintain open lines of communication on a full range of issues."

Oct. 27, 2023: President Biden [meets China's](#) Foreign Minister Wang Yi in the White House, and conveys his condolences on the passing of former Premier Li Keqiang.

Oct. 29, 2023: Department of Defense's principal director for China, Taiwan, and Mongolia Xanthi Carras [attends](#) the 10th Xiangshan Forum in Beijing, with a view to restarting direct military-to-military contact between the US and PRC.

Nov. 1, 2023: Destroyer from the US Navy 7th Fleet and a frigate from the Royal Canadian Navy jointly [conduct](#) a "routine Taiwan Strait transit through waters where high-seas freedoms of navigation and overflight apply in accordance with international law."

Nov. 1-2, 2023: Government representatives from the US and China [attend](#) the AI Safety Summit convened by the UK in Bletchley Park and are listed as participants who adhere to The Bletchley Declaration.

Nov. 2, 2023: Speaking at an Asia Society event, Secretary of the Treasury Yellen [delivers](#) remarks on the "Biden Administration's Economic Approach Toward the Indo-Pacific" in which she reiterated how "the United States does not seek to decouple from China."

Nov. 3, 2023: [US](#) Department of State China Coordinator and Deputy Assistant Secretary for China and Taiwan Mark Lambert holds "substantive, constructive, and candid discussions on a range of maritime issues" with [China's](#) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General for Boundary and Ocean Affairs Hong Liang.

Nov. 3, 2023: US Navy destroyer USS Dewey [conducts](#) a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea near the Spratly Islands.

Nov. 4-7, 2023: US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate Kerry and [China's](#) Special Envoy for Climate Change Xie Zhenhua [meet](#) at Sunnylands, California, where they sign the Sunnylands Agreement on “Enhancing Cooperation to Address the Climate Crisis.” (The statement was released by the US on Nov. 14, 2023, local time and by China on Nov. 15, 2023, local time.)

Nov. 6, 2023: Special Advisor on International Disability Rights Sara Minkara and Department of Labor Assistant Secretary for Disability Employment Policy Taryn Williams [meet](#) the China Disabled Persons’ Federation (CDPF) to resume the US-China Coordination Meeting on Disability.

Nov. 6, 2023: Ambassador to the PRC Nicholas Burns [leads](#) the first official US representation at the China International Import Expo in Shanghai.

Nov. 7, 2023: Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance Mallory Stewart [meets PRC](#) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General of Arms Control Sun Xiaobo and holds “a candid and in-depth discussion on issues related to arms control and nonproliferation.”

Nov. 7, 2023: It is [reported](#) that the office of Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin made a formal request to meet with Austin’s Chinese counterpart on the sidelines of the upcoming ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM+) in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Nov. 9-10, 2023: Secretary of the Treasury Yellen and PR [China](#) Vice Premier He [meet](#) in San Francisco where they hold “candid, direct, and productive discussions on the US-China bilateral economic relationship and a wide range of issues.”

Nov. 12, 2023: In a news [interview](#) with CBS’ “Face the Nation,” White House National Security Adviser Sullivan says that reestablishing US-China military ties “has been a priority for President Biden” so as to reduce “miscalculations” and secure US national security interests.

Nov. 14, 2023: US Presidential Climate Envoy Kerry and Chinese counterpart Xie Zhenhua jointly [release](#) the “Sunnylands Statement on Enhancing Cooperation to Address the Climate Crisis,” committing both countries to deeper cooperation on methane reductions.

Nov. 15, 2023: President Biden and [Chinese](#) President Xi [have](#) a “candid,” “in-depth,” and “constructive” conversation on the bilateral relationship and a range of global issues in Woodside, CA. They agree to promote and strengthen bilateral dialogue and cooperation in areas AI and counternarcotics; resume high-level communication between the two militaries; and work toward a significant further increase in scheduled passenger flights, among others.

Nov. 16, 2023: President Biden provides remarks and [holds](#) a press conference following the conclusion of meetings with President Xi in which he details the main accomplishments and outcomes of the “candid,” “constructive and productive” bilateral meetings.

Nov. 16, 2023: President Xi [delivers](#) a speech at a welcome dinner by friendly organizations in the US, where he champions people-to-people ties as the foundation of China-US relations.

Nov. 16, 2023: China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi [gives](#) a readout on the significance and features of the Xi-Biden meeting to the press, in which he describes the meeting as strategic and historic as well as one that provides stewardship.

Nov. 16, 2023: Secretary of Commerce Raimondo and [China's](#) Minister of Commerce

Wang Wentao [hold](#) first ministerial meeting following the Xi-Biden meeting in California and conduct “pragmatic, constructive and fruitful communication on China-US economic and trade relations and economic and trade issues of common concern.”

Nov. 16, 2023: US Vice-President Kamala Harris [meets](#) President Marcos of the Philippines during which she “reiterated the United States stands shoulder-to-shoulder in defending the Philippines’ sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the South China Sea” and reaffirmed the United States’ defense commitment under the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty.

Nov. 17, 2023: President Biden [states](#) in his remarks at the APEC Leaders Retreat Meeting in San Francisco how he and President Xi had a brief discussion during their in-person meeting a few days before about the “impact of artificial intelligence and how we have to work on it.”

Nov. 17, 2023: Department of Commerce’s BIS [announces](#) that it has removed the Ministry of Public Security’s Institute of Forensic Science of China from the Entity List.

Nov. 21, 2023: Broadcom and VMware [announce](#) that they intend to close the former’s acquisition of the latter after receiving all required regulatory approvals, including the final one outstanding from China’s anti-trust regulator, the State Administration for Market Regulation.

Nov. 25, 2023: US Navy destroyer *USS Hopper* [conducts](#) a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea near the Paracel Islands.

Nov. 29, 2023: In a press briefing for the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC (COP28), US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate Kerry [highlights](#) the importance of the US-China partnership to fight the climate crisis and deliver progress at COP28.

Dec. 1, 2023: Department of Commerce [releases](#)

two [proposed](#) guidance on electric vehicle tax credits under the US Inflation Reduction Act to prohibit tax credit recipients from manufacturing battery components or extracting critical minerals in China.

Dec. 5, 2023: China’s Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#) goes to the [US](#) Embassy in China to mourn the passing of former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Dec. 6, 2023: US Navy *P-8A Poseidon* [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait in international airspace.

Dec. 6, 2023: Leaders of the Group of Seven (G7) [meet](#) virtually and release a Leaders’ Statement which says the G7 “stand prepared to build constructive and stable relations with China” but remain committed to “push for a level playing field” for workers and companies and remain “seriously concerned” about the situation in the East and South China Seas.

Dec. 6, 2023: [US](#) Secretary of State Blinken and [China’s](#) Foreign Minister Wang Yi have a phone call at the former’s request.

Dec. 8, 2023: Department of Homeland Security [designates](#) three additional PRC-based companies to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act Entity List.

Dec. 8, 2023: Department of State’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor [releases](#) a report to Congress on the Imposition of Sanctions Pursuant to the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, as is required by Section 6(a) of the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020.

Dec. 10, 2023: Noting that Chinese ships “employed water cannons and reckless maneuvers” near Second Thomas Shoal, the Department of State [releases](#) a press statement to show “support for the Philippines in the South China Sea.”

Dec. 13, 2023: *Financial Times* releases an article [reporting](#) that Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Chase “recently” met Maj.

Gen. Liu Zhan, the PRC's defense attaché in Washington, which took place prior to the Biden–Xi summit.

Dec. 14, 2023: Secretary of the Treasury Yellen [delivers](#) remarks on the US–China economic relationship at the US–China Business Council's 50th Anniversary Dinner, and discusses the plans for the Biden administration's economic approach to China.

Dec. 15, 2023: Department of Commerce's BIS [removes](#) four Chinese companies from the Unverified List "because BIS was able to verify their bona fides."

Dec. 15, 2023: US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns [delivers](#) public remarks on US–China relations at the Brookings Institution in which he mentions, among other topics, a mutual commitment to double scheduled passenger flights between the US and China in early 2024.

Dec. 17, 2023: US [condemns](#) the prosecution of "pro-democracy advocate and media owner Jimmy Lai in Hong Kong under the PRC-imposed National Security Law."

Dec. 17, 2023: President Biden [delivers](#) a statement on the 80th Anniversary of the Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act to remember the harms resulting from the act and honor the people of Chinese heritage and their contributions to the US.

Dec. 18, 2023: Head of US Indo-Pacific Command Adm. John Aquilino [tells](#) reporters in Tokyo that, "[s]ince the [Biden–Xi] summit, those [risky and coercive plane maneuvers] seem to have stopped," also noting that "would be an incredibly positive outcome if that were to continue."

Dec. 19, 2023: Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) [adds](#) 13 PRC companies to the Unverified List "on the basis that BIS was unable to verify their bona fides."

Dec. 21, 2023: Gen. Charles Q. Brown, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, [holds](#) a video meeting with [Gen. Liu Zhenli](#), a member of the China's Central Military Commission (CMC) and chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department at the invitation, as part of the efforts to maintain open lines of military-to-military communications.

Dec. 21, 2023: Department of Commerce [announces](#) the launch of an industrial base survey of the US semiconductor supply chain to "bolster the semiconductor supply chain, promote a level playing field for legacy chip production, and reduce national security risks posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC)." The announcement follows the release of an [initial](#) survey of the capabilities and challenges faced by the US semiconductor industry in which China is readily mentioned.

Dec. 22, 2023: Department of Commerce's Assistant Secretary for Export Enforcement [testifies](#) that China has taken concrete steps to stem the flow of fentanyl precursor chemicals into the US during a House Foreign Affairs Oversight and Accountability Sub-committee hearing to review the Bureau of Industry and Security's policies and practices.

Dec. 26, 2023: Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) [extends](#) COVID-related exclusions on the Section 301 tariffs on certain Chinese imports through May 31, 2024 to "enable the[ir] orderly review," and effectively thereby pushing out further the date of conclusion of its ongoing four-year review of the Section 301 tariffs that began in May 2022.

Dec. 26, 2023: China's foreign ministry spokesperson [announces](#) Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law-based countermeasures against a US intelligence data company Kharon and two researchers for providing "so-called evidence for America's illegal sanctions related to Xinjiang," during her regular press conference.

Dec. 29, 2023: China opens the door to a conversation among defense chiefs by

[appointing](#) a non-US sanctioned former Navy commander, Adm. Dong Jun, as its new defense minister, two months after his predecessor Gen. Li Shangfu was officially sacked.



COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

BOTH KOREAS DITCH THEIR BORDER ACCORD

AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

The last third of 2023 was eventful in Korea, especially the two final months. Fall found South Koreans preoccupied with events elsewhere, and their implications for the peninsula. In September, Kim Jong Un's Siberian summit with Vladimir Putin prompted worries as to how closer Pyongyang-Moscow military ties might affect the ROK. In October, Hamas' shocking attack on Israel added a new layer of alarm, warranted or otherwise. President Yoon Suk Yeol was among those expressing fear that the DPRK might launch a similar surprise assault. He soon had less hypothetical concerns. In November, in response to Pyongyang's successful launch (following two earlier failures) of a military reconnaissance satellite, Seoul partially suspended 2018's inter-Korean military accord—whereupon the North predictably scrapped it entirely. Tensions grew as both sides rearmed at the ironically named Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and talked tough—none tougher than Kim Jong Un, who spoke openly of occupying the South. As the year ended, Kim declared a major change in DPRK doctrine. Dropping its longstanding lip service to reunification, the North now regards the peninsular situation as “relations between two belligerent states.” The implications of this shift remain to be seen.

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The Kim-Putin Show: Less Than Met Seoul's Eye?

Four months is a long time in Korea. Back in early September, South Korea was basking in the relief of a second failed spy satellite launch by North Korea. On Sept. 1, Seoul slapped a set of sanctions on a bunch of DPRK officials, who (obviously) have no dealings with the ROK anyway, the 11th time Yoon's government has performed this empty gesture. The same day, the ROK military called off its search and salvage operations in the West/Yellow Sea, having found nothing significant. After Pyongyang's first failed launch in May, Seoul retrieved a big chunk of the rocket and part of the actual satellite. US and ROK experts examined the debris, snootily [concluding](#) it had "no military utility at all as a reconnaissance satellite." (So why all the fuss in November when the North got third time lucky?)

A few days later came the first media reports that Kim Jong Un would visit Russia. That is a different bilateral, covered elsewhere in this issue and more [widely](#). Our concern here is the impact (actual and potential) on inter-Korean relations, and how that was framed in Seoul. This visit was obviously something for the ROK to watch closely, but it also requires nuanced, well-informed, and sober evaluation. Those qualities seemed absent from much of the commentary, in Seoul and elsewhere, which took the spectacle of the Kim-Putin show at face value—just as the principals doubtless hoped. (Two ogres meet! The world is in peril!)



Figure 1 On September 13, President Vladimir Putin of Russia shakes hands with North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un during a meeting at the Vostochny Cosmodrome in the far eastern Amur region. Photo: Vladimir Smirnov

Malevolent Kim and Putin may be, but each is also calculating. For instance, any suggestion

that Russia might now aid North Korea's nuclear program seems far-fetched. It is hardly in Moscow's interest to bolster Kim's capacity to act as a loose cannon, risking a repeat of the bloody and costly peninsular adventurism in which his grandfather embroiled the USSR in 1950 (a notional secret, which Putin for some reason chose to [reveal](#) in July). Moreover, although multilateral cooperation in the UN Security Council (UNSC) on the DPRK has broken down, Moscow was [cooperating](#) with a major Western think-tank in assessing North Korean WMD as recently as 2021.

Yet there had to be some quid pro quo for the DPRK munitions and [missiles](#) that are now killing Ukrainians. And there was: satellite launch assistance. Putin [said](#) so during Kim's visit, and South Korea's spy agency [reckons](#) there was Russian input in North Korea's successful launch in November. While this violated UNSC resolutions, helping a space program will be widely regarded as a less serious breach than directly boosting Kim's WMD efforts.

Also dubious is the [suggestion](#) that North Korea, Russia, and China constitute a "developing trilateral imperialist partnership." Despite a superficial resemblance, unlike the Cold War of yore this is an alliance of convenience between three states with a long history of deep mutual mistrust. Why assume each shares the other's goals? Xi Jinping has even less cause than Putin to assist Kim in harming South Korea, a key trading partner, which despite Yoon's pro-US bent is resisting pressure from Washington to disengage economically from China.

Indeed, contrarian as it may sound, Kim's snuggling up to Beijing and Moscow—a striking break from Pyongyang's shrill past assertions of *Juche* (self-reliance)—may actually enhance South Korea's security. The more North Korea depends on this pair, the better they can rein Kim in. Neither wants a Korean distraction from their primary foci, Ukraine and Taiwan.

Hamas: A Misleading Comparison; No Real Link

Then came Oct. 7, and the world changed. As with Kim's visit to Russia, South Korea must ponder the implications of Hamas's shocking assault on Israel and the war this unleashed. But here again, what is needed is careful analysis, not hasty and far-fetched comparisons. True, the ROK too faces a hostile and unpredictable

neighbor. Like Israel, its border security relies on human vigilance and electronic surveillance, either or both of which may fail. Yet does that really mean a North Korean attack “could follow a similar pattern to the Hamas invasion,” as the chairman of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [suggested](#)? President Yoon echoed this in November, telling the visiting US Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, that—as the BBC [put](#) it—the allies must “be vigilant against any type of North Korean attack, including surprise assaults ‘resembling Hamas-style tactics.’”

Vigilance is certainly essential, but misleading opportunist comparisons that foment a generalized jumpiness do not help. There is also a risk of fighting the last war. The 1950-53 Korean War did start with a surprise DPRK attack across the 38th Parallel. But in 2023, any future all-out conflict (God forbid) would begin in the air, with missile strikes. Or if—far more plausibly, recent rhetoric notwithstanding—Kim seeks to harm the South without provoking retaliation, then [cyber-attacks](#) would fit the bill much better.

The fact that Hamas has some DPRK weapons is irrelevant. In an awkward moment in January 2024, Washington said it did not know of any military links between Pyongyang and Hamas, contra claims by South Korea’s National Intelligence Service (NIS). In all probability, the Palestinian group obtained North Korean weaponry from Iran, its main sponsor.

North’s Spy Satellite: Third Time Lucky—But How Serious?

In November events refocused Seoul’s attention on realities at home rather than speculative comparisons. Yet once again, the balance of risk assessment was questionable. Moreover, it has to be asked whether the ROK government’s actions lowered risk, or potentially raised it.

After North Korea’s second attempt this year to place a military reconnaissance satellite in orbit failed in August, Kim Jong Un vowed to try again in October. That month came and went, but in mid-November preparations were noticed. On Nov. 21, the DPRK notified Japan (but no one else, it seems) of a 10-day launch window, starting from midnight. In the event they jumped the gun by 78 minutes, interrupting Yoon’s lunch with King Charles at Buckingham Palace in London.

The next day the National Aerospace Technology Administration (NATA, formerly NADA; the D was for Development) reported a successful launch, overseen by Kim Jong Un, adding that it plans to put up several more satellites “in a short span of time.” The morning after, Kim visited NATA’s control center in Pyongyang and congratulated all concerned. KCNA, North Korea’s news agency, reported that he was shown “aerospace photos of Anderson Air Force Base, Apra Harbor and other major military bases of the US forces taken in the sky above Guam in the Pacific.” Several similar visits and reports followed over the next few days, with claims that Kim had viewed photos of the Pentagon, the White House, and much more.



Figure 2 On November 22, 2023, Kim Jong Un (second from the right) visited the Pyongyang General Control Centre of the Korean National Aerospace Technology Directorate, a day after the launch of a rocket carrying the reconnaissance satellite 'Malligyong-1'. Photo: AP

Did he, really? Were they any good? Regular readers may recall the brouhaha a year ago, when North Korea released satellite images of Seoul and Incheon in grainy black and white, taken from a test rocket—only to be mocked for their poor quality. Russian help may have solved the launch issues, but is the camera any better? Pyongyang has lied about its satellites before. This could all be a bluff. Even South Korea’s hawkish new Defense Minister Shin Won-sik (more on whom in a moment) called the North’s new satellite “rudimentary.”

Even if it is for real, or if future satellites—Pyongyang has pledged more launches—carry better cameras, this might render the peninsula more rather than less secure, by reducing the risk of misunderstanding. Armageddon in Korea could plausibly begin, as in Jeffrey Lewis’s chilling 2018 speculative [novel](#), with one side wrongly believing it was under nuclear attack—and

responding in kind. If Kim Jong Un can now view ROK and US force movements in real time, he is arguably less likely to over-react to unseen unknowns.

Seoul could have taken a relaxed view of this new DPRK spy in the sky. Especially as, just 10 days later, its own—undoubtedly far superior—first indigenous reconnaissance satellite joined the North's in orbit. To be sure, the North's launch violated UNSC resolutions prohibiting any activity related to ballistic missiles (Pyongyang indignantly insists that space and BMs are two different things). Routine condemnation was thus *de rigueur*. Yoon could also have slapped on a few more symbolic sanctions.

Both Koreas Undermine Their Border Peace Accord

Instead, he chose to up the ante: suspending part of an inter-Korean military accord signed in September 2018, in happier times. While not addressing fundamental issues such as WMD, the Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA), as Seoul terms it, set up air and sea buffer zones along the border, banned live-fire drills with artillery and coastal guns, and withdrew a few guard posts from the DMZ. (Not many: each side demolished 10, but that still left the South with 67 and the North with 150.) By all accounts, these modest but meaningful measures had for five years improved the atmosphere and kept the peace at the de facto inter-Korean border. This was surely a plus— despite several breaches by North Korea, such as artillery shelling in buffer zones near the DMZ, and December 2022's cheeky Boxing Day drone incursions.

That last incident prompted Yoon's first threat to suspend the CMA, a call that grew louder as 2023 progressed. This fall it became an insistent drumbeat, after Yoon nominated a new minister of National Defense: Shin Won-sik, a retired three-star general turned lawmaker. Among many incendiary remarks, Shin has said South Korea's military should prepare for "unification through marching North" and train units ready "to decapitate Kim Jong Un when there is a possibility to remove him." He also once called Yoon's liberal predecessor Moon Jae-in "a North Korean spy," adding that it is a "matter of time until we cut his throat." (Such appalling language is no joke. On Jan. 2, opposition leader Lee Jae-myung was [stabbed](#) in the neck, just

missing an artery, by a far-right assailant who [admitted](#) his aim was to stop Lee ever becoming president.)



Figure 3 Minister of National Defense Shin Won-sik addresses the audience during his inauguration ceremony at the ministry in Yongsan District. Photo: Yonhap

Shin apologized for that murderous last comment at his National Assembly confirmation hearing on Sept. 27. He also vowed to end or suspend the CMA, saying it "primarily benefits North Korea and is largely unfavorable for us." In particular, the no-fly zone restricts surveillance and, as the ROK news agency *Yonhap* put it, limits "ROK capabilities for precision strikes against North Korea." He also warned: "If North Korea attempts a nuclear attack, the DPRK regime will meet its end...If it provokes, we will retaliate powerfully so they miserably regret it..." This set the tone for similar strong language and calls to partly suspend the CMA, echoed by among others both the outgoing and incoming JCS chiefs.

It was hard to avoid the impression that Shin and others deemed the CMA a fetter, and were looking for a pretext to ease its restrictions. They must have known how Pyongyang would respond. Unpredictable as North Korea can sometimes be, how it would react to this was a racing certainty. And so it proved. On Nov. 23, a day after South Korea suspended Article 1, Clause 3 of the CMA, which sets no-fly zones, the North tore up the whole thing. Somewhat contradictorily, it accused the South of breaking faith—while also claiming that the accord "has long been reduced to a mere scrap of paper." The DPRK Ministry of National Defense (MND, the same as in the ROK; for many years the Ministry of People's Armed Forces) roundly declared: "From now on, our army will never be bound by the September 19 North-South

Military Agreement...We will immediately restore all military measures that have been halted.” Should “an irretrievable clash” occur, “the political and military gangsters of the ‘ROK’ ...will be held wholly accountable.” (More on that surprising ‘ROK’ below.)

Events then moved as expected. On Nov. 27 South Korea’s MND said the North had begun rebuilding guard posts—at first temporary structures, but later with concrete—and was bringing heavy firearms into the DMZ. Next day “informed sources” told *Yonhap* that KPA troops at Panmunjom were sporting pistols. Photos showed Northern troops installing temporary guard posts, carrying apparent recoilless guns, and standing guard at night in the DMZ. On Dec. 19, the UN Command (UNC), which has authority over the Joint Security Area (JSA) at Panmunjom, authorized ROK troops in the JSA to carry guns. Its spokesman added, “UNC has also informed the ROK government and KPA of its position that a disarmed JSA is safer and more peaceful ... this can be achieved by reimplementing the previous UNC-KPA agreements.”

This was by no means Korean War redux, but a return to the status quo ante pre-Sept. 2018. Yet as every headline agreed, [tensions rose](#). MND Shin called the partial suspension of the CMA “a proportional response” and “minimal defensive measure” to Pyongyang’s spy satellite launch. But if the wholly predictable result was to raise tensions on the peninsula, was the game worth the candle? In early January, North Korea fired some 350 artillery shells into the West Sea, close to the Northern Limit Line (NLL). 2024 looks set to bring more such activity, hopefully within rather than crossing the MDL.

What’s In a Name? If It’s Korea, Plenty

Words, which do less harm than shells, are hurled across the DMZ constantly, mostly, though not solely, from the Northern side. Our last issue noted some linguistic developments, such as Pyongyang sometimes using the phrase “ROK”—which hitherto it had abjured, as implying recognition. We noted: “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.”

They may both be right. Recent months have made it clear that something is up. As Kim Jong

Un’s year-end speech (discussed below) confirmed, North Korea has been reconceptualizing how it thinks about, relates to, and refers to, the South. This turns out to be no easy task, as witness the variety of usages—some at least implicitly contradictory—currently in play.

The one consistent thread is a new and radical rejection of the shibboleth that (at some level) Korea is one; hence inter-Korean relations are not normal inter-state relations, but special in some way. The DPRK’s increased use of ‘ROK’—usually abbreviated, rather than spelt out—is part of this. But if this is de facto recognition of a kind, it is also disparaging. The context makes this clear—as when Kim refers to “the ROK clan,” for instance—along with weird formulations such as “ROK things” (meaning people; B.R. Myers [suggests](#) “ROK types” as conveying the flavor Pyongyang intends).

“Region of South Korean puppets” is another odd phrase, now not rare in headlines: [searching](#) *h* yields 203 uses (many are duplicates, to be sure), all but seven of them since July 2023. And whatever the new convolutions around “ROK,” the P-word has by no means gone away. During the Asian Games in October, a KCTV on-screen scorecard during an inter-Korean soccer game billed this brusquely a match between “Korea” and “Puppets.”



Figure 4 This footage, taken from North Korea’s Korean Central Television, features a women’s football match between South Korea and North Korea at the Asian Games held at Wenzhou Sports Centre Stadium in Wenzhou, China, on September 30. Photo: *Yonhap*

POWs and Abductees: Why Disinter Now?

Evidently South Korea will face fresh challenges from the North in 2024. Is Yoon Suk Yeol ready? We must hope so. Yet, aside from military matters, some aspects of his *Nordpolitik* are

frankly hard to fathom. One is the unrelenting focus on North Korea's human rights abuses. This is of course a huge issue, downplayed by those past ROK governments—most recently Moon Jae-in—which sought to engage the DPRK government above all. The crux is familiar. Advocates of engagement argue for sequencing: Start by seeking common ground, and leave more difficult issues for later, once trust has been built. Trouble is, later never comes.

If Moon bent the stick too far in one direction, Yoon is at the opposite extreme. By all means stress North Korean human rights, but the question is: How? Why? For whom? And to what end? If the aim is to publicize DPRK abuses, surely these are already well known—having been the subject of a special UN investigation almost a decade ago. In practice, what Yoon's administration mostly does, like its predecessors, is organize meetings and conferences. In December *NK News* ran an [article](#) headlined: "Lavish meals and North Korean human rights collide at Seoul's glitzy conferences." This noted the irony of marking DPRK suffering with a sumptuous steak dinner in a 5-star hotel—at which an actual defector, tearfully telling of her suffering and escape, was told to hurry up and finish her speech so that eating can commence.

The broad thrust of Yoon's policy also includes specific peculiarities. Of all the "tough nut" issues on which Pyongyang has never engaged, POWs and early abductees top the list. Here again, the crime was real enough. In 1950 the DPRK took up to 100,000 South Koreans north, during its brief occupation of the ROK at the start of the Korean War. In 1953 it retained a further 90,000 POWs who should have been repatriated. The North's shortage of skills and labor likely drove these de facto mass kidnappings. Criminal this was, but it is history: almost all concerned will now be dead. After over 70 years, why on earth, in 2024, would any ROK government seriously interested in engaging the North literally disinter this matter and try to put it on the formal inter-Korean agenda, packed as that is with many live issues? Yet that is Yoon's avowed policy (see the Chronology, Nov. 14–15). One might conclude, from this and other evidence, that Yoon does not seriously expect or intend to talk to Pyongyang.

Kim Declares War—Or Does He?

Low expectations in Seoul are understandable. It is now four years since Kim Jong Un in effect broke off contact, even before his Hanoi debacle with Donald Trump in February 2019. If Kim shunned even the endlessly friendly Moon Jae-in, *a fortiori* he would have no time for his hawkish successor. That much was already clear as 2023 drew towards its close. And then Kim cranked up the rhetoric and tension even more.

In the Kim Jong Un era, the New Year speeches and editorials that laid out policy under his grandfather and father, respectively, have been replaced by year-end Party plenums, lasting several days and ranging widely. The latest of these—officially, the 9th Enlarged Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the WPK—was held Dec. 26–30. At this meeting, among much else, Kim announced a radical [change](#) in North Korea's stance toward the South. To [some](#), this sounded like a declaration of war; [others](#) reckoned it was not so new. Still others [predicted](#) it may actually benefit the South. The relevant section of *KCNA's* report is excerpted as an Appendix, below.



Figure 5 The 9th Enlarged Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the WPK occurred at the office building of the Central Committee of the WPK. Photo: KCNA

Writing against the clock, I leave it to readers to form their own judgment. The avowed stance certainly sounds new, in ways foreshadowed in the discussion of nomenclature above. But the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. North Korea says a lot of things, many of them tough. Talk is cheap, trash talk included. From now on Pyongyang will talk differently about Seoul. How far it will walk differently remains to be seen. Watch this space.

Appendix: North Korea's New Stance on South Korea

Excerpt from [KCNA](#), "Report on 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th WPK Central Committee," 31 Dec. 2023.

The General Secretary made a detailed analysis of the gigantic geopolitical changes in international geo-political situation and balance of forces in 2023, the main features of present international situation and the external environment of the Korean peninsula. And he advanced the strategic and tactical policies to be held fast to in the external affairs and clarified the need to newly formulate the stands on the north-south relations and reunification policy and make a decisive policy change in the work against the enemy.

The field of external affairs should actively and tactically cope with the changing and developing international situation and write a diplomatic history of the DPRK which accords with the position of a powerful country on the principle of defending the dignity of the Party, raising the national dignity and protecting the national interests.

He set forth the tasks for concentrating the main efforts on the development of relations with the ruling parties of socialist countries to further expand and strengthen the external sphere of the country, further consolidating the foundation of support and solidarity to the DPRK by further developing the relations with the anti-imperialist independent countries opposed to the hegemony strategy of the U.S. and the West under ever-changing international situation and waging a dynamic anti-imperialist joint action and struggle on an international scale.

We should consistently adhere to the anti-U.S. and anti-enemy struggle principle of power for power and head-on contest and pursue the high-handed and offensive toughest policy.

This year we reaffirmed the unshakable will to counter the frantic nuclear war threat racket and all-out confrontation of the U.S. and its vassal forces with nukes and all-out confrontation and inflicted insurmountable security crisis and horror upon the enemies by the overwhelming exercise of the thorough war deterrent.

Whatever the enemies attempt and whatever they choose, it is our unshakable principle and mode of struggle against the enemy to control by super-tough counteraction beyond it and by the exercise of powerful ability overwhelming it.

The conclusion put forward the line of making a fundamental turnabout in the sector of work toward the south on the basis of a cool analysis of the bitter history of the north-south relations which has repeatedly suffered only distrust and confrontation.

The Korean Peninsula is now constantly in the grip of an uncontrollable crisis due to the reckless anti-DPRK confrontation hysteria and military provocations of the U.S. and south Korean puppets.

It is a well known fact that physical clash can be caused and escalated even by a slight accidental factor in the area of along the Military Demarcation Line where large armed forces of both sides are standing in confrontation with one another, and no one can deny the fact that the two states, the most hostile toward each other, are coexisting in the Korean peninsula at present.

Such abnormal situation is not a random phenomenon like mutation in the light of the successive puppet regimes' extension of their policies but an inevitable result of the history of the north-south relations.

For a long period spanning not just 10 years but more than half a century, the idea, line and policies for national reunification laid down by our Party and the DPRK government have always roused absolute support and approval of the whole nation and sympathy of the world as they are most just, reasonable and fair. But none of them has brought about a proper fruition and the north-south relations have repeated the vicious cycle of contact and suspension, dialogue and confrontation.

If there is a common point among the "policies toward the north" and "unification policies" pursued by the successive south Korean rulers, it is the "collapse of the DPRK's regime" and "unification by absorption." And it is clearly proved by the fact that the keynote of "unification under liberal democracy" has been invariably carried forward although the puppet regime has changed more than 10 times so far.

