

PACIFIC  FORUM

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

EDITED BY

ROB YORK

BRAD GLOSSERMAN

JANUARY – APRIL 2024

VOL. 26, NO. 1

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PACIFIC FORUM

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

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HONOLULU, HAWAII

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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 SHEILAA SMITH, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS & CHARLES T. MCCLEAN, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

2024 began with a full agenda for the US and Japan. All eyes were on the January presidential election in Taiwan, and China’s reaction to it. The choice of William Lai Ching-te, who is currently vice president, cemented the hold of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) on power, with a third term for the party. Lai has close ties with Japan and has made no bones about his expectation that Japan, as well as the US, will figure prominently in his hopes for Taiwan’s future. The invitation to former Kuomintang (KMT) President Ma Ying-jeou to visit Beijing on April 10 [made it clear](#) that Beijing had a different preference than the people of Taiwan. The uptick in Chinese military pressure across the Strait as well as in the South China Sea also concerned the US and Japan. The People’s Liberation Army’s growing demonstration of pressure on Taiwan’s eastern islands continued in the months after Lai’s victory, as Taiwan prepared to inaugurate him as president on May 20. The US and Japan found common cause also in speaking out against China’s growing aggression against Philippine maritime forces at Second Thomas Shoal.

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BY SOURABH GUPTA, INSTITUTE FOR CHINA-AMERICA STUDIES

US-China relations were marked by a paradox during the first trimester of 2024. On the one hand, a distinct stabilization was evident in ties. The two sides made concerted efforts to translate their leaders' 'San Francisco Vision' into reality. Cabinet officials exchanged visits across the Pacific, working groups and dialogue mechanisms met in earnest and produced outcomes, functional cooperation was deepened, sensitive issues such as Taiwan were carefully managed, and effort was devoted to improving the relationship's political optics. On the other hand, the negative tendencies in ties continued to deepen. Both sides introduced additional selective decoupling as well as cybersecurity measures in key information and communications technology and services sectors, with US actions bearing the signs of desinicization—rather than mere decoupling—of relevant supply chains. The chasm in strategic perception remained as wide as before. In sum, the “new normal” in US-China relations continued to take form, one piece at a time.

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

The first reporting period of 2024 US-Korea relations was busy, both with managing ongoing issues (good and bad) and adapting to genuinely new evolutionary turns in US-Korea affairs. Concerning the former, US-South Korea relations continued on the same trajectory since President Yoon Suk Yeol assumed office in 2022: deepening bilateral alliance interoperability, enriching trilateral cooperation with Japan, increasing economic security policy convergence with the US. And this despite new foreign, defense, finance, and trade ministers in Seoul. Widely viewed as a referendum on Yoon, [April National Assembly elections](#) cast a shadow over much of his foreign and security policy during the reporting period. However, the crushing defeat of Yoon's conservative People Power Party is unlikely to affect his approach to external affairs, where the president retains significant unilateral power. The “management” bucket also contains more threatening scenarios that have been building for months, years, decades. At the top of the list in importance is North Korea's build-out of its nuclear and missile program, which continued apace in the January-April 2024 period, also providing more evidence of the essential hopelessness of international sanctions.

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

Incorporating major foreign policy initiatives of leader Xi Jinping, Beijing completed its effort from the past two years [with instructions](#) in January on China's new approach to foreign affairs to Chinese foreign policy officials and others concerned. The new approach added authority and momentum to Beijing's emphasis since Xi's summit with US President Joe Biden last November on greater Chinese moderation and restraint as a "responsible" great power pursuing peace and development in dealing with Southeast Asian

neighbors and elsewhere. Nevertheless, Beijing remains selective in how it applies moderation, and the record of the past two years shows great swings between moderation and truculence in its approach to foreign affairs, depending on circumstances which remain subject to change. The success of China's regional importance showed in Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies [annual survey](#) of regional elites with China viewed as both the leading economic and political-security power, overshadowing the United States, and the judgment that if forced to choose between them, more respondents would select China than the United States.

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

As 2024 dawned, Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterated in his New Year Address that Taiwan must unify with China. In her New Year Address, Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen, with the election of her successor only 14 days away, repeated her offer to meet China on the basis of equality, mutual respect, and without preconditions, echoing themes dating back to her first inaugural address in 2016. On Jan. 14, Tsai's chosen successor, Vice President Lai Ching-te, won an unprecedented third successive term for the Democratic Progressive Party, promising to uphold the independence of the Republic of China, but the party lost its majority in the legislature. A month later, two Chinese fishermen operating illegally near Kinmen Island died when their boat capsized as they were pursued by the Taiwan Coast Guard. Five days later, a Chinese Coast Guard vessel boarded and inspected a Taiwanese tour boat near Kinmen. Tensions grew but they did not boil over.

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Kim Jong Un elaborated his radical new line on South Korea to the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) in January. It sounded just as nasty as when he first expounded it in December, but no more coherent. Though obscure, this is clearly very important. Hence most of this article is devoted to a detailed reading of what Kim said, in a bid to tease out what this means in practice for South Korea's security. While awaiting further specification in a promised Constitutional amendment, our provisional assessment is that this is more bark than bite. Buttressing that view, close analysis of the two Koreas' artillery shelling near the Northern Limit Line (NLL) in early January, and the barbs they also traded, highlights an element of performativity—especially from Pyongyang—that is somewhat reassuring. Despite much fiery rhetoric, and while vigilance and deterrence remain crucial, this does not look like a peninsula on the brink of war.

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China-ROK relations reached critical junctures across political, security, and economic fields. China-ROK relations had a bad start in 2024 with discord over regional security priorities. The inaugural US-Japan-ROK Indo-Pacific Dialogue in Washington on Jan. 5, a deputy foreign minister-level initiative emerging from the August 2023 Camp David summit, reignited frictions with Beijing. The resulting tensions constrained anticipation about their own trilateral summit with Tokyo. The shifting China-ROK trade structure and Chinese e-commerce practices emerged as central points of economic debate.

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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

The concert hall massacre near Moscow on March 22 was a source of shock and awe for Russia and the world. The incident, which resulted in the deaths of [144 people and 551 wounded](#), was the largest since the [2003 Beslan school siege](#) (where more than 330 hostages died). Its timing cast a long shadow over major developments in the first few months of 2024, particularly the fifth term of President Vladimir Putin, who won [87.28%](#) of the vote just five days prior. It also made any effort to end the two-year Ukraine war more difficult, if not impossible. As a result, much of China’s mediation 2.0 (March 2–12) was in parking mode. The Sino–Russian strategic partnership, too, was tested by two different priorities: Moscow’s need for more security coordination on one hand and China’s interest in stability in the bilateral, regional, and global domains on the other. Whatever the outcome, the stage was set for more dynamic interactions between the two large powers in the months ahead.

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BY KEI KOGA, NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

Japan–Southeast Asia relations marked two milestones in 2023–24. The first was the 50th anniversary of Japan–ASEAN Relations, during which Japan and ASEAN emphasized an equal partnership by adopting the keyword “co-creation” to promote economic prosperity and security stability in Southeast Asia and beyond. The second is strengthening Japan–Philippines bilateral strategic ties, not only bilaterally, but also trilaterally with the United States and quadrilaterally with Australia. Japan continuously engages with other Southeast Asian states and strengthens ties with ASEAN to reinforce ASEAN Centrality and unity, yet a challenge remains: how Japan can design a regional architecture in East Asia and the Indo–Pacific by clarifying the roles and division of labor among those institutions.

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May 2024 Regional Overview: The “Year of Elections,” Take Two!

President Yoon’s tenuous political position and the continued political weakness of Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio (who faces an LDP leadership election this fall), when combined with former US President Donald Trump’s ever-looming shadow as US presidential election politics heat up, have added a sense of urgency behind efforts in all three countries to institutionalize their budding trilateral relationship in the wake of last summer’s groundbreaking Camp David Summit.

Minilateral cooperation was the order of the day this reporting period, not just among the United States, Korea, and Japan, but involving the US, Japan, and Philippines and the increasingly popular (in some quarters) AUKUS (Australia, US, and United Kingdom) defense and technology-sharing arrangement. Washington’s efforts at strengthening its Quad relationship is being met by a new quad, the so-called “axis of upheaval” involving Beijing, Moscow, Pyongyang, and Tehran. Finally, a few words about economics relations. If anyone was expecting major progress in trade policy during a US election year, they clearly have not been paying attention. Nonetheless, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity is slowly taking substance, but there is a long way to go and, like so many regional developments, any progress could be undone in a Trump presidency.

The “Year of Elections”

As we summarized in our [January report](#), the year of elections is upon us, 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.

Taiwan

The people of Taiwan (or at least 40% of voters) selected the ruling DPP candidate, (William) Lai Ching-te over Hou Yu-ih from the Kuomintang (KMT) and Ko Wen-je of the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP). A fourth major candidate, independent businessman Terry Gou, founder of the world’s largest electronics manufacturer,

Foxconn, dropped out last November after reports that Beijing, which made no secret of its support for the KMT and its dismay over the split opposition, reportedly began an investigation into Foxconn. Attempts by the KMT and TPP to field a common candidate failed, however, opening the door for the DPP’s less-than-majority win.



Figure 1 Taiwan President-elect Lai Ching-te speaks as Incoming Defence Minister Wellington Koo stands next to him during a press conference where incoming cabinet members are announced, in Taipei, Taiwan April 25, 2024. Photo: Carlos Garcia Rawlins

While securing the presidency, the DPP lost its majority in the Legislative Yuan. The TPP, with its eight seats, now gets to play kingmaker over the KMT (52 seats) and DPP (51 seats). The China-Taiwan chapter [\[add hot link\]](#) provides analysis of the implications of a third straight DPP-run administration. All eyes will now be on Lai’s May 20 inauguration address which, if the past is precedent, will include overtures toward Beijing “on the basis of equality.” While this will provide Xi Jinping with an opportunity to find a new “2024 consensus,” odds are it will be an opportunity the mainland fails to seize.

Pakistan

The Indo-Pacific’s biggest election surprise thus far was the ability of candidates associated with the jailed former prime minister and star cricket player Imran Khan to win the most seats (but not a majority) in Feb. 8 national elections, despite his PTI party (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf or Pakistan Movement for Justice) having been all but disbanded. While this did not prevent the Army’s preferred candidate, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League, from forming a new government, it did demonstrate the limits of authoritarian control

as long as some semblance of freedom of choice still exists.

Russia

Regrettably, the same cannot be said in Russia, where President Vladimir Putin, now in command since 2000 (including a 2008-12 stint as prime minister when then-constitutional restrictions prohibited him from a third consecutive term) has once again emerged victorious in March 15-17 elections, after silencing most of his critics, including heroic opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who died in a Siberian prison several weeks before the election. Navalny supporters lodged a silent protest of sorts, when they called on voters to create long lines at polling stations at noon on the last day of voting.



Figure 2 Russian presidential candidate and incumbent President Vladimir Putin speaks after polling stations closed, in Moscow, Russia, March 18. Photo: Maxim Shemetov

Indonesia

Unlike Taiwan, where the presidential candidate with the most votes wins, even with a plurality, in Indonesia the winner must achieve a majority of votes or face a runoff between the two leading contenders. To his credit, Prabowo Subianto of the Great Indonesia Movement or Gerindra Party, managed to secure over 58% of the vote against ruling Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan or PDI-P) candidate Ganjar Pranowo (16%) and independent candidate Anies Rasyid Baswedan (25%), a former minister of Education and Culture under current President Joko Widodo (a.k.a. Jokowi) and subsequent governor of Jakarta.

As a member of the Jokowi administration and with Jokowi's son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, as his running mate, Prabowo was seen more as a

continuation than an alternative to current administration policies and his early pronouncements underscore this belief. Like Jokowi, his first post-election, pre-inauguration overseas trip was to Japan and China, demonstrating his awareness of the necessity to balance relations with Asia's two largest economies. He did attract media attention, however, when decrying the international "double standard" that has caused the world to rally behind Ukraine while largely ignoring the plight of the Palestinian people in Gaza.

India

National elections are underway in the "world's largest democracy," with voting spread out over seven phases between April 19 until June 1. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is expected to win, even though his rightwing Hindu party has been accused of suppressing democracy. Modi's government 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, given Washington's view of its Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad") partner (along with Australia and Japan) as a necessary counterweight to China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region.



Figure 3 India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi gestures as he walks on the day he files his nomination papers for the general elections in Varanasi, India May 14, 2024. Photo: Adnan Abidi

Washington's love affair with Modi is being severely tested, however, as more details emerge surrounding a failed assassination attempt against Sikh activist Gurpatwant Singh, a US citizen, reportedly undertaken by India's spy agency, the Research and Analysis Wing, last summer. Compounding the problem (and adding credence to the charges) is the recent arrest, in

Canada, of three Indian nationals accused of assassinating Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Canadian citizen and prominent campaigner for a separate Sikh homeland, in British Columbia last June. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau previously announced that his government had credible information linking the Indian government to the killing.

Japan

Hopes that Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's successful summit with US President Joe Biden would earn him a second term in office—the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) holds elections in the fall; the winner becomes president of the party and then prime minister of Japan by virtue of the LDP's status as senior member of the ruling coalition—dissipated after April by-elections for three seats in Parliament. In those votes, scattered across the country in Nagasaki, Shimane, and Tokyo prefectures, the opposition Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) won all by convincing margins. (In two of the three, the LDP didn't bother fielding a candidate.) The shellacking has (temporarily at least) put an end to talk of a snap parliamentary election this summer—a vote must be held by fall 2025—at which a convincing LDP win would consolidate Kishida's hold on power.



Figure 4 Yukio Edano, leader of the new Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, speaks during a news conference in Tokyo. Photo: AP

In theory, that vulnerability could upend many of the policies that Kishida and the LDP have trumpeted: a more visible regional and global role, closer ties to the United States, increasing efforts to counter China. If the public is less comfortable with Tokyo's activism, worried about the state and trajectory of relations with the US or China, or unhappy about a doubling of

the defense budget, a change in leadership could have big implications.

At least in theory. In fact, it isn't clear what the opposition stands for on those big issues or if a change in the prime minister's office (whether the officeholder is from the LDP or not) would shift positions. Kishida may be at the center of gravity of Japanese national security policy and any future prime minister might continue current trajectories.

This also assumes that Kishida's weakness is a threat to his future. That too isn't clearly the case. While the prime minister, his cabinet, and the LDP aren't popular, that doesn't mean that the public is ready for an alternative. While the opposition did well in the by-elections, there is little indication that it poses a national threat and that the ballots weren't protest votes. Within the party, there is no obvious challenger to Kishida and finding a consensus candidate would require introspection and internal debate for which the LDP looks ill-prepared.

South Korea

Barring impeachment (a rare but not unprecedented event), Yoon Suk Yeol has three years remaining on his five-year term as South Korean president. But the failure of his People Power Party (PPP) to wrest control of the National Assembly from the opposition Democratic Party (DP), which won 175 seats to the PPP's 108 in the 300-seat legislature, will result in "strong headwinds" as he attempts to pursue his domestic and foreign policy agendas.

Yoon is expected to stick to his foreign policy priorities, which include strengthening the US-South Korea alliance and an unyielding stance toward North Korean provocations. Most notably, Yoon appears determined to push forward to improving South Korea's strained relationship with Japan and the building of close trilateral cooperation with Washington and Tokyo. This will no doubt continue to draw political backlash. During the National Assembly campaign, DP leader Lee Jae-myung stated that "This general election is a perfect new Korea-Japan war," adding "There are still too many pro-Japanese remnants in this country that have not been cleared up."

Trilateral Arrangement, Not Alliance

While some enthusiastic supporters now refer to a US-South Korea-Japan "trilateral alliance,"

purists will continue to call it an arrangement or cooperative agreement or use language of that sort. While formal alliances exist between the United States and South Korea and between the United States and Japan, there is no formal alliance between South Korea and Japan or formally among the three. It would take a great deal of political courage in all three capitals, and perhaps a constitutional change or at least reinterpretation in Japan, for a formal trilateral alliance to be created. However, if all the Camp David initiatives and agreements can be institutionalized, it will go a long way toward establishing what has previously been dubbed as a “virtual alliance” cementing cooperation among the three like-minded partners who share democratic values and comparable social and legal systems.

To that end, the three partners issued a Joint Statement on the Trilateral United States-Japan-Republic of Korea Indo-Pacific Dialogue on Jan. 6, identifying “a new chapter in our countries’ partnership and an important step forward to strengthen and more closely align our policies globally.” They “reiterated their ongoing commitment to trilateral maritime security and law enforcement cooperation in accordance with international law with a focus on support for capacity building in the region.” In case that was too subtle, the also noted “recent dangerous and escalatory behavior supporting unlawful maritime claims by the PRC in the South China Sea,” while reiterating their “firm commitment to international law, including the freedom of navigation and overflight, as reflected in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.” Rounding out their agreement, they “opposed any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion anywhere in the waters of the Indo-Pacific,” “condemned the DPRK’s continued development of its unlawful nuclear and ballistic missile programs, growing military cooperation with Russia, and grave human rights violations and abuses”; and “reaffirmed the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as indispensable to security and prosperity in the international community.”

US-Japan-Philippines: A “New Chapter” Begins

Coverage of the summit between President Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida belongs in the US-Japan chapter. We, however, should comment on the first trilateral meeting among the US, Japanese, and Philippine heads of government that followed. The Joint Vision

Statement that they released explained that the three countries are “bound together by historical ties of friendship, robust and growing economic relations, and a proud and resolute commitment to our shared fundamental values of freedom, democracy, respect for human rights, and the rule of law,” and pledged that they will work together “for decades to come.”

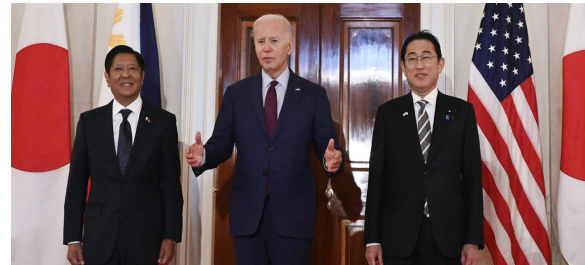


Figure 4 Yukio Edano, leader of the new Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, speaks during a news conference in Tokyo. Photo: AP

The summit was the culmination of a process set in motion by the June 2023 meeting of the three national security advisors and had been building with joint exercises, consultations at increasingly senior levels, and efforts to forge cooperation across the widest possible range of government activities. It was intended to consolidate a relationship that has become increasingly important as China expands its activities in the South China Sea.

At the summit, the three nations agreed to step up maritime security cooperation, including enhanced maritime domain awareness, as well as to launch a Japan-Philippines-US humanitarian assistance and disaster response exercise, which could be integrated into trilateral or multilateral activities. This is part of a broader effort to “advance trilateral defense cooperation, including through combined naval training and exercises between our three countries and additional partners,” such as Australia.

It is telling that the first items on the list of deliverables from the summit were economic. Topping the agenda was the Luzon Economic Corridor, the first Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment corridor in the Indo-Pacific. This project will support connectivity between Subic Bay, Clark, Manila, and Batangas in the Philippines through “coordinated investments in high-impact infrastructure projects, including rail; ports modernization; clean energy and semiconductor

supply chains and deployments; agribusiness; and civilian port upgrades at Subic Bay.”

Second, they will work together on critical and emerging technologies, with the US and Japan agreeing to provide millions of dollars in aid for Open Radio Access Network (RAN) field trials and the Asia Open RAN Academy based in Manila, which will build “an open, interoperable, secure, reliable, and trusted information communications technology ecosystem in the Philippines.” Third, they agreed to pursue a semiconductor workforce development initiative to help make chip supply chains more resilient. They also said they would “expand trilateral cooperation in the Philippines on the deployment of clean energy technologies, including renewable energy projects...to support energy requirements in the Philippines and help ensure a just energy transition.”

While these declarations are often filled with hyperbole, it's hard to dismiss this statement's claim that a “new trilateral chapter between our three nations begins today.”

AUKUS Advances

The Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) “enhanced strategic partnership” made important progress this reporting period as well. Critical to its success is the loosening of restraints on export controls since tech sharing—whether submarines (pillar one) or advanced and emerging technologies (pillar two) —is the core of the agreement. All three governments introduced legislation to do just that. The Australian bill is [here](#), the UK one [here](#), and the US package [here](#). The Australian bill follows passage of [amendments](#) to its trade control regulations the previous month. The US legislation is also part of a longer process; April amendments to export regs can be found [here](#). One commentator called the US measures a “[once-in-a-generation defence trade reform in support of AUKUS](#),” but it seems fair to extend that assessment to the amendments in each country.



Figure 6 The three AUKUS leaders: Australian PM Anthony Albanese, US President Joe Biden and UK PM Rishi Sunak. Photo: Getty Images

Efforts to turn the AUKUS potential into reality, coupled with the eternal buzz surrounding new and emerging technologies, has other governments considering membership in the group. Prior to Kishida's trip to the US, senior US officials were talking about Japan joining— a prospect long mooted in Tokyo—but what looked to be a sure thing was reportedly batted back by Canberra and London out of concern that it might distract from the primary focus of getting those submarines built and delivered (more on which below). Officials denied that Japan would become a formal member but are ready to work with it on pillar two. (Actually doing so requires Tokyo's progress on information security.) The Republic of Korea was reportedly also interested in joining the effort, both to keep pace with Tokyo and to be on the cutting edge of defense tech development. In addition, New Zealand was said to be eager to join (although subsequent reporting traced that interest back to September 2021.)

The biggest challenges for the optimists are difficulties the US faces in building submarines, not just those for AUKUS. The Navy is building (on average) just more than a single *Virginia*-class submarine each year; AUKUS pushes total demand to 2.33 annually. And delivery of those boats is now about 30 months late on average. That makes somewhat inexplicable the Biden administration decision to cut funding for that submarine class in its new budget.

Still, officials publicly insist they have confidence in the AUKUS project. Australian Defense Industry Minister Pat Conroy said he remains “very confident that we'll be in a position for the *Virginia* class to be sold to Australia on the timeframes articulated.” Others,

such as former Australian defense official Michael Shoebridge, aren't so sure. He noted that the US fleet of attack submarines will fall to 46 from a target of 66 in 2030. "It's going to get harder for a commander of the US submarine force to say, no, I can get by with less submarines, I'm happy to sell three to my Australian friends." He worries that "A US president will come under more pressure to say, I need to look after my own security first."

Axis of Upheaval: For Every Action

Another minilateral arrangement was highlighted this reporting period: "the Axis of Upheaval." That tasty moniker was affixed to the group, consisting of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, in thoughtful analysis by Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, of CNAS, the Washington-based national security think tank. Attention has focused on the grouping in recent months following recognition that Chinese, North Korean, and Iranian support for Russia's war against Ukraine makes them "critical enablers of Moscow's war machine."



Figure 7 Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov walks with his North Korean counterpart Choe Son Hui, in Moscow, Russia, January 16, 2024. Photo: Maxim Shemetov

In fact, however, their ties go considerably further back, and well predate the declaration of "a friendship without limits" by China's supreme leader Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin on the eve of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While "cooperation among the four countries was expanding before 2022, the war has accelerated their deepening economic, military, political, and technological ties."

This group is bound by collective dissatisfaction with the existing international order, a "shared opposition to the Western-dominated global order, an antagonism rooted in their belief that that system does not accord them the status or freedom of action they deserve." They seek to overturn existing rules, norms, and institutions that check the spread of their influence and power and are willing to court instability to achieve this objective. They cooperate to enhance their respective military capabilities and diplomatic clout, while simultaneously undermining international institutions that might check those efforts as well as the economic power that is the foundation of US global power. They reject universal values, human rights, and international democracy—if it checks the assertion of their national prerogatives. But they argue that all countries are equal insofar as they must have respect for their internal political system.

Trump's Looming Shadow

Let's be honest! There is a growing sense of urgency, especially in Seoul but also in Tokyo and even Washington, behind the need for institutionalization of this trilateral effort. South Korean President Yoon has demonstrated extraordinary political courage in his attempt to build a better relationship between Seoul and Tokyo but he is limited to one term and many are already calling him a "lame duck" given the ruling party's aforementioned setbacks in recent legislative elections. Japanese Prime Minister Kishida has likewise been more forthcoming than many of his predecessors in opening his arms to his South Korean counterpart, but he too is on shaky domestic political grounds, as described above.

Finally, and most significantly, the US elections might (or might not) result in a major change in alliance management tactics and perhaps policy, depending on who wins. We are not foolhardy enough to try and predict what former President Donald Trump's Asia policy might be if he is returned to the Oval Office. (We will, perhaps foolishly, take a stab at this in the next issue, however, once the candidates have officially been nominated and party platforms revealed.) Suffice it to say that candidate Trump is already saying things that are making alliance supporters in Seoul and Tokyo (and Washington, and Europe, and almost everywhere else) very nervous. But, if

the past is a precedent (and it often, but not always, is), then it's useful to distinguish between what then-President Trump said and what the Trump administration did when he was last in office.



Figure 8 Donald Trump speaks in Florida at a rally. Photo: Gage Skidmore

The former Trump administration's National Security Strategy document, which outlines and guides US policy, was remarkably similar to those that preceded and followed it when it came to the discussion of US alliances. This is because, while political parties and political rhetoric and catchphrases change from administration to administration, US national interests seldom shift dramatically. Trump's negotiating style certainly differed from most others who have held the job, but the role of the US alliance network as the "foundation" of US policy has changed little in the past 75 or more years.

Candidate Trump is not the first presidential aspirant to threaten to remove US forces from Asia. That "honor" goes to Jimmy Carter, who discovered as president that this was easier said than done. Recent Congressional legislation (the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2024) aimed at insuring that no future US president (read: Trump) can unilaterally remove US forces from Europe or Asia without Congressional approval further restricts presidential authority in this regard, demonstrating that the US system of checks and balances remains alive and well. It also signals a realization that many in Congress on both sides of the political divide share Korea's and Japan's fears.

In the meantime, regardless of the reason or motivation, steps are already underway in all three capitals to institutionalize the agreements and practices outlined at the Trilateral Leaders' Summit at Camp David—the "virtual alliance" gets stronger by the day.

IPEF Makes Real Progress...For Now

This has already been a big year for the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), the 14-member agreement to create a new economic order for the region. For many, IPEF aims to make up for US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP, now known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership, or CPTPP), although a key difference is that IPEF offers no market access arrangements.

IPEF consists of four pillars: trade, supply chains, clean economy, and fair economy. Most progress has been made on supply chains: an agreement was reached in May last year, and it went into effect Feb. 24, 2024 after it was ratified by five member governments. The agreement is the first of-its-kind to promote coordination among IPEF partners on building resilient, efficient, productive, sustainable, transparent, diversified, secure, fair, and inclusive supply chains. It requires member governments to identify within 120 days "critical supplies"—those that would have a large, negative impact in the event of a shortage—so that they can begin working on ways to mitigate the damage if supply shortages occur. They must also set up three bodies—the Supply Chain Council, a Crisis Response Network and a Labor Rights Advisory Board—to address such contingencies. These are "the most tangible outcomes of IPEF so far."

At its March 2024 virtual ministerial meeting, the group released final texts of the clean economy and fair economy pillars, as well as the final Agreement of Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity. That conclave launched four new Cooperative Work Programs (CWPs)—on carbon markets, clean energy enhancement, workforce development efforts, and clean aviation fuel—and announced the inaugural IPEF Clean Economy Investor Forum will be held in Singapore on June 5-6, while also providing details on the IPEF Catalytic Capital Fund. That will have \$33 million in initial grant funding and (is planned/ hoped) to catalyze up to \$3.3 billion in private investment for climate infrastructure projects in IPEF economies party to its Clean Economy Agreement. Fund founding supporters include Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the US.

Finalization of the clean economy and fair economy pillars is anticipated later this year. The fate of the trade pillar is uncertain, given mounting resistance in the United States. Worse, as above, all progress is considered imperiled by a Trump presidency. The GOP candidate has called IPEF “TPP two” and promised to withdraw the US from it as he did its predecessor.

CHRONOLOGY OF REGIONAL OVERVIEW

JANUARY-APRIL 2024

Jan. 1, 2024: Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen [calls](#) for peaceful coexistence with Beijing, just hours after China's President Xi Jinping reiterated his ambition to "reunify."

Jan. 1, 2024: Taiwan's one-year compulsory military service for men goes into effect.

Jan. 1, 2024: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and President Xi [vow](#) to increase cooperation between the two countries in New Year messages.

Jan. 1, 2024: President Xi [exchanges](#) congratulations with President Biden on the 45th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the two countries.

Jan. 2, 2024: South Korea [protests](#) against Tokyo's inclusion of disputed islands in a tsunami advisory issued after a major earthquake struck a day earlier.

Jan. 2, 2024: Thailand and China [plan](#) to permanently waive visa requirements for each other's citizens in March.

Jan. 2, 2024: South Korea's Ministry of Unification (MOU) [launches](#) a new early warning system to detect Northern defectors who need more support or are at risk.

Jan. 2, 2024: China's Taiwan Affairs Office [calls](#) on Taiwan to promote a process of "peaceful reunification."

Jan. 3, 2024: Asian leaders [extend](#) support to Japan following the magnitude-7.6 earthquake that struck Japan on New Year's Day.

Jan. 3, 2024: Two Chinese balloons [cross](#) the median line separating Taiwan from China, with one balloon detected directly above the island.

Jan. 3, 2024: Philippines and the US [begin](#) a two-day joint patrol in the South China Sea.

Jan. 4, 2024: South Korean and US troops [conduct](#) joint combat firing drills near the North Korean border, as Pyongyang condemns the allies for pushing the region to "an inferno of nuclear war."

Jan. 4, 2024: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [releases](#) a statement designating the People's Republic of China as one of 12 "Countries of Particular Concern for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom."

Jan. 4, 2024: China [lodges](#) a protest to Myanmar after five people were injured by artillery shells fired in battles between the country's ruling junta and rebel groups.

Jan. 4, 2024: Two Chinese navy vessels [shadow](#) Philippine and US ships conducting joint patrols in the South China Sea.

Jan. 5, 2024: China's foreign ministry [spokesperson condemns](#) second US-Philippines patrol in the disputed South China Sea.

Jan. 5, 2024: US official [claims](#) that North Korea has sent several dozen ballistic missiles to Russia.

Jan. 5, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korea [hold](#) the inaugural Trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue in Washington, DC, an outcome of the 2023 Camp David Summit, and release a [Joint Statement](#).

Jan. 5, 2024: Huawei [dismantles](#) its public relations and government relations teams in the US and Canada.

Jan. 5, 2024: ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [says](#) that from 0900 to 1100 the DPRK fired some 200 shells into the sea from two locations: [Jangsan Cape](#), north of South Korea's northernmost

island of Baengnyeong, and Deungsan Cape, north of the ROK's western border island of Yeonpyeong. Residents of both islands are [ordered](#) to "evacuate" (meaning seek shelter, not to actually get off the islands: regular ferry services are briefly suspended). South Korea [carries](#) out a live-fire exercise in response to shelling by North Korea, which spurred the evacuation of two South Korean islands in the Yellow Sea.

Jan. 6, 2024: Taiwan's defense ministry [accuses](#) China of threatening aviation safety and waging psychological warfare with a recent spate of balloons spotted near or over the island, days before key Taiwanese elections.

Jan. 6, 2024: ROK JCS [report](#) a second day of KPA coastal artillery firing.

Jan. 7, 2024: Kim Yo Jong issues another [statement](#). She claims the KPA did no sea shelling yesterday, but rather "conducted a deceptive operation" with explosions on land—to see if Seoul could tell the difference: "The ROK military gangsters quickly took the bait we threw."

Jan. 7, 2024: PRC foreign ministry [announces](#) the imposition of countermeasures against five US defense industry companies for arms sales to "China's Taiwan Region" in accordance with its Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law.

Jan. 7, 2024: Maldives [suspends](#) three deputy ministers for disparaging Indian Prime Minister Modi, during a dip in ties between the two nations.

Jan. 7, 2024: North Korea [fires](#) shots into the sea north of South Korea's Yeonpyeong island.

Jan. 7, 2024: PRC foreign ministry [announces](#) the imposition of countermeasures against five US defense industry companies for arms sales to "China's Taiwan Region" in accordance with its Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law.

Jan. 8, 2024: Taiwan's defense ministry [detects](#) three more Chinese balloons flying over the Taiwan Strait, one of which crossed the island.

Jan. 8, 2024: An annual parachuting drill including forces from eight countries including

Britain, France, Germany, the US, and Japan's 1st Airborne Brigade [features](#) the recapturing of an island that had been occupied by an unnamed enemy force.

Jan. 8, 2024: US Justice Department, in partnership with other government partners, [sentences](#) a US Navy service member to 27 months in prison "for transmitting sensitive US military information to an intelligence officer from the People's Republic of China (PRC) in exchange for bribery payments."

Jan. 9, 2024: China [threatens](#) new trade measures against Taiwan, after it accused Beijing of "economic coercion" ahead of elections and expressed anger at a surprise Chinese satellite launch over its airspace.

Jan. 9, 2024: As it has done ever since 1996, the Korean Institute for National Unification ([KINU](#)), the ROK government's main think-tank on North Korea, [releases](#) its annual *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea*.

Jan. 11, 2024: China and the Maldives [upgrade](#) relations during newly-elected President Muizzu's first state visit to Beijing.

Jan. 11, 2024: South Korean Supreme Court [upholds](#) appellate court's ruling that orders Nippon Steel Corp. to provide compensation for the family of a South Korean wartime labor victim. The Japanese Foreign Ministry [says](#) this is "extremely regrettable and totally unacceptable."

Jan. 11, 2024: Aso Taro, LDP vice-president and former prime minister, [speaks](#) to the US Congress and, separately, to reporters saying that the Japanese government may regard a contingency in Taiwan as a situation threatening the existence of Japan, thus implying that Japan may exercise the right of collective self-defense based on 2015 national security legislation.

Jan. 11, 2024: *NK News* [reports](#) that several North Korean propaganda websites targeting South Korea went offline simultaneously. Sites affected include *Uriminzokkiri*, *DPRK Today*, *Arirang Meari*, *Tongil Voice*, and *Ryomyong*. This appears

related to Pyongyang trying to work out Kim Jong Un's new line on South Korea.

Jan. 11, 2024: Myanmar's junta chief, Min Aung Hlaing, [meets](#) a special envoy from ASEAN, which has encouraged peace efforts in the country.

Jan. 11, 2024: Malaysia and Singapore [agree](#) to jointly develop a special economic zone (SEZ) in the southern Malaysian state of Johor.

Jan. 12, 2024: China brokers a truce and ceasefire agreement in Kunming between Myanmar's military regime and an alliance of Myanmar's ethnic minority groups.

Jan. 12, 2024: United States [imposes](#) sanctions on three Russian entities (the Ashuluk Firing Range, 224th Flight Unit State Airlines, and the Vladimirovka Advanced Weapons and Research Complex) and one individual (Vladimir Mikheychik, general director of 224th Flight Unit State Airlines) for their involvement in the transfer and testing of North Korean ballistic missiles for Russia's use against Ukraine.

Jan. 12, 2024: 14th Ministerial-level meeting of the India-US Trade Policy Forum [commences](#). The Ministers took stock of the progress made in addressing concerns impacting the bilateral trade relationship since the 13th TPF in January 2023. This was highlighted by the historic settlement of all seven longstanding trade disputes at the World Trade Organization (WTO) between the two countries. Key areas of discussion were: critical minerals, supply chains, and trade in high-tech products.

Jan. 12, 2024: Chinese Coast Guard ships are videotaped by the Philippines [driving away](#) Philippine fishing boats near the disputed Scarborough Shoal.

Jan. 13, 2024: Lai Ching-te of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party [is elected](#) president of Taiwan, but his party loses control of the Legislative Yuan. The following day China [says](#) Taiwan's ruling DPP does not

represent the island despite its victory. President Joseph [Biden says](#), "[We do not support independence](#)" when asked to comment on the results of Taiwan's election.

Jan. 15, 2024: Maldives [asks](#) India to withdraw its troops by March 15.

Jan. 15, 2024: North Korea [says](#) it has successfully test-fired a solid-fuel intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) carrying a hypersonic warhead.

Jan. 15, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korea [launch](#) a three-day joint naval exercise to strengthen "deterrence and response capabilities" in response to North Korea and to respond to "maritime security threats."

Jan. 15, 2024: Nauru [severs](#) ties with Taiwan, switching its political allegiance to China.

Jan. 15, 2024: White House dispatches former US National Security Advisor Steven Hadley and Former Deputy Secretary of James Steinberg to Taiwan to meet President Tsai Ing-wen, President-elect Lai, and leaders of opposition parties in a show of US support for Taiwan after the election.

Jan. 15, 2024: (North) Korea Central News Agency briefly [reports](#) that on Jan. 14 "the DPRK Missile Administration conducted a test-fire of an intermediate-range solid-fuel ballistic missile loaded with a hypersonic maneuverable controlled warhead."

Jan. 15, 2024: North Korea's Supreme People's Assembly [abolishes](#) three bodies handling inter-Korean matters: the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country (CPRK), the National Economic Cooperation Bureau, and the Kumgangsan International Tourism Administration.

Jan. 15, 2024: Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. [congratulates](#) the winner of Taiwan's presidential election, Lai Ching-te.

Jan. 17, 2024: US, South Korea, and Japan [conduct](#) combined naval exercises in a show of strength against North Korea.

Jan. 17, 2024: South Korea [sanctions](#) 11 vessels, two individuals, and three companies. Most are North Korean, and all have been named in UN Panel of Experts (PoE) reports as involved in ship-to-ship transfers of oil, coal, and other products: violating UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions against the DPRK.