The puppet forces' sinister ambition to destroy our social system and regime has remained unchanged even a bit whether they advocated "democracy" or disguised themselves as "conservatism," the General Secretary said, and went on:

The general conclusion drawn by our Party, looking back upon the long-standing north-south relations is that reunification can never be achieved with the ROK authorities that defined the "unification by absorption" and "unification under liberal democracy" as their state policy, which is in sharp contradiction with our line of national reunification based on one nation and one state with two systems.

Even at this moment, the south Korean puppets are unhesitatingly contending that the DPRK and its people are territory and population of the ROK that should be reclaimed, and it is shamelessly specified in the constitution of the ROK that "the territory of the ROK contains the Korean peninsula and its attached islands."

The reality urgently requires us to adopt a new stand on the north-south relations and the reunification policy.

Now we need to admit the reality and make the relations with the south Korean puppets clearer.

I think it is a mistake we should no longer make to regard the clan, who publicly defined us as the "principal enemy" and is seeking only the opportunity of "collapse of power" and "unification by absorption" in collusion with foreign forces, as the partner of reconciliation and reunification.

It is not suitable to the prestige and position of the DPRK to discuss the issue of reunification with the strange clan, who is no more than a colonial stooge of the U.S., just because of the rhetorical word the fellow countrymen.

South Korea at present is nothing but a hemiplegic malformation and colonial subordinate state whose politics is completely out of order, whole society tainted by Yankee culture, and defense and security totally dependent on the U.S.

The north-south relations have been completely fixed into the relations between two states hostile to each other and the relations between

two belligerent states, not the consanguineous or homogeneous ones any more.

It can be said this is the present address that shows the relations between the north and the south today.

The conclusion, lucidly looking into and recognizing the reality, stressed the need to take measures for readjusting and reforming the organizations in charge of the affairs related to the south including the United Front Department of the Party Central Committee and to fundamentally change the principle and orientation of the struggle.

Solemnly declaring that if the U.S. and south Korean puppets stubbornly attempt a military confrontation with the DPRK, the latter's nuclear war deterrence will go over to a grave action without hesitation, the conclusion set forth the important tasks for the fields in charge of the affairs with enemies and foreign countries to make preparations in a foresighted way for keeping pace with the powerful military actions of the Korean People's Army to subjugate the whole territory of the south on the basis of making it a fait accompli that a war may break out on the Korean peninsula any time due to the enemies' reckless moves for invading the DPRK.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2023

Sept. 1, 2023: Responding to North Korea’s failed satellite launch on Aug. 24, South Korea [sanctions](#) the Ryugyong Program Development Company (which [reportedly](#) “develops unmanned weapon systems and deploys its experts abroad”), plus the firm’s CEO and four other officials. This is the 11th set of bilateral ROK sanctions imposed in little over a year under Yoon Suk Yeol, targeting 51 institutions (mostly DPRK) and 54 named individuals. None of these have any dealings with Seoul, obviously, so this gesture is largely symbolic.

Sept. 1, 2023: An unnamed official [tells](#) *Yonhap*, South Korea’s semi-official news agency, that the ROK military has halted search and salvage activities after the DPRK’s second failed satellite launch, having found nothing significant.

Sept. 2, 2023: ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [says](#) that in the early hours the DPRK fired several cruise missiles toward the Yellow (West) Sea.

Sept. 3, 2023: Confirming Seoul’s report, KCNA [says](#) that “two long-range strategic cruise missiles tipped with mock nuclear warheads were fired” by “a high-spirited ... unit of the Korean People’s Army in the western region.” It [calls](#) this “a firing drill for simulated tactical nuclear attack...to warn the enemies of the actual nuclear war danger.” Pyongyang claims this “nuclear strike mission” was a success: the missiles flew 1,500 km for 7,672 and 7,681 seconds, respectively, detonating at a preset altitude of 150 meters above the target.

Sept. 5, 2023: South Korea’s Ministry of Unification (MOU) [reports](#) that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has delivered 98 speeches since inheriting power in late 2011. 32 of these, or almost one-third, were carried by DPRK media in his own voice—unlike his

microphone-shy father Kim Jong Il, who during his 17-year reign was only ever heard to utter a single sentence in public.

Sept. 5, 2023: MOU suggests that, as *Yonhap* [headlines](#) it, Kim Jong Un is “flaunting” his daughter Ju Ae at military events to “elicit” the Korean People’s Army (KPA)’s loyalty. 12 of Ju Ae’s 15 reported public appearances have been on military-related occasions. (As of Sept. 9 this becomes 13 of 16: father and daughter [attend](#) a paramilitary parade marking the 75th anniversary of the DPRK’s foundation in 1948.

Sept. 5, 2023: A propos US media [claims](#) (correct, it soon transpired) that Kim Jong Un may shortly visit Russia for a summit with Putin to discuss an arms deal, MOU [opines](#) that “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.” The ROK “is closely watching cooperative ties involving North Korea and has raised the reminder that all member countries of the United Nations have a duty to comply with the UN Security Council resolutions.”

Sept. 6, 2023: Speaking in Jakarta where he is attending the ASEAN and related summits, ROK President Yoon [says](#): “Attempts at military cooperation with North Korea, which damage peace in the international community, should be stopped immediately.”

Sept. 6, 2023: New MOU Kim Yung-ho [appoints](#) Ko Young-hwan—the first DPRK diplomat ever to defect to the ROK, and a former French interpreter for North Korea’s founding leader Kim Il Sung—as a special adviser “to help bolster the ministry’s capabilities.” (This must be for his experience rather than current knowledge: Ko came South in 1991.)

Sept. 7, 2023: After receiving a complaint from a Seoul city councilor, Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency (SMPA) [opens](#) a probe into Youn Mee-hyang, an independent lawmaker who recently attended a commemoration in Tokyo of the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake. The event was organized by the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon, Chosen Soren), which supports Pyongyang. Under the National Security Law (NSL), South Koreans must notify their government in advance of any contact with Chongryon.

Sept. 7, 2023: South Korean canoeists, who at the 2018 Asian Games in Indonesia won gold (500 meters) and bronze (200m) in dragon boat racing as part of a rare joint Korean women's team, [say](#) they look forward to beating their erstwhile Northern teammates at the upcoming Asiad in Hangzhou, China—but also hope to hang out with them. The DPRK has [registered](#) to participate in the Games. In May KBS, citing Kyodo, [said](#) Pyongyang will send 200 athletes for at least three events, including dragon boat racing. On Sept. 13 it is [confirmed](#) that the DPRK has registered 191 athletes for eight events, including dragon boat racing.

Sept. 9, 2023: ROK prosecutors [question](#) opposition leader Lee Jae-myung (on hunger strike since Aug. 31) for 11 hours; a medical team is on standby. This is Lee's fifth interrogation; already indicted on two other counts of corruption, he claims political persecution. This time, it is alleged that \$8 million illegally remitted to North Korea in 2019–20 by Ssangbangwool Group, an underwear maker, included \$3 million to facilitate a visit to Pyongyang by Lee, then governor of Gyeonggi province (greater Seoul). Lee says not a shred of evidence was produced. Admitting he had “tried to do business with the North for humanitarian support and exchanges,” he insists he “did not provide, or ask to provide, money and goods to the North in violation of South Korean laws and United Nations sanctions.” Lee is questioned [again](#) about this on Sept. 12, this time for five hours. He ends his hunger strike on Sept. 22.

Sept. 13, 2023: Yoon [nominates](#) Shin Won-sik, a hawkish retired three-star general turned lawmaker, as minister of National Defense. Among many incendiary remarks, Shin has [said](#) the ROK military should prepare for “unification through marching North” and train units ready “to decapitate Kim Jong Un when there is a possibility to remove him.” He also called Yoon's liberal predecessor Moon Jae-in “a North Korean spy,” adding that it is a “matter of time until we cut his throat.” (On. Sept. 27 he apologizes for that last comment.)

Sept. 14, 2023: A propos the previous day's summit between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin, South Korea's National Security Council (NSC) [says](#) in a press release: “North Korea and Russia will clearly pay the price if they are involved in any acts that pose a significant threat to our security by violating UN Security Council resolutions.” Earlier, the ROK foreign ministry (MOFA) similarly warns that any Russia-DPRK military cooperation deal would have a “very negative impact” on Seoul's relations with Moscow. MOU Kim Yung-ho [chimes](#) in too, calling on “North Korea and Russia to stop illegal and reckless acts that only deepen their own isolation, and abide by international norms.”

Sept. 21, 2023: Following Kim Jong Un's trip to Russia (Sept. 10–19) and summit with Putin, South Korea [sanctions](#) 10 individuals (mostly North Korean) and two entities—both Slovakian companies—said to be involved in DPRK weapons exports, including to Russia. These are the 12th unilateral sanctions of Yoon's presidency. Those sanctioned now total 64 individuals and 53 institutions. (See also Sept. 1, above.)

Sept. 21, 2023: MOU [offers](#) to repatriate the remains of a North Korean—identified as such by his badge of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il—found on a beach on the South's Seongmo island on Sept. 10. During the decade 2010–19 Seoul returned 23 Northern corpses, but latterly Pyongyang has turned unresponsive. The last

two such cases, in November 2022 and June 2023, were cremated after the North failed to reply.

Sept. 26, 2023: By a 7-2 vote, the ROK Constitutional Court [strikes down](#) the Moon-era revision to the Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act, which since March 2021 has prohibited—though not effectively prevented—the sending of propaganda leaflets by balloon into North Korea. Activist groups had challenged the constitutionality of this. The Court rules that the ban excessively restricted freedom of expression.

Sept. 26-27, 2023: North Korea holds the 9th session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), its rubber-stamp Parliament. The date was announced in advance, but unusually the meeting goes unreported until [afterwards](#); causing brief [doubt](#) in Seoul as to whether the assembly actually assembled.

Sept. 27, 2023: At his National Assembly confirmation hearing, MND nominee Shin [vows](#) to end or suspend Sept. 2018's inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement ([CMA](#)). This created air and sea border buffer zones, banned live-fire drills with artillery and coastal guns, and partially withdrew guard posts from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Shin says the accord “primarily benefits North Korea and is largely unfavorable for us.” In particular, the no-fly zone (in Yonhap's summary) “restricts surveillance and ROK capabilities for precision strikes against North Korea.” Seoul claims Pyongyang has violated the CMA at least 17 times. Shin adds: “If North Korea attempts a nuclear attack [against us], the DPRK regime will meet its end...If it provokes, we will retaliate powerfully so they miserably regret it.”

Sept. 28, 2023: KCNA reports that, among the SPA proceedings (which also include a small Cabinet [reshuffle](#)), the section of the DPRK Constitution (chapter 4, article 58) which covers nuclear policy has been beefed up. (An amendment a year earlier [enshrined](#) the right to strike first.) Kim Jong Un [avers](#): “The DPRK's

nuclear force-building policy has been made permanent as the basic law of the state, which no one is allowed to flout with anything.”

Sept. 30, 2023: North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui [blasts](#) the UN Security Council (UNSC) for its “extreme double standard” in taking issue with Pyongyang's “exercise of its legitimate sovereign right” to strengthen its nuclear forces, while ignoring “the US and its vassal forces' ceaseless nuclear threats...which has lingered for more than half a century.”

Oct. 1, 2023: South Korea's foreign ministry [responds](#) to Choe: “The international community clearly bans North Korea's nuclear and missile development and provocations ... Regardless of North Korea's actions and claims, its possession of nuclear weapons will never be recognized, and the sanctions of the international community will further deepen.”

Oct. 1, 2023: KCNA [reports](#): “The women's football team of the DPRK attending the 19th Asian Games advanced into the semi-finals. The quarter-final match was held between teams from the DPRK and the region of south Korean puppets (sic) on September 30. The DPRK team defeated its rival 4:1.” Similarly, the North's *Korean Central Television* (KCTV), while broadcasting the match, [tags](#) it as being between Choson (the DPRK's name for Korea; the ROK uses Hankuk for itself) and “Puppets” (*Goeloe* 괴뢰 in Korean). (See also Oct. 5, below.)

Oct. 2, 2023: Speaking in Berlin, ROK MOU Kim Yung-ho [says](#) that Pyongyang's vicious cycle of provoking Seoul into talks, receiving aid, and then breaking off agreements “will no longer work” in the Yoon era.

Oct. 4, 2023: ROK National Intelligence Service (NIS) [reveals](#) that in August and September it detected “multiple” North Korean hacking attempts against South Korean shipbuilders and related firms. The agency attributes this to Kim Jong Un's order to build mid- to large-sized warships. Methods include infiltrating the computers of shipbuilders' IT maintenance

firms, and sending malware-infected emails to employees to steal sensitive information.

Oct. 4, 2023: Responding to the DPRK enshrining its nuclear force in its Constitution (see Sept. 28), the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) [warns](#): “If North Korea attempts to use nukes (sic), it will face the end of its regime.”

Oct. 4, 2023: In a speech to the Korean Veterans Association, President Yoon [says](#): “We will firmly protect the free Republic of Korea and defend our people's safety by strengthening our capability to immediately and overwhelmingly respond to any provocation from the enemy.” He adds: “Our security is under threat from within and outside. Moreover, fake news and instigation through false manipulation are threatening this country's democracy.”

Oct. 5, 2023: A propos the North's “puppet” slur—see Oct. 1—an unnamed MOU official [comments](#): “North Korea has generally used the term South Korea in sports games. But the regime has revealed its own lack of confidence by using such an extremely belittling expression and overreacting even in a sporting event.”

Oct. 5, 2023: South Korea [beats](#) North Korea 3-1 in women's volleyball at the Asian Games in Hangzhou. Neither team is a medal contender by now, having lost earlier matches to China and Vietnam, respectively.

Oct. 5, 2023: MOU [says](#) it is “closely monitoring some 6,000 vulnerable North Korean defectors considered at a high risk of suicide attempts and lonely deaths due to financial difficulties and other hardships.” (That is more than one in six of all defectors, who total just under 34,000.) This monitoring began in Nov. 2022, after some [high-profile tragedies](#). MOU now uses 39 “crisis indicators, such as whether the supply of electricity, water and gas was suspended for their households or there was any previous attempt to commit suicide.”

Oct. 5, 2023: Seoul is oddly vague about its stance on sending leaflets across the DMZ, now that this has been unbanned (see Sept. 26). MOU [says](#): “We will consult with organizations while comprehensively factoring in circumstances such as the inter-Korean relationship ... [and] think about what policy [we] will take by taking various points into account.”

Oct. 7, 2023: As he is empowered to do, President Yoon [appoints](#) Shin Won-sik as minister of National Defense, despite the opposition-controlled National Assembly's refusal to confirm him.

Oct. 8, 2023: On the 10th anniversary of North Korea's arrest of South Korean pastor Kim Jung-wook, later [sentenced](#) to hard labor for life for alleged espionage and religious activity, MOU [urges](#) the North to free Kim and five other ROK nationals similarly held since 2014 and 2016, calling their detention “illegal and inhumane.” The DPRK holds a further 516 South Koreans, mostly fishermen abducted at various times since 1953. Choi Sung-ryong, head of an association of their family members, claims that more than half have subsequently died.

Oct. 10, 2023: A detailed [study](#) by Mandiant (Google's intelligence arm), titled “Assessed Cyber Structure and Alignments of North Korea in 2023,” reports—among much else—that DPRK hackers have targeted Lee Min-bok, head of a defector group which [claims](#) to have sent 300 million leaflets and other items by balloon into the North between 2003 and 2018, when Moon Jae-in's government made him stop. Lee, who came South in 1995, [confirms](#) that Pyongyang tries to hack his emails “about once a week.”

Oct. 10, 2023: Defense Minister Shin [renews](#) his attack on the CMA: “I will push for the suspension of the Sept. 19 inter-Korean military agreement as soon as possible ... Scrapping (the accord) requires a legal process, but I understand a suspension only requires a Cabinet approval.”

Oct. 11, 2023: MOU Kim Yung-ho, not often the voice of moderation, [tells](#) a parliamentary audit of his ministry that the CMA suspension issue should be “prudently discussed.”

Oct. 11, 2023: At the same audit, MOU (the ministry) [provides](#) data on past humanitarian aid by South Korea to the North, mainly via UN agencies. From 1996–2022 the ROK sent \$151.3 million via the World Food Program (WFP), \$66.48 million to the World Health Organization (WHO), and \$40.14 million to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). Bilaterally, during 2018–22 Seoul gave nutritional supplies and medicines worth 36 billion won (\$26.8 million), using a mix of state and NGO funding. (These figures seem incomplete: excluding, for instance, aid provided by ROK NGOs during the ‘sunshine’ era, 1998–2007). All this is loose change for South Korea, whose own GDP rose from \$610 billion in 1996 to \$1.7 trillion in 2023.

Oct. 11, 2023: Visiting Ground Operations Command in Yongin, 42 km south of Seoul, soon after Hamas’s attack on Israel, Defense Minister Shin [orders](#) the unit—tasked with neutralizing DPRK artillery: “If the enemy provokes, punish them immediately, strongly and until the end...I call on you to push for developing and deploying an operational system that can completely destroy the enemy’s long-range artillery capabilities within hours of an enemy provocation.” Shin again reiterates his call to suspend the CMA.

Oct. 12, 2023: Gen. Kim Seung-kyum, soon to be replaced as chairman of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff ([JCS](#)), echoes new Defense Minister Shin in criticizing the CMA. He [tells](#) a National Assembly audit, “Due to no-fly zones set under the military agreement, our surveillance range is restricted in terms of time and space.”

Oct. 12, 2023: After the shock of Hamas’s Oct. 7 surprise attack on Israel, an anonymous MOU spokesperson [suggests](#) that Seoul could suspend the CMA even without any prior provocation by Pyongyang, “if it judges such a move is necessary for national security.”

Oct. 16, 2023: After Washington says the DPRK has delivered over 1,000 containers of arms and munitions to Russia recently, contra Pyongyang’s denials, MOU spokesperson Koo Byoung-sam [comments](#), “The true nature of North Korea, which has attempted to deceive the whole world, has been exposed.”

Oct. 18, 2023: ROK [blocks](#) two DPRK accounts on X/Twitter, [YuMi_DPRK_daily](#) (aka Olivia Natasha), and [@Parama_Coreafan](#). Fronted by winsome young women, both —especially the former—post ‘soft’ propaganda, supposedly portraying normal everyday life in North Korea. (Although ‘normal’ is [relative](#).)

Oct. 19, 2023: Unification Minister Kim [tells](#) *Yonhap*: “If Russia offers military technology to North Korea ... we cannot help but seek powerful sanctions against Russia and North Korea, with the US and other nations.” Taking a harder line on the CMA than a week ago, Kim now calls the pact “an own goal in the security field.” He ventures two predictions: doubting Pyongyang if could have “addressed technical challenges in a short span of time to enable it to make [a] third attempt” to launch a reconnaissance satellite—oops: see Nov. 21,—and (on safer ground) that the trickle of defectors reaching the South will more than double this year, as North Korea starts to reopen its borders.

Oct. 19, 2023: A *propos* reports that last week China repatriated some 600 North Korean defectors detained in its border provinces Jilin and Liaoning, South Korea’s Ambassador to the UN Hwang Joon-kook, [says](#), “We strongly protest this grave human rights incident, which should never happen again...The international community cannot tolerate such actions...We all should understand that the horrendous living conditions and human rights situation in the DPRK have continually forced its people to flee across the border, mainly to China...It is both horrifying and heartbreaking to witness North Korean escapees, who had risked everything including their lives on their long arduous road to freedom, being forcibly repatriated.” Such

trenchant criticism of Beijing by Seoul is rare, even under Yoon.

Oct. 23, 2023: Visiting the frontline island of Yeonpyeong, shelled by North Korea in 2010 (four died), Defense Minister Shin again [calls](#) for the CMA's suspension.

Oct. 23, 2023: In policy reports for a parliamentary audit, the ROK Army and Air Force [describe](#) how each plans to strengthen defense capabilities against North Korea's evolving WMD threat and asymmetric warfare tactics. (For details, see the [link](#).)

Oct. 24, 2023: South Korea's Marine Corps Commandant [tells](#) a parliamentary audit that live-fire exercises need to resume on five front-line islands in the West Sea. Lt.-Gen. Kim Gye-hwan says the CMA has weakened military readiness, which requires firing major assets such as K-9 self-propelled howitzers into the sea. Since 2018 such drills have been held on land, but this is more expensive and the range is too short.

Oct. 24, 2023: The ROK coast guard and military [report](#) that four North Koreans—one man and three women—have defected in a small (7.5 meter) boat via the East Sea. They first approached a Southern fisherman, Lim Jae-kil, asked where they were, and said how nice his vessel was. As for their own craft, Lim said “he had never seen such a boat in his more than 40 years of life as a fisherman ... it appeared to have the engine of a cultivator.”

Oct. 24, 2023: MOU data [show](#) the number of Northern defectors reaching South Korea this year so far has more than tripled: up from 42 in January–September 2022 to 139 in the same period of 2023. This is still far below the pre-pandemic annual [norm](#) of 1,000 or more. (Very few of these will be direct arrivals; most have spent years elsewhere, usually in China.)

Oct. 26, 2023: With the end of the month nigh, MOU [sees](#) no signs of a fresh satellite launch

attempt by North Korea. After two failures, Kim Jong-un had vowed to try again in October.

Oct. 27, 2023: Defense Minister Shin [says](#) North Korea has violated the CMA “close to 3,600” times in the western maritime buffer zone. Most (3,400) of these involve failing to cover gun barrels; Shin acknowledges that Pyongyang “doesn't seem to recognize leaving the porthole (of artillery pieces) open as a violation.” It has also fired artillery shells into the sea 110 times.

Oct. 29, 2023: ROK JCS [says](#) a spotter plane found a small (10m) DPRK vessel drifting near the Northern Limit Line (NLL, the de facto maritime border) in the East Sea. Seoul dispatched a patrol boat. Those aboard said they had been adrift for 10 days, and asked for food and water, which they were given. They did not wish to defect. Next day the JCS [reports](#) that a North Korean vessel came and towed them away.

Oct. 30, 2023: After the intergovernmental Financial Action Task Force (FATF) decides, for the 13th consecutive year, to keep the DPRK on its [list](#) of “high-risk jurisdictions subject to a call for action,” MOU spokesman Koo Byoung-sam declares: “The North Korean regime's seizure of illicit funds to secure money for its rule and development of weapons of mass destruction is becoming bolder day by day, in means and scale ... The shortcut to resolving all problems on the Korean Peninsula, such as the North's denuclearization and promotion of human rights, lies in blocking the inflow of black money to the regime of Kim Jong Un.”

Nov. 1, 2023: Adm. Kim Myung-soo, [named](#) on Oct. 29 by Yoon as the next chairman of the JCS, [says](#) “there are certainly limitations militarily” caused by the CMA. He adds: “The South Korean military should exist as a tiger and fight like a hound.” (See also Nov. 17.)

Nov. 2, 2023: MOU [says](#) it will recognize relatives of South Koreans imprisoned in the North as victims of abduction. This renders them eligible for state compensation, at a

modest 15–20 million won (\$11,234—15,100) per family. [Six](#) such detainees are known—three [missionaries](#) and three defectors; four have family in South Korea. Pyongyang is silent about their fate. (See also Oct. 8.)

Nov. 2, 2023: MOU [urges](#) North Korea to reactivate the inter-Korean liaison line; Pyongyang has not picked up the phone since April. Seoul notes that cases like the recent drifting DPRK vessel—see Oct. 29—highlight the need for this; although in fact the ROK found other ways to get in touch, via the UN Command and international maritime communication channels.

Nov. 2, 2023: A “government source” [tells](#) *Yonhap* that the four Northerners who defected by boat last month include a pregnant woman in her 20s. They cited food shortage as their reason for leaving.

Nov. 5, 2023: North Korea [designates](#) Nov. 18 as “day of the missile industry,” marking the date in 2022 when it tested a *Hwasong-17* ICBM. More significantly, this was the first public appearance of Kim Jong Un’s daughter Ju Ae. (In 2021 some DPRK calendars [marked](#) Nov. 29—the anniversary of an earlier launch of a different ICBM, the *Hwasong-15*, in 2017—as “rocket industry day”; but this was not celebrated, and has gone unmentioned since.)

Nov. 6, 2023: Seoul [deplores](#) Pyongyang’s designation of a missile industry day.

Nov. 6, 2023: MOU Kim [says](#) North Korea seems to have been getting technical help from Russia for another satellite launch. He also suggests that Pyongyang’s recent “designation of a ‘missile industry day is ...apparently not irrelevant to [Kim] Ju Ae’s emergence.”

Nov. 7, 2023: MOU Kim Yung-ho [tells](#) an academic forum in Seoul that the ROK “will continue to support” the stalled joint project of compiling a unified Korean [dictionary](#). In 2005–10 and 2014–15 lexicologists from North and South met 25 times, in Seoul, Pyongyang,

Kaesong, Mount Kumgang, and three Chinese cities: Beijing, Shenyang, and Dalian. They agreed on the definition and pronunciation of 128,000 of a projected 307,000 words. Since 2015 the Southern team has continued alone, faxing their work to Pyongyang, but receiving no response. One comments: “It’s like a one-sided love.”

Nov. 8, 2023: A KCNA [article](#) headlined “It Will Act as ‘Detonator’ of End of ‘Republic of Korea’” warns that, if propaganda balloon launches resume (see Sept. 26), “it is the stand of the enraged revolutionary armed forces of the DPRK to pour a shower of shells into the bulwark of the region of south Korean puppets.” (Bylined as commentary by a named author, this carries less weight than an official government or Party statement.) It also repeats the ludicrous canard that this is how Covid-19 got into North Korea, referring to “the inroad of the malignant infectious disease caused by shabby things of human scum.” (sic).

Nov. 9, 2023: MOU [responds](#), calling the leaflets “a voluntary activity carried out by civic groups in accordance with the freedom of expression guaranteed in our Constitution ... We sternly warn North Korea against acting rashly.”

Nov. 9, 2023: Following [reports](#) that North Korea has revised its election law to permit some voters in local elections a choice between two candidates, instead of just endorsing one as hitherto, MOU [comments](#): “This is far from [an] actual guarantee of people’s suffrage.” The ballot will still not be secret. The first elections under the new system are due in Nov.

Nov. 14, 2023: Government “sources” [tell](#) *Yonhap* that if Pyongyang tries again to launch a spy satellite, Seoul “is considering partially suspending [the] 2018 inter-Korean military agreement as a precautionary measure against North Korean provocations.”

Nov. 14, 2023: ROK’s task force on South Korean abductees held in North Korea [meets](#) for the first time since 2012. Four ministries are

involved—MOU, MND, MOFA, and MOJ (justice)—plus the National Police Agency and NIS. Admitting past government action has been “insufficient,” MOU’s Kang Jong-suk says the North “continues to deny the presence of abductees, detainees and prisoners of war, and remains unresponsive to our requests to verify their status and repatriate them.”

Nov. 15, 2023: MOU Kim [presents](#) his ministry’s “fourth basic plan,” a five year blueprint for inter-Korean relations (2023–27; President Yoon’s term ends in May 2027) to the National Assembly. This includes a pledge to raise the issue not only of separated families, but also of detainees, abductees and POWs held by North Korea. Pyongyang has never admitted the last two categories, estimated as originally having [numbered](#) almost 100,000 and over 90,000 respectively. After 70 years almost all must now be dead, so the point of pushing this as an agenda item is unclear. For that matter, with no North–South talks held since Dec. 2018 and none in prospect, any and all of what Seoul might propose now is arguably hypothetical.

Nov. 17, 2023: Kim Myung-soo, the next JCS Chairman nominee, [tells](#) his parliamentary confirmation hearing that the CMA “clearly limits [our] military’s capability.” Specifically, it restricts surveillance of North Korea in terms of “space and time,” including (as *Yonhap* puts it) “real-time monitoring of the North’s rear side,” and live-fire drills on ROK islands close to the DPRK in the West (Yellow) Sea. (See also Oct. 24.)

Nov. 18, 2023: DPRK media carry [no](#) reports of the recently designated missile industry day being marked. Kim Jong Un too has gone unreported for almost a month; he was last seen greeting Russia’s foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, on Oct. 20.

Nov. 19, 2023: Defense Minister Shin [predicts](#) that North Korea may launch its military satellite “within a week or so,” having “almost resolved” its engine problems “with Russia’s help.”

Nov. 20, 2023: Lt. Gen. Kang Ho-pil, ROK JCS chief director of operations, [warns](#) the DPRK to “immediately stop” its satellite launch preparations. Should it go ahead, “our military will come up with necessary measures to protect the lives and safety of our people.”

Nov. 21, 2023: At short notice, the DPRK [notifies](#) Japan (but seemingly no one else) of a 10-day satellite launch window, starting midnight, through Dec. 1. In the event they jump their own gun by 78 minutes, launching at 2242 local time that same day.

Nov. 21, 2023: ROK and Japanese military officials [say](#) the DPRK has launched its satellite, slightly ahead of the window it had notified. President Yoon [chairs](#) a National Security Council meeting from London, where he is on a state visit: the North’s launch interrupted his lunch at Buckingham Palace. South Korea announces that it will resume reconnaissance activities close to the DMZ, ahead of formal suspension of the relevant section of the CMA.

Nov. 21, 2023: ROK National Police Agency (KNPA) [says](#) that a DPRK hacking group, dubbed “Kimsuky,” hijacked the email accounts of 1,468 South Koreans so far this year: a 30-fold jump from 49 cases in 2022. Victims include 57 current or former government officials. Nothing important was stolen, however, thanks to strict security protocols.

Nov. 22, 2023: DPRK National Aerospace Technology Administration (NATA, formerly NADA; the D was for Development) [reports](#) a successful satellite launch, late on the previous evening, overseen by Kim Jong Un. It plans to put up several more “in a short span of time.” Next morning, Kim [visits](#) NATA’s Pyongyang General Control Center and congratulates all concerned. He is shown “aerospace photos of Anderson Air Force Base, Apra Harbor and other major military bases of the US forces taken in the sky above Guam in the Pacific.”

Nov. 22, 2023: An extraordinary [Cabinet](#) meeting chaired by Prime Minister Han Duck-soo officially [suspends](#) Article 1, Clause 3 of the [CMA](#), which stipulates no-fly zones, effective 3 p.m. local time. President Yoon later approves this electronically from London.

Nov. 23, 2023: Pyongyang responds to Seoul's partial suspension of the CMA by [repudiating](#) it *in toto*. Accusing Seoul of breaking faith—while also claiming that the accord “has long been reduced to a mere scrap of paper”—the DPRK MND [declares](#): “From now on, our army will never be bound by the September 19 North-South Military Agreement ...We will immediately restore all military measures that have been halted.” If “an irretrievable clash” occurs, “the political and military gangsters of the ‘ROK’...will be held wholly accountable.”

Nov. 23, 2023: Defense Minister Shin [calls](#) Seoul's partial suspension of the CMA “a proportional response” and “a minimal defensive measure” to Pyongyang's spy satellite launch.

Nov. 27, 2023: ROK MND [says](#) North Korea has begun rebuilding guard posts and is bringing heavy firearms into the DMZ.

Nov. 28, 2023: “Informed sources” [tell](#) *Yonhap* that KPA troops at Panmunjom are now sporting pistols. Photos released by MND show Northern troops installing temporary guard posts, carrying what appeared to be recoilless guns and standing guard at night in the DMZ.

Dec. 1, 2023: Ten days after the North's launch, South Korea too [gets](#) its own (much higher quality) first indigenous military reconnaissance satellite, launched atop a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket from Vandenberg Space Force Base in California.