Jan. 17, 2024: China and the Philippines [agree](#) to improve maritime communication and to properly manage conflicts and differences through friendly talks.

Jan. 18, 2024: MOU data [show](#) that North Korean defector arrivals almost tripled in 2023.

Jan. 19, 2024: Japan and NATO [begin](#) talks to establish a secure communication line to quickly share sensitive security information.

Jan. 21, 2024: Taiwan [says](#) that six Chinese balloons either flew over the island or through airspace just north of it, while Chinese warplanes and navy ships were also detected in the area.

Jan. 23, 2024: Vietnam's ambassador [urges](#) Washington to end its “non-market economy” label on Hanoi, warning that maintaining punitive duties on Vietnamese goods is bad for bilateral ties.

Jan. 23, 2024: Co-chairs of the US Congressional Taiwan Caucus [make](#) the first trip by US lawmakers to Taiwan after the presidential election.

Jan. 23, 2024: China and Nauru formally [restore](#) diplomatic relations after the Pacific island nation cut its ties with Taiwan earlier this month.

Jan. 24, 2024: US navy destroyer USS *John Finn* transits the Taiwan Strait.

Jan. 24, 2024: After North Korea testfires several cruise missiles over the Yellow Sea, ROK MND Shin Won-sik [tells](#) ROKAF 17th Fighter Wing

Jan. 24, 2024: North Korea [appears](#) to have torn down a huge arch in its capital that symbolized reconciliation with South Korea, a week after leader Kim Jong Un dismissed hopes for peaceful reunification.

Jan. 24, 2024: A newly released report says Japan's Air Self-Defense Force [scrambled](#) fighter jets 555 times from April to December 2023, of which 392 or about 70% of which were against Chinese aircraft, down by 70 scrambles year on year.

Jan. 24, 2024: North Korea [fires](#) several cruise missiles from its west coast into the sea.

Jan. 25, 2024: South Korea's Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) [says](#) that production of spy drones to monitor North Korea has begun, under a 471.7 billion won (\$353.6 million) contract it signed in December with a consortium comprising Korean Air and two defense firms, LIG Nex1 and Hanwha Systems.

Jan. 25, 2024: Chainalysis report [shows](#) that North Korea-linked hackers stole \$1 billion worth of crypto-currency through 20 attacks in 2023, the highest number of their hacks since record-keeping began in 2016.

Jan. 26, 2024: Taiwan's defense ministry [detects](#) 23 Chinese air force planes operating around Taiwan and carrying out “joint combat readiness patrols” with Chinese warships, ahead of high-level China-US talks in Thailand.

Jan. 26, 2024: Biden administration [proposes](#) a requirement on US cloud companies to determine whether foreign entities are accessing US data centers to train AI models, as part of a series of measures to prevent China from using US technology for AI.

Jan. 26, 2024: South Korea and the United States [conduct](#) their first cyber security drills to bolster their joint posture against rising cyber threats.

Jan. 26-27, 2024: Top Chinese diplomat Wang Yi [meets](#) US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in Bangkok.

Jan. 28, 2024: North Korea [fires](#) several cruise missiles off its east coast, continuing a streak of weapons tests that have drawn condemnation from the US, South Korea, and Japan.

Jan. 29, 2024: China's Wang Yi [says](#) that China and Thailand must accelerate the construction of a planned high-speed railway linking the countries.

Jan 29, 2024: US Commerce Department [issues](#) a proposed rule that would compel US cloud companies to alert the government when foreign clients train their most powerful AI models using the compute power provided by these cloud companies.

Jan. 29, 2024: Southeast Asian foreign ministers [press](#) for an end to Myanmar's conflict and express their support for a regional peace plan and a “Myanmar-owned and led solution” to the crisis.

Jan. 29, 2024: Papua New Guinea [engages](#) in talks with China on a potential security and policing deal.

Jan. 30, 2024: Japanese government sources [reveal](#) that four Chinese warships have been constantly deployed around Taiwan, likely aiming to block US and other forces by using the ships in conjunction with other warships nearby.

Jan. 30, 2024: CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative [reports that](#) Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia blocking Philippine resupply missions to disputed Second Thomas Shoal had increased in frequency and intensity since 2022.

Jan. 30, 2024: Office of the United States Trade Representative [releases](#) the findings of its 2023 Review of Notorious Markets for Counterfeiting and Piracy, which lists several China-based e-commerce and social commerce markets, a cloud storage service, and “seven physical markets in China known for the manufacture, distribution, and sale of counterfeit goods.”

Jan. 30, 2024: US and Chinese officials [commit](#) to working together to stem the flow of fentanyl into the US.

Jan. 30, 2024: North Korea [fires](#) multiple unidentified cruise missiles into the sea off its west coast—the third time Pyongyang tested cruise missiles in less than a week.

Jan. 30, 2024: Philippine navy [detects](#) nearly 200 Chinese warships and maritime militia boats around Mischief Reef in the South China Sea.

Jan. 30-31, 2024: Taiwan's military [conducts](#) a two-day exercise at sea, on land, and in the air to practice defending against a surprise attack.

Jan. 31, 2024: US Department of Commerce announces that the IPEF Agreement Relating to Supply Chain Resilience will enter into force from today. Ratification occurs after five IPEF partners deposited their instruments of ratification, acceptance, or approval with the Depository.

Jan. 31, 2024: United States, European Union, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Republic of Korea, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom [issue](#) a joint statement marking three years since the military coup in Myanmar on Feb. 1, 2021. The statement condemned the military's ongoing human rights abuses and urged “unified efforts by ASEAN” to resolve the crisis.

Feb. 1, 2024: KMT legislator and 2020 presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu is elected speaker of the Legislative Yuan.

Feb. 1, 2024: Philippine President Marcos [approves](#) the third phase of the military's modernization, which includes the purchase of the country's first submarine, to defend its maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea.

Feb. 1, 2024: South Korea [unveils](#) a new National Cybersecurity [Strategy](#).

Feb. 2, 2024: North Korea [says](#) it tested cruise missiles outfitted with “super-large” warheads and a new type of anti-aircraft missile.

Feb. 3, 2024: Thailand and Sri Lanka [sign](#) a free trade agreement, a move Sri Lanka hopes will help it emerge from its worst financial crisis in decades.

Feb. 5, 2024: Chinese-Australian writer Yang Hengjun [receives](#) a suspended death penalty in China, and Australia is “appalled” by the sentence.

Feb. 5, 2024: US [urges](#) Papua New Guinea to turn down China's offer of a potential security pact, warning the Pacific nation against any security guarantee with Beijing.

Feb. 5-6, 2024: Senior officials from the Department of the Treasury and China's Ministry of Finance [hold](#) the third meeting of the Economic Working Group, the first time the meeting is held in China.

Feb. 6, 2024: China's Coast Guard [patrols](#) the waters of the Diaoyu Islands, which are territories in the East China Sea that are claimed by China, Japan and Taiwan.

Feb. 7, 2024: US National Security Agency and partners [issue](#) a Cybersecurity Advisory titled “PRC State-Sponsored Actors Compromise and Maintain Persistent Access to US Critical Infrastructure.”

Feb. 7, 2024: Department of Justice [arrests](#) an individual in California seeking to illegally transfer to China software and technology developed by the US government for use to detect nuclear missile launches and track ballistic and hypersonic missiles.

Feb. 7-8, 2024: USS *John Finn* (DDG 113) and USS *Gabrielle Giffords* (LCS 10) [conduct](#) trilateral operations with allied maritime forces from Japan and Australia in the South China Sea to “promote transparency, rule of law, freedom of navigation and all principles that underscore security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.”

Feb. 8, 2024: Kim Jong Un [says](#) North Korea would not hesitate to use all of its military power against its enemies if any of them used force against the country.

Feb. 8, 2024: Following Korean Supreme Court rulings upholding lower court decisions that order Japanese firms to compensate wartime labor victims, President Yoon [states](#) he “wish[es] to see cooperation between business people of

the two countries” on the issue to improve bilateral ties.

Feb. 8, 2024: Pakistan elections take place, six months after parliament was dissolved. Ousted ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan's party, Tehreek-e-Insaf, [wins](#) the most seats at 100, but short of the 134 necessary to form a government. Shehbaz Sharif of the center-right Pakistan Muslim League is ultimately re-elected prime minister as the head of a coalition government.

Feb. 8, 2024: 2024 National Proliferation Financing Risk Assessment report [shows](#) that North Korea continues to engage in “malicious” cyber activities and mobilize information technology (IT) workers to bankroll its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs.

Feb. 9, 2024: South Korea [conducts](#) a US-led multinational air exercise, along with Japan, Australia, France and Canada, in Guam to enhance joint operability.

Feb. 9, 2024: US Navy and Philippine Navy (PN) [conduct](#) third iteration of the Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA) in the South China Sea.

Feb. 9, 2024: Taiwan [detects](#) 8 Chinese balloons crossing the Taiwan Strait in an uptick of activity at the start of the Lunar New Year holiday.

Feb. 9, 2024: On her first [visit](#) to Taiwan since taking office in 2016, Tokyo Gov. Koike Yuriko spends two days in Taiwan “to strengthen ties with the island's leadership.”

Feb. 9, 2024: US Navy and Philippine Navy [conduct](#) the third iteration of the Maritime Cooperative Activity in the South China Sea, “reaffirming both nations' commitment to bolstering regional security and stability” and “in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

Feb. 9-10, 2024: 7th Indian Ocean Conference [is held](#) in Perth, Western Australia.

Feb. 12-15, 2024: US Marines from III Marine Expeditionary Force and the US Agency for International Development [assist](#) the government of the Philippines in providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in

response to severe flooding and landslides in the southern Philippine province of Mindanao.

Feb. 13, 2024: Australia's trade minister [plans](#) to talk with Chinese officials about the removal of restrictions on Australian imports and the suspended death sentence given to writer Yang Hengjun.

Feb. 14, 2024: Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto [wins](#) Indonesian presidential race with an absolute majority, the first candidate to do so since the 1998-99 democratic transition in Indonesia. Prabowo's campaign coalition does not win a majority in Parliament, which will require that he build a broad coalition within his Cabinet.

Feb. 14, 2024: Two Chinese fishermen [drown](#) while being chased by Taiwan's Coast Guard off the coast of Taiwan's Kinmen archipelago.

Feb. 14, 2024: US Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson, testifying before the House of Representatives Committee on Financial Services, [lists](#) China as a threat to the US financial system and affirms "we will safeguard our priority interests, along with those of our allies and partners, and will protect human rights."

Feb. 14-18, 2024: Mongolian Prime Minister Oryun-Erdene Luvsannamsrai [visits](#) South Korea in an effort to bolster economic relations, particularly in mineral extraction, tourism, and urban development.

Feb. 15, 2024: USS *John Finn* (DDG 113) [conducts](#) a bilateral exercise with allied maritime forces from Japan in the South China Sea.

Feb. 15, 2024: DPRK media [report](#) that Kim Jong Un, at the test-firing of a new surface-to-sea missile named *Padasuri-6*—it means sea eagle—the previous day, termed the NLL "a ghost [line] without any ground in the light of international law."

Feb. 15, 2024: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong [says](#) that there is no impediment to closer ties with Japan.

Feb. 16, 2024: Multi-agency Disruptive Technology Strike Force, led by the Departments of Justice and Commerce, [releases](#) a fact sheet on its one-year anniversary summarizing its progress in its mission to "prevent nation-state actors [including China] from illicitly acquiring our most sensitive technology."

Feb. 16-17, 2024: [Liu Jianchao](#), head of the CCP's Liaison Department, travels to Moscow for [the first "For the Freedom of Nations" International Forum](#) of Supporters of the Struggle Against Modern Practices of Neocolonialism. The forum is launched by the "United Russia" party chaired by Dmitry Medvedev, [who meets Liu](#) on the sidelines of the forum. More than 400 participants from over 55 countries join. Russian FM Lavrov also speaks at the forum.

Feb. 17, 2024: India and Taiwan [sign](#) a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on migration and mobility that will open the doors for Indian workers to seek employment in the island.

Feb. 17, 2024: Chinese FM [Wang Yi](#) delivers a keynote speech at the annual Munich Security Conference (MSC). He reiterates China's commitment to promoting peace talks for the Ukraine crisis.

Feb. 18, 2024: China [increases](#) patrols in the waters off the coast of Taiwan's Kinmen archipelago, days after two of its fishermen drowned while being chased by the Taiwanese coast guard, which accused the boat of trespassing.

Feb. 18, 2024: Top diplomats of the G7 countries strongly [condemn](#) North Korea's arms transfers to Russia, calling it a direct violation of relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions.

Feb. 19, 2024: A US [B-52 bomber flies](#) with three Philippine jet fighters as part of three days of joint air patrols over disputed territory in the South China Sea, prompting Chinese condemnation.

Feb. 19, 2024: China [asks](#) the US to end the “unwarranted harassment” of its students, following renewed reports of interrogation and deportation at a US airport.

Feb. 20, 2024: Taiwan [protests](#) the Chinese coast guard’s boarding of a tourist boat.

Feb. 20, 2024: Family of a South Korean wartime labor victim [withdraws](#) compensation of 60 million won (about \$44,000) from Hitachi Zosen Corp., marking the first time that a wartime labor victim accepts a Japanese company’s compensation. In response, the Japanese government summoned Korean Ambassador to Japan Yun Duk-min to [protest](#).

Feb. 21, 2024: Biden-Harris Administration [issues](#) an [Executive Order](#) to bolster the cybersecurity of US maritime ports, which includes a “Maritime Security Directive on cyber risk management actions for ship-to-shore cranes manufactured by the People’s Republic of China located at US Commercial Strategic Seaports.”

Feb. 22, 2024: US Representative Mike Gallagher leads a bi-partisan delegation to Taiwan composed of members of the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party.

Feb. 22, 2024: Biden administration approves a \$75 million arms sale to upgrade a data communications system employed by Taiwan’s military.

Feb. 22, 2024: President Biden [signs](#) an executive order to bolster defenses against cyberattacks on the nation’s ports, as officials warn about the threat posed by Chinese hackers.

Feb. 22, 2024: Chinese coast guard [says](#) it drove off a Philippine vessel that had “illegally intruded” into waters near the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea—a claim disputed by the Philippines.

Feb. 23, 2024: Indonesia’s and Australia’s defense ministers [meet](#) in Jakarta to discuss the strengthening of security ties and the signing of a defense cooperation agreement.

Feb. 24, 2024: First agreement from the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) [goes into effect](#) for five of the 14 IPEF members: Japan, India, Singapore, Fiji, and the United States.

Feb. 24, 2024: Using such foreign organizations as the US Defense Department’s Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) or the DoD affiliated Defense Innovation Unit (DIU), as models, Japan announces it will [launch](#) a research institute for innovative technology development this autumn.

Feb. 24, 2024: Japan and China [launch](#) a new round of discussions regarding the release of treated wastewater from the disaster-hit Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

Feb. 26, 2024: India and Japan [begin](#) a two-week “Dharma Guardian” military exercise to foster greater cooperation in confronting common security challenges.

Feb. 26, 2024: US [cautions](#) Pacific Islands nations against assistance from Chinese security forces after it was reported that Chinese police are working in Kiribati, a neighbor of Hawaii.

Feb. 27, 2024: Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs Permanent Secretary Albert Chua and Assistant Secretary Krittenbrink [meet](#) in Singapore to co-chair the 6th United States-Singapore Strategic Partnership Dialogue.

Feb. 27–March 8, 2024: 43rd iteration of *Joint Exercise Cobra Gold*, co-hosted by Thailand and the US, [takes place](#) in Rayong, Thailand. Over 33 nations train in the air, sea, and space domains.

Feb. 28, 2024: China [says](#) its coast guard patrols around the Kinmen islands near the Chinese coast are “beyond reproach” and dismisses complaints about the boarding of a Taiwan tourist boat.

Feb. 28, 2024: Beyond Parallel [reports](#) that since August 2023, there have been at least 25 different visits to Najin for the loading of munitions from North Korea to be delivered to Russia, and, at least 19 “dark vessels”—vessels with their AIS transmissions turned off to avoid outside detection—have visited Vostochny Port in Russia

to both unload and load containers from the port. These voyages have reportedly supported the transfer of more than 2.5 million rounds of artillery shells and other munitions.

Feb. 28, 2024: Biden-Harris administration [issues](#) an Executive Order on Preventing Access to Americans' Bulk Sensitive Personal Data and United States Government-Related Data by Countries of Concern.

Feb. 28, 2024: Philippine President Marcos [tells](#) Australia's Parliament that the strategic partnership between the two nations is more important than ever with peace in the region under threat from China.

Feb. 28-29, 2024: In Bangkok, Assistant Secretary Krittenbrink [co-leads](#) 9th US-Thailand Strategic Dialogue alongside Ministry of Foreign Affairs Permanent Secretary Eksiri Pintaruchi as well as the Second Strategic and Defense Dialogue alongside Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Jedidiah Royal. Both dialogues are conducted under the auspices of the US-Thai Communiqué on Strategic Alliance and Partnership.

Feb. 29, 2024: A Philippine lawmaker [demands](#) answers from Singapore about an alleged exclusivity agreement with pop star Taylor Swift.

Feb. 29, 2024: India [begins](#) replacing dozens of its military personnel in Maldives with civilian technical staff who will operate three aircraft given by India to provide humanitarian services.

Feb. 29, 2024: President Biden [orders](#) US investigation of national security risks posed by Chinese-made "smart cars" that can gather sensitive information about Americans driving them.

March 1, 2024: South Korea's President Yoon [calls](#) for unification on the March 1st Independence Movement Day, a holiday marking a 1919 Korean uprising against Japanese colonial rule.

March 1, 2024: China and Thailand implement a bilateral visa waiver agreement, enabling visitors from both countries to travel between China and

Thailand without visa requirements. The measure is seen as a way to revive Thailand's tourism industry as the new Thai government aims to attract more than 8 million Chinese visitors in 2024.

March 1, 2024: Tuvalu's Prime Minister Feleti Teo [reaffirms](#) that his government will maintain diplomatic ties with Taipei, ruling out a shift to Beijing.

March 2-8, 2024: China's Special Representative on Eurasian Affairs [Li Hui](#) travels to Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Germany, and France for his second round of talks on the peaceful settlement of the Ukraine conflict.

March 4, 2024: Maldives [signs](#) a military pact with China.

March 4, 2024: South Korea's National Intelligence Service [reveals](#) that DPRK hackers have broken into at least two ROK makers of chipmaking equipment.

March 4, 2024: Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim [defends](#) ties with China and complains of alleged pressure by the US and its regional allies to take sides in the West's rivalries with Beijing.

March 4, 2024: *Freedom Shield*, a large-scale annual US-ROK military drill, [begins](#). North Korea [calls](#) the ongoing South Korea-US military drills a plot to invade the country and threatens to take unspecified "responsible" military steps in response.

March 4-6, 2024: Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese [hosts](#) ASEAN and Timor-Leste leaders for the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit to celebrate 50 years of partnership.

March 5, 2024: Assistant Secretary Krittenbrink and Vietnam Standing Vice Foreign Minister Nguyen Minh Vu [conclude](#) 10th Asia-Pacific Dialogue in Hanoi, the first under the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

March 5, 2024: United States and India [hold](#) 20th meeting of the US-India Counter Terrorism Joint Working Group and 6th Designations Dialogue in Washington, DC.

March 5, 2024: USS *John Finn* (DDG 113) [conducts](#) a routine south-to-north Taiwan Strait transit “through a corridor in the Taiwan Strait that is beyond any coastal state’s territorial seas.”

March 5, 2024: Chinese and Philippine coast guard vessels [collide](#) in the South China Sea, injuring four Filipino crew members. US Department of State [releases](#) a press statement saying the US “stands with our ally the Philippines following the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) provocative actions.

March 5, 2024: Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong [defends](#) the country’s exclusive arrangement with Taylor Swift.

March 5, 2024: Australia [announces](#) a \$1.3 billion fund to boost investment in Southeast Asia.

March 5-8, 2024: Indian EAM Subrahmanyam Jaishankar [goes](#) on a tour of East Asia, with stops in South Korea and Japan, to boost security and economic cooperation.

March 6, 2024: Philippines [says](#) it won’t let China remove a Filipino military outpost on a disputed shoal.

March 6, 2024: US Attorney General Merrick Garland [announces](#) the arrest and indictment of a Chinese national residing in California charged with theft of trade secrets in connection with an alleged plan to steal artificial intelligence-related technology from Google “while covertly working for China-based companies seeking an edge in the AI technology race.”

March 6, 2024: ASEAN leaders [call](#) for South China Sea disputes to be resolved without threats or force.

March 7, 2024: Australia [upgrades](#) relations with Vietnam, beginning an annual dialogue on minerals amid a push to shift supply chains away from China.

March 7, 2024: Malaysian Prime Minister Ibrahim [says](#) that attempts to contain China’s rise will only aggravate the country and sow discord in the region.

March 8, 2024: North Korea’s Kim Jong Un [guides](#) an artillery firing drill, involving units near the border that are in firing range of Seoul.

March 8, 2024: Seoul’s Joint Chiefs of Staff [says](#) North Korea has tried to jam US-ROK navigation system during drills; no military or civilian damage from first GPS jamming by DPRK in eight years is reported.

March 8, 2024: US court [orders](#) forfeiture of 145 crypto accounts tied to North Korea cybercrime, Washington alleges two Chinese nationals used accounts to launder some \$100 million in virtual assets stolen by DPRK

March 10-13, 2024: New Zealand’s Foreign Minister Winston Peters [visits](#) India and says that India’s importance to New Zealand’s society, economy, and security is growing.

March 11, 2024: President Biden’s 2025 budget proposal [includes](#) a \$100 million request to help Taiwan strengthen cross-strait deterrence. Defense Department requests \$500 million to replenish US munitions stockpiles drawn down to aid Taiwan through Presidential Drawdown Authority.

March 12, 2024: China [protests](#) against Prime Minister Modi’s new tunnel built in territories along the two countries’ disputed Himalayan border.

March 12, 2024: China [demands](#) that Japan set up a compensation system for potential economic damage from the release of treated radioactive wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear plant.

March 12, 2024: China’s foreign ministry [responds](#) to Biden’s budget proposal, saying it “strongly opposes” US efforts to arm Taiwan and “will take resolute measures to firmly safeguard its own sovereignty and territorial integrity.”

March 13, 2024: SDF and US Marine Corps [conduct](#) the annual *Iron Fist* exercise to practice recapturing remote Japanese Islands.

March 13, 2024: Thailand [expects](#) to complete its negotiations over a free trade agreement with the European Union by the end of next year.

March 14, 2024: North Korea [hosts](#) a military demonstration involving a new battle tank, as South Korea and the US wrap up joint drills.

March 14, 2024: President Joe Biden [opposes](#) the planned sale of US Steel to Japan's Nippon Steel, saying that the US needs to "maintain strong American steel companies powered by American steel workers."

March 15, 2024: India [rejects](#) US concern over the implementation of a religion-based citizenship law as "misplaced, misinformed, and unwarranted."

March 17, 2024: Russian President Vladimir Putin officially wins his fifth presidential term with [87.28%](#) of the vote.

March 18, 2024: North Korea [fires](#) short-range ballistic missiles into the sea for the first time in two months, as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visits Seoul for a conference hosted by President Yoon Suk Yeol on advancing democracy.

March 18, 2024: China's foreign minister [meets](#) New Zealand counterpart at the start of a tour that will also include Australia.

March 19, 2024: Kim Jong Un [oversees](#) firing drills in the western region of North Korea by artillery units involving "newly-equipped super-large" rocket launchers.

March 19, 2024: US officials [approve](#) legislation providing billions of dollars in funding for the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of Palau.

March 19, 2024: US Secretary of State Blinken [underscores](#) Washington's "ironclad

commitment" to help defend the Philippines in case of an armed attack against its forces in a news conference with Philippine counterpart Enrique Manalo.

March 19, 2024: US State Department spokesperson [says](#) that the US believes Hong Kong's new national security law has the potential to accelerate the closing of a once open society.

March 19-20, 2024: Japan [hosts](#) officials from 14 Pacific Island countries for the 2nd Japan Pacific Islands Defence Dialogue.

March 20, 2024: North Korea [says](#) it has successfully conducted a ground jet test of a solid-fuel engine for a new type of intermediate hypersonic missile amid heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

March 20, 2024: Japanese Coast Guard [states](#) that a fleet of Chinese ships sailed in the territorial waters of the Diaoyu Islands on March 20.

March 20, 2024: Taiwan's foreign minister [says](#) that China has built "enormous" military bases on three islands in the South China Sea, but Taipei is not looking to further escalate tensions.

March 20, 2024: China's Wang Yi [meets](#) with Australian counterpart Penny Wong in Canberra—the most highest level meeting in Australia between the two nations since 2017.

March 21, 2024: China [opposes](#) the "denigration and smearing" by the US of the new Hong Kong security law passed earlier this week.

March 21, 2024: A report by the UN panel of experts shows that North Korea engages in "malicious" cyber activities to generate about half of its foreign currency revenue and bankroll its weapons programs.

March 21, 2024: Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong, in office only a year, [is pushed out](#) of power in the Vietnamese Communist Party's

anti-corruption purge. A successor is not yet named.

March 21, 2024: China's coast guard [says](#) a number of Philippine personnel ignored its warnings and illegally landed on a reef in the Spratly Islands.

March 22, 2024: China and Singapore announce that they will restart a high-level bilateral forum, the Social Governance Forum, in June.

March 22, 2024: Unidentified gunmen conduct [a terrorist attack](#) in Crocus City Hall in Krasnogorsk in the Moscow Region, killing [143 people](#) and wounding more than 80.

March 22, 2024: Chinese coast guard ships unsuccessfully [attempt](#) to block two Philippine government vessels carrying scientists from reaching two sandbars in the South China Sea.

March 22, 2024: Australia and the UK [criticize](#) China for its actions in Hong Kong and the South China Sea and its support of Russia.

March 22, 2024: Philippines [plans](#) to build a port in its northernmost islands without help from the US military.

March 23, 2024: Japanese government announces [plans](#) to build underground evacuation shelters capable of accommodating residents for about two weeks in times of emergency in remote islands near Taiwan, including Yonaguni and Ishigaki.

March 23, 2024: State Department [issues](#) a statement condemning PRC actions against Philippine maritime operations in the South China Sea, pointing to the repeated use of water cannons and reckless blocking maneuvers resulted in injuries to Filipino service members and significant damage to their resupply vessel, rendering it immobile.

March 23, 2024: President Biden signs into law the US federal government's Fiscal Year 2024 spending bill, which includes \$300 million in Foreign Military Financing loans for Taiwan under the State Department.

March 23, 2024: Another [major incident](#) takes place involving Chinese Coast Guard ships blocking access to Second Thomas Shoal by a Philippines supply ship with construction materials and two accompanying Coast Guard vessels. Beijing accuses the United States of instigating Manila's provocations and warns that Manila's relations with China were "at a cross roads."

March 24-April 1, 2024: Nepal's newly-appointed foreign minister, Narayan Kaji Shrestha, [visits](#) China on his first foreign visit.

March 25, 2024: North Korea [says](#) that Prime Minister Kishida Fumio has offered to meet with leader Kim Jong Un but stresses that prospects for this summit depend on Tokyo tolerating the North's weapons program and ignoring its past abductions of Japanese nationals.

March 25, 2024: Secretary Blinken [meets](#) Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son in Washington, for the inaugural Comprehensive Strategic Partnership foreign ministerial meeting.

March 25, 2024: Philippines [lodges](#) its "strongest protest" against Beijing after a water cannon assault by the Chinese coast guard injured Filipino navy crew members in the South China Sea.

March 25, 2024: US and UK [accuse](#) hackers linked to China of being behind "malicious" cyber campaigns targeting political figures.

March 26, 2024: China [responds](#) to the hacking allegations, urging the US and UK to stop slandering and smearing China and imposing unilateral sanctions on the country.

March 26, 2024: World's longest twin-lane tunnel officially [opens](#), resulting in a heated exchange of remarks between Beijing and New Delhi. Both countries claim the Arunachal Pradesh region where it was built.

March 26, 2024: New Zealand [alleges](#) that hackers linked to the Chinese government launched a state-sponsored operation that targeted New Zealand's Parliament in 2021.

March 26, 2024: China [files](#) a WTO complaint against the US over what it says are discriminatory requirements for electric vehicle subsidies.

March 27, 2024: President Xi [meets](#) representatives of US business, strategic and academic communities at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. It is his first meeting with a visiting US business delegation since 2015.

March 27, 2024: India strongly [rejects](#) remarks made by the United States and Germany on the arrest of key opposition leader and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal a month before its national election.

March 27, 2024: China's Xi [calls](#) for closer trade ties with the US during a meeting with top American business leaders.

March 27, 2024: Taiwan [commissions](#) two new navy ships as a safeguard against the rising threat from China, which has been increasing its naval and air force missions around the island.

March 28, 2024: China [lifts](#) its punitive tariffs on Australia's wine exports, signaling an end to a three-year campaign of trade pressure on Canberra.

March 28, 2024: US Marines join a large-scale combined exercise at a high-tech training facility in South Korea for the first time amid efforts to boost readiness against North Korean threats.

March 28, 2024: President Marcos [says](#) that the Philippines will take action against dangerous attacks by the Chinese coast guard and suspected militia ships in the South China Sea.

March 29, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korea [hold](#) their [second](#) "Trilateral Diplomacy Working

Group for Foreign Ministry Cooperation on North Korea's Cyber Threats."

March 29, 2024: North Korea's foreign minister [says](#) the country has no interest in dialogue with Japan.

March 29, 2024: Spokesman of former Philippine leader Rodrigo Duterte [alleges](#) that Duterte made a "gentleman's agreement" with Chinese President Xi to maintain the status quo in the South China Sea while he was in office.

March 30, 2024: US [says](#) it will impose new visa restrictions on a number of Hong Kong officials over the crackdown on rights and freedoms in the Chinese-ruled territory.

March 31, 2024: According to Japan's Coast Guard, two Chinese Coast guard ships [stay](#) in Japanese waters near the contested Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands for more than two days before leaving on the 30th.

April 1, 2024: Indonesian President-elect Prabowo Subianto [pledges](#) to continue his country's friendly policy toward China as he meets with Chinese leader Xi in Beijing.

April 2, 2024: Japanese government [designates](#) 16 airports and ports in seven prefectures where the SDFs and the coast guard will be granted peacetime use, as part of efforts to boost the country's defenses.

April 2, 2024: Philippines' national security adviser and US counterpart [discuss](#) "coercive, aggressive and deceptive actions" by Beijing in the South China Sea.

April 2, 2024: ISEAS-Yusof Institute in Singapore [releases](#) the 2024 State of Southeast Asia Survey. The Survey finds that a slight majority of respondents in the region would align with China rather than the United States if they felt compelled to choose.

April 2, 2024: North Korea [fires](#) a suspected intermediate-range ballistic missile into the sea, drawing swift condemnation from South Korea, Japan, and the US.

April 2, 2024: India [rejects](#) China's renaming of nearly 30 places in its northeastern Himalayan state of Arunachal Pradesh, calling the move “senseless” and reaffirming that the border province is an “integral” part of India.

April 3, 2024: President Biden [speaks](#) with China's Xi for nearly two hours on a range of topics including TikTok ownership, tensions in the South China Sea, and whether American sanctions against China amounted to de-risking or decoupling.

April 3, 2024: Japan's industry ministry [approves](#) subsidies up to 590 billion yen (\$3.9 billion) for chip foundry venture Rapidus as Tokyo pushes forward with plans to rebuild the country's chip manufacturing base amid concerns over supply chain security.

April 3, 2024: US [issues](#) a response of “strong opposition” to China's renaming of geographical areas—mountains, rivers, and residential areas—in the Indian-administered Arunachal Pradesh state. Washington's statement of opposition comes after Beijing released a list of 30 new names for places along the 1,865-mile disputed Himalayan border between China and India, citing China's list issuance as a “unilateral attempt” to assert claim over the disputed territory of strategic interest.

April 3, 2024: Philippines [says](#) it is prepared to respond to China's attempts to disrupt its supply missions in the South China Sea and protect its troops stationed in the waterway.

April 3, 2024: Indonesia's Prabowo [meets](#) Prime Minister Kishida and says he wants to deepen security and economic cooperation with Japan.

April 3-4, 2024: Representatives from US Indo-Pacific Command, US Pacific Fleet, and US Pacific Air Forces [meet](#) with People's Liberation Army representatives in Honolulu, Hawaii for the first Military Maritime Consultative Agreement working group held since December 2021.

April 4, 2024: Starting a five-day visit to China, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen [calls](#) on China to address manufacturing overcapacity and to

create a level playing field for American companies and workers.

April 4-5, 2024: US-EU Trade and Technology Council holds its sixth ministerial meeting and [releases](#) a joint statement saying the parties have “engaged with other countries who share our concerns about China's non-market policies and practices in the medical devices sector, and conveyed these concerns directly to China.”

April 6, 2024: US and China [hold](#) maritime military talks this week in Hawaii.

April 7, 2024: South Korea [launches](#) its second military spy satellite into orbit, days after North Korea reaffirmed its plan to launch multiple reconnaissance satellites this year.

April 7, 2024: Vietnam National Assembly Chairman Vuong Dinh Hue [meets](#) President Xi in Beijing and proposes more cooperation on trade and development projects.

April 7, 2024: Australia-Japan-Philippines-United States Maritime Cooperative Activity [takes place](#) in the disputed South China Sea.

April 8, 2024: UK, US, and Australia [consider](#) working with Japan through their AUKUS security pact.

April 8, 2024: US Department of Commerce announces a \$6.6 billion subsidy and up to \$5 billion in loans to support TSMC's new fab facility in Arizona.

April 8, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [arrives](#) in Washington, kicking off a six-day official visit.

April 8, 2024: President Xi and Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, [meet](#) in Beijing.

April 9, 2024: President Marcos [says](#) he is “horrified” to learn of an agreement between his predecessor and China that bars Manila from shipping construction materials to a military outpost in the South China Sea.

April 10, 2024: Former Taiwan president and KMT elder Ma Ying-jeou meets President Xi in Beijing, their first meeting since November 2015, when they met in Singapore as Ma's presidency drew to a close.

April 10, 2024: President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida [issue](#) a joint leaders' statement, declaring that their countries will be “global partners” going forward, acting together on the world stage to uphold a free and open international order based on the rule of law.

April 10, 2024: South Korea's ruling People Power Party [suffers](#) a defeat in National Assembly elections, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of President Yoon Suk Yeol's agenda.

April 10, 2024: China [accuses](#) the EU of protectionism and “reckless distortion” of the definition of subsidies in response to a new EU investigation into Chinese wind turbine makers.

April 11, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [addresses](#) a joint session of the US Congress. He [states](#) that “China's current external stance and military actions present an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge, not only to the peace and security of Japan but to the peace and stability of the international community at large.”

April 11, 2024: Visiting Kim Jong Il University of Military and Politics (some DPRK [media](#) style this Kim Jong Il Military and Political Academy), Kim Jong Un [says](#): “Now is the time to be more thoroughly prepared for a war than ever before.” KCNA's photos show blurred maps and a model, which appear to depict South Korea and central Seoul.

April 11, 2024: China bans senior executives from two US defense contractors, General Atomics Aeronautical Systems and General Dynamics Land Systems, in retaliation for US sales of their systems to Taiwan.

April 11, 2024: President Biden [hosts](#) a first-ever joint meeting with the leaders of Japan and the Philippines.

April 11, 2024: China's top legislator Zhao Leji [says](#) China is willing to work closely with the North Korean legislature to help relations reach a “higher level.”

April 11, 2024: Japan-Philippines-US Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida, President Marcos, and President Joe Biden. Japan-Philippines Foreign Ministers' Meeting is also [held](#) between FM Kamikawa and FS Manalo.

April 12, 2024: US [holds](#) a two-day joint military exercise with Japan and South Korea.

April 12, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korea [conclude](#) two-day naval exercise to strengthen response capabilities against the North.

April 12, 2024: Inaugural Philippines-United States 3+3 Senior Officials Meeting [is launched](#) in Washington.

April 13, 2024: China's Zhao [meets](#) Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang, expressing Beijing's willingness to deepen trust and boost cooperation.

April 14, 2024: Aiming to [reduce](#) their reliance on China for critical minerals, Japan, the US and the Philippines agree to a framework for a stable supply of nickel under which resource-rich countries and high-consumption countries in Europe, Africa and other regions work together to share information and invest in developing critical minerals.

April 16, 2024: South Korea [summons](#) a Japanese diplomat to protest against Japan's claim on a group of islands at the center of a longstanding territorial dispute.

April 16, 2024: US [reiterates](#) to China its concerns over what it sees as industrial overcapacity in China, prompting Beijing officials to push back against that accusation.

April 16, 2024: US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Chinese counterpart Dong Jun [hold](#)

their first substantive talks in nearly 18 months as the two countries work to restore military ties.

April 16, 2024: Fourth US–People’s Republic of China Economic and Financial Working Groups are [held](#) in Washington, DC, both of which discuss macro- and micro-issues of import and conclude with mutual commitments to continually deepen bilateral communications.

April 17, 2024: US Navy [flies](#) an aircraft through the Taiwan Strait, as China sends fighter jets to monitor the plane’s passage.

April 17, 2024: President Biden [gives](#) a speech in a presidential campaign stop at the United Steelworkers Headquarters in Pennsylvania titled “New Actions to Protect US Steel and Shipbuilding Industry from China’s Unfair Practices.”