Dec. 3, 2023: Among much such bluster daily from DPRK media, KCNA carries a lengthy (2,850 word) [article](#) by “a military commentator.” Accusing Seoul of multiple provocations, this [warns](#) that a “physical clash and war on the

Korean peninsula have become a matter of time, not possibility...Any hostile act of the puppet group against the DPRK will lead to the miserable destruction of the puppet army and the total collapse of the ‘ROK’ (sic).”

Dec. 4, 2023: After a joint investigation with the FBI, Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency [says](#) that a hacker group dubbed Andariel, a unit of the DPRK's Reconnaissance General Bureau, stole 1.2 terabytes of data in 83 separate raids between Dec. 2022 and March 2023. “Dozens” of ROK entities were compromised: defense firms, universities, research centers, financial institutions, et al. A laxly monitored Southern server was used to hack the targets, who were unaware. The stolen data is thought to include key defense technologies, notably anti-aircraft [lasers](#). Andariel also netted 470 million won (\$360,236) from ransomware attacks on three South Korean firms; the transfer of some of the proceeds to Pyongyang was traced. (See also Nov. 21.)

Dec. 4, 2023: MOU [raps](#) Pyongyang for its “false and far-fetched claims” and using “rude language” (see Dec. 3). The ministry specifically denies the North's [claim](#) that Seoul “blared anti-Pyongyang loudspeaker broadcasts along the border 3,200 times this year.” Propaganda loudspeakers at the border remain banned under ROK law, although Yoon's ruling People Power Party and other conservatives have called for their resumption.

Dec. 6, 2023: For the first time under Yoon Suk Yeol, the ROK government [holds](#) an inter-agency meeting—MOU, MOFA, and MND—on Southern POWs detained in North Korea. Seoul urges Pyongyang to acknowledge this issue, “and cooperate in uncovering their fate.” An estimated 80-90,000 were not returned as the 1953 Armistice stipulated. The DPRK has always denied this, but over the years around 80 have escaped; at least one wrote a gripping [memoir](#). As of 2016 the South reckoned some 500 might still be alive.

Dec. 7, 2023: After a year-long investigation into how Seoul handled the case of Lee Dae-jun, the ROK fisheries official killed in mysterious circumstances off the DPRK coast in 2020, the Board of Audit and Inspection (BAI) [issues](#) a damning final report. It accuses the then Moon Jae-in government of (1) not acting promptly to try to save Lee; (2) seeking to cover up the incident, after the North killed him and burnt his body; and (3) distorting the truth by claiming Lee was seeking to defect. Agencies failed to coordinate; data were deleted, facts withheld, and Parliament misled. BAI recommends that 13 officials involved be disciplined or cautioned, including ex-Defense Minister Suh Wook and a former Coast Guard commissioner. Last year BAI called for 20 officials to be prosecuted; several court cases are in progress.

Dec. 8, 2023: MOU [says](#) North Korea is illegally operating some 30 South Korean-owned factories—up from [10 in May](#)—at the joint venture Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), which the ROK unilaterally shut down in 2016. Pyongyang is also removing debris from the former joint liaison office in the KIC, which it blew up in 2020. Seoul warns that both these actions infringe on its property rights, and tells the North to desist—or it may sue. *Reports that Kim Jong Un's riposte was "Go ahead, dude, make my day" remain unconfirmed.*

Dec. 12, 2023: MOU Kim [tells](#) a press conference that his ministry will “introduce a new human rights roadmap” and establish a National Center for North Korean Human Rights, to raise awareness about abuses there. It will also publish a report titled “Economic and Social Reality of North Korea,” based on interviews with over 6,000 defectors. He insists he also supports humanitarian aid to Pyongyang.

Dec. 13, 2023: Defense Minister Shin [tells](#) senior ROK military commanders: “North Korea has only two choices: peace or destruction...If they make reckless actions that harm peace, only a hell of destruction awaits them...Our military must clearly imprint this on North Korea.” He

also savages Moon Jae-in's approach: “The ‘peace process,’ which relied on North Korea's goodwill and surreal optimism, was completely fake. It would not be an exaggeration to describe it as a well-planned fraud.” He makes other similarly trenchant speeches.

Dec. 15, 2023: A [report](#) by South Korea's Rural Development Administration (RDA) broadly endorses Pyongyang's [claims](#) of a good harvest this year. RDA estimates total output of North Korea's main crops—rice, corn, potatoes, wheat, barley and soybeans—at 4.82 million tons, up 6% from 2022. This is still below the pre-pandemic figure of 5.2 million tons, let alone the 8 million tons claimed in the 1980s and [set](#) as a target for 2020 in 2016's five year plan.

Dec. 19, 2023: UN Command (UNC) [permits](#) ROK troops in the JSA to carry guns. Its spokesman [says](#) “Given the KPA's current armed security posture, [we have] authorized ... members of the guard forces on the UNC side of the JSA to re-arm to protect both civilian and military personnel.” He adds, “UNC has also informed the ROK government and KPA of its position that a disarmed JSA is safer and more peaceful for the Korean Peninsula, and that this can be achieved by reimplementing the previous UNC-KPA agreements.”

Dec. 19, 2023: A day after North Korea [test-fires](#) its fifth ICBM this year, Yoon tells his Cabinet: “The North Korean regime will come to realize its provocations will only come back to them (sic) as greater pain.” He does not say how such a learning experience will be arranged. The third successful test of a *Hwasong-18* probably means that this solid-fuel, road-mobile ICBM is now [operational](#).

Dec. 19, 2023: ROK Defense Counterintelligence Command [reveals](#) that a young sailor doing his national service has been indicted for distributing pro-DPRK materials in his unit's restroom. The unnamed petty officer second class is also accused of using his smartphone to

disclose his vessel's location to an unidentified Chinese during maritime operations.

Dec. 20, 2023: Yoon Suk Yeol [tells](#) the third meeting of the presidential defense innovation committee, which he [set up](#) a year ago, to “dramatically strengthen our military's surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities...against North Korea's nuclear and missile threats.” MND says it will streamline procedures to halve average procurement time from 14 to seven years.

Dec. 26–30, 2023: As has become the norm at year-end, North Korea holds a party plenum to look forward and back. The 9th Enlarged Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the WPK is held on Dec. 26–30, with short daily reports on KCNA from [Dec. 28](#) onward.

Dec. 28, 2023: The NIS [says](#) “there is a high possibility that North Korea could unexpectedly conduct military provocations or stage a cyberattack in 2024, when fluid political situations are expected with the [April 10 parliamentary] elections.” The agency cites three factors: past precedent; the return to high office in Pyongyang of three figures linked to previous incidents; and military measures the North has taken since the CMA collapsed.

Dec. 29, 2023: Echoing the NIS a day earlier, Yun Jae-ok, floor leader of South Korea's conservative ruling People Power Party (PPP) [avers](#): “It seems certain that North Korea has planned to simultaneously carry out military provocations and covert operations against South Korea to interfere in our elections.”

Dec. 31, 2023: KCNA [reports](#) the Party Plenum, at length. Among much else, Kim Jong Un announces a radical [reorientation](#), and hardening, of North Korea's stance and policy toward South Korea (see Appendix).



COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

A SUBDUED ENVIRONMENT AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

SCOTT SYNDER, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
SEE-WON BYUN, SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY

Chinese diplomacy toward the Korean Peninsula in late 2023 sputtered forward, driven more by a calendar of bilateral anniversaries with North Korea and multilateral gatherings involving South Korea than any sense of strategic purpose. Both relationships seemed preoccupied with off-stage developments such as the September summit between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin and the momentum of US-Japan-South Korea trilateral relations, rather than any inherent dynamism of their own. Still, regular Sino-North Korean bilateral exchanges ahead of the 75th anniversary of the bilateral relationship and Sino-South Korean bilateral economic dialogues provide opportunities to overcome resistance and sustain progress in the face of deepening major power rivalries. Senior-level dialogues between China and North Korea occurred on North Korea's 75th founding anniversary in September, with the visit of Chinese Vice Premier Liu Guozhong to Pyongyang, a visit that occurred against the backdrop of the second US-South Korea Nuclear Consultative Group meeting, North Korea's first successful indigenous satellite launch, and North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Pak Myong Ho's visit to Beijing.

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Meanwhile, ministerial and working-level economic dialogues on issues such as supply-chain stability, export controls, and trade facilitation continued between China and South Korea, punctuated by a notable bilateral exchange between Chinese President Xi Jinping and South Korean Prime Minister Han Duck-soo in late September on the 19th Asian Games in Hangzhou. But these exchanges did not generate the traction necessary for South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol to have substantive bilateral meetings with President Xi on the sidelines of the APEC meeting in San Francisco in November. Bilateral and trilateral foreign ministerial meetings in Busan between South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin and counterparts Wang Yi and Kamikawa Yoko—the first in four years—failed to generate sufficient momentum to set a date for the resumption of China-Japan-South Korea summitry. Instead, the resumption of China-South Korea or China-Japan-South Korea summitry will depend on developments in 2024.



Figure 1 President Xi and South Korean Prime Minister Han Duck-soo meet in Hangzhou, where the 19th Asian Games start. Photo: Pang Xinglei

China-South Korea Bilateral Dialogues Generate Mixed Signals

Despite relative inertia surrounding China-South Korea relations, the two governments maintained a steady stream of bilateral contacts in the closing months of 2023. But these dialogues failed to generate sufficient impetus to yield a bilateral leader-level summit by the end of the year despite an optimistic exchange between President Xi and Prime Minister Han during the Asian Games. [Han's visit to China](#) was the first by a South Korean prime minister in over four years and generated expectations in South Korea that Xi might make his first visit to Seoul since 2014. Han expressed the desire “to cultivate a healthy and mature

relationship between South Korea and China, grounded in mutual respect, mutual benefit, and common interests.” Han also requested China’s support for the Yoon administration’s “Audacious Initiative” toward North Korea and for South Korea’s bid to host the 2030 World Expo in Busan. [Xi emphasized](#) the importance of “friendly cooperation” and expressed hope that South Korea “will work with China in the same direction, take policies and actions that can reflect the importance it attaches to the development of China-ROK relations, respect each other, and safeguard the general direction of friendly cooperation.” Media reports expressed optimism that the meeting would lead to the resumption of trilateral China-South Korea-Japan summit meetings to be held in South Korea. But Liaoning University Professor Lü Chao stated [in the Global Times](#) that political tensions generated by President Yoon’s pro-US approach and statements regarding Taiwan had “become a significant barrier to revive the three-way cooperation mechanism.”

Despite mixed signals surrounding the Xi-Han exchange, China and South Korea held regular bilateral working-level, private sector, and ministerial consultations through the end of the year. In November, South Korea returned the remains of 25 Chinese troops killed during the Korean War in another gesture designed to improve the bilateral relationship. [China received the remains](#) and honored their sacrifices in a burial ceremony at the Shenyang Martyrs’ Cemetery.



Figure 2 On November 23, 2023, a Chinese Air Force Y-20 transported the remains of 25 Chinese People’s Volunteers martyrs from South Korea to Shenyang Taoxian International Airport in Northeast China’s Liaoning Province. Photo: VCG

The inaugural [South Korea-China Economic Cooperation Exchange](#) public-private meeting took place in Changchun in November, led by

China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and South Korea's Ministry of Finance and Economy, following up on a ministerial pledge made in August 2022. Representatives from Hyundai Motor, LG Chem, and others participated along with China's Alibaba Group in a meeting designed to promote better public-private sector communication regarding obstacles to doing business in China. In addition, the two countries held the first South Korea-China Supply Chain Hotline meeting and the fourth South Korea-China Working-Level Industrial Cooperation meeting in Seoul in December. [Business leaders](#) from the China Center for International Economic Exchanges and the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry also met to discuss global supply chains, digital and green transitions, and intellectual property protection issues.

In December, South Korean Trade Minister Ahn Dukgeun led a delegation to Beijing for consultations with International Trade Representative Wang Shouwen on the fifth Korea-China Free Trade Agreement Joint Committee meeting. There, both sides agreed to [strengthen industrial supply chain cooperation](#) and exchanged views on launching a dialogue on export controls alongside discussions on FTA implementation. Both sides also [agreed to activate a hotline between ministries](#) to discuss supply chain issues, and South Korea requested "imminent action" to address Chinese delays in customs procedures for urea exports to South Korea. At the deputy director-general level, the Chinese and South Korean foreign ministries led a meeting on maritime affairs, marking the return of working-level contact on such issues.

Other developments affecting the bilateral China-South Korea relationship included the announcement of a US-South Korea joint effort to counter disinformation, [MOTIE's announcement of its 3050 Strategy initiative](#) designed to stabilize South Korea's supply chains and reduce dependence on China to less than 50% by 2030, and [South Korean scrambling of jets](#) following the entry of two Chinese and four Russian military planes into South Korea's air defense identification zone. The signing of the US-South Korea Memorandum of Understanding occurred on the occasion of [US Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy Liz Allen's](#) visit to Seoul in December and reflects South Korean concerns about false propaganda and global disinformation campaigns, mentioned by

President Yoon in his April address to a joint session of the US Congress. The signing of the MOU is even more salient in light of reports that the [Chinese Ministry of State Security](#) attempted to hack South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and had infiltrated the computer network of the Presidential Office during the Moon Jae-in administration. Similarly, MOTIE's effort to reduce dependence on China in its supply chains responds to a deeper realization in South Korea of its vulnerability to possible Chinese economic retaliation. South Korea's scrambling of jets to defend its KADIZ against Chinese and Russian aerial intrusions further underscores the impact of deepening major power rivalry on South Korea's security environment.

Multilateral Diplomacy and Missed Opportunities for China-South Korea Summitry

Annual ASEAN and APEC meetings have long provided opportunities for national leaders to hold summit meetings on bilateral issues of concern, such as when President Yoon met President Xi at the [November 2022 G20 Summit in Bali](#). But the November 2023 APEC meeting in San Francisco generated only an exchange of greetings between Presidents Xi and Yoon. Likewise, despite Xi's expression of willingness to visit Seoul in his meeting with Prime Minister Han referenced above, South Korea's preparations to host the first leader-level trilateral meeting with China and Japan yielded no fruit in 2023.

President Yoon and Premier Li Qiang held two brief encounters in quick succession on the sidelines of the ASEAN and G20 summits in Jakarta and New Delhi, respectively, in early September. In those meetings, Yoon expressed his hope that the North Korean nuclear issue would not be an [obstacle](#) to improved China-South Korea relations. [Premier Li emphasized](#) the need to expand cooperation to "seek mutual benefit and win-win results."



Figure 3 South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Chinese Premier Li Qiang meet in Jakarta on the sidelines of ASEAN meetings. Photo: Xinhua

Chinese scholar Zhan Debin laid out the obstacles to the realization of a trilateral summit in a *Global Times* column pointedly titled “[South Needs to Prove Sincerity for China-Japan-SK summit](#).” The article points to several obstacles to the stabilization of China-South Korea relations under the Yoon administration. First, the article takes issue with the proposition that South Korea will be able to induce greater respect from China based on closer relations with the United States and Japan, asserting that South Korea has instead weakened its “autonomy.” Second, Zhan points to Yoon’s disavowal of the Moon-era “three nos and one restriction” understanding with the Chinese government regarding THAAD and its disregard for Chinese “red lines” on Taiwan, the South China Sea, and Xinjiang. Third, Zhan criticizes alleged South Korean interference in the activities of the Chinese ambassador to South Korea, covered in the [summer 2023 issue of Comparative Connections](#). Zhan concludes that “if South Korea is pushing for the China-Japan-South Korea trilateral talk because of US instructions, it would be better not to hold the meeting at all.” A series of [Global Times](#) editorials and [columns by Zhan](#) reiterated the message that US-Japan-South Korea trilateralism was more likely to hurt than help the China-South Korea relationship.

Efforts to Jump-Start Trilateral China-Japan-South Korea Summitry

Amid such rhetoric, China participated in the trilateral senior officials’ meeting in Seoul in late September and meetings with Foreign Minister Park Jin. Those meetings were accompanied by a more optimistic tone from the *Global Times*, which emphasized the unchanged

framework of “gain from cooperation, lose from confrontation” stemming from economic interdependence, the priority of economic development, and close geographical and cultural ties. President Xi’s meeting with Prime Minister Han further underscored a positive tone around prospects for reviving trilateral China-Japan-South Korea summitry.

However, [Chinese commentators responded](#) negatively to the virtual US-Japan-South Korea defense ministerial meeting in mid-November that was held alongside the US-South Korea Security Consultative Meeting in Seoul. Liaoning University’s Lu Chao suggested that following the Camp David Summit, enhanced United States-Japan-South Korea military cooperation contributed to a worsening of tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and China Foreign Affairs University’s Li Haidong asserted that such ties would make the Korean security situation more volatile and that the shift to a “trilateral bloc is a substantial step in reshaping US hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region.”

Minister Park Jin met Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of the trilateral China-Japan-South Korea foreign ministers’ meeting in Busan at the end of November. The [South Korean readout](#) from the bilateral meeting emphasized joint efforts to strengthen mutual understanding, strengthen strategic communication, and contribute to regional and global peace and prosperity through economic cooperation, promotion of people-to-people exchanges, and restoring and normalizing cooperation among China, Japan, and South Korea. Park also highlighted South Korean concerns about North Korea’s satellite launches and objected to China’s “forcible repatriation of North Korean defectors in China.”

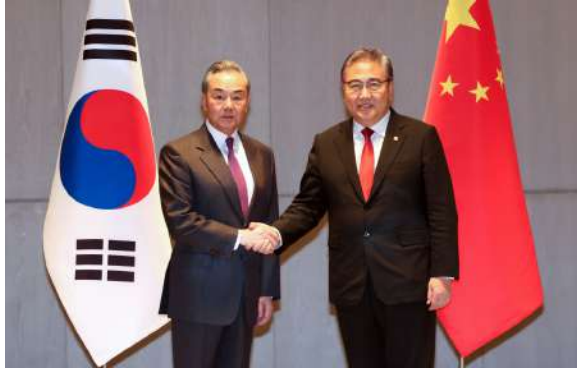


Figure 4 Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Park Jin meet in Busan on the sidelines of the tenth China-South Korea-Japan Foreign Ministers' Meeting. Photo: Yonhap

The Chinese readout reported [Wang's description](#) of changes in the international and regional landscapes and their impact on China-South Korea relations in greater detail. Wang emphasized that "China and the ROK are neighbors that cannot move away, and this objective fact will never change," arguing that cooperation is the only path through which to develop a mutually trusting and respectful relationship. Wang emphasized that "the two sides should jointly resist the tendency of politicizing economic issues, instrumentalizing scientific and technological issues, and overstretching the concept of security of economic and trade issues, maintain stable and unimpeded industrial and supply chains, and work for greater development of economic and trade cooperation between the two countries."

[Chinese](#) and [South Korean](#) readouts of the trilateral meeting with Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko emphasized efforts to institutionalize cooperation through a trilateral leader-level summit at the earliest possible time and to deepen substantive trilateral cooperation across six main areas: people-to-people exchanges, science and technology and digital transition, sustainable development and climate change, health and aging population, economy and trade, and peace and security. The three ministers appreciated reforestation projects to combat desertification in Mongolia, the need to maintain communication to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, and cooperation on functional issues including climate change, cybersecurity, and the situations in Ukraine and the Middle East. In addition to the foreign ministerial meeting, the three countries [successfully hosted](#) the 16th trilateral health ministers' meeting in early December in Beijing

for the first time in four years and released a joint statement on cooperation in response to infectious diseases.

China and North Korea Commemorate Friendship as North Korea Test-Fires ICBM

North Korea's 75th founding anniversary in September and the 75th anniversary of China-North Korea diplomatic ties in December catalyzed bilateral exchanges following the hiatus caused by COVID-19. Vice Premier Liu Guozhong led a Chinese delegation to Pyongyang's National Day celebrations. Events included a [military parade](#) on Sept. 9 attended by Kim Jong Un, who vowed to bolster nuclear deterrence after overseeing North Korea's [launching](#) of a "tactical nuclear attack submarine" three days earlier. In a Sept. 9 [message](#) to Kim, President Xi pledged to advance the "traditional friendship," noting their five meetings between 2018 and 2019. Xi hailed Pyongyang's "new achievements" pursuing its "socialist cause," including economic successes since the Eighth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea in 2021. While North Korea's Vice Sports Minister Kim Il-guk visited China in late September for the Asian Games, no other official engagements were reported. In October, China's National Day prompted Xi and Kim to exchange letters consolidating bilateral ties. Commemorations of China's entry into the Korean War at the Friendship Tower in Pyongyang symbolized the historical relationship.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong and North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Pak Myong Ho used the 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties to reaffirm the friendship, [meeting](#) on Dec. 15 in Beijing. The talks coincided with the second US-South Korea Nuclear Consultative Group [meeting](#) initiated under the April 2023 [Washington Declaration](#). Pak met Foreign Minister Wang Yi three days later when North Korea test-fired a *Hwasong-18* intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in violation of UN resolutions. South Korea's foreign ministry [called for](#) China's "constructive role" as "a responsible permanent member of the UN Security Council and a country that has an influence over North Korea," promising to work with other partners including the United States and Japan on "independent and multilateral sanctions."



Figure 5 Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Park Jin meet in Busan on the sidelines of the tenth China-South Korea-Japan Foreign Ministers' Meeting. Photo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China

Peninsula tensions had already surfaced with Pyongyang's launching of a military spy satellite on Nov. 21 after two failed launches in May and August. On Nov. 30, the US Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) international agents of North Korean sanctions evasion and a North Korean cyber espionage group. In response to North Korea's ICBM test, South Korea sanctioned eight North Korean individuals involved in illicit arms trade and cyber activities on Dec. 28.

Nuclear Diplomacy and Strategic Triangles

In a [joint statement](#) ahead of a Dec. 19 UN Security Council meeting, the United States, Japan, South Korea, and seven other countries condemned North Korea's ICBM launch—its fifth this year. The United Nation's repeated failure to act renewed skepticism about any new resolution emerging over Chinese and Russian opposition. North Korean UN envoy Kim Song reiterated "the right to self-defense of the DPRK," denouncing the "military threat" from "the US and its followers." South Korean envoy Hwang Joon-kook reasserted South Korean efforts to counter North Korean security threats in cooperation with the United States and Japan. Joint US-South Korea military exercises on Dec. 20 showed such efforts, in addition to operationalization of a missile warning data-sharing system by the end of the year under the August 2023 [Camp David Summit](#). In a Dec. 21 KCNA [press statement](#), Kim Jong Un's sister and WPK Central Committee Vice Department Director Kim Yo Jong condemned US-led "military threats" as "the root cause of escalating the regional situation."



Figure 6 On December 19, 2023, the U.N. Security Council meets to address North Korea's recent solid-fuel ICBM launch. Photo: U.N. Web TV

Ahead of his parliamentary confirmation hearing on Dec. 20, Seoul's nominee for foreign minister and former UN Ambassador [Cho Tae-yul](#) promised to boost nuclear deterrence. He also [signaled](#) intentions to rebalance ties with Washington and Beijing. Projecting a worsening security environment next year, South Korean media commentators urged the Yoon administration to coordinate US deterrence with alternative solutions, including "[improving ties with China](#)" to "[restore diplomatic balance](#)."

Chinese and North Korean trilateral ties with Russia are another point of South Korean debate. In a Nov. 19 [interview](#) with *The Telegraph* ahead of his UK state visit, President Yoon reminded China that "pursuing trilateral cooperation with North Korea and Russia...will not be helpful for its international reputation and standing." US-Japan-South Korea foreign ministerial [talks](#) on Nov. 14 at the APEC Summit raised similar concerns over North Korea's "trilateral security cooperation." The US State Department highlighted the nuclear risks of such an arrangement in its "[Report on Deterrence in a World of Nuclear Multipolarity](#)," [released](#) a day later.

South Korea's Shifting Regional Geoeconomic Orientation

A [significant measure](#) of the impact of South Korea's evolution in geopolitical orientation reflects the shift in South Korea's trade relations, as the United States became South Korea's number one export destination in December 2023, surpassing China for the first time since 2004. South Korea also recorded an \$18 billion trade deficit with China, the first bilateral deficit with China in 31 years. South Korean exports to China in 2023 dropped 20%

year-on-year, to \$124.8 billion, while imports from China dipped 8% year-on-year, to \$142.8 billion. Strong investment flows to the United States by South Korea's major conglomerates have resulted in a boost in South Korean car, automobile parts, and automotive battery exports. If such trends continue, South Korea in 2024 may have the distinction of being the only country adjacent to China for which China is not its number one trade partner.

Another indicator of distancing between China and South Korea post-pandemic is evident in the educational sector, as South Korea's [Ministry of Education](#) reports that the number of South Korean students studying in China has declined from 26,949 (17.2% of Korean students abroad) in 2021 to 15,857 (12.9% of Korean students abroad) in 2023. While the number of Korean students in the United States has declined from 49,809 in 2021 to 40,755 in 2023, the proportion of South Korean students abroad studying in the United States has increased from 31.8% to 33.1%.

In terms of inbound students to South Korea, the [Ministry of Education reports](#) that the number of Chinese students has remained the same at around 68,000 from 2018 to 2023, but the proportion of Chinese students among the overall foreign student population has declined from 48.2% to 37.4%, as South Korea has registered an increase in the number of foreign students from 142,205 in 2018 to 181,842 in 2023. During this same period, the number of foreign students from Vietnam has increased from 27,061 (19% of all students) to 43,361 (23.8% of all students).

Border Reopening Revives China-North Korea Trade and Human Rights Concerns

Pyongyang's post-pandemic border reopening in late August sharpened attention on economic engagements with China. China's trade with North Korea has rebounded from historic lows resulting from North Korea's pandemic-era self-quarantine. Chinese exports to North Korea from January to November 2023 increased by over 130% over 2022 levels to almost \$1.8 billion while Chinese imports from North Korea increased by a similar amount to \$266 million, based on [Chinese customs data](#). Although North Korea has presumably reduced its economic dependency on China somewhat because of its munitions trade with Russia, China likely remains an irreplaceable source for procuring

many necessities for daily life in North Korea. In December, South Korea's Unification Minister Kim Yung-ho raised concerns over North Korea's [unauthorized](#) use of South Korean-owned facilities at the Kaesong Industrial Complex, and Beijing's limited imposition of sanctions on the North Korean regime. Air Koryo's resumption of Pyongyang-Shenyang commercial flights in August indicated a gradual revival of cross-border activity.

The China-North Korea border reopening also renewed attention on China's repatriation of North Korean refugees, who China has traditionally identified as illegal economic immigrants. Concerns heightened with China's reported repatriation of hundreds of North Korean defectors in October, as reflected in recent UN and South Korean resolutions. On Dec. 19, the UN General Assembly passed a [resolution](#) on North Korean human rights for the 19th year in a row, referencing North Koreans "being forcibly repatriated." Adopted on Nov. 30, a resolution by South Korea's National Assembly called on China to stop repatriating North Koreans, while pushing South Korean and international agencies to work harder on the issue. At a [forum](#) in Washington earlier that month, Unification Minister Kim urged Beijing to ensure "North Korean defectors in China can be protected of their human rights based on the international norm." Activists [rallied](#) at the South Korean Foreign Ministry in October, voicing public demands to "[stop China's repatriation of North Koreans](#)." [Video talks](#) between special representatives Liu Xiaoming and Sung Kim on Oct. 30 prioritized China's repatriation of North Korean nationals, in addition to Pyongyang's aggression and military cooperation with Russia. The Chinese foreign ministry's [report](#) of the meeting did not specify such priorities.

Conclusion

The impact of deepening geostrategic rivalry is clearly contributing to a reconfiguring of political and economic relationships in Northeast Asia, with a mixed impact on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea appears to be drawing away from China's geoeconomic orbit as South Korean investment in the United States reinforces the geopolitical choices of the Yoon administration. Meanwhile, China's economic relationship with North Korea has recovered, with the effects of North Korean diversification

efforts and revitalization of its relations with Russia still unknown. In addition, it remains to be seen how China grapples with closer Japan-South Korea relations and whether China will achieve the normalization of a “[win-win-win](#)” relationship among the three countries “with a particular emphasis on Tokyo and Seoul demonstrating more strategic autonomy” or whether the Camp David Summit will create additional impediments and constraints on China’s ability to project its sphere of influence in the region.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2023

Sept. 7, 2023: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Chinese Premier Li Qiang [meet](#) in Jakarta on the sidelines of ASEAN meetings.

Sept. 8, 2023: A Chinese delegation led by Vice Premier Liu Guozhong [visits](#) Pyongyang.

Sept. 9, 2023: President Xi Jinping [sends](#) a message to Kim Jong Un marking North Korea's 75th founding anniversary.

Sept. 23, 2023: President Xi and South Korean Prime Minister Han Duck-soo [meet](#) in Hangzhou, where the 19th Asian Games start.

Sept. 24, 2023: Kim [sends](#) a response letter to Xi.

Sept. 25, 2023: South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Park Jin [takes part](#) in the Korea-Japan-China Trilateral Senior Officials' Meeting.

Sept. 26, 2023: China-South Korea-Japan senior officials' meeting [takes place](#) in Seoul.

Sept. 28, 2023: US soldier Travis King [is returned](#) from North Korea, with assistance from China.

Oct. 1, 2023: Kim [sends](#) a letter to Xi marking China's seventy-fourth founding anniversary.

Oct. 17, 2023: Activists at the South Korean Foreign Ministry protest China's repatriation of North Koreans.

Oct. 24, 2023: Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Nong Rong and a China-South Korea-Japan Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat delegation led by Secretary-General Lee Hee-sup [meet](#) in Beijing.

Oct. 25, 2023: North Korea [commemorates](#) 73rd anniversary of China's entry into the Korean War.

Oct. 28, 2023: President Xi [sends](#) a reply letter to Kim Jong Un.

Oct. 30, 2023: South Korean Foreign Ministry sends condolence messages to China on the death of Premier Li Keqiang.

Nov. 2, 2023: Xi sends a response letter to Kim.

Nov. 14, 2023: First South Korea-China Economic Cooperation Exchange [is held](#) in Changchun.

Nov. 21, 2023: North Korea [launches](#) a military spy satellite.

Nov. 22, 2023: Yulin, Shaanxi province [hosts](#) 20th Korea Heart to Heart (K2H) Symposium on International Exchanges of Civil Servants for subnational China-South Korea cooperation.

Nov. 23, 2023: South Korea [returns](#) the remains of 25 Chinese soldiers killed in the Korean War.

Nov. 26, 2023: Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Park Jin [meet](#) in Busan on the sidelines of the tenth China-South Korea-Japan Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

Nov. 27, 2023: UN Security Council [holds](#) a briefing on North Korea's satellite launch.

Nov. 30, 2023: South Korea's National Assembly [passes](#) resolution calling on China to stop repatriating North Korean refugees.

Dec. 3, 2023: 16th Tripartite Health Ministers' Meeting [is held](#) in Beijing.

Dec. 4, 2023: South Korean Minister for Trade Dukgeun Ahn and Chinese International Trade

Representative Wang Shouwen [attend](#) the fifth Korea-China Free Trade Agreement (FTA) Joint Committee meeting held in Beijing.

Dec. 6, 2023: South Korean Deputy Director-General for Northeast Asian Affairs Kang Young-Shin and Chinese Deputy Director-General of the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs Yang Renhuo [co-chair](#) a Korea-China Deputy Director-Generals' Meeting on Maritime Affairs in Shanghai.