April 17, 2024: US, Japanese, and South Korean finance leaders [agree](#) to consult closely on foreign exchange and market developments in a trilateral meeting.

April 17, 2024: Office of the USTR, following a review of a petition filed on March 12 by five US national labor unions, [initiates](#) a Section 301 investigation into “the PRC’s longstanding efforts to dominate the maritime, logistics, and shipbuilding sectors.” Beijing [expresses](#) strong dissatisfaction to the investigation.

April 18–23, 2024: China’s Wang Yi [pays](#) an official visit to Indonesia, Cambodia, and Papua New Guinea.

April 18, 2024: China’s Wang Yi [meets](#) Indonesian counterpart, Retno Marsudi, in Jakarta, and the two nations pledge to strengthen economic ties and maintain peace and stability in the region.

April 18, 2024: China [claims](#) that China and the Philippines entered a “gentleman's agreement” to avoid conflict in the South China Sea under former President Duterte.

April 18, 2024: ASEAN Foreign Ministers [issue](#) a joint statement of concern over the recent escalation of conflict in Myanmar, including

around Myawaddy, Kayin State, along the border area between Myanmar and Thailand and in Rakhine State of Myanmar, both which have caused significant displacement of civilians.

April 19, 2024: General elections begin in India to determine majority control of the Lok Sabha, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking a third term. Voting is to continue through June 1.

April 19, 2024: Meeting in Washington, [G7 foreign ministers call peace and stability](#) across the Taiwan Strait “indispensable to security and prosperity for the whole international community,” and call for peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues. They add, “We support Taiwan’s meaningful participation in international organizations, including in the World Health Assembly and WHO technical meetings.”

April 19, 2024: Taiwan [says](#) China’s decision to open new air routes that run close to two Taiwanese-controlled islands was a flight safety risk taken without consultation.

April 20, 2024: [China’s Ministry of Commerce imposes anti-dumping duties](#) on polycarbonate imported from Taiwan for a period of five years.

April 22, 2024: US–Philippine 39th *Balikatan Exercise*, joined in part by the French navy and set to conclude on May 10, [kicks off](#) in the South China Sea region.

April 22, 2024: China [accuses](#) the US of “stoking military confrontation” with the recent deployment of a powerful missile launcher to exercises in the Philippines.

April 23, 2024: Japan’s coastguard [extends](#) an initiative designed to help other nations counter Chinese expansion in the South China Sea to the Marshall Islands and Micronesia.

April 23–25, 2024: US and South Korean officials [meet](#) in Hawaii for talks on sharing the cost of keeping American troops in South Korea, with the US seeking “a fair and equitable outcome” that will strengthen the alliance.

April 24, 2024: Descendants of 18 Chinese "comfort women" who were sexually exploited by Japanese soldiers during World War II file [lawsuits](#) in the Shanxi High People's Court against the Japanese government.

April 24, 2024: President-elect Lai Ching-te announces ministerial level appointments to his national security and cross-Strait team. Almost all are holdovers from President Tsai's team, signaling again Lai's stated commitment to continue Tsai's policies.

April 24, 2024: US Congress [passes](#) a sweeping foreign aid package which includes arms support for Taiwan, as China urges Washington to stop selling weapons to Taipei.

April 24-26, 2024: US Secretary of State Blinken [goes](#) on an official visit to China.

April 25, 2024: According to a survey conducted by *Yomiuri* in February and March, 84% of respondents feel that Japan is in a threatening security environment. Respondents who considered China a threat rose to 91%, up five percentage points from last year's survey.

April 26, 2024: France and the Philippines [plan](#) to begin talks next month on a defense pact that would allow troops from each country to hold exercises in the other's territory.

April 26, 2024: Department of Homeland Security [announces](#) the establishment of the Artificial Intelligence Safety and Security Board to advise the Department and the broader public on the "safe and secure development and deployment of AI technology in our nation's critical infrastructure" to stay ahead of potentially hostile nation-state actors such as the PRC.

April 26, 2024: *Korean Central News Agency* [reports](#) that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has guided the test of a rocket developed by "newly-founded" military factory, as North Korea celebrates 92nd founding anniversary of the Korean People's Revolutionary Army.

April 26, 2024: US Secretary of State Blinken [raises](#) concerns about China's support for

Russia's military, during five-and-a-half hours of talks with China's Wang Yi in Beijing.

April 27, 2024: Philippines [denies](#) the Chinese claim that the two countries reached an agreement over an escalating maritime dispute in the South China Sea, calling the claim propaganda.

April 29, 2024: China [hints](#) that it would retaliate after President Biden signed legislation to boost Taiwan's defenses and get TikTok's Chinese owner to divest from the social media platform.

April 29, 2024: Philippines' House of Representatives [begins](#) to investigate former President Duterte over a pact he allegedly made with China.

April 29, 2024: US and Taiwan [start](#) another in-person negotiating round for the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade in Taipei.

April 29, 2024: Victor Cha [conducts](#) the first US multi-question polling of strategic elites in South Korea on the nuclear question and finds that the vast majority of South Korean strategic elites (66%) do not favor nuclearization and that confidence in the United States as a security provider remains strong.

April 30, 2024: Philippines [accuses](#) China's coast guard of harassment and of damaging two of its boats in the South China Sea, rejecting Beijing's position that it had expelled those vessels from the hotly contested shoal.

April 30, 2024: US Labor Department official [calls](#) on international companies to leave Xinjiang due to forced labor concerns.

April 30, 2024: US Authorities [announce](#) that Indian agents may have been involved in the attempted murder of a Sikh separatist in the United States, and the assassination of another in Canada. India's foreign ministry said *The Washington Post* report made "unwarranted and unsubstantiated imputations on a serious matter," while New Delhi is investigating the issue.

April 30, 2024: MOU [reports](#) that in the first quarter 43 North Korean defectors—eight men and 35 women—arrived in the South: fewer than in the previous quarter (57), but more than in the same period in 2023 (34).

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

US-JAPAN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON WELCOMES PRIME MINISTER KISHIDA

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2024 began with a full agenda for the US and Japan. All eyes were on the January presidential election in Taiwan, and China's reaction to it. The choice of William Lai Ching-te, who is currently vice president, cemented the hold of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) on power, with a third term for the party. Lai has close ties with Japan and has made no bones about his expectation that Japan, as well as the US, will figure prominently in his hopes for Taiwan's future. The invitation to former Kuomintang (KMT) President Ma Ying-jeou to visit Beijing on April 10 [made it clear](#) that Beijing had a different preference than the people of Taiwan. The uptick in Chinese military pressure across the Strait as well as in the South China Sea also concerned the US and Japan. The People's Liberation Army's growing demonstration of pressure on Taiwan's eastern islands continued in the months after Lai's victory, as Taiwan prepared to inaugurate him as president on May 20. The US and Japan found common cause also in speaking out against China's growing aggression against Philippine maritime forces at Second Thomas Shoal.

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But the headlines for this first quarter of 2024 clearly belong to Prime Minister Kishida Fumio and President Joe Biden. Kishida [visited](#) the US from April 8 to 14 for a formal State Visit, the first in nine years. Japan's prime minister was [feted](#) at a State Dinner at the White House, [spoke](#) at a Joint Session of Congress, and then was [hosted](#) for a lunch by Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of State Antony Blinken before heading to North Carolina to highlight the role of Japanese foreign direct investment there.

Some important personnel changes for the US-Japan alliance occurred this quarter. Japan sent its new ambassador, [Yamada Shigeo](#), to Washington, DC in time to begin the new year. Yamada is well-known to Washington insiders, having served at the embassy several times over his career. He has also been at the forefront of broadening the scope of US-Japan strategic coordination both in the Indo-Pacific, including the Quad Leaders' Summits and the US-Japan-South Korea Summit at Camp David, and globally after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including the G7 Summit in Hiroshima and the NATO Summits.



Figure 1 Japan eyes senior diplomat Shigeo Yamada as ambassador to U.S. Japanese Senior Deputy Foreign Minister Shigeo Yamada (far right) speaks at a high-level security dialogue with China at the foreign ministry in Tokyo on Feb. 22, 2023. Photo: Kyodo

Out in Hawaii, the US Indo-Pacific Command also has a new commander. On May 3, John Aquilino stepped down and [Adm. Samuel Paparo](#), Pacific Fleet Commander, became the region's combatant commander. Admiral Paparo is a naval aviator, a TOPGUN graduate, and has served in Japan as well as Central Command. As head of the US Navy's Pacific Fleet from 2012 to 2024, Paparo witnessed firsthand the expansion of Chinese maritime activity across the Indo-

Pacific and has [led the US response](#) in building a coalition of allied navies.

Taiwan's Expectations of the US-Japan Alliance

Both Washington and Tokyo are concerned about rising tensions between China and Taiwan. On Jan. 13, Taiwan held elections for its presidency and national legislature, the Legislative Yuan. DPP candidate and current vice president Lai emerged victorious, although the DPP lost its legislative majority. Lai's presidency will mark the third consecutive term for the DPP, following the two terms of President Tsai Ing-wen (2016-2024). With the election concluded, attention has turned to how Lai will govern when he takes office on May 20.

During his campaign and since becoming president-elect, Lai has [repeatedly stressed](#) his intention to [deepen cooperation](#) with the US and Japan. Lai brings significant experience with both countries to his new role. He has made multiple visits to Tokyo and Washington throughout his political career, first as a member of the Legislative Yuan (1999-2010), then as mayor of Tainan (2010-2017), premier (2017-2019), and vice president (2019-2024). Notable visits include his 2019 [speech](#) to Japan's House of Representatives; his 2020 visit to the US, where he [attended](#) the National Prayer Breakfast as the highest-ranking Taiwanese official in over 40 years; and his 2022 visit to Japan to [pay respects](#) to the family of assassinated former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, which marked the highest-ranking visit by a Taiwanese official in over 50 years.



Figure 2 China protests Taiwan's VP paying respects at Abe's memorial. Taiwan's Vice-President Lai Ching-te, centre, leaves Zojoji temple after the funeral of former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe in Tokyo, July 12, 2022. Photo: Hiro Komae

Officials in both Tokyo and Washington quickly [congratulated](#) Lai on his victory. Secretary of

State Blinken noted that the US looks forward to working with Lai to “[advance our shared interests and values](#),” though both Blinken and President Biden were careful to state that the US [does not support](#) Taiwan’s formal independence in keeping with the US one-China policy. In comparison, Foreign Minister Kamikawa issued a stronger statement, referring to Taiwan as “[an extremely crucial partner and an important friend](#).” This choice of words [elicited a strong protest](#) from China, with the Chinese Embassy in Tokyo criticizing Japan for “seriously interfering with China’s internal affairs.” However, two days later, Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi Yoshimasa seemed to double down on Kamikawa’s remarks, referring to Taiwan as “[an extremely important partner for Japan](#).”

Lai was also quick to meet with delegations from both Japan and the US in Taipei. On Jan. 14, the day after the election, Lai [met](#) with Ohashi Mitsuo, Japan’s de facto ambassador as chair of the Japan-Taiwan Association, and Furuya Keiji, who heads a group of lawmakers promoting Japan-Taiwan relations. Lai focused particularly on strengthening economic cooperation, especially in the semiconductor industry, as Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) is [investing](#) heavily in new chip plants in Kumamoto.

On Jan. 15, Lai [met](#) with an unofficial delegation from Washington, including former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, former Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, and Chair of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) Laura Rosenberger. During the meeting, Hadley [praised](#) Taiwan’s democracy as a “shining example for the world,” while Lai referred to freedom and democracy as the “core values” shared by the two countries “and the foundation for the long-term stability in the Taiwan-US partnership.” Later in the month on Jan. 25, Lai [met](#) with a group of US lawmakers from the House of Representatives Taiwan Caucus.

Looking ahead, Taiwan clearly will remain a high priority for the US and Japan. Moreover, how to cope with a crisis across the Taiwan Strait will be high on the alliance agenda. In their remarks following their summit meeting in Washington on April 10, both Biden and Kishida emphasized the importance of [maintaining peace and stability](#) across the Taiwan Strait. Putting personnel in place to advance dialogue on how Taiwan might be managed in the US-Japan alliance is also important. Media reports [indicate](#)

that Raymond Greene is set to become the de facto US ambassador to Taiwan as the next AIT director. Greene is currently the deputy chief of mission at the US embassy in Tokyo, but prior to that, he served as consul general in Okinawa and as deputy head of AIT.

Kishida’s State Visit

The US-Japan alliance could not have had a better fete than it had during Kishida’s State Visit to Washington, DC. The mood was celebratory but relaxed. The list of alliance initiatives exhaustive—over 70 deliverables was the standard phrase around Washington, DC. A firehose of deliverables, in fact. But what was remarkable was the ambitions of the two governments.

Here are [some of the highlights](#) from the [Biden-Kishida Joint Statement](#) and the [Fact Sheet](#):

- The US Indo-Pacific Command will assign a commander to work with the Japan Self-Defense Forces’ Permanent Joint Operations Command to ensure smooth operational command and control.
- A new, \$12 million educational exchange endowment was created for the Mineta Ambassadors Program, which honors Norman Mineta, a former member of the House of Representatives and the first Asian-American to serve as a cabinet secretary.
- US and Japanese universities are teaming up to form AI research partnerships, with funding from public and private sector sources. Additionally, Microsoft has committed \$2.9 billion in AI investment in Japan.
- A Lunar Surface Exploration Implementing Arrangement was signed, including an agreement that two Japanese astronauts will join a future US Artemis mission to land on the moon.

The Kishida-Biden summit also emphasized *who* must play a role in the strategic development of the US-Japan alliance in the years ahead. First, and perhaps most obvious, are the two national militaries. Japan’s strategic review in 2022 [transformed](#) the organization of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to a joint operational command. In 2025, a Permanent Joint Operational Command will be launched that will appoint a combatant commander for the entire

SDF. Integrating Japan's three services—Maritime, Ground and Air—will be the first step toward ensuring an integrated response to a crisis as well as enhancing Japan's readiness. This command will look to the US for coordination of combined operations. Announced at the Biden-Kishida meeting was the [creation of a new post](#), under the Indo-Pacific Commander, tasked with coordinating operations with Japanese forces. Moreover, a Bilateral Information Analysis Cell will allow US and Japanese forces to [share military intelligence](#) in real-time.



Figure 3 U.S. President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at the White House on Friday. Photo: AFP-JJJI

Second, economic security strategies can be designed within government, but it is the private sector must be brought in to implement them. During this State Visit, several announcements were made that create new roles and missions for the US and Japanese businesses. Japanese companies have long been central to the US economy, and foreign direct investment by Japan's private sector in the United States will continue to be an indispensable foundation for the partnership. Nonetheless, there are some signs that US attitudes toward foreign firms might be changing. The politics surrounding the Nippon Steel offer to buy US Steel is a case in point and [drew](#) not only the challenger in the presidential race into the conversation but also the president himself. Union support is crucial for US presidential candidates, and this will continue to be part of the dynamics of local investment across the country.

But the prime minister was well aware of the need to [showcase the benefits](#) of Japan's investment in US communities. His trip to North Carolina after leaving Washington, DC [highlighted](#) a [\\$13.8 billion investment](#) by Toyota

Motor Company in an EV battery factory there due to go online next year. It is the first battery factory to be built overseas by Toyota. Honda Motor Company too has [investment of more than \\$380 million](#) in the state. Local media coverage on the visit put the total number of North Carolinians whose jobs are related to Japanese investment at [around 30,000](#).

Finally, the US and Japan are looking ahead to supporting the next generation that can lead the alliance. Here, too, private sector has a major role to play in investment in human capital. This takes both ideas and resources. Microsoft [announced](#) it would create a new AI collaboration and invest \$2.9 billion in the US-Japan initiative. Other companies [joined](#) to invest \$12 million in the Mineta Ambassador Program to honor Norman Mineta, the first Asian-American to serve in the US Cabinet. Ensuring people-to-people exchange continues to be robust remains an alliance priority. Charles D. Lake II, president of Aflac International and chairman of Aflac Japan, has [assumed](#) the leadership of the US-Japan Friendship Commission and the US Panel of CULCON. The two nations' scientists and innovators will also [enhance their cooperation](#). Whether it is the mission to Mars or the development of new, critical technologies, the intellectual capital of Japanese and Americans is also being harnessed to the task of building a resilient strategic partnership.

Japan's prime minister was well received on Capitol Hill. Kishida [spoke](#) of his childhood experience living in Queens, New York, referencing the Flintstones and other fond memories. But in his address to the US Congress, Kishida was surprisingly blunt about the need for US leadership. Telling the chamber that he detects "an undercurrent of self-doubt" among some about what role America should play in the world, he went on to emphasize that the US is not alone in upholding the international order, saying "Japan is proud to be your shipmate."

The theme he wanted Washington to hear was that the US and Japan now have a global mission. At a time when war continues to rage in Europe and the Middle East, Japan wants to help the United States ensure the continued viability of the liberal order Washington helped define early in the postwar era.

The US, Japan, and the Philippines

For some time now, the US and Japan have expanded their regional cooperation, especially in the maritime domain, to include other nations. Australia, India, and South Korea have become close strategic partners, dedicated toward enhancing their own defense capabilities but also consulting on the various challenges of the Indo-Pacific. This year, another partner joined the US and Japan: the Republic of the Philippines.

China's challenge to Philippine sovereignty at Second Thomas Shoal has intensified this year. The two countries have had a number of maritime encounters in this area of the South China Sea, with [tensions rising](#) precipitously in March when Chinese coast guard ships used water cannons against Philippine vessels, causing damage to ships and injuries to personnel.

On April 7, the US, Australia, Japan, and the Philippines agreed upon a Maritime Cooperative Activity, based on international law, to operate within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The first exercise was [held](#) in the South China Sea and included anti-submarine warfare drills. The effort is led by the three allies' defense ministers and the US secretary of defense, who met in Manila. Their joint statement [stated their aim](#) to “demonstrate[e] our collective commitment to strengthen regional and international cooperation in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific.” Maritime and air forces would operate together to model “professional interactions among naval/maritime and air forces.” They also reaffirmed the 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal Award as the “final and legally binding decision on the parties to the dispute.” Without a doubt, China's behavior toward the Philippine forces had stimulated this collective response.

On the heels of this came an even more conspicuous statement of cooperation between the US, Japan, and the Philippines. Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. visited Washington, DC to join Prime Minister Kishida and President Biden for a Trilateral Leaders' Summit, the first of its kind. In their joint statement, the three leaders [emphasized](#) their common concern for regional stability and a free and open Indo-Pacific. They further [committed](#) to cooperate in maritime drills, largely designed to help the Philippines police their own waters and EEZ.



Figure 4 U.S. President Joe Biden escorts Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Japan Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to their trilateral summit at the White House in Washington, April 11, 2024. Photo: Kevin Lamarque

Much of the trilateral discussions focused on economic cooperation. Three areas were identified for future collaboration: strategies for economic resilience and inclusive growth, addressing climate change and building clean energy supply chains, and developing critical and emerging technologies. The three leaders [announced](#) that the first Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment corridor in the Indo-Pacific would be in Luzon, to connect Subic Bay, Clark, Manila and Batangas. This is designed to accelerate investment in infrastructure to enhance economic connectivity between these four areas.

One other aspect of the Joint Vision Statement stood out—the mention of Taiwan:

“We affirm the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of global security and prosperity, recognize that there is no change in our basic positions on Taiwan, and call for a peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues.”

While the language was consistent with longstanding policy by the three nations, President Marcos had become embroiled in a verbal back and forth with Chinese officials after he [congratulated](#) newly elected Taiwanese president William Lai in Jan. in a social media post on X. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson claimed this violated the “one-China policy” and that the Philippines should “[refrain from playing with fire](#) on the Taiwan question.”

Nonetheless, Marcos has been forward leaning on allowing the US greater access to ports and facilities in his country. In their discussions after the trilateral summit, Marcos and Biden agreed to update their alliance. Marcos later [described](#) expanded access for the US forces in the Philippines as a defensive step, and a “useful” one should China attack Taiwan. The Philippine president has a very particular worry should a crisis, or worse yet a conflict, erupt across the Taiwan Strait. There are reportedly over 140,000 Philippine nationals living in Taiwan.

The US, Japan, and the Philippines could continue to formalize their regional cooperation, although it remains doubtful that this would entail a formal role for Philippine forces in a Taiwan contingency. Nonetheless, Chinese pressure on Manila continues and the US and Japan have offered to help enhance Philippine economic resilience and maritime law enforcement capabilities.

Conclusion

The rest of 2024 will be just as busy for the US and Japan. In July, the US will host the NATO Summit and leaders from its Indo-Pacific allies, Japan first and foremost, are expected to attend. By the end of summer too there should be some clarity on how the Indo-Pacific Command will organize its operational coordination with Japanese forces.

As the US presidential election campaign heats up, economic security issues will continue to affect US politics. The Nippon Steel buyout of US Steel has been postponed, but there are other currents of change afoot that will affect foreign direct investment in the US. United Auto Workers (UAW) are intent on targeting foreign automakers in six states across the American south in an attempt to unionize factory floors. Governors openly criticized the effort in a joint letter, saying it [would jeopardize jobs and foreign direct investment](#). The first attempt in Tennessee at a Volkswagen plant was [successfully unionized](#). Later in May, a second German auto plant will vote on joining the national union. Japanese auto manufacturers will also be part of the UAW effort.

Of course, the larger question of how the US will approach trade remains a concern. In his campaign for office, former president Donald Trump has advocated for across-the-board tariffs on foreign goods. More recently, the Biden

administration has placed new tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles and parts. In Tokyo, the concern now is how to manage the lack of US participation in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) as both Taiwan and China seek accession. The rising rhetoric of protectionism in US politics continues to be worrisome.

The US approach to China is also of interest as the election approaches. Several articles in *Foreign Affairs* magazine reveal the variety of perspectives in the US policymaking community on how to approach strategic competition with Beijing. In their article, entitled, *Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence: Why the US Must Reassure, Not Just Threaten, China*, Bonnie Glaser, Jessica Chen Weiss, and Thomas Christensen addressed the growing tensions across the Taiwan Straits and argued that the US must reassure Beijing that the US [does not seek conflict over Taiwan](#). A follow-on article, entitled *No Substitute for Victory: America's Competition with China Must Be Won, not Managed*, authored by Matt Pottinger and Mike Gallagher, both Republican China hands, argued instead that the US [should prepare to win](#) the competition with China rather than accommodate its interests. Both articles were widely read in Tokyo as possible points of view for the presidential candidates.

While the Japanese government is very familiar with those who might serve in a second Biden Administration, there is considerable effort being made to understand the composition of a possible second Trump Administration. It may be too early to tell who the next senior foreign policy makers might be should Trump win. However, LDP faction leader, former Prime Minister, and former Deputy Prime Minister under Abe Shinzo, Aso Taro, [successfully made contact](#) with the presumptive Republican nominee. They met in New York City on April 23 for dinner. At the media gathering before dinner, Trump referenced his friend, Abe Shinzo, and reassuringly praised the Japanese people.

Kishida too faces a fall election. His visit to the United States [produced a small bump](#) in his approval ratings back home but he and his party are suffering considerable headwinds. The Unification Church scandal, unearthed after the assassination of former prime minister Abe, reduced public trust in some members of the party. More recently, a more serious erosion of public trust resulted from the revelation of the

misuse of ostensible campaign funds by the Abe faction. According to a *Nikkei* poll, only 25% of respondents support the conservative party, the lowest support rate since it was voted out of power in 2009. To make matters worse for the prime minister, the LDP [lost three out of three by-elections](#) in April. To some extent, this was a self-inflicted wound as the party did not even field candidates in two of the three races. But the real setback was the loss in the third in Shimane, a bastion of conservative support. Kishida faces what is expected to be a tumultuous party leadership election in September. Then, and only then, will the Japanese prime minister be able to turn their attention to the US election outcome.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-JAPAN RELATIONS

JANUARY-APRIL 2024

Jan. 5, 2024: US-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue is [held](#) in Washington, DC.

Jan. 12, 2024: Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Minister for Foreign Affairs Yoko Kamikawa [meet](#) in Washington, DC.

Jan. 12, 2024: National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Minister for Foreign Affairs Kamikawa [meet](#) in Washington, DC.

Jan. 12, 2024: Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo and Minister for Foreign Affairs Kamikawa [meet](#) in Washington, DC.

Jan. 12, 2024: Congressional Caucus on Women, Peace, and Security and Minister for Foreign Affairs Kamikawa [meet](#) in Washington, DC.

Jan. 14, 2024: Senior Official for the DPRK Jung Pak, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Hiroyuki Namazu, and South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Kim Gunn [speak](#) by conference call.

Jan. 17-18, 2024: Senior Official for the DPRK Pak, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Namazu, and South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Gunn [hold](#) Trilateral Special Representative Consultations in Seoul.

Jan. 24, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida and a delegation from the US Congressional Study Group on Japan [meet](#) in Tokyo.

Feb. 6-7, 2024: 14th meeting of the US-Japan Dialogue on the Digital Economy is [held](#) in hybrid format.

Feb. 13, 2024: State Minister for Foreign Affairs Tsuge Yoshifumi and Special Envoy on North Korean Human Rights Issues Julie Turner [meet](#) in Tokyo.

Feb. 16, 2024: Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Okano Masataka and Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell [speak](#) by conference call.

Feb. 22, 2024: Minister for Foreign Affairs Kamikawa, Secretary of State Blinken, and South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Cho Tae-yul [meet](#) in Rio de Janeiro on the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

Feb. 27-28, 2024: Acting Special Coordinator for the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment Helaina Mataz [travels](#) to Tokyo.

March 6, 2024: United Auto Workers [says](#) that more than 30% of workers at a Toyota factory in Troy, Missouri, are seeking to join the union.

March 7-8, 2024: Second US-Japan Strategic Dialogue on Democratic Resilience is [held](#) at the US Department of State.

March 11, 2024: Deputy Secretary of State Campbell and Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Okano [meet](#) in Washington, DC.

March 14, 2024: Minister for Foreign Affairs Kamikawa and Senior Advisor to the President John Podesta [meet](#) in Tokyo.

March 14, 2024: President Biden [announces](#) his opposition to the planned sale of US Steel to Nippon Steel.

March 19, 2024: Representative to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield and Minister for Foreign Affairs Kamikawa [meet](#) in New York.

March 21, 2024: Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Okano and Deputy Secretary of State Campbell [meet](#) in Tokyo.

March 21, 2024: Minister for Foreign Affairs Kamikawa, Deputy Secretary of State Campbell, and Philippines Undersecretary of Bilateral Relations and ASEAN Affairs Maria Theresa P. Lazaro [meet](#) in Tokyo.

March 21, 2024: Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Okano, Deputy Secretary of State Campbell, and Philippines Undersecretary of Bilateral Relations and ASEAN Affairs Lazaro [hold](#) a Japan-US-Philippines Vice Ministers' Meeting in Tokyo.

March 29, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida and Ambassador to Australia Caroline Kennedy [meet](#) in Tokyo.

March 29, 2024: Second US-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Diplomacy Working Group for Foreign Minister Cooperation on North Korea's Cyber Threats is [held](#) in Washington, DC.

March 31, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) with a delegation led by Senator Kirsten Gillibrand in Tokyo.

April 1, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida and President of the Iwo Jima Association Major General (retired) David Bice [meet](#) in Tokyo.

April 3, 2024: Minister for Foreign Affairs Yoko Kamikawa, Representative Sydney Kamlager-Dove, and Ambassador-at-large for Global Women's Issues Geeta Rao Gupta [meet](#) in Tokyo.

April 9, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) with Vice Chair and President of Microsoft Brad Smith in Washington, DC.

April 9, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [attends](#) a luncheon meeting with US business leaders in Washington, DC.

April 9, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [holds](#) a dialogue with the next generation for Japan-US friendship and cooperation in Washington, DC.

April 9, 2024: President Biden and First Lady Jill Biden [host](#) Prime Minister Kishida and Spouse of the Prime Minister Kishida Yuko for an informal dinner in Washington, DC.

April 10, 2024: US Justice Department [opens](#) an extended antitrust investigation of Nippon Steel's planned takeover of US Steel.

April 10, 2024: President Biden [hosts](#) a White House Arrival Ceremony for Prime Minister Kishida.

April 10, 2024: President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida [hold](#) a US-Japan Summit Meeting at the White House.

April 10, 2024: Secretary of Commerce Raimondo and Minister for Foreign Affairs Kamikawa [meet](#) in Washington, DC.

April 10, 2024: President Biden [hosts](#) a State Dinner for Prime Minister Kishida.

April 10, 2024: Acting Assistant Secretary or the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs Jennifer Littlejohn and Deputy Director General for the Secretariat of Science, Technology, and Innovation Policy [sign](#) a Global Innovation through Science and Technology Memorandum of Understanding.

April 11, 2024: Speaker of the House Mike Johnson and Prime Minister Kishida [meet](#) at the US Capitol.

April 11, 2024: Speaker of the House Johnson, House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell [meet](#) with Prime Minister Kishida at the US Capitol.

April 11, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [delivers](#) an address at a Joint Meeting of the US Congress.

April 11, 2024: Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of State Antony Blink [host](#) a State

Luncheon for Prime Minister Kishida at the State Department.

April 11, 2024: Department of State and AirBnB [announce](#) a partnership to support binational tourism in the US and Japan with a focus on rural areas.

April 11, 2024: President Biden, Prime Minister Kishida, and Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. [hold](#) a US-Japan-Philippines Summit in Washington, DC.

April 11, 2024: President Biden, Prime Minister Kishida, and Philippines President Marcos [launch](#) partnership to develop the Luzon Economic Corridor.

April 12, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [visits](#) a Toyota Motor Corporation automotive battery manufacturing plant and other facilities in North Carolina together with Governor of North Carolina Roy Cooper.

April 12, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [visits](#) a Honda Aircraft Company plant in North Carolina together with Governor Cooper.

April 12, 2024: Governor of North Carolina Roy Cooper [hosts](#) a luncheon for Prime Minister Kishida.

April 12, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) with Japanese students studying abroad at Nagoya University Global Campus at North Carolina State University.

April 12, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) with Japanese language learners at the North Carolina Japan Center at North Carolina State University.

April 12, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) with Japanese business representatives operating in North Carolina.

April 12, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [attends](#) a dinner with those who have ties to Japan and reside in North Carolina.

April 12, 2024: US Steel shareholders [approve](#) deal to be purchased by Nippon Steel.

April 18, 2024: Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi Yoshimasa and Representative to the United Nations Thomas-Greenfield [meet](#) in Tokyo.

April 18, 2024: Japan-US Joint Event on Artificial Intelligence is [held](#) in Tokyo.

April 19, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida and Representative to the United Nations Thomas-Greenfield [meet](#) in Tokyo.

April 19, 2024: G7 foreign ministers [issue](#) statement on steadfast support for Ukraine, and [issue](#) statement on the situation in the Middle East.

April 22, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida and Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command Admiral John Aquilino [meet](#) in Tokyo.

April 23, 2024: Former President Trump and Former Prime Minister Aso Taro [meet](#) in New York.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

US-CHINA RELATIONS

TIES STABILIZE WHILE NEGATIVE UNDERCURRENTS DEEPEN

SOURABH GUPTA, INSTITUTE FOR CHINA-AMERICA STUDIES

US-China relations were marked by a paradox during the first trimester of 2024. On the one hand, a distinct stabilization was evident in ties. The two sides made concerted efforts to translate their leaders' 'San Francisco Vision' into reality. Cabinet officials exchanged visits across the Pacific, working groups and dialogue mechanisms met in earnest and produced outcomes, functional cooperation was deepened, sensitive issues such as Taiwan were carefully managed, and effort was devoted to improving the relationship's political optics. On the other hand, the negative tendencies in ties continued to deepen. Both sides introduced additional selective decoupling as well as cybersecurity measures in key information and communications technology and services sectors, with US actions bearing the signs of desinicization—rather than mere decoupling—of relevant supply chains. The chasm in strategic perception remained as wide as before. In sum, the “new normal” in US-China relations continued to take form, one piece at a time.

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What a difference a year makes. At this time in late-April last year, the US and China were barely communicating, still smarting from the balloon incident of February 2023. It was not until US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and CPC Central Foreign Affairs Commission Director Wang Yi met in Vienna in mid-May 2023 that a semblance of normality began to be restored to the relationship. Twelve months on, there has been an almost across-the-board restoration of communication channels, a deepening of functional cooperation across issues areas, and a concerted effort to manage the political optics of the relationship for the better – this, despite deep differences in strategic perception between the two sides.

Locking Down Stabilization One Meeting at a Time

The first four months of 2024 witnessed a flurry of in-person meetings of Cabinet and principals-level officials. On Jan. 18, US Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack met counterpart Tang Renjian in Washington, DC, [marking](#) the first meeting of their Joint Committee on Cooperation in Agriculture since 2015. Eight days later, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Director Wang Yi held 12 hours of talks over two days in Bangkok, their third [extended round of conversations](#) following meetings in Vienna (March 2023) and Malta (September 2023). At the meeting, a decision to [launch](#) a bilateral working group on counternarcotics and an inter-governmental dialogue mechanism on artificial intelligence (AI) later this spring was reached. On Feb.18, China's Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong [met](#) US Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas in Vienna to advance law enforcement cooperation in the fights against fentanyl as well as online child sexual exploitation. The harassment of Chinese students at US border entry points was also [raised](#) by Wang.

In early April, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen returned to Beijing to [establish](#) two dedicated workstreams in conjunction with her Chinese Finance Ministry and People's Bank of China (PBoC) counterparts—an Intensive Exchange on Balanced Growth in the Domestic and Global Economies under the aegis of their bilateral Economic Working Group (EWG), and a Joint Treasury-PBoC Cooperation and Exchange on

Anti-Money Laundering (AML) under their Financial Working Group (FWG). The former workstream is informed by [concerns of excess Chinese capacity](#) in key new industries such as solar, electric vehicles (EV) and lithium-ion batteries, and bears resemblance to the Strategic Impediments Initiative (SII) that the US and Japan devised three-and-a-half decades ago to tackle the structural drivers—many of them in the domestic regulatory policy realm—that Washington believed was behind the large trade imbalance between the two sides. Beijing [denies](#) the overcapacity charge in the EV sector, pointing out that 12% of Chinese-made EV's are exported compared to 80, 50, and 25% of autos for Germany, Japan and the US, respectively.



Figure 1 US Secretary of State Antony Blinken walks around Shanghai at night on April 26, 2024. (Source: Official State Department photo by Chuck Kennedy, Public Domain)

On April 24-26, 10 months after he had set the ball rolling with his ice-breaking visit, Secretary of State Antony Blinken returned to Beijing to hold [“candid and constructive”](#) conversations with [President Xi](#), Foreign Minister Wang and Minister of Public Security [Wang Xiaohong](#). The composition of senior departmental officials accompanying Blinken was [instructive](#) of his priorities: counternarcotics cooperation and AI. It included Todd Robinson, assistant secretary for Intl. Narcotics and Law Enforcement, and Nathaniel Fick, ambassador for Cyberspace and Digital Policy (in addition to Dan Kritenbrink, the asst. secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs). On global affairs, China's transfer of dual-use items to plug critical gaps in Russia's defense production cycle and thereby support Moscow's operations in Ukraine was the foremost topic of discussion. In Beijing, Blinken [threatened](#) his Chinese interlocutors with

secondary sanctions on its banking sector, should they facilitate ‘significant transactions’ on behalf of entities that provide specific manufacturing inputs and technologies to Russia’s military-industrial base. That Beijing is attentive to this threat can be gauged from the fact that following the issuance of Biden’s December 2023 [Executive Order](#) authorizing the imposition of US secondary sanctions on foreign financial institutions, three of China’s largest banks – Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC); China Construction Bank (CCB); Bank of China—stopped accepting payments from sanctioned Russian financial institutions.

After Blinken’s departure, a number of Chinese and Hong Kong entities that supply drones, infrared detectors, microelectronics, sensors and microcontrollers, and nitrocellulose (to make propellants) for Russia’s war machine were [slapped](#) with property-blocking sanctions by the Treasury Department. No Chinese banks were included in the current round of sanctions.

On Taiwan, both Blinken and his counterpart spelt out their respective “one China” policy and “one China” principle, and counseled restraint. With a presidential election in January on the self-governing island and with the inauguration of a deeper-green president looming in May, both sides conveyed their bottom lines while maintaining fidelity to the cross-strait status quo. Though Beijing had [snapped back](#) at Washington’s [congratulatory statement](#) in January following the DPP candidate Lai Ching-te’s victory [and snapped again](#) following US support for Taiwan’s participation as an observer at the World Health Assembly later in May, the CCP’s Taiwan Affairs Work Conference in end-February and the PRC Government Work Report of early-March [stuck to the standard theme](#) of “peaceful development of cross-strait relations” and “advancing integrated cross-strait development.” Sanctions were [imposed](#) though on five US defense industry companies for arms sales to Taiwan.

In addition to these in-person meetings, two notable meetings were conducted virtually. On April 2, President Biden and President Xi took stock of the progress as well as continuing deep differences in ties since their November 2023 summit in California. 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 has sought to follow through on his [people-to-people pledges](#), and leaven the political tone of the US-China relationship at a time when a whopping 80%-plus of Americans hold an [unfavorable view](#) of the People’s Republic.

In February, the China Wildlife Conservation Association and the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Association signed an agreement to return two giant pandas to the San Diego Zoo later this summer—the [first time](#) in more than two decades that pandas will be returning to the US. A letter of intent with the San Francisco Zoological Society was also signed on April 19. On March 27, Xi [met](#) with representatives of the US business community at the Great Hall of the People—his first meeting with a visiting US business delegation since September 2015.



Figure 2 A panda lounging in a tree at the San Diego Zoo in December 2014. (Credit: MattCC716 via Flickr, CC2.0)

And in his continuation of “letter diplomacy,” Xi exchanged missives with [friends](#) and [students](#) from Muscatine, Iowa, where he had visited, stayed, and cherished fond memories from 39 years ago. Allowable weekly round-trip passenger flights between the two countries have also [inched up](#) to 50, from 12 per week in August 2023, to 18 in September, to 24 in end-October, to 35 in late-November 2023. Prior to COVID-19, the number had exceeded 150 per week. The other notable video meeting was between the two defense chiefs. On April 16, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin III [held](#) his first talks since November 2022 with a PRC Minister of National

Defense (Adm. Dong Jun), with Taiwan and the South China Sea tensions being the [key topics](#) of discussion. A day later, a Navy P-8A Poseidon patrol and reconnaissance plane [conducted](#) a relatively rare Taiwan Strait transit in international airspace. Earlier, in January and in early-April, the 17th Defense Policy Coordination Talks ([DPCT](#)), an annual deputy assistant secretary level policy dialogue, and the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement ([MMCA](#)) talks, a working-level operational safety dialogue between US INDOPACOM and PLA naval and air forces, were held. Defense communication channels appear to be reverting to normal and instances of China's [risky aerial intercepts](#) are down significantly. In fair likelihood, the two countries' defense chiefs will hold their first in-person meeting on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in end-May—the first in-person contact since the post-balloon incident easing cycle in ties began last summer. Separately, the US was among 29 navies gathered at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) in Qingdao, China, where an updated Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) and the forming of a Working Group on Unmanned Systems were [adopted](#).

Deepening Functional Cooperation by Plucking the Low-Hanging Fruit

In the run-up to the November 2023 summit in Woodside, the Chinese and US climate envoys had [released a \(rare\) joint statement](#) committing both countries to deeper cooperation on methane reductions. To consolidate the momentum in ties, the two presidents agreed at their meeting to establish a working group on counternarcotics cooperation and convene an intergovernmental dialogue mechanism to address the risks of advanced artificial intelligence systems. Varying progress was made on both fronts.

Counternarcotics Cooperation, including on fentanyl control

In Woodside, the Biden administration had agreed to delist the Chinese Ministry of Public Security's Institute of Forensic Science 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 North America. In the

run-up to that summit, China's National Narcotics Control Commission had sent out notices to Chinese chemical companies [warning](#) of potential criminal liability for selling chemicals for the production of narcotics, including those listed in the US Drug Enforcement Administration's list of chemicals of concern.

Following the summit, China began reporting incidents for the first time in three years to the International Narcotics Control Board database used by law enforcement authorities to track and intercept shipments. At their Counternarcotics Working Group meeting in late-January, the two sides [agreed](#) to clamp down on Chinese pill press exports (which enable the production of potentially lethal fentanyl-laced fake pills) and share best practices with regard to closing money laundering loopholes. The January meeting was attended by representatives from Chinese banks, including the Bank of China. The US has [sought](#) tougher prosecution and sentencing of those accused of selling precursor chemicals and related equipment, as well as expeditious follow-through by Beijing on the scheduling of all chemical precursors controlled by the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs. China has sought to have its listing as a 'major drug source country' [removed](#). The Biden administration placed Beijing on its annual list of major drug-producing or transit countries in September 2023.

Artificial Intelligence dialogue

On March 21, the US and China along with more than 120 countries [supported](#) a landmark resolution on the promotion of "safe, secure and trustworthy" AI systems that would benefit the sustainable development of all. A month later, during Secretary Blinken's visit to Beijing, the two countries formally announced the 1st US-China talks on AI, due to be held in the coming weeks. The [purpose](#) of the talks is to better understand respective views and approaches to managing the risks associated with AI applications, and to communicate about areas of concern. Both countries are in the process of

developing guidelines, standards and best practices for AI safety and security, and are involved too in the advancement of [global technical standards](#) for AI development. Topics being addressed include best practices regarding data capture, processing, management, and analysis; best practices for AI model training; guidelines and standards for trustworthiness, verification, and assurance of AI systems; AI risk management and governance systems; as well as application-specific standards (e.g., for facial recognition technology), among others. That said, structuring the US-China conversation on AI will not be easy.

The primary focus of the bilateral conversation, from Washington's point of view, is to develop common approaches on the development and control of high-risk frontier AI models. Beijing's preference, on the other hand, is that the bilateral conversation be focused on the cooperative development of AI. The Biden administration has no interest in such a conversation; to the contrary, the administration has placed onerous export control restrictions on leading-edge GPU's (graphics processing units) to prevent China from training its frontier AI models. At the Bletchley Park AI summit last November, at which China was among two dozen-odd countries represented, the US even ensured that Chinese companies were excluded from the testing of frontier models at the AI safety institutes set up by the US and UK. This begs the question how risks, standards, and regulations on frontier models can be individually or mutually evaluated and established. On the military side of things, meanwhile, one of 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 potential focus area. That said, neither side as yet deploys frontier AI models to guide critical military operations-related applications—which, in turn, begs the question as to who would even represent either side on military AI at the

discussion table. As the working group convenes, these and other questions remain to be answered.

Science & Technology Agreement (STA) Extension

The STA was the [first major agreement](#) signed by the two governments following the re-establishment of diplomatic relations in January 1979. This framework agreement, which covers around 30 agency-level protocols and 40 sub-agreements that cover the gamut from agriculture, basic science, biomedical research, marine sciences and remote sensing to nuclear fusion and safety, provides the mutual confidence that sustains and underpins cross-border research collaborations. Last renewed in 2018 and extended for six months in August 2023, the STA was [quietly extended](#) for another six-month interval in late-February 2024 while negotiations on its renewal continue. From the standpoint of modernizing the agreement, several [sticking points](#) remain. These include the personal safety of scientists who travel to China; their ability to access, share and carry data across China's borders at this time of tight data security rules; concerns regarding IP theft; and concerns about a lack of reciprocity, transparency and a level playing field in terms of access for US scientists in China.

The Chinese side has its own interests and concerns too, not least among them being the poaching of its scientists by the US. A dispute settlement framework also needs to be worked out. That said, the Biden administration's decision to successively extend the STA—albeit temporarily, when it could easily have played to the political gallery and let the agreement expire -- signifies a willingness to engage China as a scientific near-peer than purely as a target of suppression.

A Deepening Spiral of Decoupling-linked Actions

In his phone conversation with Biden on April 2, Xi Jinping lamented that even as the US-China relationship was beginning to stabilize, the “negative factors of the relationship [were] also growing.” The two sides needed to first get the

“issue of strategic perception” right, “just like the first button that must be [put right](#).” That first button is not likely to be worn as per Xi’s liking. The Biden administration’s approach, as it has stated many times, is to *invest* (in itself), *align* (with allies and partners), and *compete* (with China), and only thereafter manage the competition from veering into conflict while also seeking out areas of cooperation.

During the first trimester of 2024, such competitive actions foremost in the advanced technologies and cybersecurity sphere remained the dominant trend. The whiff of protectionist-leaning trade policy announcements that cater to blue collar voters in toss-up electoral college states was evident too. Beijing was no shrinking violet either; it implemented countermeasures as well as self-introduced de-risking actions during this period.

Cybersecurity concerns involving China have long risen to the fore in US politics and national security. In February, FBI Director Christopher Wray [delivered](#) a blistering critique at the Munich Security Conference of China’s pre-positioning of malware within critical infrastructure systems. While Wray and the Justice Department have not always been on the money on China (witness the implosion of the “China Initiative” cases and the failure to make trade secrets theft charges stick [against Fujian Jinhua Integrated Circuit Co.](#)), his critique was a prelude to three Biden administration Executive Orders in the space of 10 days on China-linked cybersecurity concerns. On Feb. 21, an EO that addresses cyber-vulnerabilities linked to [ship-to-shore cranes](#) produced in China was rolled out, following reports as well as a congressional investigation that such cranes deployed at more than 200 US ports contained remotely accessible communications equipment (cellular modems) that was unneeded for normal operations. On Feb. 28, an EO accompanied by a 90-page Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPRM) that is designed to restrict “foreign adversaries” access to [Americans’ bulk sensitive personal data](#) was released.



Figure 5 A display of the Tesla logo at a dealership. (Credit: Milan Csizmadia via UnSplash, CC4.0)

The ANPRM constitutes the first instance of the regulation of the personal data of Americans for national security reasons, rather than for privacy or other reasons. Its drivers stem as far back as the [Anthem healthcare data breach](#) of 2015, probably by Chinese operators, with the concern being that the stolen personal data from various sources of US citizens can be aggregated – utilizing big-data analytics, AI and data-brokers—and employed thereafter as a tool of blackmail and coercion. And tucked-in also on Feb. 28 was an EO and accompanying ANPRM that seeks to [strip out](#) foreign adversary content from key electric vehicle software systems – vehicle operating system; telematics systems; automated driving systems; advanced driver assistance systems; battery management systems; satellite/cellular telecoms system—that could potentially be commandeered by an adversary state to inflict a distributed denial of service attack on US intelligent transport systems, communication hardware, or critical infrastructure.

China went in a different direction on cyber concerns during the first trimester of 2024. On April 28, Tesla’s EV Model 3 and Model Y [cleared](#) four Cyberspace Administration of China’s (CAC)-recommended data security assessments related to the collection, processing, and management of data, paving the way for the lifting of access restrictions at sensitive locations, such as government compounds and airports. Earlier, on March 22, CAC [issued an order](#) rolling back restrictive regulations on the export of personal information and other

sensitive data from China to facilitate the cross-border flow of data for business purposes.

Countering the potential for dissemination of disinformation by foreign adversaries, even be it subliminally, has been a US priority since the 2016 presidential election. To this end, on April 24, President Biden [signed](#) a bill, as part of a larger foreign aid package, that bans the popular short video-sharing app TikTok in the US if its China-based parent ByteDance fails to divest the app within 12 months. The Justice Department is authorized to enforce the ban on national security grounds.

TikTok has vowed to challenge the law citing First Amendment protections. Its chances of success are high. Courts across the country and up to the Supreme Court have ruled that mere invocation of a national security threat based on supposition is insufficient to justify the squelching of First Amendment rights. The threat must be real, and a proposed ban shown to be an unavoidable option to address this threat.

TikTok must be shown to have aligned its algorithm with Beijing's disinformation efforts at the latter's behest or coercion and likely to do so again, if such a ban is to be sustained. Neither the Trump White House in 2020 (which had [ordered](#) ByteDance to divest from TikTok) nor the foreign aid package bill today can likely mount this evidentiary threshold.

Relatedly, in late-August 2020, China's Commerce Ministry had updated its list of "forbidden and restricted technology exports" to include "personalized information recommendation services based on data analysis"—in effect, meaning that ByteDance would need government approval (which would not be forthcoming) to effectuate a divestiture.

That injunction remains just as applicable today. On the other hand, what is good for the goose does not seemingly apply to the gander, insofar as Beijing is concerned. In mid-April, while the TikTok bill was under consideration, it was reported that CAC had [ordered](#) Apple to remove

popular Western chat messaging apps WhatsApp and Threads (as well as messaging platforms Signal and Telegram) from its app store on "national security" grounds. Mobile app developers had been required to register their apps with the Chinese government by April 1; as such, more app removals could follow in the coming weeks.

Strategic trade controls in the area of information and communications technologies and services (ICTS) has been ground zero in the US-China contest for tech supremacy, starting with the [expansive ICTS Executive Order](#) of May 2019 which initiated the process of kneecapping Huawei. On January 29, the Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) [issued](#) a Proposed Rule that would compel US cloud companies to implement 'know-your-customer' procedures and alert the government when foreign clients train their most powerful AI models using the compute power provided by these cloud companies. The rule has been met with pushback from stakeholders.

On Jan. 31, the US Defense Department [released](#) its updated list of 1260H "Chinese Military Companies" that "operate directly or indirectly in the United States." While the legal impact of the designation is limited, it carries larger reputational risks for companies and could open them up to more severe sanctions later. On March 29, BIS [issued](#) its Interim Final Rule that revises elements of its punishing October 2022 and October 2023 rules aimed at restricting China's ability to obtain advanced computing chips, develop and maintain supercomputers, and manufacture advanced node semiconductors. And in late-April, the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) [ordered](#) the US units of China Telecom, China Unicom, China Mobile and Pacific Networks Corporation to discontinue their Internet "Points of Presence" (POPs) operations that offer colocation, broadband, IP transit and data center services on American soil.

Having absorbed blow-after-blow of US technology denial measures, China, too,

continued to impose countermeasures during the first trimester of 2024. In March, new procurement guidelines were [introduced](#) to phase out foreign operating systems, microprocessors and database software from government PCs and servers. In late-December 2023, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology had issued introduced new “safe and reliable” criteria for processors and operating systems and on the same day, the China Information Technology Security Evaluation Center, the state testing agency, had published its first list of “safe and reliable” processors and operating systems—all locally produced. The [muscling out](#) of US technology from the state sector dates back to a directive issued in September 2022. Separately, China’s trade controls on graphite products continue to bite. Noting China’s lock on the spherical graphite and synthetic graphite supply chains—critical minerals key to the production of batteries, the US Treasury Department recently [relaxed](#) its clean vehicle tax credit-related sourcing rules in their regard for an additional two years until 2027.

Finally, the start of 2024 witnessed the return of the threat of aggravated trade frictions in US-China relations. The first shot of this new great power rivalry had been fired, it bears remembering, in the trade policy arena, when the Trump administration introduced Section 232 tariffs on steel and aluminum and Section 301 tariffs on \$370 billion of Chinese goods in Summer 2018. With an eye on the battleground Rust Belt states in the 2024 election (Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin’s combined 77,736 vote margin was key to Trump’s victory in 2016; had 257,025 ballots been cast in his favor in these states, Trump would have remained in office in 2020), [Biden called](#) for a tripling of tariffs on Chinese steel and aluminum and a [Section 301 probe](#) into China’s shipbuilding, maritime, and logistics practices. A port fee on Chinese-built ships that dock at US ports is sought to be assessed, which would be plowed into a Shipbuilding Revitalization Fund to revive the domestic industry.



Figure 6 US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen speaking at the Suniva solar cell manufacturing plant in Norcross, Georgia on March 27, 2024. (Source: Screenshot of US Department of Transportation video, Public Domain)

Separately, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai announced that her review of Section 301 tariffs on China that began in September 2022 is nearing completion, timed to land in the middle of campaign season. And all along, US Cabinet secretaries continued to [beat the drum](#) on Chinese overcapacity in key green goods sectors: solar, EVs, lithium-ion batteries. The accusation is not without merit. Although China is moving away from its excess investment-led growth model, the underlying level of domestic savings remains excessively high. As such, the fear that these savings (and domestic under-consumption) will macroeconomically manifest itself in the form of domestic overproduction that is dumped overseas in export markets is real. And because a component of this overproduction is the product of industrial subsidies, this would amount to unfair trade-distorting competition in international markets.

Beijing continues to resist this characterization pointing to its competitiveness in these industries. And, it [initiated](#) pre-case consultations with the US at the WTO regarding the latter’s Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) clean vehicle tax credits, which it alleges is a noncomplaint trade subsidy measure. On April 26, China’s National People’s Congress also [passed](#) a revised Customs Law, as part of a codification of tax practices, that includes a new authorization for the State Council to impose retaliatory tariffs (Article 18). And in late-April, China’s Ministry of Commerce [announced](#) new anti-dumping tariffs of up to 43.5% on imports

of US propionic acid, a chemical additive used in animal feed and pesticides. Although the amounts involved are small, the measure is a shot across the bow given that Beijing had been reticent to escalate the already-high trade tensions.

CONCLUSION

The “new normal” in US-China relations continues to take shape, one piece at a time. The ‘new normal’ is not a ‘new Cold War’ as some have posited—although there is a palpable Cold War-style, zero-sum equation settling into their competition to dominate the high-technology and advanced manufacturing industries of tomorrow. Nor is the “new normal” merely a more contentious version of the mix of engagement and competition that characterized their four decade-long post-normalization period of ties. Strategic competition between the US and China is real and, if mismanaged, could drift into rivalry and across-the-board conflict—both hot and cold. That said, there is no one typology of interaction that cuts across the “baskets” of US-China issues; the two countries’ interactions, rather, span the range from the icy to the lukewarm.

The two countries’ labor ministers have never met (the US insists that genocide and forced labor [continues to be carried out](#) in Xinjiang) and US Trade Representative Katherine Tai has yet to show up in-person in Beijing and explain her administration’s stance on the Section 301 China tariffs—now judged by a WTO panel to be unlawfully imposed. Positioned toward the latter end of the spectrum is their cooperation on climate change as well as Washington’s and Beijing’s engagement on bilateral and multilateral macroeconomic and financial issues, helmed by their Economic and Financial Working Groups. A complex relationship demands complex choices, built as much on ideology and values as it is on realism and objectivity.

In an article in *Foreign Affairs* in August 2019, 18 months before they assumed their role as architects of the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific policy, Jake Sullivan and Kurt Campbell

wrote of the imperative to establish a “[clear-eyed coexistence](#) [with China] on terms favorable to US interests and values.” America could, and should, both challenge and coexist with China. In Spring 2024, the spelling out of the terms of that ‘clear-eyed coexistence’ remains a work in progress, while Beijing continues to pursue its interests reactively within this framework.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-CHINA RELATIONS

JANUARY-APRIL 2024

Jan. 4, 2024: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [releases](#) a statement designating the People's Republic of China as one of 12 "Countries of Particular Concern for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom."

Jan. 7, 2024: PRC foreign ministry [announces](#) the imposition of countermeasures against five US defense industry companies for arms sales to "China's Taiwan Region" in accordance with its Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law.

Jan. 8, 2024: US Justice Department, in partnership with other government partners, [sentences](#) a US Navy service member to 27 months in prison "for transmitting sensitive US military information to an intelligence officer from the People's Republic of China (PRC) in exchange for bribery payments."

Jan. 8-9, 2024: US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China, Taiwan, and Mongolia Michael Chase and PRC Deputy Director of the Central Military Commission Office for International Military Cooperation Major General Song Yanchao [meet](#) at the Pentagon for the 17th US-PRC Defense Policy Coordination Talks to discuss US-PRC defense relations.

Jan. 10, 2024: US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo [holds](#) a phone call with PRC Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao.

Jan. 10, 2024: US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas, accompanied by several other senior officials from various departments, [meets](#) with PRC Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong virtually to discuss "the importance of cooperating on key law enforcement issues, including combatting the illicit flow of synthetic drugs such as fentanyl and their precursor chemicals."

Jan. 12, 2024: Secretary Blinken [meets](#) with PRC Minister of the International Liaison Department Liu Jianchao [in](#) Washington, DC to "maintain open channels of communication" and discuss

"areas of potential cooperation and areas of difference."

Jan. 13, 2024: Secretary Blinken [releases](#) a statement congratulating Dr. Lai Ching-te on "his victory in Taiwan's presidential election," reiterating the US commitment "to maintaining cross-Straits peace and stability" and to the US 'One China' policy. PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson ["deplores" and firmly opposes](#) Secretary Blinken's statement.

Jan. 18, 2024: US Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack [meets](#) with PRC Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs Tang Renjian, the first meeting since 2015 of the Joint Committee on Cooperation in Agriculture.

Jan. 18-19, 2024: Senior officials from the US Department of the Treasury and the People's Bank of China, [hold](#) the third meeting of the Financial Working Group, the first time the meeting is held in China.

Jan. 23, 2024: US Permanent Representative to the United Nations Human Rights Council Ambassador Michèle Taylor, speaking on behalf of the 45th Session of the Universal Periodic Review Working Group, [releases](#) a statement on the PRC, listing recommendations and condemnations to the Secretariat of the Human Rights Council for the record.

Jan. 26-27, 2024: US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [meets](#) Chinese Communist Party Politburo Member and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Bangkok, Thailand for more than 12 hours over two days as part of efforts to "maintain open lines of communication and responsibly manage competition in the relationship as directed by the leaders" at the Woodside Summit in November 2023.

Jan 29, 2024: US Commerce Department [issues](#) a proposed rule that would compel US cloud companies to alert the government when foreign clients train their most powerful AI models using the compute power provided by these cloud companies.

Jan. 30, 2024: US Deputy Assistant to the President and US Deputy Homeland Security Advisor Jen Daskal [leads](#) an interagency delegation to Beijing to [launch](#) the US-PRC Counternarcotics Working Group, with both sides emphasizing “the need to coordinate on law enforcement actions; address the misuse of precursor chemicals, pill presses, and related equipment to manufacture illicit drugs; target the illicit financing of transnational criminal organization networks; and engage in multilateral fora.”

Jan. 30, 2024: Office of the United States Trade Representative [releases](#) the findings of its 2023 Review of Notorious Markets for Counterfeiting and Piracy, which lists several China-based e-commerce and social commerce markets, a cloud storage service, and “seven physical markets in China known for the manufacture, distribution, and sale of counterfeit goods.”

Jan. 31, 2024: US Federal Bureau of Investigation Christopher Wray [testifies](#) before the US House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party regarding the “CCP Cyber Threats to the American Homeland and National Security.”

Jan. 31, 2024: Department of Defense [updates](#) its list of names of “‘Chinese military companies’ operating directly or indirectly in the United States” in accordance with the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021.

Feb. 1, 2024: Deputy Secretary of Commerce Don Graves, speaking at the NTIA Spectrum Policy Symposium, [says](#) “[t]he US is engaged in a high-stakes, must-win competition over critical and emerging technologies with adversarial nations across the globe...As we speak, China is launching a concerted effort to dominate 5G deployment and the eventual development of 6G.”

Feb. 5-6, 2024: Senior officials from the Department of the Treasury and China’s Ministry of Finance [hold](#) the third meeting of the Economic Working Group, the first time the meeting is held in China.

Feb. 7, 2024: Department of Justice [arrests](#) an individual in California seeking to illegally transfer to China software and technology developed by the US government for use to detect nuclear missile launches and track ballistic and hypersonic missiles.

Feb. 7, 2024: US National Security Agency and partners [issue](#) a Cybersecurity Advisory titled “PRC State-Sponsored Actors Compromise and Maintain Persistent Access to US Critical Infrastructure.”

Feb. 7-8, 2024: USS *John Finn* (DDG 113) and USS *Gabrielle Giffords* (LCS 10) [conduct](#) trilateral operations with allied maritime forces from Japan and Australia in the South China Sea to “promote transparency, rule of law, freedom of navigation and all principles that underscore security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.”

Feb. 7-8, 2024: US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland and EU Secretary General Stefano Sannino [hold](#) sixth high-level meeting of the US-EU Dialogue on China and the fifth meeting of the US-EU High-Level Consultations on the Indo-Pacific in which they discussed several issues including “the trajectory of their respective bilateral relationships.”

Feb. 9, 2024: US Navy and Philippine Navy [conduct](#) the third iteration of the Maritime Cooperative Activity in the South China Sea, “reaffirming both nations’ commitment to bolstering regional security and stability” and “in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

Feb. 9, 2024: National Security Council [releases](#) a statement marking the two-year anniversary of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, reaffirming the US commitment to the region “amidst strategic competition with the People’s Republic of China.”

Feb. 12, 2024: US Space Force Chief of Space Operations Gen. Chance Saltzman [delivers](#) remarks at a public panel on great power competition, during which he names China as a “pacing threat” and explains “[w]e have to be able to assess...whether or not we are ready to engage an adversary like the PRC.”

Feb. 14, 2024: US Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson, testifying before the House of Representatives Committee on Financial Services, [lists](#) China as a threat to the US financial system and affirms “we will safeguard our priority interests, along with those of our allies and partners, and will protect human rights.”

Feb. 15, 2024: FBI Director Wray, in remarks at the Munich Security Conference, [highlights](#) “The

China Threat” and calls the Chinese government “the chief among those [cyber threat] adversaries.”

Feb. 15, 2024: USS *John Finn* (DDG 113) [conducts](#) a bilateral exercise with allied maritime forces from Japan in the South China Sea.

Feb. 16, 2024: Secretary Blinken [meets](#) with PRC Director of the Chinese Communist Party Central Foreign Affairs Commission and Foreign Minister Wang Yi [on](#) the margins of the Munich Security Conference.

Feb. 16, 2024: Multi-agency Disruptive Technology Strike Force, led by the Departments of Justice and Commerce, [releases](#) a fact sheet on its one-year anniversary summarizing its progress in its mission to “prevent nation-state actors [including China] from illicitly acquiring our most sensitive technology.”

Feb. 18, 2024: Secretary of Homeland Security Mayorkas [meets](#) PRC State Councilor and Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong [in](#) Vienna “to advance cooperation with the PRC in the fight against the scourge of fentanyl, its precursor chemicals, and associated equipment.”

Feb. 20, 2024: White House [hosts](#) a background call to preview the “Biden-Harris Administration Initiative to Bolster the Cybersecurity of US Ports,” during which US Deputy National Security Advisor for Cyber and Emerging Technologies Anne Neuberger calls the People’s Republic of China-manufactured ship-to-shore cranes an “acute...cyber vulnerability.”

Feb. 21, 2024: Biden-Harris Administration [issues](#) an [Executive Order](#) to bolster the cybersecurity of US maritime ports, which includes a “Maritime Security Directive on cyber risk management actions for ship-to-shore cranes manufactured by the People’s Republic of China located at US Commercial Strategic Seaports.”

Feb. 21, 2024: US Senior Official for the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Jung Pak [holds](#) a videoconference with PRC Special Representative on Korean Peninsula Affairs Liu Xiaoming to discuss the DPRK’s increasing destabilization and its deepening military cooperation with Russia, with both parties agreeing on the need for stability and dialogue.

Feb. 23, 2024: Office of the USTR [releases](#) its 2023 Report to Congress on China’s WTO Compliance and Trade Representative Katherine Tai remarks how “China remains the biggest challenge to the international trading system established by the World Trade Organization” in spite of China having acceded to the WTO in 2001.

Feb. 24, 2024: G7 Leaders [release](#) a joint statement focused on the Russia-Ukraine conflict in which they express “concern about transfers to Russia from businesses in the People’s Republic of China of dual-use materials and components for weapons and equipment for military production.”

Feb. 25, 2024: US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns [conducts](#) an interview with *60 Minutes* in Beijing during which he summarizes the current state of US-China relations: “We’re going to compete. We have to compete responsibly and keep the peace between our countries. But we also have to engage.”

Feb. 26, 2024: Trade Representative Tai [participates](#) in a “robust” bilateral meeting with PRC Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao during the first day of the World Trade Organization’s 13th Ministerial Conference, resulting in the two parties agreeing “to work on areas of shared cooperation” as well as those of competition.

Feb. 28, 2024: Biden-Harris administration [issues](#) an Executive Order on Preventing Access to Americans’ Bulk Sensitive Personal Data and United States Government-Related Data by Countries of Concern.

Feb. 29, 2024: White House [releases](#) a Fact Sheet on taking action to “Address Risks of Autos from China and Other Countries of Concern.”

March 5, 2024: USS *John Finn* (DDG 113) [conducts](#) a routine south-to-north Taiwan Strait transit “through a corridor in the Taiwan Strait that is beyond any coastal state’s territorial seas.”

March 5, 2024: Department of State [releases](#) a press statement saying the US “stands with our ally the Philippines following the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) provocative actions against lawful Philippine maritime operations in the South China Sea on March 5,” also calling “upon the PRC to abide by the ruling and desist from its dangerous and destabilizing conduct.”

March 6, 2024: US Attorney General Merrick Garland [announces](#) the arrest and indictment of a Chinese national residing in California charged with theft of trade secrets in connection with an alleged plan to steal artificial intelligence-related technology from Google “while covertly working for China-based companies seeking an edge in the AI technology race.”

March 7, 2024: In his 2024 State of the Union speech, President Biden briefly [refers](#) to China directly, openly disagreeing that “China’s on the rise and America is falling behind” and lauding the Biden-Harris administration’s efforts to stay economically and technologically competitive with China.

March 11, 2024: Secretary of Defense Austin [says](#) the President’s Fiscal Year 2025 Defense Budget is “paced to the challenge posed by an increasingly aggressive People’s Republic of China.”

March 11-12, 2024: US Ambassador to China Burns, hosted by US Consul General Gregory May, [visits](#) Hong Kong for the first time in his role as US ambassador to China.

March 12, 2024: PRC State Council [releases](#) its Government Work Report, which affirms its interest in the “peaceful development of cross-strait relations” and “integrated cross-strait development.”

March 12, 2024: Trade Representative Tai [releases](#) a statement on a petition filed by five US national unions “requesting an investigation into the acts, policies, and practices of the PRC in the maritime, logistics, and shipbuilding sector,” noting that “[w]e have seen the PRC create dependencies and vulnerabilities in multiple sectors.”

March 15, 2024: US Ambassador to China Burns, speaking at a virtual seminar on US-China relations, [calls](#) the US and China competition “quite profound” and notes the two “will very likely be systemic rivals well into the next decade,” to which China’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian [responds](#) that “Ambassador Burns has recently made negative comments on China on multiple occasions.”

March 19, 2024: Department of Justice [arrests](#) a Canadian national and Chinese resident in New York for conspiring with a Chinese national “to send to undercover law enforcement officers

trade secrets that belonged to a leading US-based electric vehicle company.”

March 19, 2024: Secretary Blinken, speaking at a joint news conference with his counterpart in Manila, [reaffirms](#) the “ironclad commitment” to the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty and how it “extends to any armed attacks...anywhere in the South China Sea,” to which Beijing immediately [responds](#) that the US has “no right to interfere.”

March 21, 2024: Department of State Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel, at a press briefing, [says](#) the US “recognizes Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory” and strongly opposes any unilateral attempts to advance territorial claims.

March 22, 2024: Secretary Blinken [releases](#) a statement on Hong Kong’s New National Security Law that objects to its “vaguely defined provisions” and condemns “efforts to intimidate, harass, and limit the free speech of US citizens and residents.”

March 25, 2024: Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control [sanctions](#) a Wuhan, China-based “Ministry of State Security (MSS) front company that has served as cover for multiple malicious cyber operations.”

March 25, 2024: Department of Justice [unseals](#) an indictment of seven nationals of the People’s Republic of China who committed computer instructions in support of China’s Ministry of State Security targeting perceived critics of China in addition to US businesses and politicians.

March 26, 2024: Trade Representative Tai [releases](#) a statement regarding China’s [request](#) for WTO consultations regarding parts of the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, stating that the US will “continue to work with allies and partners to address the PRC’s unfair, non-market policies and practices.”

March 27, 2024: Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell [holds](#) a phone conversation with China’s Executive Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu [as](#) “part of ongoing efforts to maintain open lines of communication...and responsibly manage competition in the relationship.”

March 27, 2024: Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen, speaking at Suniva in Norcross, Georgia, [describes](#) the “excess capacity that we are seeing

in China” as a “particular” concern for the US and notes her Chinese counterparts will be pressed to address this issue.

March 27, 2024: President Xi [meets](#) representatives of US business, strategic and academic communities at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. It is his first meeting with a visiting US business delegation since 2015.

March 28, 2024: Department of Defense [releases](#) its Defense Industrial Base Cybersecurity Strategy 2024, which lists China as “A Major Disruptor” and asserts China’s goal is to “[c]onstrain the US and become the Commercial Center of Gravity in the World.”

March 28, 2024: US Embassy & Consulates in China [celebrates](#) opening of a newly relocated consulate facility in Wuhan, China, which US Ambassador Burns and several Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other Chinese representatives attended and expressed support for.

March 29, 2024: Secretary Blinken [releases](#) to US Congress the Hong Kong Policy Act Report for 2024, commenting that “[t]his year’s report catalogs the intensifying repression and ongoing crackdown by PRC and Hong Kong authorities on civil society, media, and dissenting voices” and subsequently announcing the Department of State “is taking steps to impose new visa restrictions on multiple Hong Kong officials.”

April 2, 2024: President Biden [holds](#) a “candid and constructive” phone call [with](#) President Xi to address “a range of bilateral, regional, and global issues, including areas of cooperation and areas of difference.”

April 2, 2024: Department of Homeland Security [releases](#) the Cyber Safety Review Board’s findings and recommendations following its independent review of the Summer 2023 Microsoft Exchange Online intrusion, which found that the intrusion was conducted “by Storm-0558, a hacking group assessed to be affiliated with the People’s Republic of China.”

April 3-4, 2024: Representatives from US Indo-Pacific Command, US Pacific Fleet, and US Pacific Air Forces [meet](#) with People’s Liberation Army representatives in Honolulu, Hawaii for the first Military Maritime Consultative Agreement working group held since December 2021.

April 6, 2024: Secretary of the Treasury Yellen [meets](#) with Chinese Premier Li Qiang in Beijing, China to deepen bilateral discussions.

April 7, 2024: Secretary of the Treasury Yellen [meets](#) Minister of Finance Lan Fo’an to discuss the role of their departments in “maintaining a durable communication channel between the US and China.”

April 8, 2024: Secretary of the Treasury Yellen, speaking at a press conference in Beijing, [reviews](#) the “significant progress” made in the US-China economic relationship over the last year and during her visit to China, concluding “[t]here is much more work to do” as the US aims to find “a way forward so that both countries can live in a world of peace and prosperity.”

April 4-5, 2024: US-EU Trade and Technology Council holds its sixth ministerial meeting and [releases](#) a joint statement saying the parties have “engaged with other countries who share our concerns about China’s non-market policies and practices in the medical devices sector, and conveyed these concerns directly to China.”

April 9, 2024: Administrator of the US Agency for International Development Samantha Power, testifying before the Senate, [details](#) China’s “global lending spree” and “flagrant disregard for human rights” as a case of how “other global powers are working aggressively to erode US alliances, undermine democracy, and diminish basic rights and freedoms.”

April 11, 2024: Leaders of Japan, the Philippines and the US hold an inaugural trilateral summit and [release](#) a joint vision statement that highlights their “serious concerns” about aggressive, dangerous and coercive behavior in both the South China Sea and East China Sea.

April 12, 2024: Inaugural US-Philippines 3+3 Meeting is [held](#) in Washington, D.C., during which both parties deepened coordination on issues including “repeated harassment of lawful Philippine operations by the People’s Republic of China.”

April 14-16, 2024: US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink and US National Security Council Senior Director for China and Taiwan Affairs Sarah Beran [meet](#) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Executive Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu, Director General of the North American and

Oceanian Affairs Department Yang Tao, and Taiwan Affairs Office Deputy Director Qiu Kaiming [in](#) Beijing, “as part of ongoing efforts to maintain open channels of communication and responsibly manage competition.”

April 16, 2024: Trade Representative Tai [testifies](#) before the Senate Committee on Finance that the Biden administration “will continue to stand up to China’s unfair, non-market policies and practices” alongside partners and allies, emphasizing the complexity of the bilateral relationship and echoing President Joe Biden’s sentiments that “we want competition with China, not conflict.”

April 16, 2024: Secretary of Defense Austin [speaks](#) with China’s Minister of National Defense Adm. Dong Jun via video conference [on](#) US-China defense relations, military-to-military relations, as well as both regional and global security issues.

April 16, 2024: Fourth US–People’s Republic of China Economic and Financial Working Groups are [held](#) in Washington, DC, both of which discuss macro- and micro-issues of import and conclude with mutual commitments to continually deepen bilateral communications.

April 16, 2024: US Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs Lee Satterfield [meets](#) with the China’s Vice Minister of Culture and Tourism Li Qun in Washington, to discuss cooperation and collaboration specific to archaeology and cultural heritage.

April 17, 2024: A US Navy P-8A Poseidon surveillance aircraft [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait in “international airspace.”

April 17, 2024: President Biden [gives](#) a speech in a presidential campaign stop at the United Steelworkers Headquarters in Pennsylvania titled “New Actions to Protect US Steel and Shipbuilding Industry from China’s Unfair Practices.”

April 17, 2024: Office of the USTR, following a review of a petition filed on March 12 by five US national labor unions, [initiates](#) a Section 301 investigation into “the PRC’s longstanding efforts to dominate the maritime, logistics, and shipbuilding sectors.” Beijing [expresses](#) strong dissatisfaction to the investigation.

April 19, 2024: G7 foreign ministers [release](#) a “Statement on Addressing Global Challenges,

Fostering Partnerships” in which they “recognize the importance of constructive and stable relations with China” and reaffirm interest in “a balanced and reciprocal collaboration with China aimed at promoting global economic growth,” among other issues and concerns.

April 19, 2024: US Ambassador to the China Burns [meets](#) Special Envoy Zhai Jun of the Chinese Government on the Middle East Issue in Beijing.

April 21, 2024: US and 28 other navies gather at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) in Qingdao, China, where an updated Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) and the forming of a Working Group on Unmanned Systems is [adopted](#).

April 22, 2024: US-Philippine 39th *Balikatan Exercise*, joined in part by the French navy and set to conclude on May 10, [kicks off](#) in the South China Sea region.

April 23, 2024: President Biden [signs](#) into law a bill that would ban TikTok in the United States unless it is divested by its Chinese owner ByteDance within a year.

April 24, 2024: Department of State [releases](#) a Joint Statement on the Philippines-United States Bilateral Strategic Dialogue which reaffirms US support for the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration ruling concluded by the Permanent Court of Arbitration.

April 24, 2024: Secretary of State Blinken arrives in Shanghai to begin his three-day diplomatic visit, [speaking](#) with New York University Shanghai students and [then](#) with members of the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai.

April 25, 2024: Department of Justice [unseals](#) an indictment of two Chinese nationals for crimes related to a conspiracy to illegally export US semiconductor manufacturing technology to “prohibited end users in China.”