Dec. 13, 2023: North Korea's Air Koryo [resumes](#) Pyongyang-Shenyang commercial flights.

Dec. 14, 2023: Two Chinese and four Russian military planes [enter](#) South Korea's air defense identification zone without notice.

Dec. 15, 2023: Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong and North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Pak Myong Ho [meet](#) in Beijing.

Dec. 18, 2023: North Korea [test-fires](#) a *Hwasong-18* ICBM.

Dec. 18, 2023: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Pak [meet](#) in Beijing.

Dec. 18, 2023: First South Korea-China Supply Chain Hotline Meeting and the fourth South Korea-China Working-Level Industrial Cooperation Meeting [takes place](#) in Seoul.

Dec. 19, 2023: Chinese and South Korean foreign ministries [hold](#) director-general consultations in Shenzhen.

PACIFIC  FORUM

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

THE SPARRING CONTINUES

JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, SENIOR FELLOW OF THE FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Several senior-level contacts failed to narrow the gap between Japan and China. Xi Jinping and Kishida Fumio [met](#) at APEC for 65 minutes in November to discuss topics including a buoy placed in what Japan regards as its territorial waters, China's lack of cooperation on North Korea's nuclear program, Beijing's resumption of drilling in a disputed section of the East China Sea, and the detention of Japanese nationals on vaguely worded charges. China complained about Japan's enhanced defense relationship with the US and other countries, its chip alliance with the US aimed at excluding China, the continued release of allegedly contaminated water from the disabled Fukushima plant, as well as Japan's support for Taiwan. There was no resolution of any of these issues. Komeito leader Yamauchi Natsuo [visited](#) Beijing with a letter from Kishida; its contents have not been publicly disclosed but it had had no discernible results. Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko's meeting with counterpart Wang Yi at a trilateral meeting of foreign ministers in South Korea, also in November, was similarly unproductive. With Kishida seemingly losing support of his own party and likely to be replaced soon, Japan has little leverage in negotiations.

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Political

In October, the two sides [exchanged](#) polite congratulations on the 45th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship, though Chinese sources acknowledged the existence of tensions that they attributed to “geopolitical security, including the dispute over the Diaoyu [Senkaku] Islands, in addition to Japan's revised national security strategy that refers to China as a threat, along with its growing defense and security cooperation with the US in order to deter China, particularly on the Taiwan question.” Unnamed experts, they continued, had warned that if not solved they could deliver “a heavy blow to bilateral relations.” Premier Li Qiang said that China was willing to work with Japan to revive the spirit of the treaty with Foreign Minister Wang Yi putting forward a [five-point proposal](#), but it is unlikely that the Chinese government expected that Japan would act on any of these to the extent that would satisfy Beijing.



Figure 1 In Busan, South Korea, Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa, on the left, shakes hands with Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi. Photo: Japanese Foreign Ministry

Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [met](#) Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in San Francisco in November, their first face-to-face meeting in a year. As Chinese and Japanese leaders have done many times, they agreed to pursue mutually beneficial relations. Among the issues discussed were Japanese dissatisfaction with a buoy placed in what Japan regards as its territorial waters, the presence of Chinese coast guard vessels and fishing boats in those waters, the resumption of drilling in a disputed section of the East China Sea, a Chinese ban on imports of Japanese seafood, China's detention of Japanese nationals on vaguely

defined charges of spying, insufficient efforts to curb North Korea missile testing, and an increasingly restricted business climate. China voiced dissatisfaction with Japan's discharge of water that Beijing claims is radioactive from the closed Fukushima reactor, Tokyo's chip alliance with the United States and the Netherlands (which excludes the PRC), and Japan's support for Taiwan. Kishida [told](#) Xi that Japan wanted to promote the revitalization of China-Japan economic exchanges, but only in an environment that protects legitimate business activities.

A week later, a delegation from Komeito, the junior partner in Japan's coalition government, [visited](#) Beijing with party head Yamaguchi Natsuo bearing a letter from Kishida to Xi, whose contents have yet to be publicly disclosed. In what Japanese critics considered a snub, Yamaguchi was unable to meet Xi, and was received instead by Cai Qi, who holds a position equivalent to Japan's chief Cabinet secretary. Japanese opponents of the trip [argued](#) that if Komeito gets too close to China, it could be considered a Chinese propaganda tool. A trilateral meeting of the foreign ministers of China, Japan, and South Korea was similarly unproductive. Kamikawa Yoko urged Wang Yi to take note of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) certification of the safety of the water and [asked](#) for China's help in curbing North Korea's nuclear and missile development program, with Wang [responding](#) that China is against Japan's “irresponsible action” of releasing the wastewater (although China took part in the IAEA certification). The Chinese position is that the country should be allowed to take samples on its own, including during treatment of the water before its discharge, which would delay a decision for months. Also, at the end of November a third tranche of treated radioactive water was [released](#) into the Pacific; the process is expected to take decades. As the year closed, Japanese sources disclosed that the two governments had [agreed](#) to hold talks on the water issue at an expert level early next year, despite expressing doubts they would lead to Beijing lifting its blanket import ban on Japanese seafood.

Japanese support for Taiwan, though always couched in the language of Japan's interpretation of the “one China” policy, continued to irk China. In September, Tokyo [appointed](#) a serving Self-Defense Force (SDF) officer to serve as its de facto defense attaché in

Taiwan and an additional official to enhance information gathering and communicate with Taiwan's military. Taiwan had earlier asked for an active SDF officer, as opposed to the past practice of appointing retired SDF officers, with Tokyo reportedly on the verge of doing so but then delaying after a leak from Japanese media. Taiwan's foreign ministry declined to comment on the new defense attaché, saying only that it "would continue to deepen cooperation with similar-minded partners such as Japan." Two days later, a Cabinet revamp [named](#) Kihara Minoru, who has visited Taiwan and belongs to a Japan-Taiwan inter-parliamentary group, as defense minister. Kihara subsequently [said](#) he was "very concerned" about China's rapid military buildup and moves in the East and South China seas, calling trilateral security cooperation among Japan, South Korea, and the US the "cornerstone" of Tokyo's response to an increasingly tense regional environment that also includes Russia and North Korea.

Japan-Taiwan political ties are also warm. In his first [interview](#) with the Japanese press since being chosen the governing DPP's candidate for president, current vice-president William Lai Ching-te—referred to as vice-president rather than, as Beijing would prefer, a representative of the Taiwan authorities—stated that Taiwan and Japan are like a family and expressed his belief that Taiwan and Japan need to cooperate in every field including security, since both face direct threats from China. Though this interview was virtual, Lai had visited Japan last year to attend former Prime Minister Abe's funeral; his opponents in the January election have visited Japan more recently.



Figure 2 Taiwan Vice President William Lai Ching-te delivers remarks during an interview with *The Yomiuri Shimbum* in Taipei. Photo: Ichiro Ohara

Commercial ties have been enhanced as well. Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co.

(TSMC) [plans](#) to produce 6-nanometer chips at its second plant in Japan, with the chips to be manufactured in a new facility TSMC is planning at its Kumamoto site in the southwest of the country. They will be the most advanced semiconductor products made in the country. Total investment is estimated at 2 trillion yen (\$13.3 billion), with Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) considering providing up to around 900 billion yen. The Kumamoto fab aims to start operations next year. A second Taiwanese semiconductor manufacturer, Powerchip Semiconductor Manufacturing Corp. (PSMC) is [building](#) a plant in Japan's northern prefecture of Miyagi, to begin operations as early as 2026. METI will subsidize the project. Collectively, they will further free Japan from dependence on chips from China. And Taiwan's budget carrier Tigerair [began](#) direct flights from Taipei to Kochi in Shikoku on Nov. 1.

Beijing has also been irritated by Japanese efforts to reach out to other countries who have grievances with China. In general, Chinese media have described these as instigated by Washington with the aim of oppressing Beijing. Beijing's *Global Times* [characterized](#) Kishida's trip to the Philippines and Malaysia as "troublemaking" since, unlike previous prime ministers' visits focused solely on economic diplomacy, Kishida's "gift packs" allegedly contained lethal weapons. Under Japan's new Official Security Assistance (OSA) framework, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Fiji, and Malaysia have been [selected](#) as recipient countries for patrol boats and joint training exercises. Also in November, a reception for the Japanese, South Korea, and Chinese foreign ministers was abruptly [canceled](#), ostensibly because Wang Yi's schedule was too tight to attend. Unnamed observers speculated that China's action was motivated by dissatisfaction with historic antagonists Japan and South Korea continuing to strengthen ties with the United States. In December, South Korean tech giant Samsung announced it will [invest](#) about \$280 million over five years in a facility for research into advanced chip packaging in Yokohama. Advanced packaging techniques involve combining components in a single package to improve overall chip performance. Also in December, Kishida and French President Emmanuel Macron [agreed](#) on a road map to update a 2019 agreement prompted by growing French concern with China's behavior in the Indo-Pacific. It includes a policy of cooperation

between the SDF and the French military in the areas of space, cyberspace, and electromagnetic waves as well as the creation of a Japan-French working group on economic security to strengthen supply chains.

Another expression of Chinese dissatisfaction with Japan has been increased surveillance of Japanese nationals, including arrests and sometimes long prison terms in [accordance](#) with its revised counterespionage act, which went into effect in July. In November, the 12-year prison term of a Japanese national in his 50s accused of espionage in China was [finalized](#) after a high court dismissed his appeal. Since 2014 China has detained 17 Japanese citizens, of whom 10 have been sentenced to jail terms of up to 15 years.

The Yasukuni issue has lost salience, at least temporarily. Abe's 2013 visit was the last time a sitting prime minister paid his respects there, though he did [attend](#) after leaving office. Since then, prime ministers have limited themselves to ritual *masakaki* donations that, they carefully point out, have been paid for out of their own pockets. Chinese media continue to pay close attention to these visits and also which ministers participate but in this reporting period, as has become common in recent years, the [protests](#) have been subdued.



Figure 3 Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visits Yasukuni Shrine on December 26, 2013. Photo: Toru Hanai

The occasional bright spot notwithstanding, there is general agreement that China-Japan ties are poor. Tarumi Hideo, Japan's ambassador to the PRC from September 20 to October 2023, has [stated](#) that during his time in Beijing, Chinese public security authorities many times pressured Chinese officials to refrain from attending event hosted by the embassy in

Beijing. The annual Genron NPO-China International Communications Group joint survey [showed](#) that 92.2% of Japanese and 62.9% of Chinese feel relations with the other country are "poor" or "rather poor." Although the survey was conducted following Japan's release of water from the Fukushima nuclear plant, the percentage for Chinese was about the same as last year, while the percentage for Japan was up 4.9%. 68.4% of Japanese and 41.2% of Chinese saw relations as in a bad state. Reporting on the same poll, Beijing's *Global Times* chose to emphasize the positive, saying that 60.1% of Chinese and 65.1% of Japanese respondents had acknowledged the importance of the relationship between the two countries—the major reasons given including China and Japan "being important neighbors and major trading partners," "playing a crucial role in regional peace and development," and their "highly interdependent economies and industries." According to a Pew [poll](#) released in December, 76% of Japanese consider China a major threat, compared with 66% in Taiwan and 64% in South Korea.

Economic

Both countries struggled to get their economies back onto stronger growth trajectories. China [grew](#) over 5% in 2023, well above the world average owing in part because of a low base in the previous year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, a significant portion of the increase was unproductive, meaning that many Chinese have not benefited by it. Reform efforts have stalled, with a plan to increase welfare benefits to hundreds of millions of rural migrant workers who could, according to some estimates, add as much as 1.7% of GDP if they had access to public services comparable to those available in urban areas, put on hold. In December, credit rating agency Moody [cut](#) its outlook for Chinese sovereign bonds to negative in light of the PRC's slowing economy and the ongoing crisis in the PRC's property sector. And, as the year closed the *Financial Times* reported that nearly 9/10ths of the foreign money invested in the Chinese stock market during the year had left. Analysts interviewed cited loss of consumer, business, and investor confidence from both domestic and foreign sources. Manufacturers [face](#) less demand from abroad, and local government finances continue to be precarious.

In Japan economic output fell to \$4.2 trillion in 2022, accounting for 4.2% of global GDP. This was down 0.9% from the previous year and the lowest share since comparable data became available in 1980. The yen remains worrisomely weak. Japan remains the world's third largest economy, though its GDP is dwarfed by those of the US and China. China-Japan political and security tensions notwithstanding, the problems of the Chinese economy are not good news for Japan. In September newly appointed economy minister Yoshitaka Shindo [warned](#) that because China accounts for nearly a fifth of Japanese exports, its economic problems could potentially have “a really big impact” on his country's economy. A brighter spot for Japan was that there had been a reversal of chronically insufficient demand, with inflation running above the Bank of Japan's 2% target. And the *Nikkei* [ended](#) trading in 2023 with its key index up more than 28% over a year earlier.

The Japanese business community [mourned](#) the death of former Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in October whom, they believed, championed improved economic ties between Japan and China even when other issues such as the territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea threatened to derail friendly relations. *Asahi* cited an unnamed high-ranking LDP official as lamenting “now we see almost no one in either Japan or China with the willingness to serve as a conduit between the two nations. As the thinking about economic security spreads, it will become increasingly difficult to build a bilateral relationship based on the economy as in the past.”

Japanese companies struggled to find the sweet spot between reducing their dependence on Chinese supply chains and their reliance on both a market for goods and a supplier of needed commodities. Many companies pulled their investments out or scaled them down. Fifty fewer Japanese companies attended the China International Import Expo in November, partly due to issues surrounding the release of treated water from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, though 350 did. The Chinese government hosted the event to show its willingness to open markets in the face of a slumping economy and decreased interest by foreign investors. Also in November, Sato Yasuhiro, chairman of the Japan-China Investment Promotion Organization, and senior executives of a number of Japanese companies including Mizuho Bank,

Panasonic, and Toyota [visited](#) Beijing, with Chinese sources quoting Sato as saying that the vast majority of its member companies were willing to expand and continue to invest in China.

As losses mounted, top Japanese investment bank Nomura [reassessed](#) its mainland China business. Contributing factors included delays in securing an investment banking license in China by the end of 2023 that would have allowed Nomura to directly compete with local banks offering lucrative services such as a mergers and acquisition, as well as an exit ban imposed on one of its most senior executives. Japanese companies were not alone: Credit Suisse, Deutsche Bank, and HKBC also reported losses in their China-based units in 2022. However, some Japanese companies continued to bet on the China market. In November, the China Securities Regulatory Commission [received](#) Mizuho Securities' application to establish a securities company in China. Mizuho's action is not just a Japanese phenomenon, since New York-based Citigroup and London's Standard Chartered are also establishing securities units in the PRC.



Figure 4 Mizuho Financial Group is looking to establish a securities company in China. Photo: Kiyoshi Ota

Other Japanese companies have either elected to stay or planned to enhance their dealings in China. Chip gear-maker Kokusai Electric Corporation is [expanding](#) its staff in China in anticipation of an increase in demand from the PRC as the world's largest semiconductor market in 2024. Kokusai CEO Kanai Fumiyuki describes small-scale fabrication plants as “springing up like mushrooms in China” driven in part by efforts to localize chip production in response to the US erecting higher barriers on the export of advanced chips and chip gear.

Nissan, hoping to regain market share in China, will [launch](#) a joint research project next year with Tsinghua University on reaching Generation Z—those born between 1995 and 2009—and on the social responsibility of automakers in battery recycling, charging stations and other electric vehicle-related issues. It plans to develop 10 new-energy vehicles for the Chinese market, four under its own brand by 2026 with the other six for Chinese joint venture partners. It aims to launch the first Nissan-branded model in the second half of next year. This venture marks an expansion of an existing relationship: Nissan and Tsinghua have been research partners since they established a joint center in 2016 to study electric vehicles and autonomous driving for the Chinese market.

Efforts at official cooperation continue. Discussions on a new [framework](#) on systems and practices for export is underway with bureau chief-level and section chief-level officials in charge of export controls in the two countries holding talks. The bureau chief-level officials expect to meet at least once a year with the aim of making it a regular event. The first meeting is being arranged for the first half of 2024. The United States and European Union have created similar frameworks with China.

Japan continued to lose ground to China in the auto industry. At year's end, China [became](#) the world's top automobile exporter on an annual basis for the first time, thanks to bigger footholds in Russia and Mexico and a growing global electric vehicle industry. Chinese automotive companies have plans to move up the value chain. [Tracing](#) the trajectory of Japan in the past, China, having shaped the market with its cheap cars, is now developing luxury sports cars. BYD, for example, is [using](#) a Western-style mansion in Shanghai to introduce its SUV Yangwang U8, with a price tag of \$153,000. Still, there are [problems](#): Chinese EV company Nio has missed production targets, has yet to turn a profit and has had to be bailed out by a state-owned enterprise. Domestic EV companies compete fiercely with each other and more established manufacturers like Tesla, VW, and Ford. And despite losing first place, Japan saw a double-digit rise in worldwide auto exports.

China's ban on the import of Japanese fish, imposed in late August in retaliation for Japan's release of allegedly radioactive water into the

ocean continued to hurt the Japanese fishing industry, with Japan's finance ministry [announcing](#) that exports of fishery products to mainland China in September had fallen 99.3% year on year, to ¥58.68 million. Exports of fishery products to Hong Kong, which has imposed partial restrictions on imports from Japan, went down 8.6% to ¥3.717 billion. Although demand for Japanese food in Hong Kong remains strong despite Chinese restrictions on sales on the mainland, customs inspections now [take](#) around three hours compared with about 30 minutes in the past. Importers have requested that the Hong Kong government increase the number of inspectors to speed up customs clearance. In some cases, fresh fish and shellfish that arrive in the afternoon do not clear customs until the following morning, jeopardizing the practice of upscale Hong Kong Japanese-style restaurants' Day Zero system, under which seafood purchased at an early morning auction at a Japanese wholesale market is airlifted and served in the evening on the same day. Japan has sought alternative outlets for its fish production.

Defense

Defense issues during the reporting period fell into three broad categories: Chinese complaints about Japan increasing its defense budget; Japanese government efforts to increase military preparedness in the face of domestic opposition; and increased incursions of China coast guard vessels into waters that Japan regards as its contiguous zone.

On the first issue, September saw a spate of Chinese articles criticizing Japan's increased defense budget as reflecting an increasingly offensive military strategy as well as a whole-of-government approach to rapidly increasing military spending, accompanied by warnings that such actions will worsen arms races and undermine peace and stability in the region. China Defense News [singled](#) out Japan's intent to purchase Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile Extended Range (JASSM-ER)s from the US as evidence that Tokyo seeks to develop increasingly offensive capabilities. Although Japan's annual defense increases are a fraction of those of the PRC, Beijing media point out that the acquisition of new weapons and progressive loosening of restrictions on providing them to third parties are violations of the country's peace constitution.

Domestic opposition to Japanese government efforts to enhance deterrence against Chinese antagonism centers around cost and the alternative use of the funds for social welfare projects; the feeling that the public has been insufficiently consulted on the preparations; and a “not in my backyard” reaction from citizens who object to changes in their areas. *Asahi*, Japan’s second largest circulation daily, [editorialized](#) that though it is vital for Japan and the United States to make concerted responses to China’s military buildup, it is unacceptable for the operational range and facility usage of the US military and for the SDF to be expanded limitlessly without efforts to win the support and understanding of local communities. The Japanese government, bent on strengthening the alliance, bears responsibility for providing clear explanations about these questions to the public, it said.

Okinawa was the most salient example of opposition to defense installations in its territory. Prefectural Gov. Denny Tamaki has been a vocal opponent of bases, both US and Japanese, on the island and has aroused concern in Tokyo by seemingly flirting with China, which has from time to time questioned whether Okinawa is truly part of Japan. In October Tamaki [met](#) Chinese ambassador to Japan Wu Jianguo in Naha and expressed willingness to bolster ties between the prefecture and China.



Figure 5 Okinawa Governor Denny Tamaki, on the right, engages in discussions with Chinese Ambassador to Japan Wu Jianguo at the Okinawa Prefectural Government office. Photo: The Yomiuri Shimbun

Wu replied that he hoped Okinawa will play a special role in improving China-Japan relations “that only it can,” without providing details. A day before, Okinawa Prefectural Assembly Speaker Noboru Akamine met Wu and handed him a written request expressing concern and

asking, among other things, that Chinese vessels refrain from intruding into Japanese territorial waters near the Senkaku Islands. It was noted that Tamaki did not make a similar request of the Chinese ambassador. Tamaki repeatedly refused to approve a design change for the new area Henoko in Nago, where the functions of the US Futenma Air Station in Ginowan will be relocated, resulting in the central government for the first time [resorting](#) to execution by proxy under which it can act in place of a local government, based on the Local Autonomy Law. At the end of November, an estimated 10,000 Okinawans demonstrated in [protest](#) of the Japanese government’s decision to bolster Japan’s military presence in the prefecture.

Those who live on the small southwestern islands where the central government has placed defenses are not pleased with the disruptions to their lives brought about by the stationing of SDF personnel and their weapons. This is particularly the case where tourism and fisheries are important [sources](#) of revenue. Residents of Yonaguni, one of the areas targeted for defense upgrades, [criticized](#) the government’s lack of a plan to cope with the anticipated influx of refugees from Taiwan in the event of a war with China saying they are simply unequipped to deal with it.

Defense-related liaisons with foreign governments proved less controversial domestically and are being actively pursued. Reflecting common concern over China’s continued military buildup, Japan and Australia have continued to deepen security cooperation. This has been an ongoing process. In January 2022, Tokyo and Canberra signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement that simplified entry procedures for joint exercises, exercises conducted under a scenario of Japan exercising the right to collective self-defense with the SDF counter-attacking a military assault against Australian forces. *Asahi* has [reported](#) on constitutional law experts’ doubts about the legality of the SDF’s de facto overseas deployment. October 2023 was the first time a Japanese company entered a defense contract with a foreign government without going through Japan’s defense ministry. Mitsubishi Electric [signed](#) an agreement with the Australian Defence Department for joint equipment development. Japan’s defense ministry praised Mitsubishi Electric’s contract as a symbol of defense and technology cooperation

between the countries and called for continued public-private defense cooperation. Australia, it observed, is trying to improve its defense capabilities with an eye on China, but there are limits to what it can do on its own. Japan's defense ministry will begin [deploying](#) fighter jets to Australia on a rotational basis during fiscal year 2024 for joint exercises designed to counter a possible attack there.

In November the Japanese government [agreed](#) to supply defense-related equipment to the Philippines under what will be the first instance of the country's new official security assistance (OSA) framework. Items to be included are small patrol vessels, radars, drones, and a coastal surveillance radar. Negotiations are to begin on a reciprocal access agreement (RAA) to facilitate joint training by the SDF and the Philippine military. The Manila government has been receptive to these initiatives in light of China's aggressive maritime expansion in the South China Sea. The Japanese government is aware that Southeast Asian countries are not all of the same mind on China, and that it must tread warily. In November, China [held](#) a joint military exercise with five Southeast Asian states—Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, citing unnamed local experts' views that the exercises would be conducive to the safeguarding of regional peace and stability amid repeated provocations by the Philippines.

In November, the US, Canadian, and Australian navies [staged](#) a joint exercise in the Pacific Ocean with the Philippine Navy participating as an observer for the first time. Leaving no doubt that the exercises are meant as a signal to China, V.Adm. Saito Akira, commander in chief of the MSDF Fleet, told a joint press conference held on the aircraft carrier *USS Carl Vinson* that strong cooperation with navies of other countries is necessary as threats to maritime security, such as attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force, are increasing. About 30 vessels and 40 aircraft from the four countries participated.



Figure 6 Ships from the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, Royal Australian Navy, Royal Canadian Navy, and United States Navy sail in formation during Annual Exercise (ANNUALEX) 2023. Photo: Isaiah Goessl

Regarding increased Chinese incursions, on Dec. 31 the Japan Coast Guard [reported](#) four China Coast Guard vessels sailing in the contiguous zone off the coast of Minami-Kojima Island and Taishojima Island in the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. This is the 352nd day this year that CCG vessels have been spotted in the contiguous zone, a new record for annual incursions and an increase from the previous record of 336 days, set in 2022. A day before, citing unnamed sources “familiar with the matter” *The Japan Times* [stated](#) that China plans to keep its ships near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands every day in 2024. Its coast guard will, they say, conduct inspections of Japanese fishing boats in the area, if necessary, to boost Beijing's sovereignty claim. With this, and the continued presence of the buoy despite Tokyo's objections, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Japan's claimed sovereignty over the area has gradually deteriorated.

The Future

Economically, while trade ties are strong, the arrest of Japanese nationals, often on vaguely worded charges of spying, has made businesspeople fearful of being posted to China and, although Xi Jinping has expressed hope for more Japanese investment, totals are down. Experts [expect](#) China's economic growth will slow in the coming year to 4.6%, following a predicted 5.2% expansion this year, amid a slump in the real estate market and stagnant consumption. Predictions are that the correction in the real estate sector is likely to continue in 2024 and weigh on investment, household confidence, and local government finances. In the longer term, the “three Ds”—demographics, deleveraging, and

de-risking are [likely](#) to cause real GDP growth to slow to 3% by 2034, This will have knock-on effect on Japanese economic growth. Japanese economic growth in 2023 [was](#) 1.3%, and predicted to decline to 1.1% in 2024.

One bright spot has been the rebound in Chinese tourism to Japan. In the face of a Chinese ban on seafood imports from Japan, Tokyo will continue efforts to find alternate markets and will likely continue to release water from the Fukushima reactor into the ocean, with China continuing to complain. Each side continues to build its defenses, and though pressure from Chinese militia and coast guard vessels in the area of the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands may decrease for short periods, it is likely to resume again. Politically, there are no hopeful signs on the horizon. A state visit for the Japanese prime minister has quietly disappeared from mention, with terse conversations on differences of opinion on the sidelines of multinational meetings. Prime Minister Kishida, whose approval ratings continue to be dismal, will in all likelihood be replaced before long, adding another element of uncertainty to future interactions.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2023

Sept. 2, 2023: International media [report](#) that Chinese-language posts about Japan's release of treated radioactive water into the ocean appear designed to instill fear and inflame anti-Japanese sentiment.

Sept. 2, 2023: Japan foreign ministry [rebutts](#) Chinese claims that the monitoring system at Fukushima lacked transparency and could not be described as international monitoring since the International Atomic Energy Agency's assessment affirming the safety of the discharged water included participants from research institutions in the United States, France, Switzerland and South Korea.

Sept. 3, 2023: China [marks](#) the 78th anniversary of the end of World War II, described as the first complete victory won by the Chinese people in their struggle for national liberation.

Sept. 4, 2023: Fukushima Yasuhito, a specialist in space security at the defense ministry's National Institute for Defense Studies, [admonishes](#) the government to pay close attention to Chinese military advances fueled by the PRC's civil-military fusion.

Sept. 6, 2023: Japan's defense ministry will [establish](#) a unified command for all Self-Defense Forces at the end of fiscal 2024, changing the current practice of setting up temporary task forces. In addition to enabling more efficient responses, the unified command, to be headquartered in Ichigaya, will be able to better deal with new domains such as cyber and space.

Sept. 6, 2023: China Defense News [singles](#) out Japan's intent to purchase Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile Extended Range (JASSM-ER) capability from the US as evidence that Tokyo seeks to develop increasingly offensive capabilities.

Sept. 8, 2023: Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida [have](#) a 15-minute standing conversation at the ASEAN leaders' meeting in Jakarta, at which there was a spate of protests against China's continued behavior in the South China Sea.

Sept. 9, 2023: Japanese government [says](#) it will work with other countries and industries to counter economic coercion from China.

Sept. 10, 2023: Panasonic Software Development Center Dalian is now the Japanese electronics company's biggest overseas software development hub in terms of head count, having [grown](#) from about 700 to 1,000, including outside contractors, in 2022, with plans to add more staff in the future.

Sept. 11, 2023: Japanese government says it will [strengthen](#) its efforts to inform the international community that the Senkakus, Takeshima, and territories are inherent parts of Japan.

Sept. 11, 2023: Assessing Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative a decade after its inception, *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) that China should treat headwinds from Italy and the Baltic states as an opportunity to rethink its approach.

Sept. 11, 2023: *Voice of America* [reports](#) that public sentiment toward US military bases on Okinawa appears to be changing, amid growing tensions with China and the shock of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, with younger people feeling that the bases are necessary for the defense of Japan.

Sept. 12, 2023: Symbolic of Japan's growing support of Taiwan, the government has [appointed](#) a serving SDF office to serve as its de facto defense attaché in Taiwan and an additional official to enhance information

gathering and communicate with Taiwan's military. Taiwan had asked for an active SDF officer, as opposed to past practice of appointing retired SDF officers, with Tokyo reportedly on the verge of doing so but chose not to do so after a leak from the Japanese media.

Sept. 14, 2023: Kishida's Cabinet revamp [names](#) Kihara Minoru, who has visited Taiwan and belongs to a Japan-Taiwan inter-parliamentary group, as defense minister.

Sept. 17, 2023: Newly appointed defense minister Kihara [says](#) he is "very concerned" about China's rapid military buildup and moves in the East and South China seas, calling trilateral security cooperation among Japan, South Korea, and the US the "cornerstone" of Tokyo's response to an increasingly tense regional environment.

Sept. 17, 2023: *Kyodo* [reports](#) that China has been increasing its surveillance of Japanese nationals following Tokyo's release of treated radioactive water from the disabled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant. More than 100,000 Japanese nationals currently live in China and, with a revised counterespionage law in effect since July, the scope of what constitutes spying under Chinese law has broadened.

Sept. 18, 2023: Japanese government [protests](#) to China after it deployed another oceanographic buoy in Japan's exclusive economic zone near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

Sept. 24, 2023: Japan Coast Guard [discloses](#) that two China Coast Guard vessels that had intruded into territorial waters off the Senkaku Islands, left on the afternoon of Sept. 24 after arriving on Saturday morning.

Sept. 24, 2023: [Demand](#) for Japanese food in Hong Kong has not fallen despite Chinese restrictions on sales on the mainland. Customs inspections now take around three hours compared with about 30 minutes in the past.

Sept. 25, 2023: According to Global Fishing Watch and an investigation by *Asahi*, Chinese boats are [catching](#) fish in what Beijing calls "Fukushima nuclear-contaminated water" for distribution in China, while the same marine products caught in the same area by Japanese vessels remain banned in that country.

Sept. 25, 2023: In a break from tradition blamed on his tight schedule, Defense Minister Kihara doesn't [meet](#) Okinawa Gov. Tamaki during his first visit to Okinawa after assuming office. Tamaki, with other Okinawa residents, opposes Tokyo's efforts to shore up defenses in the prefecture against China in the area.

Sept. 28, 2023: Japanese and US authorities jointly [announce](#) that cyberattacks have been carried out by BlackTech, officially acknowledging for the first time that the group is backed by the Chinese government.

Sept. 28, 2023: According to Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Japanese population in China is on the [verge](#) of falling below 100,000 to a 20-year low as an expat exodus continues amid bilateral tensions.

Sept. 28, 2023: Mitsubishi Motors [plans](#) to withdraw from production in China due to sluggish sales of gasoline-powered vehicles in the country.

Sept. 29, 2023: Newly appointed Economics Minister Shindo Yoshitaka [warns](#) that because China accounts for nearly a fifth of Japanese exports, its economic problems could have "a really big impact" on Japan's economy.

Sept. 30, 2023: Despite Chinese government [concerns](#) with allegedly contaminated water from the disabled Fukushima nuclear reactor, flights to Japan for the National Day holiday were filled to near-capacity.