April 25, 2024: Federal Communications Commission [orders](#) the US units of four Chinese telecom companies to [discontinue](#) fixed or mobile broadband operations within 60 days, as part of a larger net neutrality order.

April 26, 2024: Secretary of State Blinken travels from Shanghai to Beijing and [meets](#) separately

with [President Xi Jinping](#), Director of the Chinese Communist Party Central Foreign Affairs Commission and Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#), Minister of Public Security [Wang Xiaohong](#) to follow up on commitments made at the Woodside Summit in November 2023, discuss “responsibly managing competition,” and address a range of other global concerns including Russia’s industrial base, the conflicts in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip, human rights, illicit drugs, and artificial intelligence.

April 26, 2024: Department of Homeland Security [announces](#) the establishment of the Artificial Intelligence Safety and Security Board to advise the Department and the broader public on the “safe and secure development and deployment of AI technology in our nation’s critical infrastructure” to stay ahead of potentially hostile nation-state actors such as the PRC.

April 26, 2024: Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress [adopts](#) a revised Customs Law that includes a new authorization for the State Council to impose retaliatory tariffs.

April 29, 2024: US and Taiwan [start](#) another in-person negotiating round for the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade in Taipei, Taiwan.

April 30, 2024: Department of Labor Deputy Undersecretary for International Affairs Thea Lee, testifying before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, [argues](#) that “ongoing human and labor rights violations in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” make reliable audits “impossible.”

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

US-KOREA RELATIONS

RIGHT WHERE WE LEFT IT

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The first reporting period of 2024 US-Korea relations was busy, both with managing ongoing issues (good and bad) and adapting to genuinely new evolutionary turns in US-Korea affairs. Concerning the former, US-South Korea relations continued on the same trajectory since President Yoon Suk Yeol assumed office in 2022: deepening bilateral alliance interoperability, enriching trilateral cooperation with Japan, increasing economic security policy convergence with the US. And this despite new foreign, defense, finance, and trade ministers in Seoul. Widely viewed as a referendum on Yoon, [April National Assembly elections](#) cast a shadow over much of his foreign and security policy during the reporting period. However, the crushing defeat of Yoon’s conservative People Power Party is unlikely to affect his approach to external affairs, where the president retains significant unilateral power. The “management” bucket also contains more threatening scenarios that have been building for months, years, decades. At the top of the list in importance is North Korea’s build-out of its nuclear and missile program, which continued apace in the January-April 2024 period, also providing more evidence of the essential hopelessness of international sanctions.

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This is connected to—albeit distinct from—the reflorescence of Pyongyang-Moscow relations. Government and open source intelligence reports throughout early 2024 demonstrate continued [massive North Korean arms sales](#) to support Russia’s war against Ukraine. Beyond financial, food, and energy assistance, the Kim Jong Un regime’s compensation for these transfers is unclear, but the possibilities are all menacing: international diplomatic cover for malign behavior, military satellite technology assistance, missile program assistance, etc. North Korea’s continued refusal to engage with the US diplomatically adds to the danger via greater misperception during potential crises. Given this threat environment, the [re-igniting in February](#) of discussion in South Korea regarding nuclear weapons development—one year after the Washington Declaration was supposed to put the issue to rest—represents another management headache for the US.

Finally, the January-April 2024 period also included substantial evolution in US-Korea affairs. Notably, North Korea [debuted a new policy line](#) denoting South Korea as an “enemy,” “implacably hostile” state no longer subject to attempts at “peaceful unification.” This was followed by numerous legal/bureaucratic/administrative and on-the-ground changes (including mining inter-Korean connector roads in the DMZ) to demonstrate resolve. North Korea’s historically official position that unification should be achieved through “peaceful” means may have always been a fiction, but words have meaning, and these changes indicate that North Korea is priming for a fight by codifying the right to destroy South Korea and South Korean citizens as though they are any other enemy and not consanguines. This is not just an inter-Korean issue, as the tension inherent in this position has downstream effects on the US-South Korea alliance.

In the international sphere, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Panel of Experts (PoE) was [formally dissolved](#) consequent to a Russian UNSC veto—likely in-kind payment for North Korea’s weapons largesse. This devolving of concerted international action seemingly brings an end to a period in which there was at least a fig-leaf of major-power agreement on monitoring North Korean sanctions evasion.

US-South Korea Relations: Two Is Better Than One... and Three is Better Than Two

The initial reporting period in 2024 US-South Korea relations was marked by the domestic weakness of President Yoon Suk Yeol. He ordered a [re-shuffle](#) of key foreign, security/defense, intelligence, and economy cabinet officials in late 2023 and into early 2024. Following Shin Won-sik’s assumption of the defense minister post in late 2023, Ahn Duk-gun (trade minister), Choi Sang-mok (finance minister), Cho Tae-yong (national intelligence director), Chang Ho-jin (national security advisor), and Cho Tae-yul (foreign minister) all took new positions in January 2024.

This was no anodyne re-shuffle, but an (expected) attempt at breathing new life into Yoon’s external relations portfolio ahead of his party challenging for a majority in April National Assembly elections. Yoon—never politically popular, and increasingly surrounded by scandals—hoped that the changes would flip the political script while still providing policy continuity. The latter has largely been the case, despite the new team handling the highest affairs of defense, security, intelligence, and international economic relations (the latter of which are themselves increasingly connected to security) during a tricky period. US-South Korea alliance relations remain strong, trilateral cooperation with Japan is gaining in maturity, Seoul and Beijing continue to seek a stable equilibrium with difficulty, and economic security choices are sharpening. Despite the continuity, Seoul seems to use the “Global Pivotal State” slogan less than under Foreign Minister Cho’s predecessor, Park Jin, a smooth-tongued diplomat beloved by South Korea’s allies and friends abroad, who hope that the receding slogan does not portend a receding South Korea.



Figure 1 Lee Jae-myung (C), head of the main opposition Democratic Party and a candidate in the Gyeyang-B district in Incheon, 27 kilometers west of Seoul, is at his election office on April 11, 2024 Photo: Yonhap

The re-shuffle did not improve Yoon's favorability or the electoral fortunes of the conservative People Power Party (PPP). Despite being gifted with an allegedly corrupt opposition in disarray, a series of remarkable domestic [political gaffes](#) and [scandals](#) led Yoon and the PPP to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, [going down in flames](#) in the April election. The results were not close: the progressive coalition led by the Democratic Party arriving at 188 seats and the PPP and its affiliate with a paltry 108 (out of 300 total seats). This huge majority gives the progressives numerous levers to make Yoon and the PPP miserable, including fast-track legislative authority and the ability to launch investigations into corruption and malfeasance of those surrounding Yoon. Yoon will be the first South Korean president to never have a legislative majority, and excepting essential legislation (e.g., budget) for which there is precedent for bipartisan action, he is likely to spend most of the rest of his term using his pen to veto opposition legislation and sign executive orders. Moreover, with a 2027 presidential election looming and the South Korean president term-limited to one five-year mandate, Yoon will face impending lame-duck status within his own party.

The good news for Yoon—such as it is—is that the South Korean presidency has very strong levers of power for foreign, defense, and security policy. He will thus be incentivized to focus as much (or even more) of his energies in those areas than before. Yoon is—infamously—allergic to changing course (this stubbornness

undermined his party dramatically in the legislative elections), so one should expect that Yoon's efforts in the foreign, defense, and security policy space will largely continue along the same path: strengthening the US-South Korea alliance, deepening trilateral security cooperation with the US and Japan, navigating the challenges of a shifting regional/global economic security landscape.

The strength of the US-South Korea alliance is most evident in combined military exercises, which have accelerated throughout Yoon's term in office. The first four months of 2024 continued the trend, with the US and South Korea carrying out their [annual Freedom Shield exercises](#), including live-fire air-assault drills (which North Korea [attempted to disrupt](#) through navigation jamming) and a US-South Korea [nuclear table-top exercise](#) incorporated in the US-South Korea Korea-Integrated Defense Dialogue (held concurrently in Washington with *Freedom Shield*). Beyond the normally scheduled joint training, the US and South Korea fulfilled Washington Declaration commitments to engage in frequent bilateral military exercise scenarios, including several joint air drills (featuring [high-end assets such as the F35](#)), [airborne assault](#) exercises, and [joint space](#) conflict training. On two occasions, US marines [rotated](#) on to the Peninsula to train with South Korean counterparts at high-tech live-fire sites. Seoul also sent military personnel and assets to participate in US-led [multinational](#) submarine and air exercises off Guam, as well as at the annual [Cobra Gold](#) exercises in Thailand.

Arguably the most important recent development in US-South Korea military exercises has been their increasing trilateralization with Japan following the August 2023 Camp David summit. The rhythm of US-South Korea-Japan military exercises across air and sea domains continued at a heightened pace during the January-April 2024 period. Already in January, the three states held [combined naval drills](#) to shore up interoperability and underscore trilateral deterrence against North Korea following Pyongyang's launch of a hypersonic missile. Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo responded to an April ballistic missile launch by North Korea via (inter alia) [joint air maneuvers](#) including strategic assets such as B-52 bombers.

And in mid-April, the US-South Korea-Japan combined militaries [conducted naval exercises](#) involving a US aircraft carrier. Unlike the other two drills, this exercise in interoperability was long-planned as a part of ongoing routinization of trilateral military collaboration to deter North Korea.

Beyond military exercises toward interoperability and combined deterrence, trilateralism was visible in other areas also. Unsurprisingly, many trilateral meetings and statements concerned North Korea in some way. As has become increasingly frequent, US, South Korean, and Japanese diplomats and senior officials often [coordinated messages](#) to underscore a combined front in pushing back against North Korea. On multiple occasions, the three countries' special envoys, foreign ministers, defense ministers, and others met to discuss responses to North Korean malign behavior (missile launches, cybercrime, sanctions evasion), producing public statements of a unified stance. The first trimester of 2024 also marked the start of a year of Washington-South Korea-Japan overlap at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), another venue in which US diplomats coordinated on North Korea issues. This was especially evident as the UN Panel of Experts (PoE) monitoring North Korean sanctions evasion was [terminated due to a Russian veto](#) at the UNSC, leading the [US, South Korea, and Japan](#) to call for the [establishment of a multinational watchdog](#) to take over the task.



Figure 2 UN members call for a multinational alternative to the PoE. Photo: KBS World

The fate of the PoE was not a bolt from the blue: Russia had been telegraphing the possibility of

terminating it, a formal nail in the sanctions enforcement coffin informally hewn by Moscow's rampant sanctions-busting trade with North Korea since at least 2019. Moscow likely considered the PoE termination an in-kind payment for the thousands of containers of weapons Pyongyang shipped to Russia to support the war effort in Ukraine. This malign tie-up was also a subject of [coordinated trilateral naming-and-shaming](#) at senior official level on multiple occasions. Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo are genuinely concerned that North Korean artillery and ballistic missile shipments to Russia will make a meaningful (if likely marginal) difference in Russia's ability to advance its military objectives, further undermining the international rules-based order. Additionally, all three allies—and especially South Korea—are worried about the military technological assistance flowing in the other direction also, allowing North Korea to grow its weapons and (possibly) military intelligence satellite programs.

Finally, as concerns US-South Korea-Japan trilateral cooperation, the January-April 2024 period announced new developments and the growth of continuing trends. As for the former, the three allies announced plans to work together on [collective quantum computing competitiveness](#), as well as [supply chain security](#). Regarding the latter, both US President Joe Biden and NATO leadership announced plans to [invite](#) President Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida to the NATO summit in Washington in July, which may lead to a trilateral summit on the sidelines.

Of course, a trilateral with Japan requires a solid US-South Korea core, which got the usual workout during the first trimester of 2024. Washington and Seoul made all the standard bilateral diplomatic statements [condemning](#) North Korean malfeasance (missile launches, etc.), and showed increasing [urgency](#) in doing so against Moscow-Pyongyang military cooperation in the context of the Ukraine war (as discussed above). Venues for this condemnation included both NATO (where South Korea is a Global Partner) and the UNSC (where South Korea began a two-year nonpermanent member period in January).

Economic cooperation—notably in areas related to economic/technological security, export controls, and other “de-risking” approaches to China—was another major (if uneasy) field of development in US-South Korea alliance relations during the first trimester of 2024. At the end of April, the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) finally [entered into force](#) in South Korea. The US also announced in April that South Korea’s Samsung Corporation would receive [\\$6.4 billion in grants](#) supporting its [\\$40 billion](#) chipmaking investment in Texas. SK Hynix [began delivering](#) fifth-generation high-bandwidth chips to fabless NVIDIA and [announced](#) a \$4 billion chip packaging plant in Indiana. Top US and Korean business leaders met also, as Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg [visited Korea](#) (Samsung in particular), and GM [discussed a tie-up](#) with Samsung in areas of electric vehicle batteries. The flip side of cooperation is [constraint](#), however, and South Korea [voiced concern](#) on a number of US-led initiatives, such as export controls on semiconductors and IRA-based [sourcing rules](#) on critical minerals for electric vehicle batteries. In both cases, South Korea continued to press for greater US flexibility in interpretation and timing of certain measures that Seoul argues are unrealistic or draconian.

Various and sundry other occasions also presented themselves for US-South Korea interaction. Washington and Seoul [pushed forward](#) on joint cyber policy against North Korean cyber threats, including combined [cyber drills](#). Seoul’s hosting of the [Summit for Democracy](#) allowed the US and South Korea to reinforce rhetorical commitment to shared values in politics, and January featured [statements from top Washington-Seoul diplomats](#) on the importance of stability in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait (it remains to be seen if South Korea will continue its rhetorical adventurousness vis-à-vis China ahead of a possible [China-Japan-South Korea summit](#) in Seoul in late May). President Biden’s hosting of Japanese Prime Minister Kishida for a state visit in April occasioned increased discussion the role of “minilateral” networks in the Indo-Pacific, including possible [AUKUS pillar 2](#) (AI, quantum computing, etc.) participation by Japan and South Korea. South Korea, under Yoon at least, is certainly showing interest, as it [reiterated the possibility](#) at the South Korea-Australia 2+2 in

April. On the cultural diplomacy front, two Major League Baseball (MLB) teams—the Los Angeles Dodgers and San Diego Padres—[visited Seoul and successfully held both exhibition games](#) with local South Korean teams and two regulation MLB games to start the regular season.

Of course, not all is perfect in the US-South Korea alliance. The US presidential election in November is looming, and South Korea—especially the Yoon administration, which has worked so well with Biden—is [worried](#) about the possible return to office of Donald Trump. Trump is famously dismissive of and ignorant about alliances in general and the US-South Korea alliance in particular, structures bilateral relationships as transactional, cares not about values other than “Trump First” and “America First,” and openly solicits dictators (including North Korea’s Kim Jong Un), among other international political vices. Most South Koreans have a dim [view](#) of Trump’s approach to the Korean Peninsula during the 2016–2021 period, so the prospect of his re-election prompted Yoon administration attempts at prophylactic measures starting in 2024. For instance, Yoon (and Biden) instructed teams to begin re-negotiating the [Special Measures Agreement](#) (SMA, South Korean funding for the US military presence in South Korea) ahead of schedule to hopefully have a deal on the way before Trump would be able to use the SMA as a cudgel threatening the alliance. Yoon, Biden, and Kishida continued work from last fall to “lock-in” trilateral cooperation, making it tougher for Trump to kill it.

But history doesn’t repeat, it rhymes, and Trump 2.0 could be very different from Trump 1.0. For one thing, he is likely to have a large number of relatively unknown advisors around him, in part because so many former Trump officials refuse to work for him again. This has a practical consequence: Yoon-adjacent experts and government think-tank affiliated analysts now incorporate stops at Trump-friendly think-tanks and political organizations in Washington during their travels to the US, mostly to bank access to potential future Trump 2.0 officials.

Lastly, the prospect of Trump 2.0 has re-ignited the South Korea nuclear weapons debate. Trump held an end April/early May [Time interview](#), in which he again placed [transactional conditions](#)

on US willingness to keep troops on the peninsula and defend South Korea. Christopher Miller, Trump's final (acting) secretary of defense and possible appointee for the position for Trump 2.0, [gave an interview](#) toying with the idea of pulling some troops off the Peninsula. Elbridge Colby, another former Trump senior official and possible major security and defense player in a new Trump administration, [all but encouraged](#) South Korea to develop nuclear weapons given constraints on US military resources and the need focus them on China. The threat of abandonment—even if negligible—cannot be overstated in terms of its clarifying effect on South Korea strategic elites, who fret that international disorder from Ukraine and the Middle East could incentivize North Korea and China to engage in highly risk-tolerant behavior. Were the US not to meet its extended deterrence commitments, South Korea could be looking at catastrophe. Consequently, South Koreans, both elites and the public (which remains [60–70% in favor](#)), have begun to again discuss South Korean nuclear weapons acquisition, a discussion that quieted after the 2023 Washington Declaration and the introduction of the Nuclear Consultative Group. In February, President Yoon himself brought up the possibility (albeit to brush it away *for the moment*). A late April CSIS [elite survey](#) showed that 34% are in favor of developing nuclear weapons (66% reject the option), but that the percentage supporting indigenous South Korean nuclear weapons jumps to 51% if the US appears to fail in its security commitments, such as via withdrawing soldiers from the Peninsula.

US-North Korea Relations: You Need to Calm Down

As with the last reporting period, the US spent much of the first four months of 2024 dealing with the ramifications of North Korea's increasing alignment with Russia, specifically Pyongyang's provision of munitions for Moscow's ongoing invasion of Ukraine. While there was not a repeat of Kim Jong Un's September 2023 meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, high-level [meetings](#) between Russian and North Korean officials have continued, and CSIS Beyond Parallel [reported](#) in late February that starting in August 2023 more than two dozen different visits to Najin, North Korea, took place for the provision of munitions

destined for Russian use against Ukraine. Furthermore, nearly 20 “dark vessels”—vessels with their AIS transmissions turned off to avoid outside detection—visited Vostochny Port in Russia in that time. The result: more than 2.5 million rounds of artillery shells and other munitions to Russia. As of May 2024, the US government estimates that Pyongyang has provided at least [10,000 containers](#) of munitions to Moscow, and evidence of the use of North Korean artillery shells and ballistic missiles in the field is [confirmed by open source intelligence](#). The closer coordination between these two, plus their relations with China and Iran (an “axis of upheaval,” as our Regional Overview authors call it), leaves officials such as the head of US Strategic Command [concerned](#) about “simultaneous conflicts with multiple nuclear-armed adversaries.” At the very least, North Korea is likely getting various forms of financial, energy, food, and technical assistance from Russia in exchange for weapons transfers, in addition to [intelligence about the performance](#) of some of its arsenal (although there are questions about [high failure rate](#) and whether North Korea has shipped low-quality arms to Russia).



Figure 3 Putin and Choe. Photo: Yonhap

With limited options to halt the exchanges (thanks to Russia's veto power at the UNSC, inter alia) the US has addressed the collusion by [seeking to draw attention](#) to it (along with the [South Koreans](#)), [imposed sanctions](#) on those Russian entities instituting the exchanges, and led international efforts to condemn the attacks. This includes rallying [South Korean condemnation](#), as well as [NATO's](#) and (on [multiple](#) occasions) the [G7's](#). Beyond that, Washington tracks the [continued efforts](#) by the

North to simultaneously deepen its ties with Russia and China, and to prevent it, given that China's own "no limits" partnership with Russia has seemingly precluded provision of lethal aid. State officials have also said they have [tightened](#) sanctions to curb such exchanges, though what effect this has had is unclear.

It also says much about the deterioration of the international security space—thanks to the upheaval axis' activities—in the past two years that North Korea's continued testing activities remain under the radar, comparatively speaking. While Russia continues its offensives and attacks on Ukraine's infrastructure, Iran backs Hamas against Israel's efforts to dislodge it, and China continues to provoke the Philippines in the South China Sea, North Korea continues to methodically proliferate and prepare for conflict. This [includes](#) live-fire drills from its western coast, [tests](#) of hypersonic warheads (including from a solid-fuel IRBM), [several tests](#) of cruise missiles (including [ones](#) launched by submarine), and [guided](#) artillery firing drills simulating attacks on an "enemy's capital." As with the response to Russian arms, the US response appears consigned to [condemnation](#), sanctions, attempts to rally [international support](#) at the UNSC, and calls for "[serious and sustained](#)" diplomacy that are certain to be ignored.

For now the US [finds](#) no evidence of North Korean plans to take direct military action, although at the end of 2023 and throughout 2024 Pyongyang has consistently raised tensions by declaring South Korea an "enemy," and "implacably hostile" state (a topic dealt with in greater detail in the chapter on inter-Korean relations). Seoul is no longer a misguided "brother" requiring return to the fold, but rather a state open to annihilation and occupation like any other. Chairman Kim has consequently ordered the mining of inter-Korean connector roads, demanded that the military [prepare](#) its naval forces for war, and [called](#) for practical war drills in response to joint US-South Korea military exercises. The lack of inter-Korean hotlines and US-North Korea diplomacy makes possibilities for misperception greater. Thus the dire state of inter-Korean relations affects the US, as the increased likelihood of skirmishes (or even

crisis) tests US military strategy and readiness on the Peninsula.

Washington and Seoul can, for the moment, take small comfort in the fact that North Korea's capabilities do not seem to match intent, from its failed efforts to [jam US-South Korea navigation systems](#) during drills, to a lack of success in [hypersonic tests](#), and (more recently) reports that its missiles in Ukraine consistently [blow up mid-air or veer off course](#). That hostile intent, however, cannot be denied, and makes North Korea's shortcomings in capability only mildly less worrying.

Various odds and ends also marked US-North Korea relations in the first trimester of 2024. One peculiarity was Pyongyang's apparent (feigned?) [openness to diplomacy](#) with Tokyo. For a brief moment, Japan responded cautiously but positively, as did the US (perhaps interested in finding any way to get North Korea to engage), but then Kim Yo Jong conditioned potential talks on an unacceptable agenda, and the prospect seemed to evaporate. Was the call for talks genuine? A red-herring? An attempt to drive a wedge between the US, South Korea, and Japan? There was also some speculation that post-COVID North Korea might begin to [open back up](#) to European diplomatic delegations, perhaps as a precursor to a broader opening, but those hopes have also seemingly stagnated. With Pyongyang still largely closed off from the West, cooperating with Russia and China, and its weaponry and rhetorical hostility growing apace, Washington's options appear limited to trying to maintain deterrence and curtail the North's various means of defying sanctions, such as [cryptocurrency theft](#) and oil smuggling, through court [orders](#) and ad hoc multilateral [agreements](#).

Conclusion: Cruel Summer?

What North Korea intends through its provocative measures has been widely debated among watchers of the Peninsula, with some [claiming](#) the "strategic" decision to go to war has already been made, and others stating the North is taking steps to win a war should one break out, but not actually seeking to provoke it. Others say such actions may instead be mere posturing ahead of the [US elections in the fall](#), after which Pyongyang might have a negotiating partner more to their liking. Assuming as much might be

dangerous, though, as the 2019 Hanoi summit showed Donald Trump to be less pliant than expected, while subsequent [correspondence](#) revealed that Kim took the summit's failure personally. It was this perceived "betrayal" that led him to change course in foreign policy, away from seeking reconciliation with Washington.

Kim can continue to maintain or even escalate his provocations, however, notably in the gray-zone, through the months to come in the hopes of undermining the standing of the incumbent administration. Even if it seems unlikely that Korean Peninsula security is the issue on which the US election will turn, supporters of a Trump presidency are fond of reminiscing about the relative lack of missile tests that took place between 2018 and 2021. Even if there is limited space for improved relations between the US and North Korea, there is plenty of room for relations between Washington and Seoul to deteriorate from their current highs—on [both](#) the [security](#) and economic fronts.

That might serve Kim Jong Un's purposes as well as another summit.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2024

Jan. 5, 2024: US official [claims](#) that North Korea has sent several dozen ballistic missiles to Russia.

Jan. 5, 2024: Senior defense officials of South Korea and the United States strongly [condemn](#) North Korea's announcement to launch more spy satellites.

Jan. 7, 2024: A military source [says](#) North Korea is conducting live-fire drills from its western coast.

Jan. 7, 2024: South Korea's military [says](#) North Korea fires artillery off western coast for a third consecutive day.

Jan. 10, 2024: National security advisers of South Korea and the United States [condemn](#) "in the strongest possible terms" North Korea's transfer of ballistic missiles to Russia for use in Ukraine.

Jan. 11, 2024: South Korean Defense Minister Shin Won-sik [says](#) North Korea may sell new types of tactical guided missiles to Russia in addition to its alleged supply of short-range ballistic missiles for Moscow's use in its ongoing war with Ukraine.

Jan. 12, 2024: Top diplomats of South Korea and the United States [agree](#) to work together to address North Korean threats and support peace in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

Jan. 12, 2024: United States [imposes](#) sanctions on three Russian entities (the Ashuluk Firing Range, 224th Flight Unit State Airlines, and the Vladimirovka Advanced Weapons and Research Complex) and one individual (Vladimir Mikheyichik, general director of 224th Flight Unit State Airlines) for their involvement in the transfer and testing of North Korean ballistic missiles for Russia's use against Ukraine.

Jan. 15, 2024: North Korea [says](#) it has successfully test-fired a solid-fuel intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) carrying a hypersonic warhead.

Jan. 15, 2024: United States [condemns](#) North Korea's ballistic missile launch as a violation of multiple UN Security Council resolutions.

Jan. 15, 2024: North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui [arrives](#) in Russia for an official visit to further deepen military ties.

Jan. 16, 2024: South Korea and the United States [agree](#) to begin talks on their next deal on defense cost sharing earlier than planned, a move that appears to consider the possible reelection of former US President Donald Trump, known for his tough bargaining on such deals.

Jan. 16, 2024: South Korea [is to join](#) a US-led multinational anti-submarine exercise in waters off Guam in an effort to hone capabilities against underwater threats.

Jan. 17, 2024: Russian President Vladimir Putin [meets](#) with North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui amid deepening military cooperation between the two countries.

Jan. 17, 2024: US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [expresses](#) worries about North Korean threats and other challenges, but stresses closer alliance cooperation.

Jan. 17, 2024: Joint Chiefs of Staff [says](#) that South Korea, the US, and Japan have jointly conducted naval drills in waters south of the Korean Peninsula following North Korea's recent launch of a hypersonic missile.

Jan. 18, 2024: Top nuclear envoys of South Korea, the US, and Japan [hold talks](#) in Seoul as tensions rise on the Korean Peninsula amid North Korea's belligerent rhetoric and deepening military cooperation with Russia.

Jan. 18, 2024: United States [warns](#) against North Korea's provision of additional military aid to Russia for use in Ukraine, as Pyongyang's top diplomat visits Moscow in an apparent sign of deepening bilateral ties.

Jan. 18, 2024: A senior Pentagon official [says](#) that the United States will take North Korea's military

space capability "seriously" amid concerns about Pyongyang's pursuit of space-based military capabilities.

Jan. 18, 2024: Top national security advisors of South Korea, the US, and Japan [sign](#) a trilateral quantum partnership to train a quantum workforce and strengthen their collective competitiveness in the field.

Jan. 19, 2024: Senior South Korean general [highlights](#) the need for international response and cooperation against North Korea's evolving military threats at a major gathering of top NATO military officials.

Jan. 19, 2024: UN Security Council (UNSC) [holds](#) closed-door consultations on North Korea-related issues amid tensions heightened by Pyongyang's recent launch of a claimed hypersonic missile and its hardening rhetoric against Seoul.

Jan. 19, 2024: North Korea [says](#) it has tested an underwater nuclear weapon system under development in response to the latest joint maritime exercise between South Korea, the United States and Japan.

Jan. 19, 2024: South Korea and the United States [hold](#) a working-level cyber policy meeting to bolster efforts against North Korea's growing threats in cyberspace.

Jan. 22, 2024: South Korea and the United States [discuss](#) ways to expand the participation of South Korean companies in the maintenance of US military equipment in the Indo-Pacific region.

Jan. 22, 2024: US surveillance aircraft [flies over](#) South Korea on an apparent mission to monitor North Korea following its claimed test of an underwater nuclear attack drone.

Jan. 22, 2024: Hyundai Motor [calls](#) on the US government to provide a temporary Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) exemption on a limited number of critical materials such as graphite, stating that not sourcing raw materials from China is "unrealistic" currently.

Jan. 23, 2024: South Korea's top envoy to the UN [renews](#) Seoul's criticism of arms transactions between North Korea and Russia during a UNSC meeting, as Russia's top diplomat shifts the

blame to the West for the prolonging of the war in Ukraine.

Jan. 24, 2024: North Korea [fires](#) several cruise missiles toward the Yellow Sea.

Jan. 25, 2024: North Korea [says](#) it has test-fired a new strategic cruise missile, named *Pulhwasal-3-31*, in what is seen as an effort to strengthen capabilities to deliver nuclear weapons.

Jan. 25, 2024: Chainalysis report [shows](#) that North Korea-linked hackers stole \$1 billion worth of crypto-currency through 20 attacks in 2023, the highest number of their hacks since record-keeping began in 2016.

Jan. 25, 2024: South Korea's top nuclear envoy [meets](#) NATO officials to discuss North Korea's provocations.

Jan. 26, 2024: South Korea and the United States [conduct](#) their first cyber security drills to bolster their joint posture against rising cyber threats.

Jan. 27, 2024: North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui [meets](#) a senior Chinese diplomat in Pyongyang, as the North appears to be seeking to strengthen ties with Beijing amid stepped-up cooperation with Russia.

Jan. 29, 2024: United States [urges](#) North Korea to refrain from further "threatening" activity and engage in "serious and sustained" diplomacy, after Pyongyang fires several cruise missiles.

Jan. 29, 2024: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [oversees](#) the test-fire of submarine-launched cruise missiles and reviews a project to build a nuclear-powered submarine.

Jan. 29, 2024: South Korea's military [says](#) it is putting weight on the possibility that North Korea's latest purported test of submarine-launched cruise missiles is "exaggerated."

Jan. 30, 2024: US Chamber of Commerce [expresses](#) concerns over South Korea's proposed regulations aimed at preventing unfair market activities by major online platform businesses such as Naver, Kakao, Google, and Apple.

Jan. 30, 2024: US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and the secretary general of the NATO [express](#) concerns over North Korea's export of military equipment to Russia for use in Ukraine.

Jan. 30, 2024: South Korean military [says](#) that North Korea has fired several cruise missiles off the west coast, just two days after it has test-fired submarine-launched cruise missiles from the east coast.

Jan. 31, 2024: South Korea [calls](#) for the United States to come up with "reasonable" regulations on limiting the sourcing of critical minerals and components from countries like China to qualify for US incentives for electric vehicles.

Feb. 1, 2024: Semiconductor Industry Association [calls](#) on the US government to craft multilateral chip equipment export controls, claiming the current unilateral ones put US firms at a disadvantage over rivals from South Korea and other countries.

Feb. 2, 2024: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [calls](#) for strengthening the country's navy to step up war preparations and protect maritime sovereignty during a visit to a shipyard for warships.

Feb. 2, 2024: North Korea [fires](#) several cruise missiles off the west coast.

Feb. 3, 2024: North Korea [says](#) it has conducted what it calls a "cruise missile super-large warhead power test" and had test-fired a new-type of anti-aircraft missile.

Feb. 4, 2024: United States [finds](#) no indications of "direct" North Korean military action, pledging to make "relentless" efforts to deter and constrain evolving threats from the recalcitrant regime.

Feb. 4, 2024: South Korea's top naval officer [visits](#) a key naval submarine base in the United States for the first time and stresses the need to strengthen ties against growing North Korean threats.

Feb. 7, 2024: Head of the US auto giant General Motors [meets](#) with chiefs of Samsung Group affiliates to discuss cooperation in areas involving electric vehicle batteries and auto electric parts.

Feb. 8, 2024: President Yoon Suk Yeol [says](#) that South Korea can develop nuclear weapons in a short period of time if it decides to do so, but going nuclear is "unrealistic" because it would entail various economic sanctions.

Feb. 8, 2024: 2024 National Proliferation Financing Risk Assessment report [shows](#) that North Korea continues to engage in "malicious" cyber activities and mobilize information technology (IT) workers to bankroll its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs.

Feb. 9, 2024: South Korea [conducts](#) a US-led multinational air exercise, along with Japan, Australia, France and Canada, in Guam to enhance joint operability.

Feb. 13, 2024: Kim Sung-han, former South Korean national security advisor, [says](#) that South Korea is "open-minded" about Japan participating in a currently bilateral nuclear deterrence dialogue between Seoul and Washington.

Feb. 14, 2024: Former President Donald Trump's NATO remarks [renew](#) worries in Seoul about the US commitment to alliance amid growing North Korean threats.

Feb. 14, 2024: North Korea [fires](#) several cruise missiles off the east coast.

Feb. 15, 2024: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [supervises](#) the test-firing of a new surface-to-sea missile and orders a tighter defense posture near the western maritime border.

Feb. 15, 2024: US National Security Advisor Sullivan [says](#) the National Security Council remains "fundamentally engaged" in a key South Korea-US nuclear deterrence dialogue platform.

Feb. 15, 2024: North Korea [releases](#) a barrage of harsh insults against Julie Turner, US special envoy for North Korean human rights, who is visiting Asia on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of a landmark UN report on the North's rights abuses, calling her a "human rights strangler" and "apostle of aggression."

Feb. 15, 2024: US Marines based in Okinawa [arrive](#) in South Korea to join an ongoing bilateral exercise with the South's Marines Corps amid efforts to boost readiness against North Korean threats.

Feb. 15, 2024: Kim Yo Jong, the sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, [says](#) that the regime is open to improving its relationship with Japan, including inviting the Japanese leader to Pyongyang.

Feb. 16, 2024: South Korean and US special envoys for North Korean human rights [hold](#) talks with activists to discuss ways to improve the rights situation in the reclusive country, urging solidarity on the matter so that the North Korean rights issue does not become a "forgotten crisis."

Feb. 18, 2024: South Korea and the United States [agree](#) to kick off a research campaign to uncover the cause of air pollution across Asia during the winter season as part of efforts to better address air quality challenges and come up with policies designed to improve air quality.

Feb. 18, 2024: Top diplomats of the G7 countries strongly [condemn](#) North Korea's arms transfers to Russia, calling it a direct violation of relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions.

Feb. 20, 2024: Korean electric vehicle battery makers [insist](#) that the US government give at least a two-year grace period before enforcing regulations outlined in the IRA concerning battery materials, allowing for the discovery of new non-Chinese companies to source materials like graphite.

Feb. 21, 2024: CNN [reports](#) that a North Korean ballistic missile that Russia fired against Ukraine contained many parts traced to companies in the United States and Europe.

Feb. 21, 2024: United States [asks](#) China out about the possibility of a trilateral project to excavate and recover the remains of troops killed during the 1950-53 Korean War, raising the prospects for three-way humanitarian cooperation despite hardening Sino-US rivalry.

Feb. 22, 2024: Top diplomats of South Korea and Japan [agree](#) to continue bilateral cooperation to address North Korean issues during talks on the margins of a foreign ministerial gathering of the G20 in Brazil.

Feb. 22, 2024: North Korea [denounces](#) the United States over what it claims to be a "double standard" toward human rights issues, calling on the country's special envoy to visit the Middle East rather than "scheming" against the North.

Feb. 23, 2024: South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko [highlight](#) the importance of

trilateral coordination to respond to North Korea's provocative acts and its military support for Russia's war against Ukraine during their trilateral meeting on the margins of the foreign ministers' meeting of the G20 nations in Rio De Janeiro.

Feb. 23, 2024: United States [tightens](#) sanctions to prevent North Korea's supply of weapons and other materials to support Russia's war efforts.

Feb. 23, 2024: Senior US diplomat Bonnie Jenkins [says](#) that any North Korean nuclear attack against South Korea will be met with a "swift," "overwhelming" and "decisive" response.

Feb. 23, 2024: South Korea's Foreign Minister Cho is set to [visit](#) New York to attend a UNSC briefing.

Feb. 23, 2024: South Korea's Foreign Minister Cho [urges](#) G20 countries to play active roles in addressing escalating military threats from North Korea.

Feb. 23, 2024: South Korea and the United States [stage](#) joint air drills with advanced F-35A fighter jets amid joint efforts to strengthen deterrence against North Korean threats.

Feb. 24, 2024: US State Department [says](#) that North Korea has shipped over 10,000 containers of munitions or munition-related materials to Russia since September 2023, as Moscow strives to replenish its weapons stockpile for use in Ukraine.

Feb. 24, 2024: State Department [says](#) that the top nuclear envoys of the United States and China have held video talks to discuss North Korea's "destabilizing" behavior and its deepening military cooperation with Russia.

Feb. 25, 2024: Leaders of the G7 strongly [condemn](#) arms transactions between North Korea and Russia, as they mark the second anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Feb. 27, 2024: US diplomat Yuri Kim [expresses hopes](#) for South Korea to provide more defense material support to Ukraine, stressing the importance of air defense assistance for Ukrainian forces striving to fend off Russian attacks.

Feb. 27, 2024: US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo [says](#) that "tough" talks are under way with advanced semiconductor companies over grants to be awarded under a program to reinvigorate chip manufacturing in the United States.

Feb. 27, 2024: German delegation [visits](#) North Korea to inspect the country's embassy in Pyongyang, in what appears to be the first visit by European staff in four years, though Germany says it doesn't guarantee embassy reopening.

Feb. 28, 2024: Lael Brainard, a senior White House official, [portrays](#) South Korean enterprises operating in the United States as helping foster a robust supply chain ecosystem and create decent jobs.