Oct. 1, 2023: According to an unofficial policy document, the Japanese government has [designated](#) 14 airports and 19 ports for improvement with an emphasis on preparing for a Taiwan contingency.

Oct. 3, 2023: Chinese sources [dispute](#) Japanese claims of large numbers of Chinese tourists visiting Japan for Golden Week as part of their pretexts to mislead the public.

Oct. 4, 2023: Indicative of closer commercial ties, Taiwan's budget Tigerair carrier will [begin](#) direct flights from Taipei to Kochi in Shikoku on Nov. 1.

Oct. 5, 2023: After [meeting](#) US counterpart Lloyd Austin, Defense Minister Kihara announces that Japan will start procuring *Tomahawk* cruise missiles in 2025. Japan initially planned to buy up to 400 *Block V* missiles, the latest generation of *Tomahawk*, in fiscal 2026 and 202.

Oct. 5, 2023: Agriculture and Fisheries Minister Miyashita Ichiro [says](#) Japan hopes to resolve China's ban on its seafood following the release of treated wastewater from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant within the World Trade Organization's scope short of filing a formal complaint.

Oct. 6, 2023: With an eye on China, Japan plans to [introduce](#) a security clearance system for people handling sensitive information, *Nikkei* reports, aiming to set standards compatible with the US and Europe.

Oct. 6, 2023: China's foreign ministry [states](#) that China "firmly opposes Japan's unilateral action of discharging the water into the sea." Compared with Japan's first release of treated wastewater from the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, the outcry from China, Hong Kong, and South Korea on the second release is [subdued](#).

Oct. 6, 2023: In response to many bothersome [calls](#) thought to be from China in the wake of Japan's initial release of treated water from Fukushima, NTT East Corporation is establishing a new service that will allow local governments beset by nuisance calls to reject all phone communications from specific countries.

Oct. 6, 2023: Okinawa Gov. Tamaki [meets](#) with Chinese Ambassador to Japan Wu Jianghao in

Naha and expresses his willingness to bolster ties between the prefecture and China.

Oct. 7, 2023: In his first [interview](#) with the Japanese press since being chosen the governing DPP's candidate for president, Vice-president William Lai Ching-te states that Taiwan and Japan are like a family and expresses his belief that they need to cooperate in every field including security, since both face threats from China.

Oct. 8, 2023: All eight US MQ-9 reconnaissance drones deployed at the MSDF's Kanoya Air Base in Kagoshima will [relocate](#) to the US's Kadena Air Base to strengthen warning and surveillance activities regarding the increasingly active Chinese military around the Nansei Islands and Taiwan.

Oct. 8, 2023: *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) on the need for international cooperation to prevent the spread of Chinese disinformation. Disinformation efforts involving billions of dollars of expenditure per year, are particularly noticeable in Asia, Africa, and South and Central America.

Oct. 8, 2023: A video posted on X [shows](#) Chinese high-school students re-enacting and cheering the assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, with a banner in the background criticizing Japan's release of water from Fukushima.

Oct. 9, 2023: In the first intrusion since Sept. 23-25, four Haijing coast guard vessels [enter](#) Japanese territorial waters, leaving after less than two hours.

Oct. 9, 2023: An *Asahi* editorial [terms](#) the Kishida administration's intent to quickly acquire military capabilities to strike enemy bases "unacceptable."

Oct. 10, 2023: China has [embarked](#) on production of a new generation of nuclear-armed submarines that are expected to

pose a challenge to growing US, Japanese, other allies' efforts to track them.

Oct. 10, 2023: NHK reports that the annual Genron NPO-China International Communications Group joint survey [shows](#) 92.2% of Japanese and 62.9% of Chinese felt that relations with the other country were poor or rather poor.

Oct. 11, 2023: MSDF [announces](#) that Japan, the United States, and South Korea conducted a 7-vessel joint drill in the East China Sea, where China claims islands administered by Japan, on the 9th and 10th.

Oct. 11, 2023: *Asahi*, [citing](#) the Genron-China International Communications Group poll, 26.7% of Chinese are not at all or not very worried about the water discharge from Fukushima, while 25% said it was too early to make a judgment.

Oct. 12, 2023: As concerns grow over the global reliance on China in critical materials for such items as electric vehicles and solar panels, Japan, the World Bank and other partners [launch](#) RISE, the partnership for Resilient and Inclusive Supply-chain Enhancement to diversify renewable energy supply chains.

Oct. 12, 2023: Of 502 major Japanese companies surveyed by *Reuters*, 52% say they [expect](#) the slowdown in China to continue into 2025, with 17% predicting weaker economic growth to persist until the end of 2024.

Oct. 12, 2023: Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. is [planning](#) to produce 6-nm chips at its second plant being built in Japan with the chips to be manufactured in a new facility that TSMC is planning at its Kumamoto site in southwestern Japan.

Oct. 12, 2023: China, a harsh critic of Japan's release of water from its crippled Fukushima nuclear power plant, will [join](#) the monitoring of radioactive substances in seawater and seafood products in the area.

Oct. 17, 2023: Kishida in his official capacity as prime minister but at his own expense, [donates](#) a ritual *masakaki* sprig to the Yasukuni Shrine's 3-day autumn festival.

Oct. 17, 2023: Japanese foreign ministry [regrets](#) Russia's decision to restrict imports of Japanese seafood despite having been provided with transparent and scientific explanations about safety of the treated water release from the Fukushima plant.

Oct. 17, 2023: Japan [joins](#) a 13-nation international framework backed by cyber powers, including the US, the UK, and Israel, for software manufacturers to ensure security of products against cyber-attacks, principally from China and Russia.

Oct. 19, 2023: After being unable to keep up with the major shift to electric vehicles in China, Mitsubishi is expected to [announce](#) it will not resume production in China by the end of October.

Oct. 19, 2023: Chinese authorities announced they formally [arrested](#) a Japanese employee of drugmaker Astellas Pharma in Beijing, who has been detained since March on espionage charges.

Oct. 23, 2023: It is [revealed](#) that a Japanese trading company's Chinese employee overseeing rare metals in China was taken into custody by Chinese authorities in March.

Oct. 23, 2023: It is announced that Japan's next [minister](#) to China will be Kanasugi Kenji, 64, currently serving as ambassador to Indonesia. For the first time in about seven years, the ambassador will not be a member of the Foreign Ministry's Chinese language training group, dubbed the China School.

Oct. 23, 2023: *Asahi* [editorializes](#) that China's spy probes have unnerved Japanese and hurt economic ties.

Oct. 23, 2023: Premier Li Qiang and Prime Minister Kishida [exchange](#) polite congratulations on the 45th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between China and Japan.

Oct. 20, 2023: Marking the first time a Japanese company has entered a defense contract with a foreign government without going through the defense ministry, Mitsubishi Electric [signs](#) an agreement with the Australian Defence Department for joint equipment development.

Oct. 24, 2023: [Interviewed](#) by *Nikkei*, expert Yoshihara Toshi assesses that China's advantage over the US in theater-range missiles could enable it to "intimidate" frontline states like Japan during a crisis over Taiwan.

Oct. 25, 2023: As losses mount, Japanese investment bank Nomura is [reassessing](#) its mainland China business.

Oct. 27, 2023: Japan's finance ministry [announces](#) that the country's exports of fishery products to mainland China in September fell 99.3% year on year.

Oct. 27, 2023: As part of Japan's desire to free itself from chip dependence on China, a second Taiwanese semiconductor manufacturer, Powerchip Semiconductor Manufacturing Corp. (PSMC) will [build](#) a plant, this one in Japan's northern prefecture of Miyagi.

Oct. 27, 2023: An *Asahi* editorial, conceding that it is vital for Japan and the US to make concerted responses to China's military buildup, [argues](#) it is unacceptable for the operational range and facility usage of the US military and the SDF to be expanded limitlessly without efforts to win support and understanding of local communities.

Oct. 28, 2023: Members of the Japanese business community [mourn](#) the loss of former Chinese Premier Li Keqiang whom, they believe, championed improved economic ties between Japan and China even when issues such as the

territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands threatened to derail friendly relations.

Oct. 29, 2023: Japanese Defense Ministry [confirms](#) that the China's aircraft carrier with its fighter jets and helicopter jets practicing take-offs and landings 460 km south of Miyako, Okinawa prefecture.

Oct. 30, 2023: *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) that there is little room for optimism in the outlook for future Chinese economic growth and laments the lack of transparency in the PRC's statistics.

Oct. 30, 2023: Japan's defense ministry will begin [deploying](#) fighter jets to Australia on a rotational basis as early as next fiscal year for joint exercises designed to counter a possible attack there.

Oct. 31, 2023: New quarterly results [show](#) Chinese automaker BYD within reach of surpassing Japanese rival Nissan Motor in global sales as its electric vehicles grab market share at home and abroad.

Oct. 31, 2023: Acknowledging the G7's call for the immediate repeal of import curbs on Japanese food products, Chinese media [ridicules](#) the US decision to bulk-buy Japanese seafood to supply its military there.

Nov. 1, 2023: Aiming to [strengthen](#) security ties with the Philippines in light of China's maritime expansion in the East and South China Seas, the Japanese government will supply defense-related equipment to Manila under what will be the first instance of the country's new official security assistance (OSA) framework.

Nov. 2, 2023: Chinese government [protests](#) Japan's third round of dumping allegedly nuclear-contaminated water into the sea.

Nov. 3, 2023: *Global Times* [characterizes](#) Kishida's trip to the Philippines and Malaysia as "troublemaking" since, unlike previous prime ministers' visits that focused on economic

diplomacy, Kishida's "gift packs" contain lethal weapons.

Nov. 3, 2023: Nikkei Asia's editor-in-chief Nakayama Shin [describes](#) Sino-Japanese relations as showing no sign of improvement. China's ban on fish imports continues, and Japanese officials have grown less optimistic about a sit-down between Prime Minister Kishida and Xi during APEC.

Nov. 4, 2023: Yomiuri [interprets](#) Kishida's move to deepen security cooperation with the Philippines as indicative of a strong sense of urgency over China's aggressive maritime expansion.

Nov. 6, 2023: Fifty fewer Japanese companies are [expected](#) to join the China International Import Expo, partly due to issues surrounding the release of water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant though 350 apparently will.

Nov. 7, 2023: Japan's defense ministry [discloses](#) that the Chinese aircraft carrier *Shandong* conducted about 570 aircraft takeoffs and landings in international waters off Japan over the nine days ending on Nov. 5.

Nov. 7, 2023: *Asahi* [reacts](#) to the Manila-Tokyo agreements by editorializing that "instead of contributing to a hostile encirclement of China that would undermine regional stability, Japan and the Philippines, which have deep historical and economic ties with China, should play key roles in building an inclusive international order encompassing China as well."

Nov. 7, 2023: Liu Shijin, a member of the People's Bank of China's monetary policy committee, [disputes](#) comparisons between Japan's stagnation decades ago and the PRC's current situation, saying that Japan's recession was a result of a lack of new sources of growth, but China still has potential that can be realized by lifting the consumption of low-income groups and promoting emerging industries, without specifying which.

Nov. 8, 2023: In what *Nikkei* calls a [milestone](#) for Washington-Tokyo efforts to deepen defense industry cooperation amid growing challenges from China, US defense contractor RTX is finalizing a deal to procure a major component for an advanced missile defense radar system from Mitsubishi Electric.

Nov. 10, 2023: Japan's finance ministry [announces](#) that in September the country had its largest current account surplus in 18 months and eighth straight month of surplus due to hefty gains from overseas investments boosting the balance of payments.

Nov. 11, 2023: China [declines](#) to renew agreement for the import of Japanese koi, of which it is the world's largest customer.

Nov. 11, 2023: 12-year prison term of a Japanese national in his 50s accused of espionage in China has been [finalized](#) after a high court dismissed his appeal earlier this month.

Nov. 12, 2023: China [announces](#) that it will hold a joint military exercise with five Southeast Asian countries this month, citing local experts' opinion that the exercises conducive to the safeguarding of regional peace and stability amid repeated provocations by the Philippines.

Nov. 12, 2023: Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force [begins](#) a joint exercise with the US, Canadian and Australian navies in the Pacific Ocean with the Philippine navy participating as an observer for the first time.

Nov. 12, 2023: Japan, the United States, and South Korea on Sunday [agree](#) to start operating a mechanism to share information on North Korean missile launches in real time and affirmed the importance of having full respect for international law, including freedom of navigation, and maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, with press agency *Jiji* commenting "apparently bearing China's maritime expansion in mind."

Nov. 12, 2023: US military unit operating MQ-9 spy drones [completes](#) withdrawal from the MSDF Kanoya air base for relocation to Okinawa Prefecture.

Nov. 13, 2023: A *Yomiuri* editorial [urges](#) the Japanese government to do more than protest China's intrusions, since inaction will simply encourage Beijing to further encroach on Japanese territory.

Nov. 13, 2023: *Global Times* [describes](#) the Japanese Defense Ministry's decision to fast-track the deployment of an upgraded version of its GSDF anti-ship missile as an expansion of Japan's military ambitions that will undermine peace and stability in the region, plunging it into a major crisis and a vicious arms race.

Nov. 14, 2023: *Kaga*, a MSDF destroyer, [begins](#) sea trials following changes to the ship's bow, which was made square, had heat resistance reinforced, and the addition of markings for F-35B aircraft to conduct takeoffs and landings on the vessel.

Nov. 15, 2023: Under a [framework](#) for a framework on systems and practices for export controls now being discussed between China and Japan, the bureau chief-level and section chief-level officials in charge of export controls in the two countries will hold talks.

Nov. 15, 2023: Japan's economy [contracts](#) 2.1% in July-September after an expansion of 4.5% in the previous quarter. China's economic recovery [picks](#) up slightly in October with industrial production increasing from 4.5% to 4.6% despite falling business confidence.

Nov. 17, 2023: Meeting for the first time in about a year at the APEC meeting in San Francisco, Kishida and Xi [agree](#) to communicate closely at all levels.

Nov. 17, 2023: Chinese media [praise](#) the Xi-Kishida meeting as reaffirming strategic and

mutually beneficial relations and playing a significant role in stabilizing ties.

Nov. 17, 2023: [Commenting](#) on Kishida's statement that the Japan ASDF will be renamed Japan Aerospace Self-Defense Force before 2027, *China Daily* notes that the country's security concerns have been heightened by seeing its advantage diminished by the military strength and technologies of "neighboring countries" compounded by an aging society, shrinking population, a low fertility rate and a grim fiscal situation.

Nov. 18, 2023: *Yomiuri* [cites](#) unnamed sources saying that China suddenly approached Japan about a summit immediately after foreign minister and Politburo member Wang Yi visited the US in late October.

Nov. 18, 2023: Center-right daily *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) that results of the Xi-Kishida talk at APEC were "sorely lacking" and advises that before relations can improve Beijing must first change its coercive behavior and stop making unreasonable claims. Center-left *Asahi* [presents](#) a more favorable view, citing an unnamed official in the prime minister's office as praising the shift toward constructive discussions to deal with the water release issue.

Nov. 19, 2023: Capping an 11-day series of exercises nationwide dubbed 05JX, meant to show the readiness of ground, sea and air forces to defend Japan's territory and infrastructure, including nuclear power plants, Japanese marines in amphibious assault vehicles [storm](#) an island beach at the edge of the East China Sea in a simulated attack to dislodge invaders from territory that Tokyo worries is vulnerable to attack from China.

Nov. 20, 2023: Aiming to [enhance](#) Japan's surveillance capabilities, especially around the Senkaku Islands where Chinese vessels have repeatedly intruded into Japanese territorial waters, the government is weighing the relocation of the operational base for the coast

guard's SeaGuardian unmanned aerial vehicle to Kitakyushu Airport.

Nov. 20, 2023: Japan [releases](#) a third batch of treated radioactive wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear plant into the Pacific Ocean, as the country's seafood producers continue to suffer from a Chinese import ban imposed after the discharges began.

Nov. 22, 2023: Komeito party chief Natsuo Yamaguchi [meets](#) with Cai Qi, the fifth-ranking Communist Party leader, and hands him a personal letter from Prime Minister Fumio Kishida addressed to President Xi Jinping.

Nov. 23, 2023: China Securities Regulatory Commission [receives](#) Mizuho Securities' application to establish a securities company in China after Beijing allowed wholly-owned foreign securities companies to do so in 2019.

Nov. 23, 2023: A *Global Times* editorial on Yamaguchi's visit [terms](#) his efforts "highly commendable," but adds that the effectiveness of "personal letter diplomacy" and whether his visit to China can achieve significant outcomes largely depend on Tokyo's attitude and actions toward China.

Nov. 24, 2023: An estimated 10,000 Okinawans brought together by 65 activist groups [protest](#) the Japanese government's decision to bolster Japan's military presence in the region in response to threats from China and North Korea.

Nov. 25, 2023: Japan's National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS) [issues](#) its *China Security Report 2024* analyzing Chinese and Russian cooperation to establish a new international order and US resistance thereto. Japan is mentioned only peripherally, as part of the alliance system Washington seeks to build.

Nov. 25-26, 2023: Meeting on the sidelines of a trilateral meeting of the foreign ministers of Japan, China and South Korea, Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko [urges](#) Chinese counterpart

Wang Yi to consider the scientific evidence relating to the ocean discharge of treated water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant and asks China to help deal with North Korea's nuclear and missile development program.

Nov. 26, 2023: Looking toward Taiwan's upcoming presidential election, *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) that it is unacceptable for China to ignore the will of Taiwan's people and unilaterally set a course for unification.

Nov. 26, 2023: A reception for the Japanese, South Korea, and Chinese foreign ministers is [canceled](#), ostensibly because Wang Yi's schedule was too tight to attend. Unnamed observers speculate that China's action was motivated by dissatisfaction and Japan and South Korea for continuing to strengthen their ties with the US.

Nov. 26, 2023: Xi Jinping [sends](#) a letter of condolence Kishida on the death of Ikeda Daisaku, the late honorary president of lay Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai, with whom China has had friendly ties.

Nov. 28, 2023: With China in mind, Kishida and Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong [agree](#) to upgrade Japan-Vietnam ties to a "comprehensive strategic partnership," prioritizing security cooperation, such as for stronger maritime security and safety; the transfer of defense equipment; and strengthening supply chains.

Nov. 29, 2023: *Kyodo*, citing an unnamed Japanese government official, [reports](#) that on the day before Japanese Ambassador to China Tarumi Hideo met for the first time with a senior Astellas Pharma employee who was arrested last month on suspicion of espionage.

Nov. 29, 2023: *Kyodo* [reports](#) that the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, JAXA, was hit by a cyberattack over the summer and sensitive information on space-related technologies might have been accessed.

Dec. 1, 2023: Yomiuri International Economic Society (YIES) and *Yomiuri Shimbun* [hold](#)

November symposium of the Yomiuri International Forum 2023 with Stanford University scholar Wu Guoguang, assessing that while the Chinese government's reach has increased its ability to develop, the economy has significantly declined.

Dec. 1, 2023: Japanese government [fears](#) that the crash of a US military *Osprey* will arouse public sentiment against the planned deployment of 17 Japanese *Ospreys* considered essential for the defense of the Nansei Islands.

Dec. 2, 2023: Jiji Press [reports](#) that in response to sluggish sales of gasoline-powered vehicles, which are Toyota's mainstay products, amid a rapid shift to electric vehicles in the Chinese market, Toyota is partially halting production in China.

Dec. 4, 2023: After a 10-minute telephone conversation, Kishida and French President Emanuel Macron [agree](#) on a road map that revises a 2019 agreement prompted by growing French concern with China's behavior in the Indo-Pacific.

Dec. 5, 2023: Residents of Yonaguni [criticize](#) the government's lack of a plan to cope with the influx of refugees from Taiwan in the event of a war with China.

Dec. 5, 2023: Departing Japanese ambassador to China Tarumi Hideo [calls](#) for an end to what he terms the rollercoaster cycle of ups and downs in China-Japan relations.

Dec. 5, 2023: Japanese auto parts manufacturers for gas engines find sales in China [plummeting](#). Those of Honda-affiliated Yutaka Giken, which traditionally accounted for about half its total revenue, fell 24% from April to December, year on year.

Dec. 6, 2023: METI [adds](#) the China Academy of Engineering Physics to the latest iteration of its End User List due to concerns that the entity may be involved in nuclear development.

Dec. 7, 2023: LDP and Komeito lawmakers [agree](#) to allow non-lethal exports of defense equipment to all nations being invaded in violation of international law.

Dec. 8, 2023: According to a Pew [poll](#), 76% of Japanese consider China a major threat, compared with 66% in Taiwan and 64% in South Korea.

Dec. 10, 2023: China and Japan [accuse](#) each other of maritime incursions after a confrontation between coast guards in waters around the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Japan's coast guard said on Dec. 9 that two Chinese maritime patrol boats left Japan's territorial waters around the islands after receiving warnings, and that its patrol vessels were protecting a Japanese fishing boat that had been approached by the Chinese ships.

Dec. 13, 2023: As much of the population [sees](#) China as a threat to Japan's security, polls show support for such measures as the acquisition of missiles capable of striking enemy territory and legal changes that would allow Japanese troops, restricted by the constitution to defense of the nation, to fight in some combat situations outside Japan.

Dec. 13, 2023: *Asahi* [criticizes](#) the Hong Kong district council elections, saying "we" must never forget that the record low turnout was an expression of protest that citizens of Hong Kong were forced into silence.

Dec. 14, 2023: Japan Coast Guard [reports](#) three China Coast Guard vessels sailing in the contiguous zone (22 km outside territorial waters) off the Senkakus, marking a record 337 days and surpassing the previous of most sightings of Chinese vessels in the area last year.

Dec. 14, 2023: Responding the Japan's National Institute for Defense Studies *China Security Report 2024*, Chinese military spokesperson Zhang Xiaogang [urges](#) Japan to "immediately stop meddling in China's internal affairs, stop spreading false narratives, and stop hyping up

the so-called 'Chinese military threat' as an excuse for its military expansion."

Dec. 14, 2023: Japan [hosts](#) the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit marking the 50th anniversary of ASEAN-Japan friendship and cooperation, seeking to offset China's aggressive behavior in the region.

Dec. 15, 2023: A total of 17 military aircraft from Russia and China [conduct](#) a joint air operation over the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan.

Dec. 15, 2023: According to a [survey](#) by the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, India is the top choice of Japanese manufacturing companies among promising countries or regions for business development for the second year in a row, with China slipping to third place behind Vietnam.

Dec. 16, 2023: Japan and Malaysia [sign](#) a security assistance deal that includes a \$2.8 million grant to boost Malaysia's maritime security, as Asian nations seek to counter an increasingly assertive China.

Dec. 17, 2023: Referencing the Japan-ASEAN forum, *Global Times* [cites](#) unnamed experts warning that if defense cooperation between Japan and Southeast Asian countries is directed against a third party, it will have a very negative impact on the stability of the regional order.

Dec. 17, 2023: Japanese chip gear-maker Kokusai Electric Corp. is [expanding](#) staff in China in anticipation of an increase in demand from the world's largest semiconductor market in 2024. Kokusai CEO Kanai Fumiyuki describes small-scale fabrication plants as "springing up like mushrooms in China" driven in part by efforts to localize chip production as the US is erecting higher barriers on the export of advanced chips and chip gear.

Dec. 18, 2023: *Yomiuri* [observes](#) that Japan must take steps to resolve Beijing-related differences among ASEAN members to formulate a trustful relationship with the group.

Dec. 18, 2023: Hoping to regain market share in China, Nissan will [launch](#) a joint research next year with Tsinghua University on reaching Generation Z—those born between 1995 and 2009 — and on the social responsibility of automakers in battery recycling, charging stations and other electric vehicle-related issues.

Dec. 18, 2023: Namazu Hiroyuki, director-general of the Japanese foreign ministry's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, [lodges](#) a telephone protest with Yang Yu, deputy minister at the Chinese Embassy in Tokyo, saying that it is extremely regrettable that China has resumed development at a gas field in the East China Sea.

Dec. 19, 2023: In the 34th such [intrusion](#) by official Chinese ships this year and the first since Dec. 10, four Chinese coast guard ships enter Japanese territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands on Dec. 18. The Haijing-class vessels leave after approximately two hours.

Dec. 19, 2023: Chinese media [point](#) out that Japan's continued release of water from the Fukushima reactor undermine its claims to for cooperation and development with ASEAN and believe[s] that wise individuals within ASEAN can see through this and will remain sufficiently vigilant."

Dec. 19, 2023: On his first day in Beijing, Japanese Ambassador Kanasugi Kenji [vows](#) to "tenaciously" negotiate with Beijing to solve the row over the release of treated radioactive water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant into the sea.

Dec. 19, 2023: Japanese exports [decline](#) year on year for the first time in three months, dragged down by weak demand from China.

Dec. 20, 2023: Bearing in mind China's continued hegemonic moves in the East China Sea and the South China Sea and aiming to [ensure](#) the safety of sea lanes by tightening cooperation among coastal nations, the heads of

the Japan and Philippine coast guards sign a memorandum of understanding to improve their maritime domain awareness by pooling oceanographic data to detect suspicious ships.

Dec. 21, 2023: China's renminbi [surpasses](#) the Japanese yen's share of global payment transactions for the first time in almost two years, as low interest rates in China boost the appeal of its currency for financing trade.

Dec. 21, 2023: In a further indication of Japanese-South Korean cooperation to counter China's technological prowess, Samsung will [invest](#) about \$280 million over five years in a facility for research into advanced chip packaging in Yokohama.

Dec. 21, 2023: A Chinese year-ender review [notes](#) that signs of Japan's right-wing military ambitions that go along with the US' "Indo-Pacific Strategy," including accelerated deployment plan of missiles that can strike foreign countries, have raised vigilance among Chinese experts.

Dec. 22, 2023: Taking note of the Japanese government's approval of a record-high 7.9 trillion yen (\$56 billion) defense budget for fiscal 2024, the vice-president of the Center for China and Globalization [warns](#) that China needs to make it very clear to the Japanese government that it cannot have a free hand in increasing its military budget to develop its military capabilities to such an extent.

Dec. 25, 2023: To [counter](#) Chinese and Russian "killer satellites" capable of destroying other countries' satellites, the Japanese government is considering adding surveillance capabilities to the Self-Defense Forces' next-generation communications satellites set to be launched in the 2030s.

Dec. 25, 2023: [Tracing](#) the trajectory of Japan in the past, China, having shaped the market with its cheap cars, is now developing luxury sports cars. BYD, for example, is [using](#) a Western-style mansion in Shanghai to introduce its SUV Yangwang U8, with a price tag of \$153,000.

Dec. 26, 2023: A Chinese military source [accuses](#) Japan of attempting to leverage ASEAN to open the Pandora's Box of its arms exports under the guidance or tacit approval of the US.

Dec. 26, 2023: Writing in *South China Morning Post* former Chinese diplomat Shi Jiangtao [argues](#) that unless China moderates its stand, addresses security concerns, and works on its image, it will be hard to prevent a pivot toward Japan in the region.

Dec. 27, 2023: By the end of fiscal year 2023 in April 1 2024, the Japanese government will have [designated](#) a total of 583 sites as critical to national security.

Dec. 29, 2023: Japanese government sources say that the Japanese and Chinese governments [plan](#) to hold discussions at an expert level early next year regarding treated radioactive wastewater discharged into the ocean.

Dec. 29, 2023: China [becomes](#) the world's top automobile exporter on an annual basis for the first time, thanks to bigger footholds in Russia and Mexico and a growing global electric vehicle (EV) industry, even compared to former export leader Japan's double-digit rise.

Dec. 29, 2023: [Interviewed](#) by Yomiuri, Tarumi Hideo, ambassador to China from September 2020 to October 2023, says that Japan and China are ready to resolve specific issues between the two countries since Kishida and Xi confirmed their intention to promote strategic and mutually beneficial ties between the two nations in November.

Dec. 29, 2023: Yomiuri [editorializes](#) on the need to "devise ways to ensure that the procurement of drug substances and other materials is not biased toward certain countries, including China."

Dec. 30, 2023: Citing unnamed sources "familiar with the matter" *Japan Times* [reports](#) that China plans to keep its ships near the Diaoyu/Senkaku

Islands every day in 2024. Its coast guard will, according to the sources, conduct inspections of Japanese fishing boats in the area, if necessary, to boost Beijing's sovereignty claim.

Dec. 31, 2023: Japan coast guard [reports](#) four China coast guard vessels sailing in the contiguous zone (approximately 22 km outside territorial waters) off the coast of Minami-Kojima Island and Taisho Island in the Senkakus. This is the 352nd day this year that CCG vessels have been spotted in the contiguous zone, a new record for annual incursions and an increase of 16 days over the previous record of 336 days in 2022.

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CONNECTIONS

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

JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

THE YEAR 2023—MAJOR TURNING POINT AND BLOSSOMING COOPERATION

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The year 2023 was a turning point for Japan-South Korea relations. There was a breakthrough in the issue of compensating forced laborers, which led South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio to meet seven times since their summit in March. Shuttle diplomacy has been fully resumed. By year's end, their cooperation in new areas such as energy, critical and emerging technology, development and humanitarian assistance, space, and cyber is blossoming. Last year will be remembered as the year that began to demonstrate a real potential for Seoul and Tokyo to be like-minded global partners, along with Washington. If the first half of 2023 was a speed chase to get to the finish line—the Camp David trilateral summit meeting—the latter half of 2023 was a coordinated plan to prepare for many more races. As noted in our [last issue](#) of *Comparative Connections*, the Camp David trilateral summit represented a potential harbinger for the future of Japan-Korea relations.

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First, the trilateral summit signified South Korea's commitment to "actively participat[ing] in shaping the future of regional and international order" to an unprecedented level. Second, it suggested potential for Japan and South Korea to be "like-minded partners beyond consultations over North Korea, seeking to shape the contours of international affairs in the Indo-Pacific." Third, Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington "took huge strides towards institutionalizing and strengthening security cooperation." Fourth, they agreed on "an ambitious schedule of trilateral dialogues." And fifth, they decided to cooperate on economic security issues such as global supply chain disruptions.

The final months of 2023 witnessed Japan and South Korea focusing intently on implementing the deliverables, which [showed](#) the "extraordinary degree of alignment" at all levels and in different strategic priorities, to quote Mira Rapp-Hopper, National Security Council senior director for East Asia and Oceania, present at Camp David. There [have been](#) 30 trilateral meetings since Aug. 18, a blistering pace of a trilateral meeting every 3.5 days, and at various levels. While these meetings may seem normal now, it was unthinkable just a year ago, especially considering how many observers thought Seoul-Tokyo relations were at the lowest point since the 1965 normalization.

Diplomacy and Dialogues Thrive

Bilateral diplomacy continued at all levels, leading President Yoon to [declare](#) in November that "all government-to-government dialogue mechanisms that the two countries had agreed on in March have been restored [100%]." Since March 2023, President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida have met seven times, including a [meeting](#) on the sidelines of the G20 summit in New Delhi in September, [one](#) on the sidelines of the APEC meeting in San Francisco on Nov. 16, and a trilateral meeting with President Biden. Yoon and Kishida also [went](#) to Stanford University together for a rare joint event (first time ever in a third country).

It is no exaggeration to say that the two leaders' diplomatic activities add up to the implementation of the [Camp David Principles](#) as like-minded partners and shapers of international affairs in the Indo-Pacific. For example, their joint appearance at Stanford in November signaled to the world what they are

seeking to accomplish—Seoul-Tokyo partnership over science and technology, the field that lies at the intersection of national security and economy. They [discussed](#) quantum technology, clean energy and innovation. In line with their commitment to addressing economic security issues together, the two leaders [announced](#) the Hydrogen Ammonia Global Value Chain. Under this framework, Japan and South Korea seek to build a global value chain of hydrogen and ammonia, considered crucial in terms of the goals of decarbonizing their economies. To strengthen collaboration in science and technology, Japan's National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology and the Korea Research Institute of Standards and Science will sign a memorandum of understanding; the University of Tokyo, Seoul National University, and the University of Chicago will collaborate, as well. During their visit to San Francisco, President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida also [spoke](#) with Korean and Japanese startups working in Silicon Valley. Korea reportedly has plans to open a Korea Startup Center in Tokyo in 2024 to facilitate startup exchanges between Korea and Japan.



Figure 1 At an event hosted by Stanford University on November 17, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, on the left, and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, on the right, participated, with former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice serving as the moderator in the center. Photo: Office of the President South Korea

Prime Minister Kishida and President Yoon also continued to voice support for the bilateral relationship. On Oct. 23, Kishida, during his policy speech to the 212th session of the Diet, [reconfirmed](#) the importance of Japan's relations with South Korea, stating that he [is deepening](#) bilateral engagement with Seoul based on the personal trust he shares with President Yoon. At a meeting with members from the Korea-Japan Friendship Association and the Japan-Korea Friendship Association on Oct. 13, Yoon [said](#) he

believes they can “open a new future over and beyond the period when South Korea-Japan relations were at their best.” Likewise, in his message to a group of senior political and business leaders from both countries on Oct. 23, Kishida [called](#) upon a “new era” of bilateral relations between “important neighbors...working together on various challenges in the international community.”

In mid-September, Prime Minister Kishida [reshuffled](#) his Cabinet, and replaced his long-time Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa who has been at the center of his rapprochement and trilateral efforts, with Kamikawa Yoko, a former three-time justice minister. Hayashi was later [brought](#) back by Kishida to serve as his chief Cabinet secretary in mid-December. Not long after taking office, Foreign Minister Kamikawa [met](#) South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, where they discussed the bilateral relationship and North Korea. She also had her first trilateral foreign minister meeting the day after, where they [discussed](#) trilateral cooperation and North Korea-Russia arms cooperation with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

On Oct. 5, Korea and Japan [resumed](#) vice-ministerial strategic dialogue for the first time in nine years. Participating in that dialogue was First Vice Foreign Minister Chang Ho-jin, who was [named](#) by President Yoon in late December as his new national security advisor. The three foreign ministers [met](#) again on Nov. 14 on the sidelines of the APEC summit in San Francisco, where they discussed the situation in the Middle East, North Korea and Russia. On Dec. 19, South Korean Foreign Minister Park, who is returning to contest in the 2024 National Assembly elections, was [replaced](#) by Cho Tae-yul. This marked the end of a very successful run for two diplomats, Hayashi and Park, who did a lot in the past two years to repair the tumultuous relationship. But this also represents a transition point as the bilateral relationship moves into a relatively more settled, institutionalized state.

Finally at the national security advisor level, there were strong efforts to continue coordination, including [phone calls](#) to discuss breaking events. They [established](#) a new trilateral communication hotline, enabling voice and video communication at all times, further demonstrating the closeness of the relationship.

On Dec. 9, they [met](#) in Seoul for the first time since Camp David. During their meeting, they reviewed progress on trilateral initiatives, and discussed next steps for trilateral cooperation in 2024, including the supply chain early warning initiative and alignment of their respective Indo-Pacific Strategies. President Yoon [hosted](#) them for dinner a day prior and said he looked forward to continued smooth implementation of deliverables from the Camp David Summit.



Figure 2 President Yoon Suk Yeol is pictured alongside National Security Adviser Cho Tae-yong on the left, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan second from the left, and Japan's National Security Secretariat Secretary General Takeo Akiba, before their dinner meeting at the presidential residence in Seoul on December 8th. Photo: Brittany Hosea-Small

Like-Minded Partners in the Making

While the pace of bilateral and trilateral diplomatic activities in the last four months of 2023 has been impressive, the new areas of cooperation may be even more important in terms of the expansion of Seoul-Tokyo-Washington partnership. These newly invigorated areas of cooperation are development and humanitarian assistance, space, cyber, and critical and emerging technology. With recent post-Camp David summit activities and the plans they have made, Japan and South Korea are serious like-minded partners in the making, shaping the contours of international affairs in the Indo-Pacific, with the United States.

Along with their bilateral plan of establishing the Hydrogen Ammonia Global Value Chain announced in November by President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida, Seoul and Tokyo joined Washington in reshaping international economic order through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). On Nov. 16, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework

for Prosperity (IPEF) Leaders' meeting brought President Biden, Prime Minister Kishida, and President Yoon together in San Francisco, based on their embrace of clean energy and global supply chain resilience. Launched in May 2022 in Japan, the 14 IPEF partners -- Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, the United States, and Vietnam -- [signed](#) the IPEF Supply Chain Agreement and negotiated the Clean Economy Agreement, IPEF Fair Economy Agreement, and the Agreement of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity. At the IPEF Ministerial on Nov. 13 and 14, Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa and Minister for Economy, Trade and Industry Nishimura Yasutoshi said that Japan will contribute approximately \$10 million to the IPEF Fund designed to advance the transition to clean economy.

The first trilateral development and humanitarian assistance policy dialogue was [held](#) in Honolulu at the end of October, which covered issues such as development financing, climate change and humanitarian assistance. This was the [first deliverable](#) from the Camp David summit to be completed. The US and Japan are top five providers of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) in the world, while Korea is in the top 20. In their joint statement, the three partners [described](#) how they can and will use their "comparative advantages strategically to create transformational opportunities in sustainable development." Furthermore, they identified several areas for joint cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, including in agriculture, youth entrepreneurship, healthcare, gender, as well as the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and the [Power Africa](#) initiative.

At the beginning of November, the three partners [hosted](#) the first trilateral dialogue on space security in Seoul. Washington has long been eager to increase space cooperation with its two largest partners in the Indo-Pacific, more urgent now against the backdrop of the rapid buildup of China's space capabilities. Both Japan and Korea have bilaterally [increased](#) space cooperation with the US early this year, with the former signing a bilateral framework in January and the latter signing a joint statement of intent for cooperation during a visit to NASA in April by President Yoon. There has also been talks of

integrating space capabilities, with both [Japan](#) and [Korea](#) keen on adding this critical new capability into the alliance. It is also important to note that US Space Forces had [activated](#) a new component field command in Korea in December 2022, making US Space Forces Korea the first field command outside the US.

In early December, the first meeting of the trilateral working group on North Korea's cyber threats—run by the foreign ministry—was [held](#) in Tokyo. A few weeks later, US Deputy National Security Adviser for cyber and emerging technologies Anne Neuberger [went](#) to Seoul to meet with Korean and Japanese counterparts to continue this conversation. Earlier in October, Neuberger had [called](#) North Korean hacking a "priority" for the US and pointed out the role of the trilateral partnership to tackle this problem. Overall, these meetings are an expansion of collective efforts to address the expanding North Korean threat, focusing specifically on the illicit cyber activities that fund its WMD and missile programs, including sending IT workers abroad, hacking, ransomware, and cryptocurrency theft. North Korean hackers have been prolific in the past few years, with [estimates](#) of over \$340 million in 2023, and over \$1.65 billion last year in stolen cryptocurrencies.



Figure 3 After their joint press conference at the presidential office in Seoul, South Korea, National Security Adviser Cho Tae-yong of South Korea shakes hands with U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Japan's National Security Secretariat Secretary-General Takeo Akiba on December 9, 2021. Photo: Chung Sung-Jun

On the issue of critical and emerging technology, Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington took a step forward by [signing](#) a trilateral framework on cooperation in science and technology in early December. US Under Secretary for Nuclear Security and NNSA Administrator Jill Hruby, Japan's Secretary General for Science, Technology, and Innovation Policy Matsuo Hiroki, and ROK First Vice Minister and Minister

of Science and ICT Cho Seong-kyung agreed that they would develop a memorandum of cooperation in early 2024 to increase scientific collaboration in these areas. This trilateral collaboration will involve US laboratories such as Los Alamos National Laboratory, Sandia National Laboratories, and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

Buttressed by “hot politics,” economic cooperation was also “hot.” There were a few noteworthy meetings. On Sept. 7, Korea and Japan [held](#) the first meeting of their heads of custom agencies in Sejong, Korea to discuss concerns surrounding cross-border crime, including drugs and sanctions-violating trade, and to create joint crackdown measures. On Dec. 1, the Bank of Korea and the Bank of Japan officially [signed](#) a three-year currency swap deal worth about \$10 billion. The swap is a result of discussions [held](#) by finance ministers in June. This is the first currency swap deal between the two since the last one expired in 2015. While it is much smaller than the high of \$70 billion reached in 2012, it is not an insignificant amount. Furthermore, the currency deal [allows](#) the two countries to boost their dollar liquidity and improve financial stability.

A day later, Bang Moon Kyu, South Korea’s minister of trade, industry and energy, and Yasutoshi Nishimura, Japan’s minister of economy, trade and trade, [participated](#) in the 17th MOTIE-METI soccer exchange game in Osaka. The idea that officials from the same ministries responsible for the “white list” removals in 2019 might join a sporting event seemed unfathomable until this year. This soccer game, which hasn’t been played in five years, is more than just a game. It [provided](#) the ministers another opportunity to meet and discuss bilateral industrial, trade and energy issues, in particular the promising utilization of hydrogen.

Aside from these channels of cooperation, other forms of cooperation thrived. Amid the volatile situation in Israel in early October, South Korea [helped](#) evacuate 51 Japanese nationals, along with 163 South Koreans and six Singaporeans aboard a military transport plane. This gesture was returned by Japan a week later, when they [helped](#) bring back 18 South Korean nationals and one foreign national family member aboard an air tanker from Israel. In early November, Japan again [helped](#) bring back 15 South Koreans and one foreign national family member, this time

aboard a Japanese Air Self-Defense Force aircraft from Tel Aviv. This comes after Foreign Minister Kamikawa had pledged Japan’s “proactive” cooperation in such situations and is another display of the growing trust between the two countries.

North Korea Threat and Defense Cooperation

In response to North Korea’s latest provocations in late 2023, the defense ministers of Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington have tightened high-level consultations. On Sept. 7, they had a [trilateral call](#) to discuss implementation of the Camp David deliverables. They have stepped up trilateral exercises to respond to North Korean provocations. On Oct. 10, they [held](#) a two-day trilateral maritime interdiction exercise off the Korean Peninsula, the first in seven years. Prior to the exercise, senior naval commanders from each side met aboard the *USS Ronald Reagan* aircraft carrier, which participated in the exercise, to discuss ways to strengthen trilateral and maritime security cooperation. On Oct. 22, the three [held](#) their first-ever trilateral aerial exercises, involving US B-52 bombers and fighter jets. On Nov. 26, they [conducted](#) trilateral naval exercises in response to North Korea’s claim that its newly launched reconnaissance satellite had taken photos of US military assets in South Korea, Hawaii, and Guam. The exercise involved another US aircraft carrier, the *USS Carl Vinson*. Lastly on Dec. 20, right after North Korea launched the *Hwasong-18* ICBM, the three [conducted](#) joint aerial drills involving B-15 bombers and fighter jets, marking the 13th time that a US bomber has been deployed to the peninsula in 2023.



Figure 4 The Yulgok Yi I destroyer from South Korea, the US aircraft carrier USS Nimitz, and the JS Umigiri destroyer from Japan were spotted in international waters south of the southern island of Jeju. Photo: South Korea Defense Ministry

In the last four months of 2023, North Korea launched a missile on seven occasions. That's much less compared to the last four months of 2022, when North Korea [launched](#) almost 60 missiles on 19 occasions. However, what North Korea did launch is even more concerning. On Nov. 21, it [launched](#) its first “successful” military reconnaissance satellite—reportedly with Russian technical assistance—after two failed attempts in May and August. Shortly after, it [claimed](#) to have taken satellite photos of the White House, the Pentagon and US aircraft carriers at Naval Station Norfolk, as well as Guam, South Korea, Italy, and Washington.



Figure 5 The North Korean government provided this photo, claiming it depicts the launch of the Malligyong-1 military spy satellite into orbit on Tuesday, November 21, 2023. Photo: Korean Central News Agency/Korea News Service

None of the imagery has been confirmed since North Korea has yet to release any pictures publicly. There has also been no independent corroboration of North Korea's claims that its satellite is fully functioning and in communication. While one has to take North Korea's words with a grain of salt, the fact that it succeeded in launching a satellite safely into orbit means that it has made another technological leap forward. Furthermore, North Korea accomplished this even before South Korea successfully [launched](#) its first military reconnaissance satellite, which came 10 days later on Dec. 1. Most importantly, North Korea had told the world it would not stop with just one satellite in space. It [ended](#) 2023 with a vow to launch three more satellites in 2024.

The biggest show in the expansion of trust in the bilateral and trilateral security cooperation came on Dec. 19, when the long-awaited real-time North Korea missile warning data sharing mechanism was [activated](#). The missile

sharing data was [used](#) to track the *Hwasong-18* ICBM launched by North Korea that day. Based on the flight data collected, South Korea and Japan deduced the ICBM had the range to hit anywhere in the continental US. Activating this mechanism is a major marker of trust for the relationship, given the fraught bilateral history of another similar agreement, GSOMIA (the General Security of Military Information Agreement). They also announced the establishment of a multi-year trilateral exercise plan beginning in 2024. This guarantees that cooperation is on the calendar for the next couple of years, giving the relationship stability and sending the message to competitors and adversaries that the trilateral is here to stay.

Troubling Domestic Politics for Kishida and Yoon

For their crucial role in this historic achievement and rapprochement, South Korean President Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida were [awarded](#) a Profile in Courage Award by the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation in October 2023. They were recognized for tackling the hardest political problem head on, and more tellingly, early into their respective time in office. But the critical question is how to make this momentum last. Domestic politics—1) public opinions and 2) approval ratings—holds the key.

Public opinions are an important factor that can impact and shape the future of Seoul-Tokyo bilateral ties. How has a breakthrough in bilateral relations in 2023 affected Japanese and South Korean public perceptions? According to the annual joint public opinion surveys conducted in August and September by South Korea's [East Asia Institute \(EAI\)](#) and Japan's [Genron NPO](#), both Japanese and South Koreans said that the bilateral relations improved in 2023. In 2022, 64.6% of South Koreans felt that the relations were negative. In 2023, the number went down to 42%. In Japan, 21.2% of respondents answered that the relations were negative in 2023, compared to 39.8% in 2022. In 2023, 12.7% of South Korean and 29% of Japanese respondents felt that Japan-South Korea relations were “very good.”

Importantly, the same EAI-Genron NPO survey results indicate that despite the improvement of Seoul-Tokyo relations, South Koreans' favorability toward Japan has not improved, which slightly decreased from 30.6% in 2022 to

28.9% in 2023. The percentage of Japanese respondents' favorable impression of South Korea, however, improved from 30.4% in 2022 to 37.4% in 2023. Genron NPO [notes](#), "the most commonly selected answer among South Korean respondents for the reasons for their poor impression of Japan (at 65.4%) was that they believe Japan has not properly reflected on its history in regard to its invasion of the Korean peninsula." Based on an ordinal logistic regression analysis, the EAI Issue Briefing [states](#), "even if the South Korean government makes proactive efforts, it may be difficult to improve South Korean favorability toward Japan if the Japanese government does not respond positively and takes a passive stance." Their analysis confirms that how people in both countries evaluate their own and the other governments' policies affect their feelings about each other and about bilateral relations. More Japanese supported the efforts of both the South Korean and Japanese governments at 34.8% and 34.5%, respectively; 21.7% of South Koreans evaluated their own government's efforts positively, while 15% evaluated Japan's efforts positively.

Amid low approval ratings of Yoon and the ruling People Power Party (PPP), President Yoon replaced about a third of his ministers in December, which marked the biggest in scale since the beginning of his tenure as president. Cho Tae-yul, formerly a second vice foreign minister and ambassador to the United Nations, was appointed foreign minister, replacing Park Jin; Cho Tae-yong would be new National Intelligence Service Director, a former national security advisor. On Jan. 1, 2024, Chang Ho-jin assumed the role of National Security Office chief. One of the biggest questions is the general election in April 2024. There are many moving parts. The main opposition party leader Lee Jae-myung (whose non-fatal knife attack took place after the reporting period but before publication) is dealing with scandals; key political figures—Lee Nak-yeon from the liberal camp and Lee Jun-seok from the conservative camp—have announced their intentions to leave the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) and the PPP, respectively, and create their own new parties; popular Justice Minister Han Dong-hoon resigned from his position and assumed the post of PPP interim chief in preparations for the April election.

Similarly, on Dec. 14 a political funds scandal prompted Prime Minister Kishida to replace all

four ministers who are part of the political faction previously led by Abe in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). After some rebound in the approval rating over his foreign policy performance, in the final months of 2023, Kishida's Cabinet approval ratings were dropping. According to a [Asahi Shimbun](#) survey, they were 29% in November, a fall from 37% in September. In addition to the public's lukewarm support for Kishida's economic package, [Asahi's December survey](#) suggests that Kishida's handling of the LDP's fundraising scandal was not received well. 58% of respondents said that they want Kishida to resign as prime minister. 78% of respondents said that the LDP cannot change the way it works in terms of money in politics, while 16% said that the party can reform itself. Around the same time, a [Jiji Press](#) poll showed that the public approval rating of Kishida's Cabinet sank to a record low at 17.1%, down 4.2% from November.

Looking Ahead

What do this year's developments tell us about 2024? Will the current momentum sustain? We have mixed signs. On the one hand, there have been unprecedented efforts toward the institutionalization of bilateral and trilateral cooperation, which will help. On the other hand, domestic politics circumstances of both Japan and South Korea do not bode well. Kishida and Yoon—the two leaders at the heart of blossoming of cooperation—have been struggling for popularity among voters. Importantly, a recent public opinion survey tells us that despite the improvement of South Korea's relations with Japan, South Korean public perceptions toward Japan have not improved.

In 2024, the three partners will [serve](#) together on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), with Japan and South Korea joining as elected nonpermanent members. With important elections on the horizon, and whatever the trouble they might have at home, these three partners will likely continue to be eager participants of global affairs together.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2023

Sept. 6, 2023: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [delivers](#) remarks at the ASEAN Plus Three Summit, stating that the country will work to “revive trilateral cooperation mechanisms” with Japan and China.

Sept. 7, 2023: South Korean Defense Minister Lee Jong-sup [holds](#) a phone call with US and Japanese counterparts to discuss trilateral security cooperation following up on the Camp David Summit, and North Korea’s missile launches.

Sept. 7, 2023: 32nd Korea-Japan Customs Heads’ Meeting is [held](#) in South Korea, marking the first such meeting in seven years.

Sept. 10, 2023: Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio and South Korean President Yoon [meet](#) on the sidelines of the G20 Summit and agree to work towards a China-Japan-South Korea trilateral summit.

Sept. 15, 2023: US, Japan, and South Korean national security advisors [hold](#) a call to discuss the summit between Russian President Putin and North Korean leader Kim.

Sept. 21, 2023: South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin [meets](#) Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to discuss the bilateral relationship and the North Korea issue.

Sept. 22, 2023: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, South Korean Foreign Minister Park, and Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa [meet](#) on the sidelines of the UNGA to discuss trilateral cooperation and a [possible](#) North Korean–Russia arms deal.

Sept. 23, 2023: Chinese President Xi Jinping meets South Korean Prime Minister Han Duck-soo on the sidelines of the Asian Games,

and reportedly says he “[welcomes](#)” a China-Japan-South Korea trilateral meeting “at an appropriate time.”

Sept. 26, 2023: South Korean, Japanese, and Chinese senior officials [meet](#) in Seoul and discuss resuming trilateral cooperation mechanisms including a possible trilateral summit among the three countries.

Oct. 5, 2023: South Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Chang Ho-jin and Japanese Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Okano Masataka [hold](#) a “strategic dialogue,” the first such meeting in nine years.

Oct. 10, 2023: US, South Korea, and Japan [begin](#) the two-day trilateral maritime interdiction exercise to strengthen security cooperation.

Oct. 13, 2023: President Yoon meets members of the Korea-Japan Friendship Association and the Japan-Korea Friendship Association, and [says](#) the increased people-to-people exchanges demonstrates the improved Japan-ROK relationship is “the wish and will of the two countries’ people.”

Oct. 14, 2023: South Korea military transport plane [help](#) evacuate 163 South Koreans, 51 Japanese, and six Singaporeans from Israel.

Oct. 15, 2023: Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa [thanks](#) South Korean Foreign Minister Park for helping Japanese nationals depart Israel through a Korean military aircraft, and [says](#) Japan would actively cooperate in similar situations in the future.

Oct. 17, 2023: US, South Korea, and Japan [establish](#) a communication hotline, which reportedly enables voice and video communication among the three countries’ national security councils.

Oct. 18, 2023: South Korean Vice Defense Minister Shin Beom-chul [meets](#) Japanese Vice Minister of Defense Serizawa Kiyoshi on the sidelines of the Seoul Defense Dialogue and discusses bilateral security cooperation.

Oct. 21, 2023: South Korean Foreign Minister Park [thanks](#) Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa for helping 18 Korean nationals and a foreign family member depart Israel through a Japanese air tanker.

Oct. 22, 2023: US, South Korea, and Japan [conduct](#) the first trilateral aerial exercise to strengthen their joint response capabilities against North Korea.

Oct. 23, 2023: Prime Minister Kishida [expresses](#) willingness for a “new era” of relations with South Korea in a message delivered to a gathering of Japanese and South Korean business and political figures.

Oct. 25, 2023: US, South Korea, and Japan [release](#) a joint statement “strongly condemning” North Korea’s arms transfer to Russia for use in its war against Ukraine.

Oct. 28, 2023: Japan-ROK Development Policy Dialogue is [held](#) ahead of the US-Japan-ROK “Trilateral Development and Humanitarian Assistance Policy Dialogue.”

Oct. 29-30, 2023: US-Japan-ROK “Trilateral Development and Humanitarian Assistance Policy Dialogue” is [held](#) in Honolulu.

Nov. 3, 2023: Japanese Air Self-Defense Force aircraft [helps](#) 15 South Koreans and a foreign national family member depart Israel.

Nov. 4, 2023: Japanese Environment Minister Ito Shintaro [meets](#) Korean and Chinese counterparts in Nagoya and stresses the safety of the release of treated radioactive wastewater from the Fukushima plant.

Nov. 8, 2023: US-Japan-ROK trilateral director-level meeting on space security is [held](#) in Seoul.

Nov. 13, 2023: US, Japanese, and South Korean defense ministers [hold](#) a virtual meeting and confirm that their real-time information sharing system on North Korean missiles is in its “final stage.”

Nov. 14, 2023: Secretary Blinken, South Korean Foreign Minister Park, and Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa [meet](#) on the margins of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in San Francisco to discuss topics including the Middle East, Russia, and North Korea.

Nov. 15, 2023: South Korean Foreign Minister Park and Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa [meet](#) on the margins of APEC and exchange views on the Middle East, Russia, and North Korea.

Nov. 16, 2023: President Yoon [meets](#) with Prime Minister Kishida on the margins of APEC, their seventh bilateral meeting of the year. Later that day, both [meet](#) with President Biden for a photoshoot and informal talks.

Nov. 17, 2023: President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida [meet](#) with startup representatives from both countries, and then jointly participate in an event [hosted](#) by Stanford University.

Nov. 22, 2023: US, South Korea, and Japan’s nuclear envoys [hold](#) phone calls and “strongly” condemn North Korea’s space launch. South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [reports](#) the three countries have shared information regarding the launch.

Nov. 23, 2023: A South Korean appeals court, the Seoul High Court [rules](#) in favor of a group of 16 former “comfort women” (survivors of Imperial Japan’s wartime sexual slavery) ordering the Japanese government to provide 200 million won (about \$150,000) in compensation to each victim, overruling a lower court ruling in 2021.

Foreign Minister Kamikawa issues a [statement calling](#) the ruling “extremely regrettable and absolutely unacceptable.” South Korean Ambassador to Japan Yun Dukmin is [summoned](#) by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Nov. 24, 2023: South Korean foreign ministry responds to the appeals court ruling, [stating](#) it respects the 2015 comfort women agreement and that it is “looking into the details of the ruling.”

Nov. 24, 2023: Secretary Blinken [holds](#) a call with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts to condemn North Korea’s space launch “for its destabilizing effect in the region.”

Nov. 26, 2023: South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin [meets](#) Foreign Minister Kamikawa in Busan, South Korea to [discuss](#) North Korea and the recent appeals court ruling related to comfort women. This is followed by a trilateral [meeting](#) with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi where all three sides [reaffirm](#) their agreement to hold a trilateral summit “at the earliest, mutually convenient time.”

Nov. 26, 2023: US, South Korea, and Japan [conduct](#) naval drills to strengthen their joint defense posture.

Dec. 1, 2023: Bank of Korea and the Bank of Japan [sign](#) a three-year currency swap deal worth \$10 billion in accordance with the bilateral Finance Ministers’ Meeting held in June.

Dec. 2, 2023: South Korea and Japan’s trade ministers [attend](#) their ministries’ sports exchange game in Osaka and a luncheon conference to discuss measures for bilateral cooperation.

Dec. 5, 2023: Namazu Hiroyuki, Japan’s chief nuclear envoy and director general for the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau at Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [meets](#) Kim Gunn, South Korea’s special representative for Korean

Peninsula peace and security affairs, to discuss North Korea. Namazu also meets Seo Min-jung, South Korea’s director general for Asia and Pacific affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss bilateral issues.

Dec. 7, 2023: South Korea’s senior presidential official [says](#) the country is looking to host the next US-Japan-ROK trilateral summit in 2024.

Dec. 7, 2023: US, South Korea, and Japan [hold](#) their inaugural “Trilateral Diplomacy Working Group for Foreign Ministry Cooperation on North Korea’s Cyber Threats” in Tokyo, an outcome of the Camp David Summit in August.

Dec. 8, 2023: US, South Korea, and Japan [sign](#) a cooperation framework on science and innovation, and agree to develop a Memorandum of Cooperation in 2024 to foster collaboration in critical and emerging technologies.

Dec. 8, 2023: South Korean deputy nuclear envoy Lee Jun-il [meets](#) US Deputy Special Representative for North Korea Jung Pak and Japan’s nuclear envoy Namazu Hiroyuki in Japan to discuss North Korea.

Dec. 8, 2023: South Korean National Security Advisor Cho Tae-yong [meets](#) Japanese National Security Secretariat Secretary General Akiba Takeo in Seoul; both reaffirm the need for bilateral and trilateral cooperation with the US on North Korea.

Dec. 8, 2023: President Yoon [hosts](#) US, South Korean, and Japanese national security advisors for dinner at the presidential residence.

Dec. 9, 2023: US, South Korean, and Japanese national security advisors [meet](#) in Seoul to review progress on trilateral initiatives and [agree](#) to strengthen “comprehensive cooperation in the economic security field.”

Dec. 9, 2023: Japan [does not](#) appeal a South Korean appeals court’s Nov. 23 ruling which was

in favor of a group of former “comfort women.” Japan had two weeks to file an appeal.

Dec. 10, 2023: President Yoon [states](#) that the country plans to “significantly boost semiconductor cooperation with such major countries as the Netherlands, the United States and Japan going forward.”

Dec. 17, 2023: US, South Korean, and Japanese national security advisors [hold](#) a call and condemn the *Hwasong-18* intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test conducted by North Korea. President Yoon [calls](#) for a “joint response” by the three countries.

Dec. 19, 2023: US, South Korea, and Japan [announce](#) that their real-time North Korea missile warning data sharing mechanism has been activated.

Dec. 19, 2023: US Deputy National Security Adviser for cyber and emerging technologies Anne Neuberger, South Korean Deputy National Security Adviser In Seong-hwan, and Japanese deputy head of the National Security Secretariat Ichikawa Keiichi [meet](#) virtually to share information on cyber activities by North Korea.

Dec. 20, 2023: US, South Korea, and Japan [hold](#) joint drills following North Korea’s *Hwasong-18* ICBM test.

Dec. 20, 2023: Chairman of South Korea’s Financial Services Commission Kim Joo-hyun and Kurita Teruhisa, commissioner of Japan’s Financial Services Agency, [meet](#) in Seoul to discuss financial cooperation, the first such meeting in seven years.

Dec. 21, 2023: South Korean Supreme Court [upholds](#) two rulings by appellate court that order Japanese companies to compensate South Korean forced laborers. Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi Yoshimasa [calls](#) the rulings “extremely regrettable and totally unacceptable.”

Dec. 21, 2023: In response to the South Korean Supreme Court’s ruling, the South Korean

foreign ministry [says](#) it will continue to compensate forced labor victims through a third-party reimbursement system. The ministry said 11 out of 15 plaintiffs have accepted this compensation plan.

Dec. 21, 2023: South Korean Deputy Minister for Economic Affairs Kang Jae-kwon and Japanese Senior deputy Foreign Minister Ono Keiichi [meet](#) in Seoul and agree to work together to “fully realize” bilateral economic cooperation, the first such meeting in nearly eight years.

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CONNECTIONS

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

CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

FROM GEOPOLITICS TO GEOECONOMICS

YU BIN, WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY

In the last months of 2023, China and Russia increasingly prioritized economics and geoeconomics in their bilateral interactions. In the post-COVID era and with a virtual standstill in the Russian-Ukraine war, both sides searched for new growth potential in domestic, bilateral, and multilateral domains. In October, Russian President Putin visited Beijing for the 3rd Belt and Road Forum (BRF), which was attended by thousands of participants from 151 countries. It was a convenient occasion for Putin to expand his diplomacy, which had been considerably strained by Western sanctions since early 2022. Putin's lengthy meetings (formal talks, a working lunch, and a "private tea meeting") took almost half a day for the two-day BEF. Ten years after Xi's launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), both sides found it necessary to adjust their policies between the increasingly globalized BRI and Russia's regional grouping, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

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In many ways, the 28th regular prime ministerial meeting in Beijing in December was essential to manage key issues, including the routing and pricing of the Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline (PS2) and the rapid growth of China's automobile exports to Russia. Both were directly related to Western sanctions following Russia's special military operations in Ukraine, now into its third year. At the year's end, the death of Henry Kissinger marked the end of an era of more orderly superpower relations, to the dismay of both Russia and China.

Putin in Beijing

On Oct. 17-18, President Putin traveled to Beijing for the 3rd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF). This was the first time the Russian president visited China since Russia's "special military operation" in February 2022, but it was his third time attending the BRF (2017 and 2019). The two heads of state met in early March when Xi visited Moscow.

Despite the crowded schedule of the BRF and its 4,000 participants from 151 countries and 41 international organizations, Putin and Xi set aside about four hours together, which included 90-minute [formal talks](#), a working lunch with "limited attendance" (foreign ministers of both sides), and a nearly two-hour "[private tete-a-tete conversation](#)." Neither side disclosed the substance of the private meeting. Putin, however, revealed that it was "a very productive and substantial part of the conversation."

The Xi-Putin talks covered "[entire bilateral issues](#)" including economics, finance, political interactions, and diplomatic coordination, according to Russian sources. President Xi emphasized the "long-term" nature of the bilateral relationship. It was "not an expediency" but a "permanent good-neighborly friendship" with "comprehensive strategic coordination and mutually beneficial cooperation," said [Xi](#).