Feb. 28, 2024: US Defense Department [starts](#) a process to solicit industry feedback on its pursuit of a defense procurement agreement with South Korea to allow easier access to each other's market amid growing security uncertainties from North Korean threats and other challenges.

Feb. 28, 2024: Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg [meets](#) Samsung Electronics Co. Chairman Lee Jae-yong and LG Electronics Co. CEO Cho Joo-wan to discuss ways to enhance corporate collaborations in the artificial intelligence and extended reality sectors.

Feb. 28, 2024: South Korea and the United States [plan](#) to launch annual joint military drills, as the allies seek to bolster joint readiness against evolving military threats from North Korea.

Feb. 28, 2024: Beyond Parallel [reports](#) that since August 2023, there have been at least 25 different visits to Najin for the loading of munitions from North Korea to be delivered to Russia, and, at least 19 "dark vessels"—vessels with their AIS transmissions turned off to avoid outside detection—have visited Vostochny Port in Russia to both unload and load containers from the port. These voyages have reportedly supported the transfer of more than 2.5 million rounds of artillery shells and other munitions.

Feb. 28, 2024: Defense chiefs of South Korea and the United States [vow](#) to sternly deal with North Korea's arms transfers to Russia in coordination with the international community.

Feb. 29, 2024: South Korea's Foreign Minister Cho and the Secretary of State Blinken [hold](#) their first bilateral in-person meeting in Washington since Cho took office in January 2023, as the two countries strive to strengthen cooperation to counter evolving North Korean threats and other shared challenges.

Feb. 29, 2024: Secretary Blinken is to [visit](#) South Korea in March to attend the third session of the Summit for Democracy, a US-led multilateral platform meant to promote solidarity among democracies.

Feb. 29, 2024: Experts [contradict](#) Seoul's claim that North Korean satellite is "just orbiting," as the satellite recently has used thrusters to adjust position, demonstrating it is 'alive' and functional.

Feb. 29, 2024: South Korea's Defense Minister Shin Won-sik [holds](#) talks with Gen. Christopher Cavoli, commander of US European Command and Supreme Allied Commander Europe, in Seoul to discuss security situation on the Korean Peninsula and ways to bolster ties with NATO.

Feb. 29, 2024: Hanwha Aerospace Corporation [says](#) it has submitted a bid proposal for an unmanned vehicle project of the United States Army via a consortium formed with US defense company Anduril Industries Incorporation.

Feb. 29, 2024: Sweden's ambassador-designate to Pyongyang Andreas Bengtsson [visits](#) North Korea amid prospects that European countries may reopen diplomatic missions in the country following years of North Korea's COVID-19 border shutdown.

March 1, 2024: South Korea and the United States [express](#) "deep concerns" over North Korea's definition of the inter-Korean relationship as one between two hostile states and its potential attempt at changing the status quo in the Yellow Sea.

March 1, 2024: Gen. Anthony Cotton, commander of US Strategic Command, [warns](#) that growing military cooperation among North Korea, Russia, China, and Iran raises the possibility of "simultaneous conflicts with multiple nuclear-armed adversaries

March 2, 2024: South Korea's Navy and Marine Corps [join](#) the United States and Thailand in the large-scale annual multinational *Cobra Gold* exercise to enhance amphibious landing capabilities and humanitarian operations.

March 4, 2024: South Korea and the United States [kick off](#) the major annual combined *Freedom Shield* military exercise to reinforce deterrence against North Korea's nuclear and missile threats amid concern Pyongyang could use the maneuvers as a pretext for provocations.

March 5, 2024: National Security Council senior director for East Asia and Oceania Mira Rapp-Hooper [says](#) that the United States seeks dialogue with North Korea, including on mitigating the risk of an inadvertent conflict on the Korean Peninsula, stressing its goal for the "complete" denuclearization of the peninsula remains unchanged.

March 5, 2024: North Korea [denounces](#) an annual joint military exercise between South Korea and the United States, warning they will pay a "dear price" for what it called their large-scale war drills.

March 6, 2024: Top US nuclear envoy Jung Pak [points out](#) the need for "interim steps" to be taken on a path towards North Korea's ultimate denuclearization, which would not happen "overnight."

March 7, 2024: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [calls](#) for intensifying "practical actual war drills" during a visit to a military training base, as a joint military exercise between South Korea and the United States is under way.

March 7, 2024: *Bloomberg* [reports](#) that South Korea faces pressure to join a US-led group in imposing chip export sanctions on China.

March 7, 2024: An agreement relating to supply chain resilience among Indo-Pacific countries [is to take effect](#) in Korea in April as part of the country's efforts to reduce risks in securing core materials.

March 8, 2024: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [guides](#) artillery firing drills involving front-line units capable of striking the "enemy's capital," in an apparent response to an ongoing joint

military exercise between South Korea and the United States.

March 8, 2024: Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff [says](#) North Korea has tried to jam US-ROK navigation system during drills; no military or civilian damage from first GPS jamming by DPRK in eight years is reported.

March 8, 2024: US court [orders](#) forfeiture of 145 crypto accounts tied to North Korea cybercrime, Washington alleges two Chinese nationals used accounts to launder some \$100 million in virtual assets stolen by DPRK

March 12, 2024: 2024 Annual Threat Assessment report [claims](#) that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un "almost certainly" has no intentions of negotiating away his nuclear program and aims to use his defense ties with Russia to achieve acceptance as a nuclear state.

March 13, 2024: Air Force [holds](#) exercise aimed at boosting readiness against threats posed by North Korean cruise missiles and mobile missile vehicles amid ongoing major South Korea-US military exercise.

March 15, 2024: Gen. Gregory Guillot, commander of US Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command, [voices](#) concerns over 'increasingly advanced' long-range North Korean missiles, while highlighting evolving security challenges from China, Russia and Iran.

March 15, 2024: South Korean and US warplanes [stage](#) a combined live-fire exercise against North Korean cruise missile and long-range artillery threats in waters off the west coast.

March 15, 2024: ROK and the United States [hold](#) large-scale combined air assault drills in various locations across South Korea, in a move to strengthen joint operational capabilities.

March 18, 2024: North Korea [fires](#) an unspecified ballistic missile toward the East Sea.

March 18, 2024: Secretary Blinken [says](#) the United States will always work with South Korea to firmly respond to North Korea's provocations after Pyongyang fired multiple short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea.

March 18, 2024: United States [condemns](#) North Korea's ballistic missile launches as a violation of multiple UN Security Council resolutions, and calls for the recalcitrant regime to return to dialogue.

March 18, 2024: South Korea and the United States [reaffirm](#) their shared commitment to the complete denuclearization of North Korea, hours after the North fired multiple short-range ballistic missiles.

March 18, 2024: South Korea's Defense Minister Shin [reaffirms](#) that the current size of US troops stationed in the country is "absolutely necessary" after a former top Pentagon official Christopher Miller questioned the need for such a presence.

March 18, 2024: Los Angeles Dodgers [beat](#) Korean national team 5-2 in the final of four exhibition games at Gocheok Sky Dome in western Seoul.

March 19, 2024: US Senior Official for North Korea Jung Pak [says](#) the United States remains "always watchful" for the possibility of North Korea conducting "gray zone" activities short of a major attack, restating Washington sees no signs of the recalcitrant regime preparing for a near-term attack.

March 19, 2024: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [guides](#) firing drills involving super-large multiple rocket launchers.

March 19, 2024: South Korea's SK Hynix [is set to begin](#) delivering its fifth-generation high-bandwidth memory chips—the 3E—to the US corporation Nvidia by the end of March, nabbing yet another significant lead in the highly competitive space.

March 20, 2024: South Korea and the United States [conduct](#) river-crossing drills near the border with North Korea to enhance the interoperability of their troops.

March 20, 2024: North Korea [says](#) it has successfully conducted a ground jet test of a solid-fuel engine for a new type of intermediate hypersonic missile amid heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

March 20, 2024: United States [calls](#) on North Korea to refrain from "provocative" and

"destabilizing" actions after Pyongyang claims to have tested a solid-fuel engine for a new intermediate hypersonic missile.

March 21, 2024: Gen. Paul LaCamera, commander of US Forces Korea, [emphasizes](#) the need to continue to invest in 28,500 US service members in South Korea through training programs to defend South Korea against evolving North Korean threats. These remarks come after a former top Pentagon official Christopher Miller questioned the need for such a presence.

March 21, 2024: A report by the UN panel of experts [shows](#) that North Korea engages in "malicious" cyber activities to generate about half of its foreign currency revenue and bankroll its weapons programs.

March 21, 2024: South Korea and the United States [agree](#) to launch a working-level consultative body to tackle North Korea's illegal smuggling of refined oil.

March 22, 2024: Senior US official Alan Estevez [portrays](#) South Korean companies' reported move to stop selling used semiconductor manufacturing equipment to China as "encouraging," as Washington has been seeking tighter export controls on key technologies amid an intensifying Sino-US rivalry.

March 25, 2024: Unification Minister Kim Yung-ho [asks](#) for US lawmakers' bipartisan cooperation and support for South Korea's efforts to seek a peaceful unification with North Korea.

March 26, 2024: Mark Cancian, a senior adviser at CSIS, and Chris Park, a CSIS research assistant, [float](#) the idea of using South Korea's 105mm munitions stockpile to support Ukraine's fight against Russia, as Kyiv urgently needs artillery ammunition supplies in the ongoing war of attrition.

March 26, 2024: United States [restates](#) the importance of dialogue with North Korea, after Pyongyang claimed Japanese Prime Minister Kishida expressed his intention for a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

March 27, 2024: *Wall Street Journal* [reports](#) that South Korea's SK Hynix is set to invest approximately \$4 billion in building an advanced

chip packaging facility nearby Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, the operations are expected to commence in 2028, providing jobs for up to 1,000 people.

March 27, 2024: South Korea and the United States [launch](#) a task force to effectively block North Korea from financing its unlawful nuclear and missile programs.

March 28, 2024: Top military officers of South Korea, Japan and the US [discuss](#) trilateral efforts for security cooperation to counter North Korean military threats.

March 28, 2024: US Marines [join](#) a large-scale combined exercise at a high-tech training facility in South Korea for the first time amid efforts to boost readiness against North Korean threats.

March 29, 2024: Declassified documents on first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1993 [show](#) that the United States had believed that North Korea's demand for light water reactors in return for dismantling its nuclear facilities could be a "significant opening" to resolving Pyongyang's nuclear issues.

March 29, 2024: President Yoon [calls](#) on a group of US lawmakers to support South Korean companies operating in a wide range of areas from security, economy and technology to culture and space.

March 31, 2024: Japan's *Kyodo News* [claim](#) that the President Biden is considering inviting South Korean President Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida to the NATO event in Washington in July and holding the trilateral summit on the margins.

April 2, 2024: 2024 National Trade Estimate Report on Foreign Trade Barriers [takes](#) issue with South Korean bills calling on foreign online content providers to pay network usage fees, saying they could be "anticompetitive."

April 2, 2024: Joint Chiefs of Staff [says](#) that North Korea has fired what appeared to be an intermediate-range missile into the East Sea, in its third ballistic missile launch of the year.

April 2, 2024: South Korea, the United States and Japan [conduct](#) a joint aerial exercise involving nuclear-capable B-52 bombers near the Korean

Peninsula, in an apparent show of force against North Korea following its latest ballistic missile launch.

April 3, 2024: White House [says](#) that President Biden has underscored the "enduring" US commitment to the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula during phone talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

April 3, 2024: North Korea [says](#) it has successfully test-fired a new intermediate-range ballistic missile tipped with a hypersonic warhead, saying that all missiles the country has developed are now solid-fuel and nuclear capable.

April 3, 2024: NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [says](#) that South Korea has been invited to the NATO summit scheduled in July as one of the non-NATO partners in the Indo-Pacific region, which also include Japan, Australia, and New Zealand.

April 4, 2024: White House [says](#) that President Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida are to discuss an array of issues, including North Korean threats and the two countries' trilateral cooperation with South Korea, during their upcoming summit on April 10.

April 4, 2024: South Korea's SK Hynix [announces](#) a \$3.9 billion investment package in West Lafayette, Indiana where the Korean memory chipmaker will build its first US manufacturing base.

April 4, 2024: US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell [suggests](#) that the US-UK-Australia trilateral security partnership known as AUKUS may soon be expanded to include other Indo-Pacific nations.

April 5, 2024: South Korea's Foreign Minister Cho [discusses](#) Ukraine support and North Korea-Russia cooperation at NATO meeting.

April 5, 2024: *Wall Street Journal* [reports](#) that Samsung Electronics Corporation plans to more than double its total semiconductor investment in Texas to about \$44 billion, as the South Korean chipmaker is expected to win grants under a US initiative to strengthen domestic chip production.

April 7, 2024: Gen. Charles Flynn, Pacific Army commander, [says](#) the United States is to deploy ground-based launchers capable of firing SM-6 and Tomahawk missiles in the Indo-Pacific region soon to address rising security threats.

April 9, 2024: Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [reaffirms](#) US commitment to "shore up" stability on the Korean Peninsula in the midst of persistent North Korean threats, as Washington is stepping up bilateral and trilateral cooperation with South Korea and Japan.

April 9, 2024: US-ROK forces [hold](#) joint naval drills on mine warfare against North Korea to practice both removing DPRK mines from ports and installing mines in enemy waters.

April 10, 2024: Secretary of State Blinken [reiterates](#) concerns over military support for Russia's defense industrial base from North Korea, Iran and China, as Moscow continues its protracted war against Ukraine.

April 10, 2024: National Security Advisor Sullivan [highlights](#) the "synergies" in trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the United States, and Japan in security, technology, and other fields on the eve of a summit between President Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida.

April 10, 2024: A senior US official [says](#) the United States, Britain, and Australia are considering South Korea, Canada and New Zealand as potential partners for cooperation on advanced capability projects of their AUKUS security partnership.

April 11, 2024: Main opposition Democratic Party [retains](#) a majority in the National Assembly in general elections in another major setback for the ruling People Power Party and President Yoon Suk Yeol.

April 11, 2024: President Biden [backs](#) Japan's push for summit with North Korea in talks with Prime Minister Kishida, the US and Japanese leaders also unveil plans to bolster joint deterrence, while hailing trilateral cooperation with Seoul.

April 12, 2024: United States, Japan, and the Philippines [affirm](#) their commitment to the "complete" denuclearization of the Korean

Peninsula and denounce North Korea's growing military threats in their first-ever trilateral joint statement.

April 12, 2024: South Korea and the United States [reaffirm](#) in a joint statement a plan to hold a discussion-based exercise simulating North Korea's use of a nuclear weapon as part of efforts to strengthen their joint response to Pyongyang's nuclear threats.

April 12, 2024: Seoul's industry ministry [says](#) the IPEF agreement relating to supply chain resilience is to enter into force in South Korea.

April 12, 2024: South Korea and the United States [kick off](#) a joint annual air exercise, involving some 100 warplanes, to strengthen their readiness against North Korean military threats.

April 12, 2024: South Korea, Japan, and the United States [stage](#) long-planned joint naval exercises involving a US aircraft carrier to ensure readiness against nuclear and missile threats from North Korea.

April 12, 2024: South Korea and the United States [launch](#) a bilateral working group on artificial intelligence focused on boosting tech cooperation and advancing joint research.

April 12, 2024: South Korea, the United States, and Japan [hold](#) trilateral naval drills involving a US aircraft carrier to improve their joint operability against North Korea's nuclear and missile threats.

April 13, 2024: Top US envoy to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield [plans](#) to pay a visit to the Demilitarized Zone separating the two Koreas to stress 'ironclad' security commitment and openness to "unconditional" dialogue with North Korea.

April 13, 2024: Industry Minister Ahn Duk-geun [says](#) South Korea and the United States have agreed to hold bilateral talks on supply chain and commercial issues and a trilateral industry ministers' meeting with Japan in the first half of the year.

April 14, 2024: South Korea's Defense Minister Shin [says](#) North Korea's hypersonic missile was "unsuccessful in its last glide flight."

April 15, 2024: US UN envoy Thomas-Greenfield to [meet](#) with South Korea's Defense Minister Shin to boost bilateral cooperation amid North Korean threats.

April 15, 2024: US government, striving to strengthen domestic semiconductor production, [announces](#) a plan to award Samsung Electronics Corporation up to \$6.4 billion in grants to support the South Korean tech giant's chipmaking investment in central Texas.

April 16, 2024: US UN envoy Thomas-Greenfield and South Korea's Foreign Minister Cho [discuss](#) ways to build a new mechanism for monitoring the enforcement of UN sanctions on North Korea.

April 16, 2024: Senior US officials [discuss](#) with Beijing officials a range of regional and global issues, including North Korea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea during their visit to China.

April 16, 2024: State Department report [shows](#) that North Korea has the capability to genetically engineer biological military products, noting Pyongyang has a "dedicated, national-level offensive" biological weapons program.

April 17, 2024: United States is "incredibly [concerned](#)" about long-suspected military cooperation between North Korea and Iran on nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

April 17, 2024: Department of Justice [says](#) that a former North Korean diplomat serving in Thailand was indicted on charges of sanctions evasion, a conspiracy to commit bank fraud and money laundering.

April 18, 2024: South Korea's Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, and Japan's Finance Minister Shunichi Suzuki [acknowledge](#) "serious concerns" over the "sharp" depreciation of the South Korean won and Japanese yen during their first trilateral talks in Washington.

April 18, 2024: Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Kim Myung-soo [holds talks](#) with the new commander of the US Pacific Fleet Stephen Koehler on ways to boost the allies' combined defense readiness.

April 19, 2024: Special operations forces of South Korea and the United States [stage](#) an airborne

training to enhance their joint operability as part of ongoing air drills between the two nations.

April 19, 2024: North Korea [denounces](#) recent visit to South Korea and Japan by the US UN envoy, calling it an "aid-begging" trip to invigorate the "weakened illegal" sanctions against Pyongyang.

April 20, 2024: Top diplomats of G7 countries [stress](#) their commitment to counter evasion of anti-North Korea sanctions, as a UN expert panel monitoring sanctions enforcement faces its termination this month due to Russia's veto.

April 20, 2024: North Korea [conducts](#) a "super-large warhead" power test for a strategic cruise missile and test-fires a new anti-aircraft missile, further ratcheting up tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

April 22, 2024: Joint Chiefs of Staff [says](#) that North Korea has fired several rounds of short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea, three days after it launched cruise missiles into the Yellow Sea.

April 23, 2024: 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices issued by the US State Department [state](#) that North Koreans remain exposed to a wide range of human rights abuses, including forced repatriations, extrajudicial killings, forced abortion and the "worst forms" of child labor.

April 23, 2024: United States [condemns](#) North Korea's latest round of ballistic missile launches as a violation of multiple UN Security Council resolutions.

April 23, 2024: United States [pursues](#) a "fair" and "equitable" outcome in the upcoming negotiations with South Korea over the sharing of the cost for the stationing of US Forces Korea.

April 23, 2024: *Korean Central News Agency* [claims](#) North Korea has conducted a tactical drill simulating a nuclear counterattack involving super-large multiple rocket launchers.

April 24, 2024: Kim Yo Jong, sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, [lambasts](#) joint military drills between South Korea and the United States and vows to strengthen the North's military power against hostile forces.

April 24, 2024: South Korea and the United States [conduct](#) joint space exercises to fend off North Korea's global positioning system jamming attacks and other space-based threats.

April 25, 2024: Deputy Secretary of State Campbell [says](#) the United States will take steps "in time" to have three-way engagements on nuclear deterrence with South Korea and Japan, reiterating the "firm" US security commitment to its Asian allies.

April 25, 2024: North Korea [threatens](#) retaliation against US plans for new sanctions monitoring against the regime.

April 26, 2024: *Korean Central News Agency* [reports](#) that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has guided the test of a rocket developed by "newly-founded" military factory, as North Korea celebrates 92nd founding anniversary of the Korean People's Revolutionary Army.

April 29, 2024: Victor Cha [conducts](#) the first US multi-question polling of strategic elites in South Korea on the nuclear question and finds that the vast majority of South Korean strategic elites (66%) do not favor nuclearization and that confidence in the United States as a security provider remains strong.

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

WEATHERING THE CRISIS

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For the US-India bilateral relationship, the first four months of 2024 were a repeat of the last three years: the differences in attitudes toward Cold-War era partnerships resurfaced and made difficult maintaining the calm in bilateral relations. There were significant strides in the economic and trade front. The security relationship, however, was marred by the dispute over the killing of Khalistan separatist, designated as a terrorist by India. Washington diplomatically backed India vis-a-vis China's belligerent actions such as [renaming Indian towns](#) by publicly speaking out against it and top military brass made visits to India in a show of support for the growing security cooperation between the two democracies. The election hysteria in India, the heated rhetoric, and polemical statements in the election campaigns of major India political parties provided fodder for the Western press to raise concerns about the supposed "values-based" partnership with India. While not as hyperbolic in nature, US election campaigning dragged India into the mud, with President Biden lumping Japan and India in with Russia and China in a reference to nations that were "xenophobic" and restrictive to immigrants.

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These episodes were minor squalls compared to the hurricanes the bilateral relationship has endured over the last 50 or 60 years. While elections and security divergences made headlines, the relationship continued to build on pillars of trade and technology cooperation.

Election Summer Gets Scorching

In the time between the arrest of opposition leader and leader of the Aam Aadmi Party, Arvind Kejriwal, in New Delhi and his release a month later, the parties in the opposition coalition, also known as the INDI alliance, used his case and those of other opposition party leaders arrested over corruption and other charges by the enforcement directorate to stir up the electorate's fear over supposed rising authoritarian rule. Some leaders, such as members of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist) — typically abbreviated CPI(M)—went as far as to raise concerns that a third term for the BJP-led government would lead to amendments to the constitution such as removing the words “socialist” and “secular.” Other opposition parties added to the hyperbole, with the usual rhetoric and alarm of an impending genocide, turn to fascism, and erosion of India's secular values. The BJP's election campaigning was in many instances worthy of such harsh criticism.



Figure 1 Supporters of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) hold a cutout of their leader, the prime minister, Narendra Modi. Photo: Noah Seelam/AFP/Getty Images

While the Indian prime minister campaigned on fulfilling his 2014 and 2019 election promises, such as welfare schemes, infrastructure, and the building of the Ram Temple, he also played into the fears of the electorate using rhetoric and baseless accusations such as the opposition seeking to take their land and property through what he called “redistribution policies” He also

asserted that the INDI alliance—of which the communist parties are members—if in power would give away reservations or quotas (India's affirmative action policies) to the Muslim minority.

Washington encourages and applauds the democratic exercise of going to the polls in India while raising concerns on the status of minorities through the reports it commissions annually, such as the Report on International Religious Freedom.

While a return of a majority-BJP government could lead to five more years of stable governance and macroeconomic outlook, the religious polarization and India's turn to a more outwardly Hindu-nationalist nation cannot be dismissed. This would be a perennial bone of contention for Washington, particularly as it prioritizes values-based partnerships over interest-based ones. That said, a government formed by the INDI alliance will not necessarily bode well for the US-India bilateral partnership either. With several regional parties subscribing to socialist and even Marxist ideals, the liberalization and reforms needed for a better business environment for US enterprises may not be in the cards—turning the clock back to 2014 or, worse, 1990, an era prior to India's opening to the world with liberalization recommended by the International Monetary Fund.

The leader of the opposition, Rahul Gandhi, has advocated for more [welfare schemes](#) while a few of his partners in the INDI alliance have called for radical measures such as [giving up](#) India's nuclear program or abandoning ties with Israel or increasing government job guarantees. Such hyperbole and exaggerations kept newsrooms buzzing and TV debates were not short of sparring contests between spokespersons of different political parties and analysts. Polls unanimously predict a third term for the Modi government, coming back to power with an absolute majority. However, analysts are of the view that the government's delayed response to the civil strife in Manipur could cost them the northeastern state and seats in a few others, such as the western state of Maharashtra and southern state of Karnataka. In an election year, every issue becomes highly political, so the topic of US and other foreign investments into India's critical and emerging technology manufacturing sectors turned into a political debate. In the southern states of both Tamil Nadu and [Telangana](#), leaders [accused](#) the Modi

government of diverting foreign investments in advanced and critical manufacturing to the prime minister's home state of Gujarat.



Figure 2 In Coimbatore, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was seen presenting party candidates to the public, alongside Chief Minister MK Stalin. Photo: DTNEXT Bureau

Regarding the US presidential clash, while a few Indian analysts favor a return of Trump over a second term for Biden, others feared increased trade tensions under a Trump administration. On balance, the first four months were marked by the usual media trials of India's fitness as a partner and the attempts to portray India as a nondemocratic nation. The election year made it ever more polemical, with Indian politicians' polarizing rhetoric making it easy for India skeptics to paint the nation in broad strokes.

Modi is No MBS

Crises are an important check on the statements of diplomats, who always spin relationships to see the positive. When the unexpected derails carefully choreographed diplomacy, the resulting trial by fire can reflect a relationship's true endurance. So it was with US-India ties in the final months of 2023. The crisis began on Sept. 18, 2023, when Canadian Premier Justin Trudeau accused Indian intelligence of assassinating a Sikh militant in Canada. When the Indian government pushed back and denied any involvement in the murder, Trudeau said the intelligence on Indian complicity originated with the United States, which had shared it with the "Five Eyes" intelligence-sharing partnership. US Ambassador to Canada David L. Cohen confirmed that the US intelligence community provided information after the murder, although US officials have not said Trudeau's conclusions comport with those of the United States. The accusations continue to overshadow all aspects of the India-Canada relationship.

However, the same is not true with US-India ties. While Washington's giving credence to Canada's investigation peeves New Delhi, a similar US-India incident regarding a supposed murder plot against a Khalistan Separatist did not derail the relationship.

In November 2023, a second-generation Pakistan-American reporter with *The Intercept*, citing sources in Pakistani intelligence services, the ISI, was among the first to write about the Indian government's alleged overreach through cross-border assassinations. Subsequently, the *Financial Times* reported that US law enforcement had "thwarted" a similar plot to assassinate Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a naturalized US citizen whom India designated a terrorist, on US soil. While India denies culpability in any plot against Pannun, it cooperated with US intelligence and law enforcement on the investigation. In April 2024, US intelligence officials leaked details of that investigation to *The Washington Post*. The resulting article, citing unidentified US and former Indian intelligence officers, identified Vikram Yadav, an officer in India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) as a lynchpin of the plot. He allegedly declared the elimination of Pannun to be a "priority now."



Figure 3 In 2020, India officially labeled Gurpatwant Singh Pannun as a terrorist. Photo: Getty Images

The Post reported that the CIA, FBI, and other agencies had mapped "potential" links between the assassination plot and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's inner circle and supposedly found that both RAW chief Samant Goel and perhaps National Security Adviser Ajit Doval may have been aware of the operation. Whatever the truth of the allegation—and the description of the investigation was filled with conditionals rather than firm declarations—New Delhi is right to be upset about both the leak, the patchwork narrative upon which US allegations rest, and the presence and activity on US soil of those it deems terrorists. Washington,

meanwhile, could rightly be angry if RAW plotted an assassination on US soil against a US citizen. To date, though, the US government has only filed charges against Nikhil Gupta, an accused drug and weapons trafficker allegedly tasked with hiring a hitman. Public evidence, however, is not conclusive given the organized criminal activity that surrounds much Khalistani separatism in both California and, for that matter, Canada. While the facts of the case will emerge with time, the case represents more of an irritant rather than foundational crisis in ties. This suggests US-India ties are strong enough to weather not only storms but hurricanes. Cynics might say, rightly, that fear of China's militarism and expansionism motivates both Washington and New Delhi to overcome bilateral grievances, but the desire for relations is broader. Both the United States and India base bilateral ties today as much on a desire for partnership to benefit both countries' economies rather than a simple fear of a mutual enemy. Relations are truly symbiotic.

While media figures and some experts were quick to add India to the group of nations associated with global repression such as the communist and authoritarian states of China, Iran, and Russia, the open channels for communication among the highest levels of security and intelligence in the US and India coupled with India's commitment to investigate the alleged crime highlight India's commitment to the rule of law. Furthermore, as the Indian minister quipped, "even in the worst of the weather conditions, a larger share of the population participates in the democratic exercise of voting than in the best of conditions in the Western world."

An unusual [advocate](#) for the Modi administration was the CEO of JPMorgan, Jamie Dimon. Speaking at the Economic Club of New York, he said "Modi has done an unbelievable job...I know the liberal press here beat the hell out of him...he has taken 400 million people out of poverty and really, we are lecturing him on how to do things? They've opened bank accounts for 700 million people ...this one is tough." This comes at the backdrop of JPMorgan including Indian bonds in its emerging market bond index.

Security

The United States-India security partnership continued to develop in the first four months of the year. On Feb. 21, the US Department of

Defense and India's Ministry of Defense [inaugurated](#) their second India-US Defense Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X) Summit in New Delhi. The [attendance](#) of Adm. John Aquilino, commander of US Indo-Pacific Command, highlighted the importance the Pentagon places on military-industrial cooperation with India. Indian Defense Secretary Shri Giridhar Aramane's participation likewise demonstrated high-level Indian buy-in for the summit's goals. The summit focused on ways to manufacture jointly and enhance advanced military capabilities and platforms, as well as create resilient supply chains.

The summit addressed practicalities and demonstrated forward momentum on earlier planning documents. Substance trumped showmanship. During the inaugural INDUS-X summit in June 2023 that coincided with Modi's state visit to the United States, for example, Indian and US officials signed a memorandum of understanding between General Electric and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited to co-produce GE-414 fight jet engines. In November 2023, the US [granted](#) the necessary security waivers to allow the manufacture of the engines that the Indian military will incorporate in the Tejas MK-2 and the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft MK-1. The [next milestone](#) for that project will be a formal contract. In addition, US and Indian officials continue negotiations for 31 MQ-9B drones that will include both assembly and maintenance, repair, and operations work in India. On Feb. 1, the State Department provided preliminary approval for the nearly \$4 billion sale.



Figure 4 The United States Coast Guard (USCG) Ship Bertholf arrived at Port Blair for the joint exercise 'Sea Defenders-2024' with the Indian Coast Guard (ICG), slated to occur on March 9-10. Photo: ANI.

The United States and India continue to accelerate interoperability through a series of exercises. In February 2024, the US Navy

[participated](#) for only the second time in India's flagship multilateral *Milan* naval exercise. The following month, the Indian and US Coast Guards exercised in *Sea Defenders-2024* off the Andaman Islands in the central Indian Ocean on issues relating to pollution and oil spill response, firefighting, and response to drone attacks on commercial shipping.

On March 18, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin III and Indian Counterpart Rajnath Singh [spoke by telephone](#) to discuss the "Major Defense Partnership" the two countries established. Their call coincided with the start of [Exercise Tiger TRIUMPH 2024](#), a two-week bilateral "Tri-Service Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Amphibious Exercise" first held in 2019 and designed to bolster interoperability. This year's third iteration was the most extensive and included everything from ship boarding drills to sports competitions to helicopter operations, landing of troops and establishment of a medical camp.

High-level discussions continued outside formal exercises. On April 11, US Army Pacific Headquarters in Hawaii [hosted](#) a senior Indian delegation led by Lt. Gen. TK Aich, deputy chief of the Army Staff for Strategy, to discuss cooperation between the two militaries. US and Indian military leaders are actively socializing to break down boundaries and decades of distance-creating formality.

Outside of exercises, India increasingly asserts itself on the world stage to defend the liberal order. While US and Indian diplomatic posture vis-à-vis Iran differs, India joined international operations in the Red Sea to counter threats to freedom of navigation by Iran-backed Houthi militiamen in Yemen. India demonstrates a real ability to project force in real-world rather than choreographed exercise conditions.

Washington has more outwardly supported India in its border disputes with the PRC. In early April, the US strongly opposed China's attempts to rename 30 locations inside India's northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. China's renaming effort was its fourth attempt at laying claims to Indian territory. Since the Trump era, Washington has outwardly supported New Delhi in its border disputes with China. The security US-India bilateral relationship rests on the shared concerns over a belligerent PRC in conventional and non-conventional security domains.

Trade and Technology: Pillars Holding Up the Partnership

The US-India security partnership extends beyond more traditional security operations to economic cooperation. In March, Richard Verma, an Obama-era ambassador to India who today is deputy secretary of State for Management and Resources, [issued](#) a "Dipnote" on the US-India partnership. After discussing security cooperation and democracy, he turned to the economy. "Our work on new and emerging technologies will take on even more promise [over coming years]. New and emerging technologies offer tremendous opportunities for economic growth and development." Statistics and indicators suggest Verma's declaration to be valid rather than merely aspirational. In 2023, for example, the US Embassy in New Delhi and its associated consulates issued more than 1 million visas. More than a quarter-million Indian students now study in US universities. The State Department [recognizes](#) the importance of the Indian economy. On Feb. 26, for example, the US Consul in Mumbai Mike Hankey inaugurated a Cybersecurity Center of Excellence in Pune.



Figure 5 Deputy Secretary Verma meets with Indian Defense Secretary Giridhar Aramane in New Delhi, India. Photo: U.S. Department of State.

Economic relations do not simply rely on government officials. As India [closes in](#) on becoming the world's third-largest economy, commercial relations are taking on a life of their own. Increasing numbers of US businesses are opening in India. More importantly, India increasingly captures the interest of both US businesses fleeing China or simply those seeking a lucrative market. Complementing India's domestic economic ambitions and policies for indigenous manufacturing, as previous *Comparative Connections* chapters have noted, several US companies have shifted a part of their production away from China and into India or have made greenfield investments in the nation. These investments not only position India as a

viable supply chain alternative to China but acknowledge the growing potential of India's urban middle class and favorable demography. Earlier in the year, Apple announced that 14% of its iPhones were now made in India and it plans to move 25% of global iPhone production to India.

Furthermore, US companies are beginning to invest in India in advanced and critical technologies such as semiconductors. On the backs of the CHIPS Act, several US and foreign companies had revived manufacturing in the US. However, certain nodes of the value chain remain commercially unviable to onshore. Advanced testing and packaging, also known as ATP, particularly for larger chips have found homes in emerging markets such as India and Mexico among others. Idaho-based chipmaker Micron could be the first company to [roll out](#) the chips in 2025. In a similar complementary dynamic, the three Indian plants that were announced earlier in the year, in the western state of Gujarat and northeastern state of Assam, will not only support India's domestic demand for chips but plug into global supply chains. TATA Electronics of TATA Group is set to [supply](#) Tesla's automobiles with packaged chips.

While the US and India find synergies in their industrial policies, once again, Cold-War era relations hamper true economic and trade progress in the form of sanctions. The US Treasury sanctioned three Indian companies, [supporting](#) Sahara Thunder -- Zen Shipping, Port India Private Ltd, and Sea Art Ship Management (OPC) Private Ltd. -- for facilitating illicit trade of unmanned UAVs to the Iranian military. Similarly, Indian microelectronics maker Si2 was sanctioned by the EU for allegedly supplying chips originating in the US to the Russian military.

Washington [continues to ignore](#) Indian purchase of discounted Russian oil, potentially putting India at risk of sanctioning under Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). That the United States has not enforce CAATSA against India reflects a diplomatic rather than technical decision, but the threat still looms, especially as Modi, like Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is a lightning rod on Capitol Hill.

Economic Statecraft as Deterrence

The Modi government has taken a concerted approach to increasing domestic manufacturing, particularly in sectors that are highly dependent on imports. Sectors vital to national security, such as defense, have witnessed a substantial increase in domestic manufacturing. From simple assembly of machine guns to manufacturing of drones and ballistic missiles, India's defense manufacturing has grown exponentially over the last decade or so. While still far behind exporters such as the US, UK, and Russia, India is steadily growing its export base with nations such as Armenia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. India's recent exports of supersonic ballistic missiles, *Brahmos* to the Philippines is a case in point. The Indian Airforce delivered first tranche of missiles to the Philippines in April. These ballistic missiles enhance deterrence measures in South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific region by complementing the new "Squad" grouping of Philippines, Japan, Australia, and the United States. Interestingly, India's economic initiatives are adding to conventional security deterrence efforts. The Indian edible oil-to-ports conglomerate, Adani Group, announced investment plans for the development of a port in Baatan in Luzon Island in the Philippines.

A recurring criticism of the Quad grouping was its limited scope to deliver public goods. While the Squad, a more conventional security grouping, may fill the void in the form of a multilateral security mechanism in the Indo-Pacific, New Delhi's bilateral defense and geoeconomic projects can add much-needed assistance to smaller nations in the Indo-Pacific. This port project is not an isolated infrastructure project, neither for Adani nor for India. The group has been at the forefront of India's geostrategic port and infrastructure development, from Sri Lanka and Myanmar to more recently in Greece. US, Indian, and Europe's involvement in the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) initiative holds much promise, not only for increased trade but as an alternative to the axis of disruptive powers such as Iran, China, Qatar, and Turkey.

As previous *Comparative Connections* chapters have noted, Cold-War era differences on separatist groups and nations such as Pakistan will continue to be a thorn in the relationship. That said, the thorn will neither shape nor define the partnership. The US-India partnership has

steadily grown and expanded to become a dynamic partnership not limited to any one sphere. From deep sea-to-space, the US and India are working together to solve regional and global challenges.