For [Putin](#), it was "particularly relevant" to maintain close foreign policy coordination with China given the "difficult current conditions." In his press conference with Russian media, Putin revealed that he briefed the Chinese side on "details" of Russia's military operations in Ukraine. China's press release, however, did not mention the [Ukraine](#) issue. Instead, it stressed

that the two heads of state "had an in-depth exchange of views" (深入交换了意见) on the Middle Eastern situation.

Aside from meeting Xi, Putin's Beijing visit was an important opportunity for the Russian leader to reconnect [in person](#) with many heads of state/government, including those from Vietnam, Hungary, Thailand, Mongolia, Laos, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. Putin traveled only to Kazakhstan since February 2022. He [skipped](#) the annual BRICS summit in late August in South Africa because of the host's membership in the International Criminal Court, which issued an arrest warrant against Putin for alleged war crimes in Ukraine.

Beyond these mini-summits between Putin and other state dignitaries on the BRF's sidelines, the Russian leader was prominently treated throughout the two-day forum (see group photos for the official welcoming ceremony on Oct. 17 below). Xi devoted half of the entire forum day (Oct. 18) to the Xi-Putin talks. This included an almost two-hour *ad hoc* private "tea talk" suggested by Xi following formal talks with expanded participants and a working lunch.



Figure 1 The heads of delegations participating in the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation were formally welcomed during the official welcoming ceremony. Photo: Sergei Savostyanov

There was no question that the two heads of state have developed "good business-like relations and a strong personal friendship" in their decade-long interactions (42 meetings since 2013 according to [Xi's account](#)). Xi was "a calm...and reliable partner" and "a true world leader" who "who makes all of his moves with long-term goals in mind," [remarked](#) the Russian president shortly before his trip to the BRF.

Tales of Two Regional Projects: BRI vs EAEU and beyond

One of Xi's "long-term" projects was the [BRI](#). Originally driven by China's excess manufacturing capacity, Xi proposed it in September 2013 during his tour of Central Asia as China's regional strategy in Kazakhstan. A few months later, Russia unveiled the EAEU as its own integration mechanism for the post-Soviet space.

Ten years later, the BRI has become [a global project](#) connecting more than 150 countries with more than 3,000 cooperation projects, nearly \$1 trillion in investments, and more than 20 multilateral dialogue/platforms in sectors of railway, port, finance, taxation, energy, green development, green investment, disaster risk reduction, anti-corruption, think tanks, media, culture exchanges, etc.

The BRI was "a truly important and global idea that is spearheaded into the future, towards creating a fairer multipolar world and system of relations. It is a global plan, without a doubt," remarked [Putin](#) in his address at the BRF opening ceremony on Oct. 17. This, however, was a long way from Russia's rather alarming view of the BRI 10 years before (see "[Putin's Glory and Xi's Dream](#)," *Comparative Connection*, January 2014). In responding to a reporter's question about China's BRI competing with Russia's EAEU shortly after meeting Xi, [Putin](#) insisted that the two projects "complement each other." This was because China's BRI "is a global initiative and concerns practically every region of the world...and Russia as well." Meanwhile, EAEU was a local project, explained Putin. But "it is an absolute priority for us, for Russia," he stressed.

The bulk of Putin's speech at the BRF opening session was devoted to Russia's efforts to develop EAEU's energy and transportation infrastructure. The EAEU would interact with BRI, the SCO, BRICS, and ASEAN under the umbrella of what Putin defined as "a greater Eurasian space." For this, [Putin](#) cited an agreement and a joint commission by the EAEU and BRI for "a concurrent and coordinated development" between the two sides.

Beijing was keenly aware of Russia's sensitivity regarding the growing gap in terms of comprehensive national power between China and Russia. In Beijing, Xi expressed gratitude for

Putin's attendance at all three BRFs since 2017. The Chinese president described Russia as "an important partner," and that China was willing to work with Russia and the EAEU to promote the BRI-EAEU alignment for "higher-level and deeper regional cooperation."

For Beijing, Moscow was not just another BRI partner but one with strategic stakes, particularly in the wake of a significant slowdown (-40% to -45%) of its external outreach/investment through the COVID years (2020-2022).



Figure 2 Chinese BRI investment: 2013 - 2022 (in billion U.S. dollars). Photo: [Statista](#)

In the future, BRI must cope with and adjust to a general downward trend in the world economy starting in 2021 (see IMF projection below). Western sanctions against both Russia and China have had a disruptive impact on the world's largest resource country (Russia) and manufacturing giant (China). Both must search for alternative venues to overcome these natural and manmade hurdles. Moscow, for example, needs to divert its energy exports away from Europe.

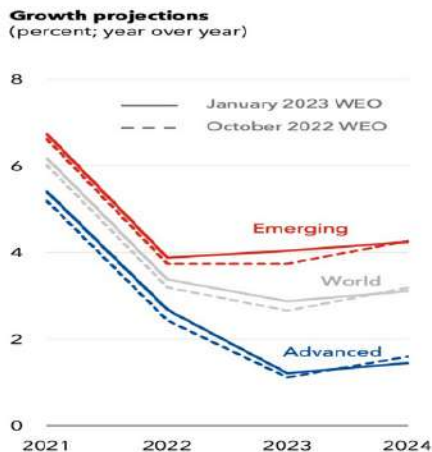


Figure 3 Global growth projections starting in 2021.
Photo: [IMF](#)

For China, the future of BRI lies in emerging markets that have already bottomed out as a group with 4% growth rate vs. the advanced economies' 1.2-1.4% growth. It is questionable if previous investment in large infrastructure projects for BRI recipients will be viable, at least in the near future. The 3rd BRF, accordingly, made several major [adjustments](#) in its future strategies. One is the 1,000 "small-and-smart livelihood projects" as part of the "practical cooperation." For this, China will set up a RMB 700 billion (about \$98 billion) financing window. An additional RMB 80 billion will be injected into the Silk Road Fund. Already, \$97.2 billion worth of agreements were already signed during the 3rd BRI in Beijing. Meanwhile, considerable effort would be devoted to the safety and security of BRI projects and personnel, green projects with 100,000 training opportunities by 2030, 100 high-tech and AI labs in five years, people-to-people exchanges, anti-corruption for "integrity-based projects, etc. While BRI's traditional connectivity projects need to be upgraded to "high-quality" and account for reliability, new venues such as digital trade service trade and investment will be sped up. At the BRF, China also promised to remove all restrictions on foreign investment access in the manufacturing sector. All this would facilitate "an open world economy" in the next five years (2024-28) with the country's total trade in goods and services exceeding \$32 trillion and \$5 trillion, respectively.

Trade with Russia in 2023 (for the first 11 months) was only [4.2%](#) of China's [\\$5.41 trillion](#) in global trade. Aside from the need to maintain normal and stable ties for the long run, China

considered Russia to be playing a salient role in Beijing's diplomatic matrix for at least three reasons. First, Russia was essential in the operation of all the multilateral platforms of the "global south" such as the SCO, BRICS, BRI, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB, for BRICS), etc. The February 2022 Russian-Ukraine war and the ensuing Western sanctions fundamentally reoriented Russia away from the West. Speaking to the 8th Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok on Sept. 12, 2023, President [Putin](#) declared that "the Far East is Russia's strategic priority for the entire 21st century, and we will stick to this." In 2024, Russia will take over BRICS chairmanship when five new members (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) join. In addition to the annual BRICS summit in Moscow in August, over [200 events](#) of different levels and types will be held across Russia. After missing the [2023 BRICS summit in Johannesburg](#), Putin is determined to make it back for both symbolic and substantive purposes.

Second, given BRI's future focus on sustainable, smaller, and greener development, Russia is perhaps the only place where large-scale infrastructure projects were still possible and desirable regardless of bureaucratic hurdles and regional underdevelopment. In formal talks in Beijing on the BRF sidelines, Xi cited the current China-Russia east-route natural gas pipeline (Power of Siberia) as a successful "major infrastructure project" with "tangible benefits to the people of both countries," and urged that "substantive progress" was needed "as soon as possible" for the China-Mongolia-Russia natural gas pipeline project (Power of Siberia 2, or PS2).

Last, Russia registered higher-than-expected economic growth in 2023 ([3.5%](#) vs. [2.1%](#) in 2022) despite the war of attrition with Ukraine. Russia-China trade, too, [grew by 26.7% to \\$218.176 billion](#) from January to November 2023, surpassing the \$200 billion goal set for 2024.

Russian PM in China: For the Not-So-Stupid Economy

On Dec. 19-20, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail [Mishustin](#) went to Beijing for the 28th regular prime ministerial meeting with Chinese counterpart Li Qiang. This was his second visit

to China in 2023. In late May, Mishustin made his first official trip to China as Russian PM. Previously, Covid-19 had prevented in-person contact by the two countries' top officials. The Li-Mishustin meeting covered an extensive range of items, including energy (oil, gas, nuclear, green), connectivity, trade, investment, finance/banking, supply chain stability, science, regional development, environmental protection, sustainable development, societal exchange, etc. For the two prime ministers, there was much to catch up after three years of COVID "break." Ten documents/agreements were inked in Beijing, including a 9,000-word (Chinese characters) [Joint Statement](#).

President Xi Jinping met with Mishustin after the prime ministers' annual meeting. Both were encouraged by the 26% bilateral trade growth for 2023 surpassing the \$200 billion target set for 2024. The figure is expected to reach \$230 billion by the year-end given the strong momentum. And "over 90 percent of our transactions are made in rubles or yuan," [Mishustin](#) remarked.

The [Russian side](#) indicated that "good results have been achieved in the investment sphere, with 80 joint projects currently in progress totaling almost 20 trillion rubles, or about 1.6 trillion yuan (about \$221 billion)." China's official [Xinhua news release](#) did not mention specifics of the joint projects but said that the Russian PM "is satisfied with the steady growth of bilateral practical cooperation and is willing to work with China to further tap potential, expand cooperation in fields such as economy, trade, energy, and connectivity."

For [Xi](#), "maintaining and developing China-Russia relations is a strategic choice (战略选择)" and "China supports the Russian people in taking the development path of their own choice." He also hoped the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Russia in 2024 would be "a new starting point" for the two sides to develop bilateral ties. As part of the societal exchange program, 2024-25 will be the "China-Russia Cultural Year."

Russia's energy export to China was a key issue for the prime ministers. In 2023, almost all Russia's oil exports went to China (50% or about 100 million tons) and India (about 40% or 70 million tons), while Europe-bound oil products fell from the pre-Ukraine war volume of

40-45% to 4-5%, according to [Russian accounts](#).

Russia's successful redirection of much of its oil exports from Europe to Asia in 2023 explained a slight decrease in its annual oil production (1.5%), from 535 to 527 million tons. Russia's gas output, however, registered an [8.5%](#) drop in the first 11 months of 2023 largely because of a steep decline of gas exports to Europe after the September 2022 destruction of the Nord Stream 2 (55 billion cubic meter annual capacity). Meanwhile, Russia's gas exports to China via the existing Power of Siberia (PS) pipeline rose sharply in 2023 to [22.5 bcm](#), a 45% increase from 15.5 bcm in 2022. By 2025, PS will reach its design capacity of 38 bcm. In 2027, completion of a connection line to the Far Eastern route ([Sakhalin-Khabarovsk-Vladivostok pipeline](#)) will add another 10 bcm per year, according to a [Nov. 2023 agreement](#) between Gazprom and CNPC. This means that the full capacity of the China-bound PS will be 48 bcm by 2027, which is still less than half of what Russia lost from Nord Streams 1 and 2 (110 bcm). Finding alternative destinations for Russia's idled gas capacity was paramount for Moscow.

For years, [Russia](#) had toyed with the idea of a second gas pipeline to China. In the past few years, it evolved to a pipeline via Mongolia to be known as Power of Siberia 2 (PS2) with an annual capacity of 50 bcm. In their March 2023 meeting in Moscow, Putin and Xi discussed PS2. The signed Si-Putin [joint statement](#), however, did not mention it. Nor did Xi talk about it in the post-summit press conference with Putin. The Russian president, however, [stressed](#) that he and Xi "discussed this in detail and have reached corresponding agreements with Mongolia."



Figure 4 Trans-Mongolian Route for Power of Siberia 2. Photo: [China's Resource Risks](#)

The two sides continued to work on the PS2 in the ensuing months while Russia pushed for its closing [by the year end](#). The December PM meeting in Beijing was unable to close the deal. Instead, the two prime ministers “called for reaching agreements on the construction of the PS2 gas pipeline as quickly as possible,” according to Russian Deputy Prime Minister [Alexander Novak](#).

Pricing and/or routing (via Mongolia) may not be the only drivers for the alleged “[delaying action](#)” by China as Moscow was said to have [less bargaining power](#) than Beijing in the post-Nord Stream era. China-Russian energy cooperation, however, has assumed new dimensions. In the 20th meeting of the Russian-Chinese Intergovernmental Commission on Energy Cooperation shortly before Mishustin’s trip to Beijing, Chinese Vice Premier [Ding Xuexiang](#) told Russian counterpart Alexander Novak that the two sides should explore new directions, broader scope, higher-level, and more integrated “all-spectrum” (上中下游一体化) cooperation. This included renewable, green, smart sectors, nuclear, hydrogen as well as energy storage and transmission. The Russian government [readout](#) of the Novak-Ding meeting, however, clearly prioritized energy export to China, while insisting on “the principles of equality, mutual respect and a readiness to provide strong mutual support on issues related to our national interests.”

2023: From China, with Cars

It was unclear if China’s “new thinking” in energy cooperation with Russia was part of the “[strategic emerging industries](#) (战略性新兴产业)” that President Xi urged Putin to “actively explore cooperation” with China. Already, 2023 was marked by phenomenal growth of China’s [export of consumer products](#) to Russia, ranging from flat panel TVs, office supplies, home electronics, etc. A case in point was a dramatic surge of Chinese automobiles to Russia from [160,000 units](#) (8%) in 2022 to [736,000](#) (56.6%) in the first 10 months of 2023. This was the single biggest factor that turned China into the world’s largest car exporter (4.41 million vs Japan’s 3.99 million for the [first 11 months](#) of 2023).

Largely because of China’s inputs, the Russian car market had a huge rebound in 2023 with staggering [60% growth](#) to 1.3 million units from

2022 when the Russian auto market dropped 58.8% (687,370 units) from 1.7 million units in 2021. Most of the growth occurred in sectors abandoned by Western, Japanese, and South Korean car companies but are being rapidly replaced by Chinese brands. In the first three quarters of 2023, nine of the 15 top car companies were from China (Chery, Haval, Geely, Omoda, Exceed, Changan, Tank, FAW, and Great Wall; see chart below). Russia’s [Lada](#) (made by Russia’s largest state-owned AvtoVAZ) was still the top seller, but only with significant components and know-how inputs from China. Meanwhile, the two South Korean brands (Kia and Hyundai) were basically selling the remainder of their inventories.

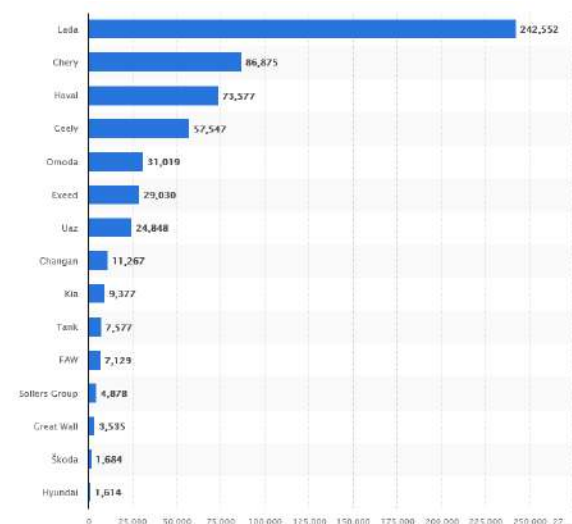


Figure 5 Sales volumes of passenger cars and light commercial vehicles (LCVs) in Russia from January to September 2023, by manufacturer. Photo: [Statista](#)

The steep rise of Chinese vehicles in Russia was both the cause and effects of an explosive expansion of car dealers of Chinese brands in Russia. In one year alone, the number of Chinese car dealers more than tripled from 527 (26.4%) to 1999 (56.3%) at the expense of European (-18.2%), Japanese (-8.7%), and Korean dealers (-4%).

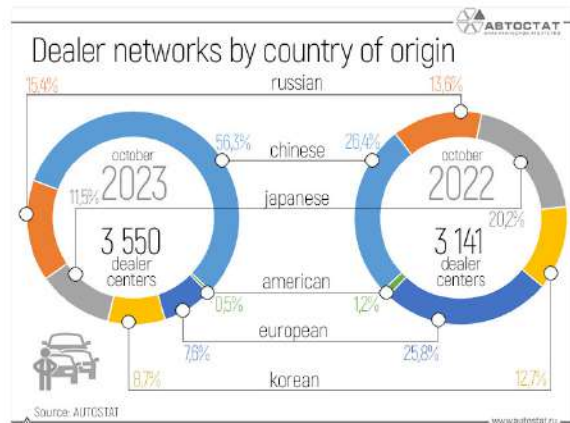


Figure 6 More than half of all car dealers in Russia are Chinese brands. Photo: *Autostat*, Russia

Behind the rapid rise and fall of foreign car dealers in Russia was the Russian government's determined actions to replace auto plants of "unfriendly countries" with friendly and more efficient Chinese manufacturers. On May 19, German carmaker Volkswagen (VW) finalized the sale of its [Kaluga](#) production plant in Russia to Art-Finance, a subsidiary of Russia's auto dealer Avilon. Four days later, Russian PM Mishustin paid his first official visit to China with more than 500 Russian businesspeople. His trip started from China's business/industrial/finance center Shanghai to "prioritize [interactions in industry](#)...", reported TASS. In his address to the Russian-Chinese Business Forum in Shanghai, [Mishustin](#) stressed the "harmonization of national standards and technical requirements" for joint initiatives in "knowledge-intensive industries ...such as civil aviation and the automotive industry." In mid-June, the former VW plant in Russia was reportedly acquired by China's [Chery](#) auto group, which would resume operation in the fall. By year's end, Art-Finance closed another deal with a [Hyundai's plant](#) in St. Petersburg (200,000 units annual capacity and worth \$221 million) for a symbolic \$110. Meanwhile, several leading Chinese car makers ([Chery](#), [FAW](#), etc.) were reportedly working with Russia's flagship automaker AvtoVAZ to produce Chinese brands in the St. Petersburg plant.

The Hyundai plant transaction coincided with the Russia-China annual prime ministerial meeting in Beijing (Dec. 19-20). Two days after his return, Mishustin chaired the first [Cabinet meeting](#) to "prioritize support" to Russia's auto industry to "develop the missing competences in a short period of time and fully guarantee

stable functioning of assembly lines in under the sanctions." He cited Putin's instruction "to expedite the development and production of the entire range of critical automotive components." This "ambitious plan" would be assisted by "additional 39 billion rubles (about \$427 million)" for Russia's leading domestic automakers for their R&D and engineering.

Russia's open-door policy to Chinese autos was driven by both expedient and long-term considerations. Sales dropped by a million units, or 60% in 2022 as a result of the [abrupt halt](#) of Western auto assembly plants in Russia. Meanwhile, China's car export started to surge largely because of [cut-throat competition at home](#). In 2021, China's car exports surpassed those of South Korea, then Germany in 2022, and Japan in 2023. In his meeting with Mishustin in December, President Xi talked about the "strong resilience, great potential and wide room for maneuver, and the long-term sound fundamentals" of the Chinese economy." China's "high-quality development and high-level opening up" meant new opportunities for many countries including Russia, remarked Xi to Mishustin.

That opportunity was open to the reeling Russian auto sector with tens of thousands of idled workers. China was not only able and willing to jumpstart Russia's auto assembly lines, but was also willing to transfer technology. This final reckoning was not easy for the Russians as many of them long favored Western brands. Others lived in the past with lingering nostalgia for Soviet times when Moscow's massive economic assistance to China (about [\\$300 million in 1950](#)) literally created China's industrial base. Few, if any, Russians knew that China's FAW, or First Auto Works in Changchun (长春), now actively operating in Russia to fill the void of Western companies, was the only automobile plant of the 156 large enterprises created by Soviet assistance 70 years ago. The largest of the Chinese auto firms in Russia now are privately owned, such as Chery, Geely, Haval (by the Great Wall Motor), etc. All of them, including the state-owned FAW had gone through the slow, costly, painful, and sometimes humiliating interactions with Western/Japanese/Korean car companies in the early decades of reform. Meanwhile, China expected its car producers "to uphold the image of their brands," said Chinese Ambassador Zhan Hanhui in late November. "China is ready to...meet the demand of the Russian market, ensure first-rate quality, provide high-quality

services, as well as facilitate the integration of production and supply chains in the two countries' automobile sector," added Zhang.

In the longer term, Russia aims to have the most advanced automobile technology and most efficient manufacturing knowhow in the world. In intensive interactions with China at both the high level (four mutual visits by Xi, Putin, and Mishustin in 2023) and on factory floors, Russian political and business elites seem convinced that China already leads the global auto industry. Most Chinese auto exports to Russia in 2023 were traditional gas-powered units given the much colder climate. Chinese companies are also leading the world's electric car sector. In 2013, China's [BYD](#) produced more than 3 million new energy vehicles in 2023, surpassing Tesla for a second straight year. Although Tesla continued to lead in battery-only passenger cars in 2023 (1.84 million vs. BYD's 1.6 million), BYD outpaced Tesla in [the last quarter of 2023](#) with 525,409 units vs Tesla's 484,507 in the pure electric sector. Meanwhile, BYD produces the world's most advanced battery, the "[Blade](#)," which is the top choice for many automakers such as Mercedes, Ford, and Kia. "China is the world's leader in EV battery production," dominating almost "every stage of the EV battery supply chain," according to a recent [report](#) by the International Energy Agency (IEA). "I would not be surprised if in 10 years such companies as Mercedes and BMW will go into history. As brands they will probably remain, but they will follow the fate of Volvo, which was sold to China," predicted Russian presidential aide Maxim [Oreshkin](#) at the end of 2023.

For Russians, working with the leading auto giant is a strategic choice. As Chinese imports were rapidly filling the void created by Western sanctions in 2023, Russia's car sector is expected to engage in the coming years in "deep localization" particularly in the area of electronic automotive components, according to Deputy Head of the Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Russian Federation [Vasily Shpak](#).

Kissinger's Passing: End of an Era?

When Henry Kissinger passed away at the age of 100 on Nov. 29, the world had changed so much -- yet so little, particularly in terms of Washington-Moscow-Beijing triangle politick. It was much because the Nixon-Kissinger team irreversibly shaped the US-Soviet bipolar world

into a more dynamic tripolarity (adding China) with Washington taking a pivot position among the three. The ensuing arms control mechanisms with Moscow, coupled with a historical rapprochement with Beijing, essentially turned the second half of the Cold War into what John Gaddis defined as the "[long peace](#)."

Toward the end of his life, however, Kissinger became visibly alarmed by a more fragmented, unpredictable, and more dangerous world. For him, this was reminiscent of both the pre-World War I world of major power rivalry sleepwalking into a war, and the first 15 years of the Cold War (1947-62) with the fast buildup of nuclear arsenals on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Worse, the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) may create the most toxic mix with WMD leading to the end of humanity (Kissinger, *The Age of AI: And Our Human Future*, Little, Brown and Company, 2019).

Moscow, Beijing, and Washington reacted to Kissinger's passing in very different ways. In his condolence message, [Putin](#) described Kissinger as "wise, farsighted, profound and extraordinary." For Putin, the ultimate contribution of Kissinger's "pragmatic foreign policy" was the strengthening of global security with his "pivotal role in defusing international tensions." In the past 22 years, Putin met Kissinger "[more than 10 times](#)" (the first meeting took place in July 2001, the last on June 29, 2017). This was perhaps far more than either Xi or Biden in their respective capacity as top leaders. One of Kissinger's most profound insights was made at the height of the Ukraine-Crimea crisis in March 2014 when he warned that "[T]he test of policy is how it ends, not how it begins." Now all war parties, direct or not, seem either [looking/waiting](#) for or thinking about an exit as the Ukraine war comes to a standstill.

For [Xi Jinping](#), Kissinger was first and foremost "an old friend and good friend of the Chinese people" because "his outstanding strategic vision" led to his "historic contributions to the normalization of China-US relations." Xi and Kissinger met the [last time](#) in July 2023 in Beijing. "The Chinese people value friendship," said Xi to Kissinger, and that "We never forget our old friends." In contrast to cool and business-like visits by US Secretary of State Blinken, Treasury Secretary Yellen and Climate Envoy Kerry, Kissinger was treated with warmth

and “red carpet” treatment. He was even able to meet then Chinese Defense Minister [Li Shangfu](#), who had refused to meet his US counterpart due to US sanctions against him.

President [Biden](#) offered a more personal condolence highlighting that they “often disagreed. And often strongly.” Biden nonetheless stressed Kissinger’s “fierce intellect and profound strategic focus.” Unlike Putin and Xi, Biden’s condolence message was issued a day after Kissinger’s passing. Aside from his measured message, [Biden](#) is perhaps the only president who did not invite Kissinger to the White House. It was unclear if Biden would send Kissinger an invite had Kissinger not died. For a sitting president who is fighting for his second term in a highly divided political atmosphere inside the Beltway, any liaison with a “China’s old friend” is a political liability. The Jewish immigrant who escaped to America at age 16 (1938) was ironically more respected outside his adopted nation, for better or worse.

Even if Kissinger was still alive, he would be very uneasy, if not alarmed, by the direction and momentum of the Russia-China-US triangular matrix in which Moscow and Beijing are moving increasingly toward a *de facto* entente. The potential between the world’s largest energy resource (Russia) and manufacturing giant (China) is a huge challenge for Washington, which was exactly what Kissinger had tried to prevent from happening.

Toward the end of his life, the biggest challenge for Kissinger was the internal decay of democracies, including the US. “I think democracy is in trouble... because the middle class is disappearing due to widening income inequalities,” remarked [Kissinger](#) in his last TV interview. “Values of compromise and understanding are in great danger in the West,” he added. Kissinger never explained the sources of his concerns about democracies. When he was born in 1923 in Bavaria Germany, the Weimar Republic (1919–33) still had a decade to go before Adolf Hitler was democratically elected. The ensuing chaos, violence, and war cast lasting impacts on the minds of the Jewish boy as many members of his family died in the Holocaust. This may well be the reason for Kissinger, at the end of his life, joined the pessimistic [George Kennan](#), also a foreign policy strategist and a centenarian (1904–2005), who was horrified by the “decadence” of the 1960s and envisioned the end of Western civilization as occurring by 2050. For both President Biden

and his political opponent (Trump), however, the make-or-break moment is not the distant 2050 but [2024](#).

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2023

Sept. 10–12, 2023: China's Vice Premier Zhang Guoqing [visits](#) Vladivostok for the 8th Eastern Economic Forum. President Putin meets him Sept. 12. Zhang holds meetings with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yury Trutnev, who is also Presidential Envoy to the Far Eastern District. Zhang also met Russian Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov, who oversees Russia's industrial development.

Sept. 13, 2023: Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu [meets](#) Russian Ambassador to Beijing Igor Morgulov in Beijing. The two discussed the preparations for the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation to be held in October.

Sept. 18–21, 2023: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [visits](#) Moscow to co-chair the 18th round of China–Russia strategic security consultations with Russian counterpart National Security Secretary Nikolai Patrushev. In Moscow, Wang first [meets](#) Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov who briefs Wang on the Ukraine issue and “applauded China's position paper for accommodating the security concerns of all parties and being conducive to eliminating the root causes of the conflict.” Putin [meets](#) Wang on Sept. 20 and “reiterated Russia's readiness to resolve the issue through dialogue and negotiation.” In Moscow, Wang also meets Mongolia's Secretary of the National Security Council Enkhbayar Jadamba.

Sept. 19, 2023: China, Russia, and Mongolia [hold](#) the first trilateral meeting of high representatives for security issues in Moscow. Chinese FM Wang Yi, Secretary of the Russian Federation Security Council Nikolai Patrushev, and Secretary of the National Security Council of Mongolia Enkhbayar Jadamba are present. They discuss the China–Russia–Mongolia Economic Corridor and the [proposed](#) Power of Siberia 2 natural gas pipeline going through Mongolia.

They also agree to further “institutionalize” the trilateral security dialogue.

Sept. 29, 2023: China's Special Envoy on Afghan Affairs Yue Xiaoyong [attends](#) the 5th meeting of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan held in Kazan, Russia. Yue also [holds](#) a China–Afghanistan–Pakistan tripartite meeting with Acting Foreign Minister of the Afghan Interim Government Amir Khan Muttaqi and Pakistan's Special Representative on Afghanistan Asif Durrani on the sidelines of the Moscow Format Consultations in Kazan.

Oct. 7, 2023: Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu [meets](#) Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Rudenko Andrey Yurevich in Beijing. They have “an in-depth exchange of views” on China–Russia strategic partnership, as well as international and regional issues of interest and concern.

Oct. 16, 2023: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [meets](#) Russian FM Lavrov in Beijing ahead of the 3rd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF). They also exchange views on the tension between Palestine and Israel.

Oct. 17–18, 2023: President Putin [visits](#) Beijing to participate in the 3rd Belt–Road–Initiative Forum. He holds talks with President Xi Jinping on Oct. 18.

Oct. 18–20, 2023: Fifth China–Russia Energy Business Forum is [held](#) in Beijing. Xi and Putin send congratulatory letters. More than 400 representatives from China and Russia attend.

Oct. 19, 2023: Special Envoy of the Chinese Government on the Middle East Issue Zhai Jun [meets](#) in Beijing with Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East and Africa and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia

Bogdanov Mikhail. They exchange views on the Palestine-Israel situation.

Oct. 25, 2023: Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Russian PM Mishustin [meet](#) on the sidelines of the 22nd SCO annual PM meeting in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Li tells Mishustin that “China supports enterprises from China and Russia in deepening cooperation on automobile manufacturing.”

Nov. 8, 2023: President Putin [receives](#) Vice Chairman of China's Central Military Commission Zhang Youxia at the Novo-Ogaryovo residence outside Moscow. Zhang holds a “regular meeting of the commission on military-technical cooperation” with his Russian counterpart. Putin told Zhang that Russia and China “are not seeking to create any military alliances using Cold War-era templates and have been maintaining constructive ties which have become a serious stability factor globally.” He also speaks highly on economic relations with China.

Nov. 8, 2023: Fourth meeting of the council of cooperation between the upper and middle [reaches](#) of the Yangtze River and the Volga Federal District is held in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province. It is co-chaired by China's Vice Premier Zhang Guoqing and Russia's Presidential Plenipotentiary Envoy to the Volga Federal District Igor Komarov.

Nov. 20, 2023: Tenth meeting of the dialogue mechanism between the ruling parties of China and Russia is [held](#) online. Both Putin and Xi send congratulation messages.

Nov. 21-23, 2023: Chairman of the Russian State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin [leads](#) a delegation to China at the invitation of Zhao Leji, chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee. President Xi meets Volodin on Nov. 22.

Nov. 29, 2023: Fourteenth Plenary Session of the China-Russia Friendship Committee for Peace and Development is held in Beijing.

China's Vice President Han Zheng [meets](#) representatives of both sides.

Dec. 12, 2023: China and Russia [hold](#) consultations on human rights affairs in Beijing. Special Representative for Human Rights of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China Yang Xiaokun co-chaired the consultations with Russian counterpart Grigory Evguenievich Lukiyantsev, director of the Department for Humanitarian Cooperation and Human Rights of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Special Representative for Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law.