Conclusion

From the 1971 crisis in the Bay of Bengal to the nuclear test crisis and the subsequent sanctions in the late 90, US-India relations have weathered severe hurricanes. A few thunderstorms here and there are not going to shake the foundations. While few were completely bilateral, on most occasions the challenge stemmed from a Cold-War era relationship. As a *Comparative Connections* chapter on US-India relations in early 2022 [noted](#), the relationship has significant potential on the economic and technological front. Even security cooperation is not limited. From military exercises in the Himalayas to maritime exercises in Hawaii, the defense and security relationship has steadily expanded. But will the two get over old friendships for a smooth ride on the diplomatic train? Probably not.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-INDIA RELATIONS

JANUARY-APRIL 2024

Jan. 3, 2024: India's Supreme Court states that it will not intervene in the case of an Indian man accused of conspiring to kill a Sikh separatist on US soil.

Jan. 12, 2024: 14th Ministerial-level meeting of the India-US Trade Policy Forum [commences](#). The Ministers took stock of the progress made in addressing concerns impacting the bilateral trade relationship since the 13th TPF in January 2023. This was highlighted by the historic settlement of all seven longstanding trade disputes at the World Trade Organization (WTO) between the two countries. Key areas of discussion were: critical minerals, supply chains, and trade in high-tech products.

Jan. 25, 2024: Republic of India [deposits](#) an instrument of ratification of Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) for Prosperity Agreement Relating to Supply Chain Resilience.

Jan. 26-31, 2024: Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu [travels](#) to India and Maldives. While in India, Lu leads a US delegation's participation at the India-US Forum in New Delhi and engages with Indian government officials and members of the private sector, academia, and media to discuss ways to enhance opportunities for partnership between the United States and India.

Jan. 31, 2024: US Department of Commerce announces that the IPEF Agreement Relating to Supply Chain Resilience will enter into force from today. Ratification occurs after five IPEF partners, including India, deposited their instruments of ratification, acceptance, or approval with the Depositary.

Feb. 2, 2024: US approves a \$4 billion deal for drone manufacturing for India.

Feb. 2, 2024: Indian Amb. Sripriya Ranganathan [meets](#) Assistant Secretary Loyce Pace on further strengthening India-US health cooperation.

Feb. 16, 2024: Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar in Munich, Germany, on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference. Blinken and Jaishankar discussed the need to ensure freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. Blinken highlighted that the respective US and Indian approaches to maritime security in the Red Sea are mutually reinforcing and play important roles in safeguarding economic stability in the region. They also discussed work to ensure lasting peace and security in the Middle East.

Feb. 17, 2024: Secretary Blinken participated in Munich Security Conference Public Forum on Multilateralism with German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar.

Feb. 19-21, 2024: Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Richard Verma [meets](#) senior Indian officials in New Delhi to advance the US-Indian global strategic partnership. Meetings with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra, Defense Secretary Giridhar Aramane, and Deputy National Security Advisor Vikram Misri explored opportunities to strengthen US-India cooperation and people-to-people ties to ensure a free, open, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

Feb. 19-27, 2024: Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Rena Bitter [travels](#) to Chennai, Mumbai, New Delhi, and Doha. She visits facilities in Chennai and Mumbai and led a US delegation in a bilateral consular dialogue with counterparts in New Delhi. Her travel aims to bolster people-to-people and economic ties.

March 2, 2024: India Dialogue at Stanford University [commences](#), with Amb. Sripriya Ranganathan speaking about the strong trajectory of the US-India relationship, especially in commerce, defense, science & tech, education, healthcare, and people-to-people ties.

March 5, 2024: United States and India [hold](#) 20th meeting of the US-India Counter Terrorism Joint Working Group and 6th Designations Dialogue in Washington, DC. They emphasized the value and durability of the US-India comprehensive global and strategic partnership and renewed commitments to countering terrorism and promoting regional security as an integral part of broader bilateral cooperation.

March 14, 2024: In a press statement, President Biden calls the US-India relationship “the defining partnership of the 21st century,” while Prime Minister Modi says the countries’ ties are “shaping lives, dreams, and destinies.”

March 15, 2024: India [rejects](#) US concern over the implementation of a religion-based citizenship law as “misplaced, misinformed, and unwarranted.” New Delhi’s strong response follows the US State Department saying it will “closely monitor” the implementation of the religion-based law.

March 15, 2024: Beijing [lodges](#) a diplomatic protest with New Delhi after Prime Minister Modi officially inaugurated a tunnel built in territories along the two countries’ contested Himalayan border. Beijing’s “solemn remarks” were given weeks ahead of India’s general elections.

March 26, 2024: World’s longest twin-lane tunnel officially [opens](#), resulting in a heated exchange of remarks between Beijing and New Delhi. Both countries claim the Arunachal Pradesh region where it was built.

March 27, 2024: India strongly [rejects](#) remarks made by the United States and Germany on the arrest of key opposition leader and Delhi Chief

Minister Arvind Kejriwal a month before its national election.

April 1, 2024: US State Department [welcomes](#) space sector leaders from India for an International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) exchange focused on commercial space engagement and collaboration to deepen US-India ties.

April 3, 2024: US Army Pacific Command, US Pacific Fleet, and the Indian Navy [conduct](#) a simulated beach landing during a Joint Force amphibious exercise enhancing combined readiness to support humanitarian assistance in the Indo-Pacific region.

April 3, 2024: US [issues](#) a response of “strong opposition” to China’s renaming of geographical areas—mountains, rivers, and residential areas—in the Indian-administered Arunachal Pradesh state. Washington’s statement of opposition comes after Beijing released a list of 30 new names for places along the 1,865-mile disputed Himalayan border between China and India, citing China’s list issuance as a “unilateral attempt” to assert claim over the disputed territory of strategic interest.

April 12, 2024: Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks [meets](#) Indian Foreign Secretary Kwatra to take stock of the defense partnership between the countries. They reaffirmed their commitment to continuing the expansion of the partnership in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

April 25, 2024: US [imposes](#) sanctions on over a dozen companies, which include three from India, for allegedly facilitating illicit trade and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) transfers on behalf of the Iranian military, announced per an official statement by the Department of Treasury.

April 25, 2024: State Department Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs (SCA) Assistant Secretary Lu, alongside students of the University of California, San Diego’s School of

Global Policy and Strategy (GPS), [meets](#) with the 21st Century India Center's network of India stakeholders to discuss ways to promote a sustainable, globally competitive, and inclusive future.

April 25, 2024: Assistant Secretary Lu [hosts](#) an informative session with General Atomics about their magnetic fusion research signaling the continued growth of US-India commercial, academic, and security ties.

April 26, 2024: US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti [reassures](#) Indian students in an official statement that the US is safe to study in, in light of recent protests within universities across the United States. According to the US embassy, the number of Indian students in the US hit an all-time high of 268,923 in the academic year 2022-23.

April 30, 2024: US Authorities [announce](#) that Indian agents may have been involved in the attempted murder of a Sikh separatist in the United States, and the assassination of another in Canada. India's foreign ministry said *The Washington Post* report made "unwarranted and unsubstantiated imputations on a serious matter," while New Delhi is investigating the issue.

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

SMALL BUT TELLING SHIFTS

CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Despite the current calm in broader US-China relations, and likely because of it, Chinese offensive actions around Second Thomas Shoal have kept security in the South China Sea as the organizing principle for Washington's relations with the maritime Southeast Asian states, most notably the Philippines. In April President Biden hosted the first-ever trilateral summit with Japan, the Philippines, and the United States, on the margins of a major agreement to expand the US-Japan alliance that will reverberate in Southeast Asia. In Myanmar, the United States moved cautiously toward the provision of non-lethal aid to resistance forces as they made headway against the military. This aid will be limited, but it could put Washington in competition with China and Russia, both of which provide arms to the junta. Although Southeast Asian leaders continue to worry about US distraction in the face of wars in other regions and the November elections, Washington continued to act as a fulcrum in major multilateral exercises in the region. In Thailand, [Cobra Gold](#) was expanded to include cooperation in space, while the *Balikatan* exercises in the Philippines expanded to include new participants, most notably the French Navy.

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However, the ISEAS-Yusof Ishok annual survey on Southeast Asia showed that a slim majority of elites in the region would align with China against the United States if forced to choose. The outcome of the February elections in Indonesia, which will bring Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto to power later in the year, signals that competition between the United States and China in Southeast Asia could intensify in the near-term.

Shifting Alignments

Framing the debate over US relations with Southeast Asia this spring was the [release](#) of the annual survey by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishok Institute in Singapore on The State of Southeast Asia, based on data collected in February. The Survey, which probes regional views on security, economic and politics flagged two noteworthy findings.

1. By a slim majority, Southeast Asians were more inclined toward alignment with China than with the United States if they are forced to take sides, a departure from the more pro-US position since 2020. On this score, China climbed from 38.9% in 2023 to 50.5% in 2024. The United States fell from 61.1% in 2023 to 49.5%. However, ASEAN members are by no means a monolith on the US-China rivalry. In 2024 China won support from Malaysia (75.1%), Indonesia (73.2%), Laos (70.6%), Brunei (70.1%), and Thailand (52.2%). Lining up in support of the US were the Philippines (83.3%), Vietnam (79.0%), and Singapore (61.5%).

Japan remains the most trusted power in Southeast Asia, at 58% this year, while China and the United States typically compete for the lowest rung in trust. However, Tokyo's image in the region is based largely on its longstanding reputation as a trading partner, investor, and aid donor. If as expected, Japan becomes more forward-leaning on security, confidence in Tokyo could dim, particularly if Japan is viewed as contributing to US-China rivalry in the region.

2. The greatest geopolitical concern in the region is the Israel-Hamas war, unusual since top security concerns for ASEAN are traditionally within the Indo-Pacific region. Concern over the latter was due primarily to fears that the war would

exacerbate violent extremism in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Although the shift in alignment is notable, the slim margin is a mitigating factor. Some of the issues that have encouraged a swing toward China are likely short-term, such as uncertainty over the approaching US elections. There is also likely some residual resentment for the 11th-hour suspension of the trade pillar in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) by the United States last November.

To the extent that Indonesian and Malaysian views of the US are entangled with the Israel-Hamas war, the Biden administration's recent shift toward greater concern over the humanitarian crisis in Gaza may ease some fears of the further radicalization of *jihadi* groups in Southeast Asia. Recently, Washington and Jakarta have cooperated on delivery of humanitarian aid in Gaza. Lastly, the passage in April of a foreign aid bill reflected near-unanimous bipartisan support for US involvement in the Indo-Pacific compared to more checkered support for aid to Ukraine or Israel. This may reassure Southeast Asians that US domestic politics are unlikely to undercut Washington's commitment to the region.

Nevertheless, Beijing's slight edge is hardly surprising. For several years regional leaders have viewed China as the most influential economic power in Southeast Asia (59.5% of respondents in the 2024 Survey) and the most influential and strategic power as well (43.9% in 2024). Regardless, Southeast Asians will continue to avoid having to choose one power over the other if they can. A plurality of 46.8% in this year's Survey favored "enhancing resiliency and unity" to fend off pressure from Beijing and Washington.

Shifting Alliances

As a follow-on to the Japan-US Summit in Washington on April 10, President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida were joined the following day by Philippine President Marcos for an inaugural Japan-Philippines-United States [Summit](#). The trilateral summit marked a turning point in a gradual process toward ventilating the response of the United States and likeminded countries to China's growing aggression in the exclusive economic zones (EEZ's) of Southeast Asian states, with the Philippines the most

obvious bullseye. Marcos proposed a “trilateral alliance” to Kishida during his visit to Japan in February 2023. On April 7, just prior to the summits, defense forces from Australia, Japan, the Philippines and the US conducted maritime exercises in the Philippines’ EEZ. On April 10, the Joint Leaders Statement from the Biden-Kishida Summit called out China’s coercion, “including destabilizing actions in the South China Sea, such as unsafe encounters at sea and in the air,” a reference to the PRC’s use of water cannons against Philippine Coast Guard vessels around Second Thomas Shoal.



Figure 1 US President Joe Biden (center) with Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr (left) and Japan Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, on their way to a trilateral summit at the White House on April 11. Photo: Kevin Lamarque/Reuters

First Among Equals?

After the US withdrawal from the Vietnam War in 1973, Washington embarked upon an attempt to redesign and redirect its alliances in Southeast Asia. They were no longer a single path on which security, political, and economic relations were entwined, but instead a multi-lane highway with firewalls separating defense cooperation, trade preferences, and economic assistance. This was a rude surprise to Bangkok and Manila at times: Thailand was resentful that its status as a US ally did not shield it from sanction threats over intellectual property rights in the late 1980s, and Ferdinand Marcos, Sr., was no doubt displeased that Washington withdrew support from him after he attempted to overturn the results of the 1986 elections.

Moreover, although the Philippines and Thailand remained spokes in the hub-and-spokes configuration of US alliances in the Pacific, Washington had diversified its defense relations dramatically, particularly in the 1990s after the withdrawal of US bases from Clark and Subic Bay

in the Philippines and following the normalization of relations with Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. To accommodate this diversity as well as the inclination of Southeast Asian states to balance relations with the US and China, the Biden administration is attempting to replace the hub-and-spokes with the looser “lattice” configuration, evoking a fence in which there is space between each plank. The lattice model accommodates a more multilateral security structure and enables countries that would eschew a formal alliance with the United States, such as Singapore, to work closely with Washington on defense.

However, as Washington and Manila deepen the bilateral relationship and, with Japan, develop a trilateral menu of cooperation, the close coordination of security and economic initiatives is evocative of a pre-1973 alliance arrangement. In March US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo [led](#) a Presidential Trade and Investment Delegation to the Philippines, at which time agreements and pledges for \$1 billion in projects were announced. Equally spectacular was the announcement at the trilateral summit of the launch of the Luzon Economic Corridor, the first such corridor to be established in the Indo-Pacific region under the G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII).

Early response in Southeast Asia to the trilateral summit have been predictably split, between confidence that the combined attention and assistance of the US and Japan to the Philippines’ security will deter China and fear that it could spur China to greater aggression. The latter has produced some speculation that the first direct military clash between China and the United States could be around Second Thomas Shoal rather than the Taiwan Strait. More generally, however, the inclusion of Japan, as well as Australia, in South China Sea exercises is viewed as an insurance policy against US inattention.

Cobra Gold and Balikatan

Compared to the current dynamism in the US-Philippines alliance, the US-Thailand alliance is more low-key and often said to have been in a state of drift for years, even decades. With the Cold War threat of a communist takeover now gone, Thailand has reverted to its longstanding principle of preserving its sovereignty through balancing external powers, often against each other. The Biden administration has pursued an episodic policy of attempting to revive and reset

the alliance, albeit on 21st century terms. In the meantime, however, continuity in the alliance is maintained through the annual *Cobra Gold* exercises.

One of the largest and longest-running multilateral exercises in the world, *Cobra Gold* is co-hosted by Bangkok and Washington and conducted on Thai territory, usually in rural areas. Thailand has the final say on the invitation list, which is graded according to tiers. Held this year from Feb. 27 to March 8, 9,500 *Cobra Gold* participants were grouped into 4 tiers: full partners (Japan, the United States, Thailand, South Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia); limited partners (Australia, China, and India); observers from the Multinational Planning Augmentation team of MPAT (Bangladesh, Canada, France, Mongolia, Nepal, New Zealand, Philippines, Fiji, United Kingdom, and Brunei); and observers from the Combined Observer Liaison team or COLT (Cambodia, Laos, Brazil, Pakistan, Vietnam, Germany, Sweden, Greece, Kuwait, and Sri Lanka). The 2024 exercises marked the China's elevation out of observer status, although its participation (and that of India) was confined to humanitarian assistance exercises and is likely to remain in that sector indefinitely.

Since its inception as a bilateral exercise in 1982 *Cobra Gold* has been limited in some years, such as after coups in Thailand or, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has expanded significantly over the long-term. Live-fire exercises, which were removed after the 2016 coup led by former Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, were restored in 2023. 2024 saw a notable expansion, the inclusion of space in the exercises, along with land, sea, air and cyber, making *Cobra Gold* is an all-domain exercise. The US Space Command was a participant for the first time. For the past several years humanitarian assistance and disaster relief have also been a standard feature.

Apart from a continual rationale for maintaining the US-Thailand alliance, *Cobra Gold* is useful to the United States in several ways. Although its participation is limited, the PLA has participated in *Cobra Gold* every year since 2014, even in those years in which US-China tensions have been high. Both Washington and Beijing are able to take public refuge in the fact that the exercises are multilateral and that China is invited by Thailand rather than the US, but both sides are strongly in favor of China's continued

participation. This is often in contrast to the annual Shangri-la Security Dialogue in Singapore, in which Chinese and US defense officials often spar from the podium. The exercises are also a *de facto* weapons fair, in which countries that are considering purchasing arms from the United States could view some of their potential purchases and even to handle them to some extent.



Figure 2 The annual *Cobra Gold* Exercises, co-hosted by Thailand and the United States, traditionally commence with demonstrations of traditional Thai martial arts. The 2024 *Cobra Gold* exercises were held in Rayong, Thailand from Feb. 7 to March 8. Photo: Exercise *Cobra Gold*

The annual [Balikatan](#) (“shoulder-to-shoulder”) exercises between the US and Philippine armed forces, which opened this year on April 22 and conclude on May 10, are in the process of transformation from bilateral to multilateral exercises. *Balikatan* hosts a smaller range of participants than *Cobra Gold* but a larger number overall, with roughly 16,000 members of the Philippine and US armed forces training together. 2024 marks the 39th iteration of *Balikatan*.

Apart from the Philippines and the United States, only two countries rank as partners at *Balikatan*: Australia and, this year for the first time, France. Like *Cobra Gold*, the exercises will host several observers: Brunei, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Not surprisingly, given tensions in the South China Sea—particularly the Philippines' EEZ—*Balikatan* is primarily a group of US security partners and does not include either China or India. This difference is underscored with a Multilateral Maritime Exercise in the Philippines' EEZ among the

Philippine, US, and French Navies on the agenda. In addition, several of the exercises will occur in the vicinity of South China Sea flashpoints.

Washington Wades into the Myanmar Conflict

Since the fall of 2023 armed resistance groups in Myanmar have seized several military strongholds, particularly in border areas. Despite these gains, there is no clear path to victory and, according to the United Nations, “255 of Myanmar’s 330 townships, or nearly four in five, had been [impacted by armed clashes](#) between the military and those resisting its rule.” An estimated 2.8 million people have been displaced by the conflict.

These resisters include armed ethnic groups, some of which have waged insurgencies against the central government since Burma gained its independence in 1948, as well as the newer People’s Defense Force (PDF), the military arm of the National Unity Government (NUG), both established in response to the 2021 military coup. Ethnic armies often control territory and have diverse sources of income, often from drug trafficking and other forms of cross-border crime. The PDF and the NUG depend primarily on external funds, mostly in the form of donations from overseas Burmese. The NUG presses Western governments for diplomatic recognition as well as for funds and arms to continue its insurgency against the junta.

To date, no government has recognized the NUG, but the United States is preparing to provide assistance to resistance groups with funds appropriated through the 2023 Defense Authorization Act, as the first implementation of the BURMA Act of 2022. The act authorizes appropriations to be allocated annually from FY 2023 through 2027, with \$121 million earmarked for FY 2024. The bulk of the 2024 appropriation will be applied to humanitarian aid, including to displaced Burmese in Thailand and India, but \$25 million is planned for “technical support and non-lethal assistance” to armed groups. The use of the funds for the junta or for military-affiliated entities, the primary targets of US sanctions, is prohibited.

While he was in Thailand in late March, State Department Counselor Derek Chollet [met](#) with representatives of four ethnic armed groups from Myanmar known as the “KC3 alliance,” comprised of the Kachin Independence Organization, the Karen National Union, the

Karenni National Progressive Party and the Chin National Front. The alliance is politically aligned with the NUG and cooperates militarily with the PDF. Although the Biden administration has made no announcements as yet, the PDF and the KCS alliance are widely assumed to be the intended recipients of the non-lethal assistance.



Figure 3 U.S. State Department Counselor Derek Chollet (right) meets with Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi (left) during a trip to Jakarta, Indonesia, Mar. 10, 2023. Photo: U.S. State Department

Shortly thereafter, China issued a statement criticizing the use of US funds to support armed groups, charging that Washington sought to undermine China’s role in Myanmar. Beijing alleged that some resistance groups should be classified as terrorist under US law. In reality, China’s role in Myanmar is increasingly complex and self-contradictory at times. Beijing provides arms to the Tatmadaw and supports the junta in conflicts in Rakhine State, through which Chinese oil and gas pipelines pass. However, they support some resistance groups on the eastern border, for various reasons. For example, some groups are instrumental in mining critical minerals and exporting them to China. China also worries about the conflict in Chin State, on the China-Myanmar border, and its potential to spread violence across the border.

But although the West and like-minded countries generally welcome the US appropriation, some analysts question the wisdom of providing aid to armed groups. “Non-lethal aid” to military and paramilitary groups is usually anything that stops short of weapons and arms, and can include a broad range of equipment as well as training and intelligence. They question whether a coherent program of assistance to arms groups can be implemented, given the wide spectrum of armed groups with an equally wide range of motivations for

resisting the central government. They also fear that foreign assistance to resistance groups will further inflame the xenophobia that has characterized military regimes throughout Myanmar's history and that it risks turning an already complicated internal conflict into a proxy war.

In the meantime, ASEAN is attempting to make subtle shifts in its policy toward Myanmar without abandoning the Five-Point Consensus Plan. In January, the first ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting of the year in Luang Prabang was [attended](#) by an official from Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the first time since the 2021 coup. Vientiane, the 2024 ASEAN chair, urged engagement with all parties in the Myanmar conflict and insisted that Myanmar, as well as neighboring Thailand, should play a greater role in formulating ASEAN policy on the conflict.

However, the war continues to escalate, giving ASEAN little interval in which to ply its new policy. In mid-April, ASEAN Foreign Ministers issued a joint statement calling for an end to the conflict after the rebel Karen National Union (KNU) announced that it had seized Myawaddy, an important trade hub on the Thai border in Kayin State in southeastern Myanmar, following a months-long offensive. Myawaddy is the largest of six border crossings into Thailand and a critical trade hub.



Figure 4 Karen National Liberation Army troops near Myawaddy on April 15. Myanmar's civil war has strengthened ethnic armed groups. Photo: Reuters

Prabowo Prepares for Power

The results of the Feb. 14 elections in Indonesia came as little surprise, since Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto had been the favorite since the fall, when he chose Gibran Rakabuming Raka, the

38-year-old son of current President Joko Widodo as his running mate. In March the Indonesian Elections Commission [confirmed](#) that Prabowo and Gibran had won more than 58% of the vote. This gave them the first absolute majority in an Indonesian election in the "Reformasi" period, therefore requiring no run-off election. As well, Prabowo swept 36 of 38 provinces. Prabowo's nearest rival was Anies Basdewan, who won 25% of the vote and 2 provinces (Aceh and West Sumatra). Third in place was Ganjar Pranowo, who won 14% of the vote but no provinces.

Prabowo will be inaugurated Oct. 20, 2024 and must announce his Cabinet no later than two weeks after that. In the meantime, Joko Widodo will remain as head of state and Prabowo will continue as defense minister. He will need the interval to assemble a Cabinet that assures his coalition a majority in Parliament, which the legislative elections failed to give him. Two of Joko's key Cabinet officials—Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati and Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi—have announced that they will leave at the end of the year. Prabowo will presumably also need to replace himself as defense minister, although there is some speculation that he may keep that portfolio as a concurrent role.

Shortly after confirmation of his election, Prabowo embarked upon a three-country tour of the region, an unusual step for a president-elect, albeit one who still a serving minister of defense. His choice of countries was taken as an indication of his likely priorities: a first stop in Beijing and a meeting with Xi Jinping; on to Tokyo to confer with Prime Minister Kishida; finishing in Kuala Lumpur to meet with Anwar Ibrahim. Given the preliminary nature of his trip, the only "deliverables" were the visits themselves.

The agendas and rhetoric attached to the China and Japan visits were intended to signal that Prabowo gave the two powers equal weight. At the same time, he underscored his desire to expand both security and economic relations with China; Xi took pains to insist publicly that China and Indonesia shared a similar position on the war in the Middle East. Prabowo's meeting with Anwar in Malaysia was primarily a gesture of solidarity over the war in Gaza but also an acknowledgment that the ASEAN chair will rotate to Kuala Lumpur in 2025. Above all, the trip was an indication that Prabowo plans to be more

active in Indonesia's foreign policy than Joko has been.

Establishing relations with Washington will be a more delicate dance, for both sides. A former son-in-law of the late President Suharto and an adherent to his ideology of a strong role for the military in Indonesia's political and economic affairs, Prabowo has re-invented himself as an elected leader but has shown little evidence of the reformist streak that other post-Suharto military leaders have adopted. He was in fact expelled by the military for suspected human rights violations against Indonesian and East Timorese civilians when he led the military's special forces, although he was never formally charged. During this time, he was also banned from entry into the United States.

However, Washington took a more pragmatic approach to Prabowo when he became defense minister. In 2020, the visa ban was set aside when he was invited to visit the Pentagon. After that, Prabowo took an active role in upgrading Indonesia-US relations and worked with Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to finalize the Defense Cooperation Arrangement (DCA) between Indonesia and the United States in November 2023. Both sides will attempt to build on this new relationship when Prabowo takes office, although his determination to deepen defense cooperation with China as well as the impact of the Israel-Hamas war will be early challenges to establishing a solid foundation.

Looking Ahead

All eyes will be on the Shangri-La Security Dialogue in Singapore on May 31-June 2 as a barometer of Southeast Asian reaction to a stronger security role for Japan; the increasing "mini-lateralization" of security cooperation, in particular the US-Japan-Philippines triangle; the impact of the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East on the Indo-Pacific region; and the foreign policy positions of new Southeast Asian leaders, particularly Prabowo Subianto.

Political uncertainty will likely rise in Vietnam, with the toll of the anti-corruption purge on government leadership, and in Thailand, where the political landscape could be shaken with court rulings on the main opposition party, Move Forward, and internal machinations within the Pheu Thai Party. However, neither of these situations is likely to alter Southeast Asia's tilt toward or away from China or the United States,

as Indonesia's would. In May Lawrence Wong is scheduled to replace Lee Hsien-Loong as prime minister of Singapore, but he will take pains initially to underscore continuity with his predecessor in foreign policy.

Uncertainty over Washington's staying power in the run-up to November elections and after will permeate the region in the summer and fall. Many Southeast Asian leaders assume that President Biden will not attend the East Asia Summit in Laos, and those who are APEC members (the 10 ASEAN states minus Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar) will fix their sights instead on the APEC Leaders Meeting in Peru in December. Several will likely make side-trips to Washington to confer with the foreign policy teams of the winner in the November elections.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

JANUARY-APRIL 2024

Jan. 5, 2024: *Nimitz*-class aircraft carrier *USS Carl Vinson* (CVN 70), flagship of Carrier Strike Group (CSG) 1, [arrives](#) in the Philippines for a scheduled port visit.

Jan. 17-20, 2024: Adm. John C. Aquilino, commander US Indo-Pacific Command, [travels](#) to Thailand, where he meets Minister of Defense Sutin Klungsang and Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) Chief of Defense Gen. Songwit Noonpackdee.

Jan. 25, 2024: Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Jose Fernandez [meets](#) with Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh in Hanoi. He expresses support for the rapid development of Vietnam's semiconductor ecosystem as part of the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and lauds Vietnam's goal of achieving net zero emissions by 2050. The two leaders also discuss expanding cooperation on renewable energy science and technology.

Jan. 26, 2024: National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [visits](#) Bangkok and meets Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin and Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara. They discuss a range of bilateral issues, as well as the need to promote a resolution to the conflict in Myanmar and efforts to obtain the release of hostages held by Hamas, which include both Thai and US nationals.

Jan. 29, 2024: With Laos as 2024 chair, ASEAN [holds](#) its first Foreign Ministers Meeting (FMM) in Luang Prabang. For the first time since the February 2021 coup, a representative from Myanmar participates in an FMM.

Jan. 31, 2024: United States, European Union, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway,

Republic of Korea, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom [issue](#) a joint statement marking three years since the military coup in Myanmar on Feb. 1, 2021. The statement condemned the military's ongoing human rights abuses and urged "unified efforts by ASEAN" to resolve the crisis.

Jan. 31, 2024: United States [designates](#) four additional individuals and two entities linked to Burma's military regime for sanctions. The new designations target the junta's sources of revenue which support military activities against civilians. The action also targets those who provide material and support to produce arms in Burma.

Feb. 1-2, 2024: Deputy Secretary of State Richard Verma [visits](#) Indonesia to discuss bilateral cooperation following announcement of the Indonesia-US Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in November 2023. In a meeting with Indonesian Vice Foreign Minister Pahala Mansury, the two officials finalize negotiations on a CSP Plan of Action to guide bilateral engagements over the next five years. The deputy secretary and vice foreign minister also discuss economic cooperation and regional and global issues, including the situation in the Middle East and importance of global health security.

Feb. 2, 2024: Former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak [receives](#) a reduction in his prison sentence for corruption related to the 1MDB scandal. He will be released in 2028 and had his fine reduced from \$44 million to \$11 million.

Feb. 9, 2024: US Navy and Philippine Navy (PN) [conduct](#) third iteration of the Maritime Cooperative Activity (MCA) in the South China Sea.

Feb. 12-15, 2024: US Marines from III Marine Expeditionary Force and the US Agency for International Development [assist](#) the government of the Philippines in providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in response to severe flooding and landslides in the southern Philippine province of Mindanao.

Feb. 12, 2024: Secretary of State Antony Blinken [meets](#) Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara in Washington, DC. The two officials discuss opportunities to strengthen cooperation across a range of bilateral and global issues, including the need to deliver humanitarian aid to Myanmar.

Feb. 14, 2024: Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto [wins](#) Indonesian presidential race with an absolute majority, the first candidate to do so since the 1998-99 democratic transition in Indonesia. Prabowo's campaign coalition does not win a majority in Parliament, which will require that he build a broad coalition within his Cabinet.

Feb. 23-March 4, 2024: Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink [travels](#) to Singapore; Phnom Penh, Cambodia; Bangkok, Thailand; Hanoi, Vietnam; and Bandar Seri Begawan, and Brunei.

Feb. 24, 2024: First agreement from the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) [goes into effect](#) for five of the 14 IPEF members: Japan, India, Singapore, Fiji, and the United States.

Feb. 27-March 8, 2024: 43rd iteration of *Joint Exercise Cobra Gold*, co-hosted by Thailand and the US, [takes place](#) in Rayong, Thailand. Over 33 nations train in the air, sea, and space domains.

Feb. 27, 2024: Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs Permanent Secretary Albert Chua and Assistant Secretary Kritenbrink [meet](#) in Singapore to co-chair the 6th United States-Singapore Strategic Partnership Dialogue. The co-chairs discuss the longstanding bilateral security relationship and also focused on new

areas of cooperation, including supply chain coordination.

Feb. 28-29, 2024: In Bangkok, Assistant Secretary Kritenbrink [co-leads](#) 9th US-Thailand Strategic Dialogue alongside Ministry of Foreign Affairs Permanent Secretary Eksiri Pintaruchi as well as the Second Strategic and Defense Dialogue alongside Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Jediah Royal. Both dialogues are conducted under the auspices of the US-Thai Communiqué on Strategic Alliance and Partnership.

March 5, 2024: Assistant Secretary Kritenbrink and Vietnam Standing Vice Foreign Minister Nguyen Minh Vu [conclude](#) 10th Asia-Pacific Dialogue in Hanoi, the first under the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

March 5, 2024: State Department [issues](#) a statement calling out PRC provocative actions against lawful Philippine maritime operations in the South China Sea on March 5 employing water cannons against Philippine vessels carrying provisions to Filipino service members stationed at the *BRP Sierra Madre*. These maneuvers caused multiple collisions, damaging at least one Philippine vessel, injuring Filipino service members, and jeopardizing the safety of the Filipino crew. The statement refers to the July 2016 decision of the Arbitration Tribunal of the UN Law of the Sea Treaty, which found that the PRC has no lawful maritime claims to the waters around Second Thomas Shoal and calls upon the PRC to abide by the ruling.

March 6-14, 2024: Adm. Aquilino [visits](#) Singapore March 6-10 and meets Minister of Defence Ng Eng Hen. From March 10-14 he [visits](#) the Philippines, where he meets President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr., Armed Forces of the Philippines Chief of Staff Gen. Romeo S. Brawner Jr.; Secretary of National Defense Gilberto C. Teodoro Jr.; and National Security Adviser Eduardo Año.

March 11-12, 2024: US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo [leads](#) first-ever Presidential Trade and Investment Delegation to the Philippines. The focus of the trip is to enhance US companies' contributions to the Philippines' innovation economy, connective infrastructure, clean energy transition, critical minerals sector, and the food security in the Philippines.

March 19, 2024: Secretary Blinken [meets](#) Philippine President Marcos, in Manila. They discuss developments in the South China Sea and recent initiatives to strengthen US-Philippine economic relations.

March 20, 2024: Secretary Blinken [issues](#) a statement congratulating Indonesian Defense Minister and President-Elect Prabowo Subianto on confirmation of his election by the Indonesian Election Commission.

March 20-24, 2024: State Department Counselor Derek Chollet [visits](#) Indonesia and Thailand. While in Thailand he meets with ethnic armed groups from Myanmar aligned with the opposition National Unity Government (NUG).

March 21, 2024: Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong, in office only a year, [is pushed out](#) of power in the Vietnamese Communist Party's anti-corruption purge. A successor is not yet named.

March 23, 2024: State Department [issues](#) a statement condemning PRC actions against Philippine maritime operations in the South China Sea, pointing to the repeated use of water cannons and reckless blocking maneuvers resulted in injuries to Filipino service members and significant damage to their resupply vessel, rendering it immobile.

March 25, 2024: Secretary Blinken [meets](#) Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son in Washington, for the inaugural Comprehensive Strategic Partnership foreign ministerial meeting. They discuss operation in the semiconductor ecosystem, supply chain diversification, education and culture, security,

and human rights as well as promoting security in the South China Sea.

March 27-29, 2024: Adm. John C. Aquilino, commander of US Indo-Pacific Command, [hosts](#) a delegation led by Gen. Songwit Noonpackdee, Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) Chief of Defense, for the annual US-Thailand Senior Leader Dialogue (SLD) in Honolulu.

April 1, 2024: US State Department [issues](#) a statement expressing concern over convictions of Vietnamese ethnic minority and religious freedom advocates, including five convictions since January 2024.

April 2, 2024: ISEAS-Yusof Institute in Singapore [releases](#) the 2024 State of Southeast Asia Survey. The Survey finds that a slight majority of respondents in the region would align with China rather than the United States if they felt compelled to choose.

April 4, 2024: Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell [meets](#) Bruneian Foreign Minister II Dato Erywan Yusof in Washington, DC during the fifth US-Brunei Senior Officials' Dialogue.

April 7, 2024: Defense forces from Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States [conduct](#) the first-ever quadrilateral maritime exercises in the Philippine EEZ.

April 8-19, 2024: Marines from the Philippine Marine Corps and the US Marine Corps [conduct](#) the second iteration of the *Philippine Marine Exercise* at Camp Iranun, Mindanao, Philippines. The *MAREX PHL* exercise led by the Philippine Marine Corps, promotes military interoperability and maritime domain awareness capabilities.

April 11, 2024: President Biden [hosts](#) Philippine President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio at the White House for the first trilateral US-Japan-Philippines leaders' summit. The leaders affirm the alliances between the United States and the Philippines, as well as the United States and Japan. They also discuss trilateral cooperation to

promote economic growth and emerging technologies; advance clean energy supply chains and climate cooperation; and further peace and security in the Indo-Pacific and around the world. On April 11 Biden also hosts a bilateral summit with Marcos.

April 12, 2024: Inaugural Philippines-United States 3+3 Senior Officials Meeting [is launched](#) in Washington when Secretary Blinken, Secretary of Defense Austin, and National Security Advisor Sullivan meet with Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo, Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro, and National Security Advisor Eduardo M. Año. The meeting follows Biden's bilateral meeting with Philippines President Marcos Jr. and the historic Japan-Philippines-United States Trilateral Leaders' Summit on April 11.

April 12, 2024: Truong My Lan, a real estate tycoon convicted of Vietnam's largest-ever financial fraud, [is sentenced](#) to death by a court in Ho Chi Minh City. Her sentence sends a strong signal that the Party's anti-corruption campaign will target the private sector as well as the government bureaucracy, which sparks worry in the foreign investment sector.

April 18, 2024: ASEAN Foreign Ministers [issue](#) a joint statement of concern over the recent escalation of conflict in Myanmar, including around Myawaddy, Kayin State, along the border area between Myanmar and Thailand and in Rakhine State of Myanmar, both which have caused significant displacement of civilians.

April 22, 2024: Philippines and the United States [kick off](#) the 2024 *Balikatan Exercises*, to conclude on May 10. The largest bilateral training exercises between the two allies, this year's *Balikatan* involves more than 16,000 US and Philippine forces, along with contingents from the Australian Defence Force and, for the first time in *Balikatan's* history, the French Navy. In addition, 14 countries field observers to the exercises.

April 23, 2024: Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell [chairs](#) a session of the Philippines-United States 3+3 Senior Officials Meeting in Washington. Deputies from the US Departments of State and Defense and the National Security Council meet with counterparts from the Philippines Departments of Foreign Affairs and Defense as well as the National Security Council.