Dec. 14, 2023: Russia and China [conduct](#) 7th joint air patrol over the Sea of Japan and East China Sea with Russia's Tupolev-95MS strategic bombers and China's Hong-6K strategic bombers. Russia's Sukhoi-35S and China's Su-30/Jian-11B provide support along the route. The first joint patrol was made in 2019.

Dec. 15, 2023: Chinese Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang and Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak co-chair the 20th Russian-Chinese Intergovernmental Commission on Energy Cooperation in Beijing.

Dec. 18, 2023: China's Finance Minister Lan Fo'an and Russian counterpart Anton Siluanov [hold](#) the 9th China-Russia Financial Dialogue in Beijing. They sign an MoU on audit standards and audit supervision to facilitate cross-border capital flow and bond issuance between China and Russia. They also agree to work with other multilateral forums for post-Covid recovery and to cooperate on BRICS' New Development Bank (NDB) with its five new members starting from 2024.

Dec. 19-20, 2023: Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin [visits](#) Beijing for the 28th regular prime ministerial meeting with his Chinese counterpart Li Qiang. President Xi [meets](#) Mishustin after the joint session of prime ministers on Dec. 20.

PACIFIC  FORUM

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

INDIA-EAST ASIA
RELATIONS

A YEAR OF INDIA EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE

SATU LIMAYE, VICE PRESIDENT EAST-WEST CENTER

In 2023, the Indo-Pacific was something of a backdrop to India's robust global activities, including the presidency of the Group of Twenty (G20), chairing for the first time the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit, participating in the Group of Seven summit, convening for the first time the Voice of Global South summits, and co-chairing with the United States the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor initiatives launched on the sidelines of the September G20 Summit in Delhi. Comparatively, India's Indo-Pacific engagements were less high-profile and leader-led but still numerous and active. India's low-level but wide-ranging defense diplomacy is particularly noteworthy. Prime Minister Modi and External Affairs Minister Jaishankar, while pre-occupied by India's role in global diplomacy, made important visits in the Indo-Pacific, with the PM making four country stops on two regional trips to the region; the first in May to the G7 Summit in Hiroshima, followed by stops in Papua New Guinea and Australia, and another in September to Jakarta, Indonesia for the annual ASEAN-led summit meetings, including the annual India-ASEAN dialogue.

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The prime minister used both trips to engage bilaterally with multiple Indo-Pacific leaders. External Affairs Minister Jaishankar and Defense Minister Rajnath Singh also made notable Indo-Pacific visits. And, of course, a number of Indo-Pacific leaders and ministers visited India.

India-China Relations

By 2022 standards of nearly zero contacts between senior Indian and Chinese officials, 2023 saw a “thaw” with two ministerial level meetings—but next to no fundamental change regarding differences on border disputes and President Xi’s decision to not attend the September G20 summit hosted by India. In early March, China’s Foreign Minister Qin Gang met India’s External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in New Delhi. China’s readout of the meeting emphasized overall bilateral relations: “The two sides should put the boundary issue in an appropriate position in bilateral relations and work for the regular management of border areas at an early date.” India rejected such a position with Jaishankar saying [talks](#) “focused on addressing current challenges to the bilateral relationship, especially peace and tranquility in the border areas.” In April, in another ministerial-level meeting, India’s Raksha Mantri (Minister of Defense) Rajnath Singh met China’s State Councilor and Minister of National Defense General Li Shangfu in New Delhi. Minister Singh “[categorically conveyed](#) [emphasis added] that development of relations between India and China is premised on prevalence of peace and tranquility at the borders. He added that all issues at the LAC [line of control] need to be resolved in accordance with existing bilateral agreements and commitments. He reiterated that violation of existing agreements has eroded the entire basis of bilateral relations and disengagement at the border will logically be followed with de-escalation.”

Other meetings/interactions between India and China were lower-level and focused on their ongoing border dispute. In February, the first in-person meeting since 2019 of the Working Mechanism for Consultation & Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) was held in Beijing to discuss proposals for disengagement in the remaining areas and create conditions for restoration of normalcy in bilateral relations. Another WMCC meeting was held in May.



Figure 1 Beijing: Indian and Chinese officials hold an in-person meeting of the China-India Border Affairs Consultation and Coordination Working Mechanism (WMCC) in Beijing on Feb 22, 2023. Photo: PTI

Neither produced notable progress on the border issue. Nor did two rounds (the 18th and 19th) of the India-China Corps Commander Level Meetings in April 2023 and August. In April a brief contretemps emerged over China renaming places in India’s state of Arunachal Pradesh, which led an Indian government spokesman to [respond](#) “We have seen such reports. This is not the first time China has made such an attempt. We reject this outright. Arunachal Pradesh is, has been, and will always be an integral and inalienable part of India. Attempts to assign invented names will not alter this reality.”

India-Australia Relations: Advancing the “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”

India-Australia relations in 2023 were active across leader visits, diplomacy, and defense. External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar met Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Foreign Minister Penny Wong, and Defense Minister Richard Marles in February. This visit prepared the details for the first India-Australia annual summit on March 10, 2023, during the state visit of Australian Prime Minister Albanese to India—his first bilateral visit since becoming prime minister. He also became the first foreign head of government to visit *INS Vikrant*, India’s new aircraft carrier. On board, he noted that Australia, for the first time since joining the *Malabar* exercise in 2020, will host the 27th edition of the annual multilateral naval wargaming exercise including the US, India, and Japan.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a bilateral visit to Sydney on May 23–24, originally for the purpose of the Quad Summit but ultimately held earlier on May 20 on the sidelines of the G7 summit in Hiroshima after US President Joe Biden canceled his attendance

at the second summit. The prime minister, rather than cancel his visit to Australia, continued on. A discordant issue was the safety of the Indian community and attacks on temples in Australia. Both prime ministers shared an ambition for an early conclusion of the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) and announced finalization of the Australia-India Migration and Mobility Partnership Arrangement, which will facilitate exchanges of students and businesspersons and reduce illegal migration.



Figure 2 Prime Minister Narendra Modi (extreme left, along with United States President Joe Biden, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, during Quad Leaders' Summit in Tokyo last year. Photo: Press Information Bureau

Defense and security ties during the year included exercises, service chiefs' visits, new initiatives such as the inaugural General Rawat India-Australia Young Officer Defense Exchange Programme, under which 15 young Australian officers visit India and 15 Indian officers travel to Australia in 2024. V. Adm. Mark Hammond, chief of Navy, Royal Australian Navy, [visited](#) India in March to meet his counterpart Chief of Naval Staff Adm. Hari Kumar. India's Chief of Army Staff Gen. Manoj Pande [visited](#) Australia in April. The 8th session of the India-Australia Defense Policy Talks (DPT) was held in Canberra in July. Both sides [agreed](#) for early finalization of a hydrography agreement.

India-Pacific Islands

India-Pacific Islands relations in 2023 revolved around Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister James Marape of Papua New Guinea (PNG) jointly hosting the Third Summit of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) at Port Moresby on May 22 and including 14 Pacific Islands countries. PNG's hosting was significant in that it is one of the few Pacific Island

countries with a mission in India and was represented at the Leaders' session of the 1st Voice of the Global South Summit in India in January. This was the first visit by an Indian prime minister to PNG.



Figure 3 Prime Minister Narendra Modi poses with leaders of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, Monday, May 22, 2023. Photo: AFP

Prime Minister Modi's [opening remarks](#) at the summit focused on the Pacific Islands countries' input at the Voice of the Global South summit, but also noted that India's presence at the G7 and membership in the Quad has direct implications for India-Pacific Island country relations—noting, for example, that in the “Quad meeting, we have taken decision to establish the Radio Access Network (RAN) in Palau. In a plurilateral format, we will enhance partnership with Pacific Island countries.” He [welcomed hearing](#) that the Sustainable Coastal and Ocean Research Institute (SCORI) has been established at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji to connect India's experiences in sustainable development with the vision of Pacific Island countries. He expressed delight that the launch of the website for space technology is taking place for national and human development, allowing the downloading of remote sensing data from the Indian satellite network to be utilized in Pacific Islands countries' respective national development plans.

In his [closing remarks](#), Modi announced initiatives to boost healthcare by paying the full cost of a super-specialty cardiology hospital in Fiji, providing dialysis units and sea ambulances in all 14 Pacific island countries attending the summit, organizing two foot camps each year to meet prosthetic needs across the region, making available quality generic medicines at affordable prices via the *Jan Aushadi* initiative and centers, establishing yoga centers to promote good

health lifestyles, and the establishment of a 24 x 7 emergency helpline in Fiji and any other regional country that has a similar request. Prime Minister Modi also announced that the Centre for Excellence for IT in PNG will be upgraded and transformed into a "Regional Information Technology and Cybersecurity Hub." On the economic front, Modi announced a "project for the development of the SME sector in every Pacific Island country. Under this scheme, machinery and technology supplies will be provided, and capacity-building programs will be conducted to enhance capabilities." Details and dollar amounts of the effort are unavailable. On the energy front, Modi announced plans to convert "at least one government building into solar powered building, in all the FIPIC countries" and welcomed receptivity of the gathered leaders "to convert the Pacific Islands Heads of State Residences to solar powered ones." He also pledged to "provide desalination units for the people of every Pacific Island country." To promote India's long-term commitment to capacity building in the region, PM Modi announced 1,000 Indian Technical and Economic training opportunities in the next five years.

On the sidelines of the FIPIC summit, Modi had a number of important interactions including bilateral meetings with PNG Prime Minister Marape, Prime Minister Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka of Fiji, and Prime Minister [Chris Hipkins](#) of New Zealand.

The Quad

The Quad maintained its momentum in 2023; framed by two Quad foreign ministers' meetings in March and September and a leaders summit in May. The 6th Quad Foreign Ministers meeting took place in early March in India, at which a third [joint statement](#) was issued, including the announcement of the establishment of the Quad Working Group on Counter-Terrorism to supplement six leader-level Working Groups on Health Security, Climate, Critical and Emerging Technology, Space, Infrastructure, and Cyber. In September, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly annual meetings in New York, the Quad Foreign Ministers met again and provided a [readout](#) rather than joint statement that flagged key themes. The main Quad event was the third in-person leaders meeting held on May 20th in Hiroshima, Japan on the sidelines of the G7 summit. The leaders

issued a [joint statement](#) which announced "cooperation with Palau to establish a deployment of Open Radio Access Networks (Open RAN), the first in the Pacific." They also issued a [Joint Vision Statement](#) and a [Fact Sheet on the Quad](#) which provides details on the main lines of effort of the Quad Working Groups.

In March a Quad Maritime Security Working Group met for the first time in Washington DC to take forward the "finalization of the Partnership's Standard Operating Procedure, streamlining HADR cooperation and IPMDA, designed to enable nations to better secure their maritime zones."

In early 2023 the four Quad countries launched the [Quad Cyber Challenge](#) to improve cyber security across their nations. The challenge invited internet users across the Indo-Pacific to pledge to practice safe and responsible cyber habits, including preventive measures such as installing security updates, enabling enhanced identity checks through multifactor authentication, utilizing stronger and regularly changing passwords, and knowing how to identify common online scams.



Figure 4 The 'Quad Cyber Challenge' exemplifies the ongoing commitment of Quad nations to enhance both awareness and proactive measures in the field of cybersecurity. Photo: Asian News International

India-Southeast Asia/ASEAN

The main event of India-Southeast Asia/ASEAN relations in 2023 was the India-ASEAN Summit held on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit hosted by Indonesia in September. This was the first ASEAN-India Summit since the elevation of India-ASEAN relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2022. Prime Minister Modi chaired the 20th ASEAN-India Summit during which he [declared](#), "ASEAN is the central pillar of India's Act East Policy...India fully supports ASEAN centrality and ASEAN's outlook

on the Indo-Pacific...[and] ASEAN holds a prominent place in India's Indo-Pacific initiative... The 21st century is Asia's century. It is our century." PM Modi also "[emphasized](#) the need to complete the review of ASEAN-India FTA (AITIGA—Trade in Goods & Services Agreement) in a time bound manner...[and] presented a 12-point proposal for strengthening India—ASEAN cooperation covering connectivity, digital transformation, trade and economic engagement, addressing contemporary challenges, people-to-people contacts and deepening strategic engagement...Two Joint Statements, [including] one on [Maritime Cooperation](#), and the other on Food Security were adopted."

India's Defense Minister/Ministry actively engaged Southeast Asian countries throughout the year; including through a range of low-level but ongoing efforts at increasing mutual familiarity and engagement particularly using naval diplomacy. For example, in May, within six months of the first India-ASEAN defense ministers' meeting, the two sides were able to hold their inaugural ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AIME) co-hosted by the navies of India and Singapore. The exercise focused on the challenges to the governance of seas in the region, including disaster management and constabulary actions such as dealing with transnational crime given ASEAN's diverse membership constraining exercises to address challenges of coercion by adversarial nation states. The occasion also served as an opportunity to conduct defense diplomacy including India's Navy chief, Adm. Hari Kumar showing his Philippines' counterpart V. Adm. Toribio D Adaci around *INS Delhi* and briefing him on India's maritime capacity-building progress. The AIME also served as a springboard for follow-on engagements across Southeast Asia including the 39th India-Thailand CORPAT; Exercise *Samudra Shakti* with Indonesia and visiting Sihanoukville in Cambodia and Da Nang in Vietnam.

As one Indian analyst put it: "The activities undertaken during AIME 2023 were one step in the long and tortuous road leading to strengthened confidence of ASEAN in India as a benign, capable and reliable partner, they enabled India to display its indigenous shipbuilding capability and overall maritime prowess. Interoperability is a far cry: the odd exercise lasting for a few days no more results in interoperability than political statements result

in meaningful outcomes. Far more will have to be done. A beginning has, however, been made. It is for leaders on both sides to follow up to ensure that this beginning results in steady progress towards a secure, stable and peaceful region."

India-Cambodia Relations

India-Cambodia relations included both military and political exchanges. In February Lt. Gen. Hun Manet, deputy commander-in-chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and Commander of Royal Cambodian Army (and as of August ,prime minister of Cambodia) [visited](#) India in the first-ever visit by any commander of the Royal Cambodian Army. He held numerous high-level meetings, including with India's vice president, minister of defense, external affairs minister, and deputy national security advisor, as well as India's chief of defense staff and chief of army staff, during which the two sides reaffirmed India's support to Cambodia by offering customized training modules for the Royal Cambodian Army. Lt. Gen. Hun Manet announced the schedule for the conduct of first Army to Army Staff Talks in Cambodia. A Bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement signed in 2007 governs military relations covering training cooperation, Counter-IED, demining and UN Peacekeeping. Later in May, as part of the Indian Navy's deployment to ASEAN countries, Indian Navy ships made a port call at Sihanoukville from May 11-14.



Figure 5 Chief of the Army Staff General Manoj Pande welcomes Lieutenant General Hun Manet, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and Commander of the Royal Cambodian Army, prior to inspecting the Guard of Honour, at South Block Lawn. Photo: Asian News International

India-Vietnam Relations

May 20 PM Modi met Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh in Hiroshima on the sidelines of G7 Summit and [noted](#) "the steady progress achieved in bilateral Comprehensive Strategic Partnership..."

Vietnam's Minister of National Defense Gen. Phan Van Giang [visited](#) India in mid-June for defense and related Comprehensive Strategic Partnership consultations with Indian counterpart Minister of Defense Rajnath Singh. Currently defense engagements between the two countries comprise service-to-service ties, military-to-military exchanges, high-level visits, capacity building and training programs, cooperation in UN Peacekeeping, ship visits and bilateral exercises. During the previous year's visit of Minister of Defense Singh's visit to Vietnam, the two countries had signed a "Joint Vision Statement on India-Vietnam Defence Partnership towards 2030" and a Memorandum of Understanding on "Mutual Logistics Support." Two Indian naval vessels visited Vietnam in May as part of a deployment to Southeast Asia.

India-Philippines Relations

India-Philippines relations included the 4th Joint Defense Cooperation Committee [meeting](#) in March to review bilateral defense cooperation and discussed effective and practical initiatives to further expand the engagements. The co-chairs reaffirmed their commitment to implement 2006 agreement concerning defense cooperation...[and] to initiate measures to enhance cooperation in Defense Industry and Technology domain and look forward to greater synergy in effectively deepening bilateral cooperative engagements across the spectrum.

India-Malaysia Relations

India-Malaysia security relations, essentially defense-led, were active during the year. The main event was Indian Defense Minister Singh's visit to Kuala Lumpur in July to consolidate bilateral defense, with focus on identifying ways to strengthen industrial cooperation Indian defense industry with capacity and capability to cooperate with Malaysian Armed Forces in its inventory modernization and maintenance plans. Minister Singh also [held bilateral talks](#)

with counterpart Dato' Seri Mohamad Hasan and called on Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim and Minister of Foreign Affairs Dato' Seri Diraja Dr Zambry Abd Kadir. Both ministers [approved](#) amendment of the Memorandum of Understanding on Defense Cooperation between India and Malaysia signed in 1993. This amendment is supposed to help expand bilateral defense cooperation. During the visit, Singh also [inaugurated](#) the Regional Office of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) in Kuala Lumpur intended to facilitate close defense industrial collaboration between India and Malaysia and serve as a hub for the HAL's engagement with the wider Southeast Asian region and act as a window for other Indian Defense PSUs.

The 10th meeting of the Sub Committee on Military Cooperation between India and Malaysia was held in New Delhi in July. India [reportedly](#) highlighted the potential of the Indian defense industry with capacity and capability to cooperate with Malaysia's military shipbuilding and maintenance plans. The 12th Malaysia-India Defense Cooperation Committee (MIDCOM) meeting at the level of Defense secretary in India was held in September.

India-Indonesia Relations

Indonesia was one of only four Indo-Pacific countries Prime Minister Modi visited in 2023 (the others being Papua New Guinea, Australia, and Japan) though it was significant because India succeeded Indonesia in the G20 presidency, and Indonesia hosted the ASEAN-led East Asia Summit and India-ASEAN Summit in September 2023. PM Modi and President Widodo also held a bilateral meeting.

Defense and maritime cooperation [continued](#) between India and Indonesia with the 4th edition in May of the India-Indonesia bilateral exercise *Samudra Shakti-23* incorporating an Indian Navy Dornier Maritime Patrol aircraft and *Chetak* helicopter and an Indonesian CN 235 Maritime Patrol Aircraft and AS565 *Panther* Helicopter, in July two Indian naval ships visited Jakarta in what was [described](#) as on "operational turnaround" culminating in a Maritime Partnership Exercise (MPX) at sea, the 39th coordinated patrol (CORPAT) was held in December.

India-Singapore Relations

An important defense visit was that of India's chief of the Naval Staff (CNS), Adm. R Hari Kumar, in May 2023 to co-officiate the inaugural ceremony of the maiden ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AIME) being co-hosted by the Republic of Singapore Navy and Indian Navy. The CNS also called on Singapore's minister for Defense, the chief of Defense Force, and other ASEAN navy chiefs.

India and Singapore held a number of their ongoing military exercise series, [including](#) the 13th edition of *Exercise Bold Kurukshetra*, a bilateral army armor exercise in March.

India-Thailand Relations

The 8th India-Thailand Defense Dialogue was held in Bangkok in April. The two sides [expressed satisfaction](#) at defense cooperation. An Indian [statement](#) noted that "bilateral defense engagements have expanded over a period of time to include wide ranging contacts between the two countries including Defense Dialogue meeting, military-to-military exchanges, high-level visits, capacity building and training programs and bilateral exercises." Other defense activities [included](#) the 35th edition of India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol (Indo-Thai CORPAT) in May.

India-Korea Relations

The main interactions between India and Korea were the visit of South Korea's Foreign Minister Park Jin to India in early April to mark the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations and to review the "special strategic partnership. The next month, Prime Minister Modi met President of South Korea Yoon Suk Yeol in Hiroshima on the sidelines of the G7 Summit to review "the progress of [India-Republic of Korea Special Strategic Partnership](#) and discuss ways to strengthen bilateral cooperation, particularly in areas of trade & investment, high technology, IT hardware manufacturing, defense, semiconductors and culture." The leaders noted the 50th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations.

Other exchanges included the 11th high-level [meeting](#) between Indian and Korea Coast Guards in April. The India-ROK Coast Guard HLM is focused at augmenting the operational level interaction and capacity building in the areas of

Maritime Search & Rescue (M-SAR), Marine Pollution Response (MPR) and Maritime Law Enforcement (MLE).

India-Japan Relations

Japan's Prime Minister Kishida Fumio visited India in March. The reported outcomes were modest, however, and included an exchange of notes for a tranche of the loan for the Mumbai Ahmedabad High Speed Rail. A second agreement was a Memorandum of Cooperation in the field of Japanese Language Education in India.

Prime Minister Modi traveled to Japan in May for the G7 Summit in Hiroshima where he held a bilateral meeting with Kishida on the sidelines of the Summit. "The leaders agreed on ways to further strengthen the bilateral Special Strategic and Global Partnership. [Discussions](#) focused on areas of education, skill development, tourism, Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE), green hydrogen, high technology, semiconductors and digital public infrastructure."



Figure 6 Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on the sidelines of G20 Summit. Photo: Asian News International

Below the leaders level, India and Japan continued a number of military and defense engagements, including: the inaugural IAF-JASDF exercise *Veer Guardian* in January with India becoming the fifth country, after the US, Australia, the UK, and Germany, to [exercise](#) with the JASDF in Japan; the fourth edition of India-Japan Joint Military Exercise *Dharma Guardian* in February and Exercise *Shinyuu Maitri* with the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) on the sidelines of [Dharma Guardian](#); and a JMSDF ship [visit](#) in February at Kochi; the conduct of Maritime Partnership Exercises (MPX) with Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) ship JS *Suzutsuki*, an *Akizuki*-class

destroyer in the Arabian Sea in March; and the 7th edition of the bilateral Japan-India *Maritime Exercise 2023 (JIMEX 23)* hosted by the Indian Navy, was [conducted](#) at/off Visakhapatnam in July.

The 7th India-Japan Defense Policy Dialogue [took place](#) in New Delhi in April to discuss a wide range of issues including service-level exercises and engagements, regional security issues and cooperation in defense equipment & technology.

Conclusion

India's relations with the Indo-Pacific in 2023 were active across defense and diplomacy. It has been five years since Prime Minister Modi laid out India's Concept of the Indo-Pacific in his keynote remarks at Shangri-La in June 2018, four years since Modi articulated the maritime concept of the Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative in 2019 at the East Asia Summit in Bangkok, and a year prior to the 10th anniversary of India's Act East policy articulated in 2014. While there were no significant advancements or developments in India's East Asia relations, India continued to maintain a "presence" via leader level and ministerial visits, regular and enhanced diplomatic platforms (e.g., a second 2 + 2 dialogue with Australia and a third summit with Pacific Islands leaders), and low-level but wide-ranging defense and particularly maritime engagements with a range of regional countries. As India moves to elections in the next couple of months, 2024 is likely to be a year of relatively modest maintenance and building of ties with the Indo-Pacific.

CHRONOLOGY OF INDIA-EAST ASIA RELATIONS

JANUARY–DECEMBER 2023

Feb. 10, 2023: 11th India–Mongolia Joint Working Group [meets](#) for the first time in person since the pandemic in New Delhi to review bilateral defense cooperation.

Feb. 15–16, 2023: External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar [makes](#) his first visit to Fiji to speak at the 12th World Hindi Conference and meet Prime Minister Rabuka after which they held a [joint press conference](#).

Feb. 16–18, 2023: Jaishankar [visits Australia](#) where he met counterpart Foreign Minister Penny Wong, as well as Minister of Defense Marles and Prime Minister Albanese and delivered the keynote address at the inaugural Raisina@Sydney Conference.

March 10–11, 2023: Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese [makes](#) a State Visit to India.

March 2, 2023: EAM Jaishankar [meets](#) Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang on the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in New Delhi. Jaishankar said talks with his Chinese counterpart “focused on addressing current challenges to the bilateral relationship, especially peace and tranquility in the border areas.” “There are real problems in that relationship that need to be looked at, that need to be discussed very openly and candidly between us. That’s what we sought to do today,” Jaishankar told reporters.

April 4–6, 2023: South Korea’s Foreign Minister Park Jin [visits](#) India to mark the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations and to review the “special strategic partnership.”

April 27, 2023: India’s Defense Minister (Raksha Mantri) Rajnath Singh meets China’s State Councilor and Minister of National Defense Gen. Li Shangfu in New Delhi. The Raksha Mantri “[categorically conveyed](#) [emphasis added] that development of relations between India and China is premised on prevalence of peace and tranquility at the borders. He added that all issues at the LAC need to be resolved in

accordance with existing bilateral agreements and commitments. He reiterated that violation of existing agreements has eroded the entire basis of bilateral relations and disengagement at the border will logically be followed with de-escalation.”

May 20, 2023: Modi [attends](#) G7 Summit in Hiroshima, and participates in the third in-person Quad leaders meeting.

May 20, 2023: Modi meets Vietnam’s Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh on the sidelines of the G7 Summit and [notes](#) “the steady progress achieved in bilateral Comprehensive Strategic Partnership...”

May 20, 2023: Modi meets President of South Korea Yoon Suk Yeol on the sidelines of G7 Summit to review “the progress of [India–Republic of Korea Special Strategic Partnership](#) and discusses ways to strengthen bilateral cooperation, particularly in areas of trade & investment, high technology, IT hardware manufacturing, defense, semiconductors and culture.” The leaders note the 50th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations.

May 20, 2023: Modi [holds](#) a bilateral meeting with Japan’s Prime Minister Kishida Fumio on the sidelines of the G7 Summit, the second bilateral meeting of the year following Kishida’s visit to India in March, where the leaders “agreed on ways to further strengthen the bilateral Special Strategic and Global Partnership. Discussions focused on areas of education, skill development, tourism, Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE), green hydrogen, high technology, semiconductors and digital public infrastructure.”

May 22–23, 2023: Modi [visits](#) Papua New Guinea for a bilateral meeting with PNG Prime Minister James Marape and the 3rd Summit of the Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation, co-hosted by PNG. This was the first visit by an Indian prime minister to Papua New Guinea, and

Marape in a “special gesture” received Modi at the airport. conferred Prime on him the Grand Companion of the Order of Logohu (GCL), the highest civilian award of PNG.

May 22, 2023: Modi, jointly with PNG Prime Minister Marape, [hosts](#) the 3rd Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC III Summit). Launched in 2014, FIPIC involves India and 14 Pacific Island Countries (PICs): Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

May 22, 2023: Modi [meets](#) for the first time with Prime Minister of the Republic of Fiji Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka. On behalf of Fijian President Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, Rabuka bestows Modi with the highest honor of the Republic of Fiji, the Companion of the Order of Fiji.

May 22, 2023: Modi [holds](#) a meeting with Prime Minister Chris Hipkins of New Zealand on the sidelines of the 3rd Summit of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation, their first interaction.

May 22-24, 2023: Modi [visits](#) Australia for “discussions focused on cooperation in defense and security, trade and investment, new and renewable energy, green hydrogen, critical minerals, education, migration and mobility and people to people ties.” The prime minister [notes](#) that “I am visiting Australia within two months of my friend Prime Minister Albanese's visit to India. This is our sixth meeting in the past one year.”

May 29-31, 2023: Norodom Sihamoni, king of Cambodia, [makes](#) his first state visit to India. Modi meets him and “resolve[s] to strengthen the bilateral partnership with Cambodia across diverse areas including capacity-building.” King Sihamoni thanked Modi “for India’s ongoing initiatives in development cooperation, and conveyed his appreciation and best wishes for India’s Presidency of G20.”

June 30-July 1, 2023: India’s defense secretary [pays](#) official visit to Myanmar for meetings with the Chairman, State Administrative Council Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing in Nay Pyi Taw, Defense Minister of Myanmar Gen (Retd.) Mya Tun Oo and held meetings with Commander-in-Chief, Myanmar Navy Adm. Moe Aung, and Chief of

Defense Industries Lt. Gen. Khan Myint Than. According to an Indian [press release](#), the focus of discussions was “maintenance of tranquility in the border areas, illegal trans-border movements and transnational crimes such as drug trafficking and smuggling...[and] [b]oth sides reaffirmed their commitment to ensure that their respective territories would not be allowed to be used for any activities inimical to the other.”

July 10-11, 2023: India’s Defense Minister Rajnath Singh [visits](#) Malaysia to meet with counterpart Defense Minister Dato’ Seri Mohamad Hasan to focus on further consolidating bilateral defense cooperation and the Enhanced Strategic Partnership.

July 13-14, 2023: EAM Jaishankar [visits](#) Indonesia for the Foreign Ministers’ Meetings under the ASEAN framework for the ASEAN-India summit, the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum. He also meets with his bilateral counterpart.

July 15-18, 2023: EAM Jaishankar [travels](#) to Bangkok for the 12th Foreign Ministers’ Meeting of Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Mechanism on 16 July, and attends the BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers’ Retreat on July 17.

July 17-31, 2023: An Indian army contingent of 40 plus personnel participates in multinational joint exercise [Ex Khan Quest](#) in Mongolia followed by the 15th edition of the bilateral joint military exercise [Nomadic Elephant-23](#).

Sept. 6-7, 2023: Modi [travels](#) to Jakarta, Indonesia for bilateral visits including with President Joko Widodo of Indonesia and to attend the 20th ASEAN-India Summit and the 18th East Asia Summit. This is the first ASEAN-India Summit since the elevation of India-ASEAN relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2022.

Sept. 7, 2023: Modi [chairs](#) the 20th ASEAN-India Summit during which he declares, “ASEAN is the central pillar of India's Act East Policy,...India fully supports ASEAN centrality and ASEAN's outlook on the Indo-Pacific,...[and] ASEAN holds a prominent place in India's Indo-Pacific initiative... The 21st century is Asia's century. It is our century.” Modi also “[emphasized](#) the need to complete the review of ASEAN-India FTA (AITIGA) in a time bound manner...[and] presented a 12-point

proposal for strengthening India—ASEAN cooperation covering connectivity, digital transformation, trade and economic engagement, addressing contemporary challenges, people-to-people contacts and deepening strategic engagement...Two Joint Statements, including one on [Maritime Cooperation](#), and the other on Food Security were adopted.”

Sept. 10, 2023: Modi [meets](#) South Korea’s President Yoon in Delhi on the sidelines of the India-hosted G20 Summit. “The leaders noted that this year marks the 50th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations. They reviewed progress on various areas of bilateral Special Strategic Partnership, including in trade and investment, defense production, semiconductors and EV battery technology.”

Oct. 15–18, 2023: EAM Jaishankar [visits](#) Vietnam for the 18th Meeting of the India–Vietnam Joint Commission on Economic, Trade, Scientific, and Technological Cooperation co-chaired with Bui Thanh Son, minister of foreign affairs of Vietnam, reviews the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. He also meets members of the Indian community and unveils Mahatma Gandhi’s Bust in Ho Chi Minh City.

Oct. 19–21, 2023: EAM Jaishankar [visits](#) Singapore to review bilateral cooperation, explore collaboration in emerging areas including digitalization and skills development under the India–Singapore Ministerial Roundtable, and exchange views on regional and global developments. He calls on President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance Lawrence Wong, and Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security Teo Chee Hean. He also meets Minister for Defense Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Home Affairs and Law K Shanmugam and Minister for Trade and Industry Gan Kim Yong.

Nov. 20, 2023: India and Australia [hold](#) their 2nd 2 + 2 Defense and Foreign Ministers Dialogue.

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