April 24, 2024: Secretary Austin [speaks](#) by telephone with Indonesian Defense Minister and President-Elect Prabowo Subianto. Austin congratulated Prabowo on his election as president in February. They discussed plans for Indonesia and the United States to deepen interoperability through closer cooperation on air and maritime defense capabilities. Austin thanked Minister Prabowo for Indonesia's recent airdrop of humanitarian assistance into Gaza.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

CHINA'S NEW FOREIGN POLICY MODERATION - MIXED REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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Incorporating major foreign policy initiatives of leader Xi Jinping, Beijing completed its effort from the past two years [with instructions](#) in January on China's new approach to foreign affairs to Chinese foreign policy officials and others concerned. The new approach added authority and momentum to Beijing's emphasis since Xi's summit with US President Joe Biden last November on greater Chinese moderation and restraint as a "responsible" great power pursuing peace and development in dealing with Southeast Asian neighbors and elsewhere. Nevertheless, Beijing remains selective in how it applies moderation, and the record of the past two years shows great swings between moderation and truculence in its approach to foreign affairs, depending on circumstances which remain subject to change. The success of China's regional importance showed in Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies [annual survey](#) of regional elites with China viewed as both the leading economic and political-security power, overshadowing the United States, and the judgment that if forced to choose between them, more respondents would select China than the United States.

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Background: China's New Moderate Approach to Foreign Affairs

The process of China's new definition and clarification of its broader approach to foreign affairs developed over several years, culminating in authoritative instructions in January 2024 to Chinese party-state practitioners, propagandists, and related representatives to give top attention to the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought and to Xi's personal leadership. Highlights of the new direction were Xi's Global Development Initiative announced in 2021, his Global Security Initiative of 2022, and his Global Civilization Initiative of 2023.

For much of this time, Chinese rhetoric and practice became increasingly harsh against growing challenges it faced, notably from the Biden administration and the broadening and deepening alignment of allies and partners. Particular [negative Chinese attention](#) focused on the Biden government's successful efforts with allies and partners in Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and North America to build domestic resiliency and international positions of strength. Chinese criticism reached a high point in October 2022, with [Xi's rhetoric](#) at the 20th Chinese Communist Party Congress validating his ever-stronger dominance of leadership decision-making and *repeatedly* invoking the need to prepare for long-term struggle against foreign foes[RY1] [RY2].

Nonetheless, to the surprise of many, Xi shifted to a notably more [moderate approach](#) to the United States and many of its allies and partners when meeting Biden at the G20 summit in Indonesia in November 2022. The process was derailed by acrimony over the discovery of Chinese spy balloons crossing US territory in February 2023, with harsh Chinese rhetoric and practices against the US and its allies and partners in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

An initial authoritative foreign policy statement integrating Xi's Development and Security Initiatives together with his Civilization Initiative announced in March 2023 and with his longer standing Belt and Road Initiative showed first in the keynote [speech](#) by Prime Minister Li Qiang at the Boao Forum for Asia on April 2023. He sharply contrasted China's avowed plans for global governance with disruptive and confrontational actions of the United States and its allies and partners. There followed a [State Council White Paper](#) on Sept. 26 showing Xi's

"vision" of a new China-supported world order. The vision incorporated Xi's contributions in his Development, Security and Civilization initiatives to lay out alternative global governance in contrast with the purported disruptive and confrontational actions of the United States and its allies and partners in the existing international order. A [Foreign Ministry White Paper](#) in October dealing with Chinese foreign policy in Asia made clearer for Asian governments the choice Beijing expected from them to make regarding alternative China-backed versus US-backed world orders.

Presumably for many of the same reasons as in November 2022, Xi again moderated in late 2023. Since then, Beijing in authoritative statements has tended to avoid harsh attacks on the US and its allies and partners seeking to support the existing world order. Notably [Xi's speech](#) to the APEC leaders in California in November was uniquely positive and cooperative with all countries. He stressed that China remained committed to the path of peaceful development and did not intend to "unseat anyone."

The [Foreign Ministry Statement](#) of Jan. 16, 2024 laid out the implications of the Central Work Conference on Foreign Affairs held mainly behind closed doors in December 2023. It was broadly in line with the moderate approach seen since November. It favored multipolarity and opposed the hegemonism and power politics carried out by unnamed countries. But there was no specific reference to the United States, its allies and partners, or even Taiwan. It stressed that Beijing is not pressing governments to choose between siding with China against the US and the West. It avowed the importance of "fighting spirit" in foreign affairs but also emphasized China's role as a "responsible" power.

Recent Developments

Seeking regional support for its new foreign policy approach and Xi's vague but seemingly goal of "building a community of shared future" between China and neighboring countries was a top priority for 2024. It featured in Xi's [New Year's address](#). Beijing notably sought endorsements during meetings with top regional leaders and in various UN resolutions.

Politburo Member and Foreign Minister Wang Yi was emphatic at the 60th [Munich Conference](#) in February that China would remain a "staunch

force for stability” in a turbulent world. It would serve as “a responsible major country” with consistent policies and principles supporting cooperation among major countries, dealing effectively with international hotspots issues, enhancing global governance, and advancing global growth.

Wang Yi repeated these themes at a [press conference](#) at the National People’s Congress in March. He stressed that China strove to promote stability in relations with the United States. There was little of the harsh criticism of the US and other perceived opponents seen in Foreign Minister [Qin Gang’s press conference](#) at the National Peoples Congress in March of the previous year. Wang sought “common progress” with China’s neighbors which involved respecting each other’s core interests and concerns, seeking mutual benefit, and commitment to openness and inclusiveness in regional groupings.



Figure 1 Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Foreign Minister Wang Yi answered questions from Chinese and foreign media about China’s foreign policy and external relations on March 7, 2024. Photo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China

Wang offered a benign view in a detailed response to a question about ASEAN and the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, arguing that despite “turbulence” in the world, “peace and stability have been maintained” in the South China Sea by China and ASEAN countries. Without mentioning the Philippines or other South China Sea disputants or the United States and other powers concerned with Chinese expansionism at others’ expense, Wang advised that China employed “a high degree of restraint” in seeking to deal with differences. But he added that abusing China’s “good faith” and “distorting” maritime laws were unacceptable, and China would take “justified actions” and

“prompt and legitimate countermeasures” against deliberate infringements and unwarranted provocations. He urged unnamed “certain countries outside the region” to not stir up troubles and problems in the South China Sea. He reiterated China’s commitment to the Declaration of the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea and highlighted China’s efforts to accelerate China-ASEAN negotiations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

Wang’s emphasis on “common progress” with China’s neighbors featured during his trips to Indonesia, Cambodia, and Papua New Guinea in April, with Chinese outlets highlighting Beijing’s economic and other [benefits](#) for the region while noting in [measured language](#) continued Chinese opposition to US policies. Notably, [China Daily](#), commenting on April 26 on Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s visit, said Beijing was dissatisfied with Biden administration actions offensive to China concerning Southeast Asia and elsewhere. It pointed to the largest US military drill with the Philippines “in decades” and the deployment of advanced US mid-range missiles in the northern Philippines capable of hitting targets near Taiwan and “the whole southeast coastal region of the Chinese mainland.”

Rising Tensions in Philippines-China Impasse over Disputed South China Sea

By far the most prominent dynamic in China-Southeast Asia relations in 2024 has been rising friction resulting from Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., [backed strongly](#) by the United States, Japan, Australia, India, South Korea, the European Union and NATO countries, continuing to challenge and defy China’s coercive activities in support of its claims to Philippine occupied and claimed territory in the South China Sea. The pattern of repeated Philippine challenges to China’s coercive measures and expansionist claims was set last year. The worsening of the impasse represents the most serious challenge to China’s emphasis on creating an [international image](#) of China as a stable and “responsible” major power employing “restraint” in dealing with Chinese disagreements with other countries.

Beijing has been placed on the defensive as the Marcos government no longer follows the practice, from before he took power in 2022, when the Philippines conformed with other South China Sea claimants and tended to avoid publicity as they faced unpublicized Chinese

coercive measures, often carried out by the world's largest fleets of modern Coast Guard vessels and Maritime Militia. Accompanying journalists now routinely provide and [widely publicize](#) high-quality video of the forceful measures including widespread use of water cannons, dangerous ship maneuvers, and occasional ramming, carried out by these much larger and more numerous Chinese vessels, depicting Beijing as a bully determined to have its way at others' expense. The United States and other supporters use such evidence in justifying [stronger support](#) for the Philippines.

As seen in Wang Yi's avoiding mention of the Philippines, the United States, or others by name when discussing South China Sea disputes at the National People's Congress in March, [high-level official Chinese discourse](#) has tended to eschew harsh rhetoric while defending Chinese actions and claims and warning of negative consequence for the Philippines. Chinese foreign ministry and defense ministry spokesperson statements have taken pains to present justifications for China's coercive measures as reflecting forbearance and restraint. As discussed below, official media have been selective in using more critical language in commenting on the Philippines and its international backers. President Marcos and his spokespersons, along with Japan and NATO have been criticized more strongly than the United States, which has been criticized more strongly than other backers of the Philippines, notably Australia.

Significant developments

On Jan. 30, CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative [reported that](#) Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia blocking Philippine resupply missions to disputed Second Thomas Shoal had increased in frequency and intensity since 2022. However, throughout the reporting period, after confrontations between the PRC and Philippines Beijing attempted to seize the high ground by claiming that agreements between the two sides had been in place, that it was Manila that had been acting contrary to them, and that outside actors—and Manila's collaboration with them, were the source of the tensions. The Philippines countered with continued publicity of incidents, and accounts from the Philippines, including from Marcos' more China-friendly predecessor, did not lend credence to their contentions of a previous agreement.

On Jan. 5, the Chinese foreign ministry [spokesperson condemned](#) the second US-Philippines patrol in the disputed South China Sea (the first was held [in November](#).) Nearly a week later, official media publicized a Chinese [intelligence analyst](#) claiming that the Marcos government's confrontation with China over the Philippine outpost on a long grounded warship on Second Thomas Shoal was motivated by the possible collapse of the ship, domestic Philippine politics involving a dispute between Marcos and previous President Rodrigo Duterte, and US intensifying efforts "to contain" China. On Jan. 12, Chinese Coast Guard ships were videotaped by the Philippines as they [drove away](#) Philippine fishing boats near disputed Scarborough Shoal.

Diplomacy between the sides continued throughout the period. On Jan. 17, the eighth meeting of the China-Philippines Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea took place in Shanghai. Two days later, Beijing highlighted [alleged agreement](#) at the [Shanghai meeting](#) to "efficiently manage maritime emergencies," especially the situation at Second Thomas Shoal. On Jan. 23, reacting to sharp Chinese criticism of Marcos' message congratulating the newly elected Taiwan president, [Marcos reaffirmed](#) his government's one-China policy. On Jan. 25 the Chinese defense [ministry spokesperson](#) said Beijing was hopeful that the meeting in Shanghai on Jan. 17 would lead to resolving disputes through dialogues and consultations. However, he harshly criticized NATO's increasing involvement in Asian security matters and Japan but not Australia in discussing Japan-Australia alleged joint efforts targeting China. This would prove to be a theme during the first four months of the year.



Figure 2 Chinese coastguard vessels fire water cannons towards a Philippine resupply vessel Unaizah May 4 on its way to a resupply mission at Second

*Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea, March 5, 2024
Photo: Adrian Portugal/Reuters*

On March 5 a [major incident](#) took place involving Chinese Coast Guard ships using water cannons to block access to Second Thomas Shoal by two Philippine supply ships and two accompanying coast guard vessels; the incident was [filmed by CNN](#) and broadcast widely. China followed with proposals to avoid recurrence of such incidents which Beijing said the Philippines rejected. This was followed by another [major incident](#) involving Chinese Coast Guard ships blocking access to Second Thomas Shoal by a Philippines supply ship with construction materials and two accompanying Coast Guard vessels. Beijing accused the United States of instigating Manila's provocations and warned the Philippines that relations with China were "at a cross roads." China's defense ministry [spokesperson said](#) on the 28th repeated provocations by the Philippines were the immediate cause of rising tensions in the South China Sea, while US interference was the biggest factor causing turbulence there. On March 26 China added India to the long list of countries it criticizes over South China Sea matters following the Indian [foreign minister's visit](#) to Manila resulting in a joint statement critical of China on the South China Sea.



Figure 3 China's top legislator Zhao Leji on Thursday delivered a keynote speech at the opening plenary of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2024. Photo: Xinhua

On Feb. 5 *China Daily* [criticized Marcos](#) for renegeing on the alleged agreement at the Jan. 17 meeting in Shanghai; it warned that China's "considerable restraint" in dealing with Philippine "provocations" intruding in waters near Second Thomas Shoal and Scarborough

Shoal could end, leading to "conflict." On April 3 China's foreign ministry [spokesperson claimed](#) the Marcos government had betrayed trust by not abiding by alleged Sino-Philippines agreements to tow away the ship grounded on Second Thomas Shoal in 1999 and to not build permanent facilities on the reef.

On April 11 China's foreign [ministry spokesperson](#) said the Philippines had gone "back on its words" in refusing to remove the grounded warship on Second Thomas Shoal, by denying the existence of the "gentleman's agreement" with China reached during the Duterte government and repeatedly infringing on China's sovereignty, and abandoning the Marcos government's "understanding" with China by sending construction material to reinforce the outpost on Second Thomas Shoal. However, former President [Duterte subsequently denied](#) there was such a gentleman's agreement but he repeated his recollection of his first meeting with Xi at which the Chinese leader indicated that "China will go to war" to counter Philippine provocations. As of mid-April Chinese diplomats continued to claim the existence of a "gentleman's agreement" to manage the situation at the Second Thomas Shoal, which it claimed the Philippines had abandoned.



Figure 4 Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and President Xi Jinping of China at the Malacañang Palace in Manila on November 20, 2018. Photo: Malacañang

And as of April tensions had not diminished: On April 14 a Chinese Coast Guard [ship blocked](#) a Philippine maritime research vessel and an accompanying escort ship from entering waters claimed by China for eight hours, an incident not discussed by the two governments but reported by foreign media based on tracking data. China also stepped up criticism of Manila's increasing cooperation with other powers, including when,

on Feb. 19, a US [B-52 bomber flew](#) with three Philippine jet fighters as part of three days of joint air patrols over disputed territory in the South China Sea. China condemned the patrol, noting they were the [first Philippine air patrols](#) with a foreign country. In mid-March, after news reports of a summit in Washington on April 11 of the leaders of the Philippines, Japan, and the United States, official Chinese [media begin](#) repeatedly criticizing the leaders of the three countries for disrupting peace in the South China Sea. On April 7, the Philippines, the United States, Japan, and Australia began their first full-scale military exercise in the South China Sea. [Chinese commentary](#) took aim at the exercises a day later, though it focused criticism on Japan, with none against Australia.

The first batch of three batteries of the shore-based, anti-ship variant of the Indian *BrahMos* missile system arrived in the Philippines on April 19 despite low-level Chinese [criticism](#) of the agreement. The prominent negative [Chinese reactions](#) to the US-Japan-Philippine summit in Washington on April 11 included formal Chinese demarches to Japanese and Philippine ambassadors in China amid widespread attack on this “substantial new step in the US-led attempt to contain China.” Chinese [commentary](#) closed the reporting period by criticizing the large-scale annual US-Philippines *Balikatan* military exercises from April 22 to May 10 involving over 16,000 participants. It gave special attention to the US deployment of its new Typhon midrange ground-based missile launcher—capable of firing Tomahawk cruise missiles and SM-6 missiles—in northern Luzon, which Beijing saw as directly related to defending Taiwan.



Figure 5 President Joe Biden, center, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., left, and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida pose before a trilateral meeting in the East Room of the White House in Washington, April 11, 2024. Photo: VOA News

Strengthening Ties between China and Indonesia

Indonesia’s President-elect Prabowo Subianto [visited](#) China and met President Xi on April 1. It was Prabowo’s first foreign trip since his election in February. As defense minister, Prabowo agreed to step up bilateral defense and security ties, working with China to ensure regional stability and to help fulfill Indonesia’s military hardware upgrade while boosting cooperation and dialogue in the defense industry. Prabowo also pledged to continue outgoing Indonesian President Jokowi’s “policy of friendship with China,” and promote the alignment of development strategies on the economy, trade, and poverty alleviation with China.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met Indonesian counterpart Retno Marsudi in Jakarta on April 18. Both ministers [agreed](#) on the urgency of implementation of a UN Security Council resolution for a ceasefire in Gaza, and discussed the prospects for resolving the Palestinian issue through a two-state solution. Wang was also in Indonesia to attend the “China-Indonesia High-Level Dialogue Cooperation Mechanism,” where senior ministers from both sides discuss cooperation in trade, business, and economic activities. China is Indonesia’s largest trading partner, with two-way trade volume reaching more than \$127 billion. China is one of Indonesia’s largest foreign investors, with investment flows of more than \$7.4 billion in 2023.

China Stages Live-Fire Exercises in Border Area with Myanmar

On April 2-3, the People’s Liberation Army Southern Theater Command’s ground and air forces engaged in live-fire exercises that included rapid deployments, precision strikes, and other operations near its border with Myanmar. The PLA [explained](#) that it is ready to “safeguard China’s sovereignty, border stability and the lives, properties and safety of the Chinese people,” referring to the rationale for the exercises in light of repeated clashes between Myanmar’s ethnic groups and the military junta. China helped broker negotiations that led to a truce in January between the Myanmar government and three ethnic groups, but fighting has continued. The agreement was supposed to see an immediate ceasefire, disengagement of military personnel, and

peaceful negotiations to resolve the disputes. The military exercises were meant to press the parties involved to abide by the agreement. Deng Xijun, China's special envoy for Asian affairs, visited Naypyitaw at the same time as the military exercises to discuss the latest developments in peace talks with Min Aung Hlaing, who leads Myanmar's military junta.

China-Vietnam Relations Warming Up

Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun and Vietnamese counterpart Phan Van Giang met in mid-April for the eighth border defense friendship exchange and [announced](#) the establishment of a hotline between the PLA's Southern Theater Command and the Vietnamese navy. The hotline reflects both countries' intention to make maritime cooperation a new highlight of cooperation despite competing claims in the South China Sea, and follows the agreement to set up a direct line between the countries' defense ministries at the end of 2015.

In addition to stepping up defense ties, China and Vietnam are pressing ahead on cooperation on trade, business, and economic activities. Vietnam announced in April that it would begin construction of two high-speed railway lines further linking the two countries and facilitating trade. One railway line would run from Vietnam's port cities of Haiphong and Quang Ninh through Hanoi to Lao Cai province, which borders China's Yunnan province. The other would run from Hanoi to Lang Son province, which borders China's Guangxi region, passing through an area densely populated with global manufacturing facilities, including some owned by Chinese firms. China remains Vietnam's largest trading partner and a vital source of imports for its manufacturing sector. According to Vietnamese official data, two-way trade in the first quarter of this year rose 22% from a year earlier to \$43.6 billion.

Cambodia: China-backed Canal; Warships at Naval Base

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet on March 12 attacked critics of a proposed \$1.7 billion China-funded [Funan Techo Canal project](#) which would bypass Vietnam, purportedly allow the Chinese navy access near the border with Vietnam, and reportedly drain fresh water from the Mekong River. The project will allow shipping from Phnom Penh to divert from the southern

Mekong River controlled by Vietnam to a 180-km canal through Cambodian territory to the deep-sea port at Kep in southern Cambodia. The [project reportedly](#) will get underway this year and will be built and operated by a Chinese company. The cost will be paid by user-fees charged by the Chinese company, which will transfer ownership to Cambodia in "40-50 years."

China Daily on April 10 disclosed former Prime Minister Hun Sen and now president of the Supreme Privy Council and chairman of the Cambodian People's Party strongly supported the canal and sought China's backing in building the project [in discussions](#) with third-ranking Chinese leader Zhao Leji in a meeting in Beijing of March 28. The Cambodian leader went on to deny the presence of Chinese troops at the Ream Naval Base, located along the coast to the west and north of Kep, although the CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency [Initiative reported](#) April 18 that two Chinese Navy ships have spent the past four months with exclusive use of a new pier at the base built by China.



Figure Zhao Leji, chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee, meets with Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who is here to attend the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2024, in Boao, south China's Hainan Province, March 28, 2024. Photo: Xinhua/Yin Bogu

Outlook

China's comparatively moderate foreign policy approach in Southeast Asia over the past six months will be challenged by active US-backed efforts to counter adverse Chinese practices. Though the rationale for continued Chinese moderation remains strong, the defiant

Philippines—backed by the US—heads the list of reasons Beijing may adopt tougher measures.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

JANUARY-APRIL 2024

Jan. 5, 2024: China's foreign ministry [spokesperson condemns](#) second US-Philippines patrol in the disputed South China Sea.

Jan. 11, 2024: Official Chinese media publicizes an [intelligence analyst](#)'s claim that the Philippine government's confrontation with China over the Philippine outpost on a long grounded warship on Second Thomas Shoal is motivated by the possible collapse of the ship, domestic Philippine politics involving a dispute between Marcos and former President Rodrigo Duterte, and intensifying US efforts "to contain" China.

Jan. 12, 2024: China brokers a truce and ceasefire agreement in Kunming between Myanmar's military regime and an alliance of Myanmar's ethnic minority groups. The agreement also includes the disengagement of military personnel and the settlement of their disputes through negotiations.

Jan. 12, 2024: Chinese Coast Guard ships are videotaped by the Philippines [driving away](#) Philippine fishing boats near the disputed Scarborough Shoal.

Jan. 17, 2024: China and the Philippines convene the 8th Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea in Shanghai. The two sides agree to manage maritime disputes through diplomacy and to maintain dialogue to avoid escalation.

Jan. 19, 2024: Beijing highlights an [alleged agreement](#) at the [Shanghai meeting](#) to "efficiently manage maritime emergencies," especially at Second Thomas Shoal.

Jan. 23, 2024: Reacting to sharp Chinese criticism of a message congratulating the newly elected Taiwan president, President [Marcos reaffirms](#) his government's one China policy.

Jan. 25, 2024: Chinese Defense [Ministry spokesperson](#) says Beijing is hopeful that the Jan. 17 meeting in Shanghai would lead to resolving disputes through dialogue and consultations.

Jan. 30, 2024: CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative [reports that](#) Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia blocking Philippine resupply missions to disputed Second Thomas Shoal had increased in frequency and intensity since 2022.

Feb. 5, 2024: *China Daily* [criticizes Marcos](#) for reneging on the alleged Jan. 17 agreement; it warns that China's "considerable restraint" in dealing with Philippine "provocations" in waters near Second Thomas Shoal and Scarborough Shoal could end, leading to "conflict."

Feb. 19, 2024: A US [B-52 bomber flies](#) with three Philippine jet fighters as part of three days of joint air patrols over disputed territory in the South China Sea, prompting Chinese condemnation.

Feb. 23, 2024: Official Chinese [media reports](#) that a Philippine government vessel with news reporters on board was expelled from waters near Scarborough Shoal by Chinese Coast Guard ships.

March 1, 2024: China and Thailand implement a bilateral visa waiver agreement, enabling visitors from both countries to travel between China and Thailand without visa requirements. The measure is seen as a way to revive Thailand's tourism industry as the new Thai government aims to attract more than 8 million Chinese visitors in 2024.

March 5, 2024: China and Thailand sign memorandums of understanding to cooperate on the peaceful use of outer space and international lunar research stations. The two countries will form a joint working group on space exploration and applications, enhancing data exchanges and personnel training.

March 5, 2024: Chinese Coast Guard vessels [use](#) water cannons to block and prevent Philippines' supply ships and coast guard vessels' access to Second Thomas Shoal, a major incident that prompted swift rebuke from the Philippines.

March 18, 2024: Chinese [media begin](#) criticizing the leaders of the US, Japan, and the Philippines in response to news of a trilateral summit between them in April, accusing the three governments of disrupting peace in the South China Sea.

March 22, 2024: China and Singapore announce that they will restart a high-level bilateral forum, the Social Governance Forum, in June. The forum will cover an in-depth exchange of views on cooperation in such areas as social governance, security and law enforcement, the building of rule of law, and managing interracial and religious diversity.

March 23, 2024: Another [major incident](#) takes place involving Chinese Coast Guard ships blocking access to Second Thomas Shoal by a Philippines supply ship with construction materials and two accompanying Coast Guard vessels. Beijing accuses the United States of instigating Manila's provocations and warns that Manila's relations with China were "at a cross roads."

March 26, 2024: China adds India to the list of countries it criticizes over South China Sea matters following the Indian [foreign minister's visit](#) to Manila resulting in a joint statement critical of China on the South China Sea.

March 28, 2024: China's defense ministry [spokesperson says](#) repeated provocations by the Philippines were the immediate cause of rising tensions in the South China Sea, while US interference was the biggest factor causing turbulence there.

March 30, 2024: In the keynote speech at the annual Boao Forum for Asia, Chinese leader [Zhao Leji](#) ignores disputes over the South China Sea and stresses the positives in Chinese foreign policy.

April 1, 2024: Xi Jinping meets Indonesia's President-elect Prabowo Subianto in Beijing. It is Prabowo's first foreign trip since his election in February. Both leaders agree to deepen bilateral cooperation across all domains.

April 2, 2024: ASEAN and China reaffirm commitment to enhance their Comprehensive Security Partnership at the 25th anniversary of ASEAN-China Joint Cooperation Committee Meeting in Jakarta. Both sides agree to enhance cooperation through dialogue on nontraditional

security, trade and investment, science and technology, public health, and the environment, among other issue areas.

April 3, 2024: China carries out live-fire exercises near its border with Myanmar as it presses the country's military and armed ethnic groups to implement a January truce brokered by Beijing.

April 3, 2024: China's foreign ministry [spokesperson claims](#) the Marcos government betrayed trust by not abiding by alleged Sino-Philippines agreements to tow away the ship grounded on Second Thomas Shoal in 1999 and to not build permanent facilities on the reef.

April 7, 2024: Philippines, the United States, Japan, and Australia began their first full-scale military exercise in the South China Sea. The following day [Chinese commentary](#) takes aim at the exercises, focusing criticism on Japan, and not on Australia.

April 9, 2024: Cambodian Senate President Hun Sen publicly denies reports and suggestions that a new navigation canal project through the country's south would facilitate the entry of Chinese naval ships up the Mekong River. The 180-km Funan Techo canal will be built and operated by Chinese companies and will be operational by 2028.

April 11, 2024: China's foreign [ministry spokesperson](#) says the Philippines "went back on its words" in refusing to remove the grounded warship on Second Thomas Shoal, in denying the existence of the "gentleman's agreement" with China reached during the Duterte government by repeatedly infringing on China's sovereignty, and abandoning the Marcos government's "understanding" with China by sending construction material to reinforce the outpost on Second Thomas Shoal. Former President [Duterte subsequently denies](#) there was a gentleman's agreement but repeated that at his first meeting with Xi the Chinese leader indicated that "China will go to war" to counter Philippine provocations.

April 13, 2024: China and Laos celebrate the first anniversary of the launch of cross-border passenger railway services linking Kunming in China's Yunnan province with the Laotian capital of Vientiane. A new railway service line between Xishuangbanna, Yunnan's southernmost tip, and Luang Prabang in northern Laos, is

announced to mark the anniversary. The bilateral railway project, under China's Belt and Road Initiative, has boosted cross-border trade and tourism.

April 14, 2024: Chinese Coast Guard [ship blocks](#) a Philippine maritime research vessel and an accompanying escort ship from entering waters claimed by China for eight hours, an incident not discussed by the two governments but reported by foreign media based on tracking data.

April 15, 2024: Negative [Chinese reactions](#) to the US-Japan-Philippine summit in Washington on April 11 include formal Chinese demarches to Japanese and Philippine ambassadors in China attacking the "substantial new step in the US-led attempt to contain China."

April 16, 2024: China and Vietnam announce the establishment of a new hotline between the PLA's Southern Theater Command and the Vietnamese navy to manage the risk of conflict and improve lines of communication between the two sides on maritime issues.

April 18, 2024: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visits Jakarta to meet with his Indonesian counterpart Retno Marsudi. They call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

April 18, 2024: Chinese diplomats provide more detailed [information](#) supporting its claim about a "gentleman's agreement" over Second Thomas Shoal.

April 19, 2024: First batch of three batteries of the shore-based, anti-ship variant of the Indian *BrahMos* missile system arrive in the Philippines against a background of low-level Chinese [criticism](#) of the agreement.

April 22, 2024: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visits Cambodia to meet senior Cambodian officials and discuss bilateral cooperation on security and economic ties.

April 22, 2024: Chinese [commentary](#) criticizes the large-scale annual US-Philippines *Balikatan* military exercises from April 22 to May 10 involving over 16,000 participants.

April 25, 2024: In response to China's announcement of its annual fishing ban in the South China Sea from May to August, Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs declares that the

fishing ban violates Vietnam's sovereignty over the Paracel Islands.

April 25, 2024: New satellite imagery from the Center for Strategic and International Studies shows that China's naval vessels are operating and deployed permanently at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base. The vessels are engaged in brief exercises at sea and have exclusive access to Ream.

April 26, 2024: Chinese Public Security Minister Wang Xiaohong meets Myanmar's Home Affairs Minister, Lt. Gen. Yar Pyae, in Beijing. They discuss collaboration to crack down transborder crime, online syndicates, and scam centers operating along the two countries' borders.

April 30, 2024: China's coast guard expels a Philippine coast guard ship from waters adjacent to the contested Scarborough Shoal, prompting protests from senior officials in Manila.

PACIFIC FORUM

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

TAIWAN AND CHINA—STEADY AS SHE GOES

DAVID KEEGAN, JOHN HOPKINS SCHOOL OF ADVANCED INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
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As 2024 dawned, Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterated in his New Year Address that Taiwan must unify with China. In her New Year Address, Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen, with the election of her successor only 14 days away, repeated her offer to meet China on the basis of equality, mutual respect, and without preconditions, echoing themes dating back to her first inaugural address in 2016. On Jan. 14, Tsai's chosen successor, Vice President Lai Ching-te, won an unprecedented third successive term for the Democratic Progressive Party, promising to uphold the independence of the Republic of China, but the party lost its majority in the legislature. A month later, two Chinese fishermen operating illegally near Kinmen Island died when their boat capsized as they were pursued by the Taiwan Coast Guard. Five days later, a Chinese Coast Guard vessel boarded and inspected a Taiwanese tour boat near Kinmen. Tensions grew but they did not boil over.

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On Jan. 30, China unilaterally moved its M503 civil aviation flight route closer to the median line of the Taiwan Strait. Premier Li Qiang included the obligatory call for Taiwan reunification in his Work Report to China's National People's Congress (NPC). Some analysts found that and other NPC references to Taiwan more strident than in recent years, but any change in tone was subtle. In apparent retaliation for Lai's electoral victory, China persuaded Nauru to switch diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China even as Taiwan continued to strengthen unofficial relations with larger powers. These Taiwan efforts were supported by US President Biden, who used a trilateral meeting with Japan and the Philippines to call for cross-Strait stability. Taiwan's continuing negotiation with the US of a 21st Century Trade Initiative and TSMC's decision to expand new facilities under construction in Arizona exemplified Taiwan's continuing diversification of economic linkages away from China. President-elect Lai will be inaugurated on May 20; his inaugural speech and China's response could portend the future course of cross-Strait relations.



Figure 1 Taiwan President-elect Lai Ching-te holds a press conference, following the victory in the presidential elections, in Taipei, Taiwan January 13, 2024. Photo: Reuters/Ann Wang

A New Year of Continuity

As 2024 began, all eyes were focused on the upcoming Taiwan elections and the risks they might pose for relations between China and Taiwan. In their New Year's addresses, leaders on both sides seemed to downplay those risks.

On New Year's Eve, Chinese President [Xi Jinping assured his audience](#) that the Chinese people "have continued to forge ahead" despite "winds and rains." On Taiwan he said simply that "China will surely be reunified, and all Chinese on both

sides of the Taiwan Strait should be bound by a common sense of purpose and share in the glory of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." The next day, Taiwan President [Tsai Ing-wen reminded the Taiwan people](#) of what her eight years in office had accomplished. On cross-Strait relations, she expressed the "hope that the two sides will soon resume healthy and orderly exchanges...by way of peace, parity, democracy, and dialogue, to jointly seek a long-term, stable way forward for our peaceful coexistence."

Taiwan Votes for Identity and Caution

On Jan. 13 Taiwanese voters went to the polls in the kind of democratic and transparent election that has been the norm since Taiwan's first popular election for president in 1996. For the first time, they extended a party's hold on the presidency for a third term, electing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Candidate Lai Ching-te, who has been vice president under Tsai for the past four years.

In a three-way race, Lai won with 40% of the vote. The Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT) candidate Hou Yu-ih, the popular mayor of New Taipei City, came in second with 33% of the vote. His defeat was a bitter disappointment to the KMT, which had expected voters would turn against the DPP after Tsai's two terms as president. Both Lai and Hou's vote totals were reduced by the presence in the race of Ko Wen-je of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), who won 26% of the vote. Voters signaled some unease with the DPP by ending its control of the national legislature, the Legislative Yuan (LY), after eight years. KMT and KMT-allied independents won 54 of the 113 seats, three more than the DPP, and the TPP won eight seats, which gave this third party the ability to control the outcome on crucial but contentious issues such as the budget, especially the military budget. China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) [dismissed the DPP victory](#), saying that its failure to win a majority of the votes for president or of seats in the LY meant that Taiwanese voters did not accept the cross-Strait policy of the new president.

What did the election results mean? [Polls suggested dissatisfaction](#) with the DPP's handling of domestic issues over the past eight years, but these issues seemed to have little influence on the outcome, perhaps because all three parties advocated continuation of Taiwan's strong social safety net, arguing only over who could best correct current weaknesses. The

decisive issue was how the candidates and parties approach China. All three insisted on the independence and sovereignty of the Republic of China (ROC). The difference lay with which candidate offered voters the clearest, most persuasive picture of the way forward. [Lai had said](#) throughout the campaign that he would continue the status quo of an independent ROC. This catchy formulation gave a nod to the independence wing of the DPP, reassured the US, and used enough one-China language to enable China not to invoke the Anti-Secession Law passed in 2005. KMT candidate [Hou offered an approach to China](#) that sounded little different. He said that “the Republic of China is a sovereign state” and that he would deal with China based on “deterrence, dialogue, and de-escalation.” Hou’s approach to cross-Strait issues was weakened by fissures within the KMT. In an interview with *Deutsch Welle*, [former president and KMT elder Ma Ying-jeou said](#) that “as far as cross-Strait relations [go], you have to” trust Chinese leader Xi Jinping, adding that he does not think Xi is pushing for reunification. Hou’s vice-presidential running mate, [Jaw Shaw-kong, was quick to distance Hou](#) from Ma’s approach, but the damage was done. Centrist voters feared that a KMT administration would follow the approach of its elder statesman; deep blue KMT voters concluded that Hou would not follow Ma’s direction. TPP candidate Ko promised he would establish pragmatic nonideological relations with China without explaining how he would overcome China’s ideological insistence that Taiwan accept the 1992 Consensus on one China.

Although Lai will not be inaugurated until May 20, the LY began its work on Feb. 1 by [electing Han Kuo-yu](#) as speaker. Han had been the KMT’s 2020 presidential candidate and was elected to the LY on the KMT party list. Because Han ran for president in 2020 advocating China-friendly positions, some wonder if he will try to obstruct DPP initiatives, especially regarding expanding defense expenditures.

China’s Role in the Election and Afterwards

In past Taiwan presidential elections, China has sought to undermine the DPP, inadvertently assisting it. For example, in 2000 Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji warned against electing Chen Shui-bian. On Jan. 1, 2019, Xi Jinping warned that the reunification of China and Taiwan was key to often-proclaimed China’s rejuvenation. Both statements boomeranged. In this year’s campaign, there were no such overt

Chinese interventions. Instead, China covertly deployed an array of disinformation on social media to undermine Lai’s candidacy. Targets ranged from Taiwan’s mishandling of egg imports to Lai’s real estate holdings, but perhaps the most dramatic was a series of excerpts on social media quoting an [alleged “Tsai Ing-wen’s Secret History”](#) by a supposed Taiwanese author but rife with mainland Chinese expressions. [The KMT insisted](#) that the DPP was trying to censor legitimate political speech by calling out this disinformation. In the end, China’s 2024 efforts to skew Taiwan’s election failed as they had in the past.

Two days after the election, the Pacific Islands nation of Nauru announced that it was switching its diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China. [Nauru’s government explained](#) that the decision was “a significant first step in moving forward with Nauru’s development,” which suggested that China had once again deployed economic incentives to persuade a Taiwan diplomatic partner to embarrass Taiwan’s government by defecting. This brings to 10 the number of Taiwan diplomatic partners that have switched relations to China since Tsai and the DPP took power in 2016. At the same time, Taiwan strengthened its unofficial ties with neighbors. Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. congratulated Lai Ching-te on his election and then joined President Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio in [calling jointly for cross-Strait stability](#). Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu subsequently [called the trilateral statement](#) a “great deterrent” against Chinese threats.



Figure 2 Taiwan's Foreign Minister Joseph Wu speaks to Nikkei Asia during an interview in Taipei on April 30. Photo: Lauly Li

An Accident Provokes Tension, then Restraint

On Feb. 14, [an unregistered Chinese fishing boat sank](#) in a prohibited area within the Taiwanese controlled waters around Kinmen island while

being pursued by the Taiwan Coast Guard. Two of the four fishermen on board died. When the two survivors returned to China, they claimed that their boat had been rammed by the Taiwan Coast Guard vessel, which Taiwan denied. [China's Taiwan Affairs Office \(TAO\) insisted](#) that Taiwan-controlled waters or prohibited areas cannot exist because Taiwan is part of China. It demanded that the Taiwan Coast Guard sailors involved be punished. [China's Coast Guard announced that it would carry out regular patrols](#) in the waters between Kinmen and the nearby Chinese city of Xiamen. Five days later, [the Chinese Coast Guard boarded a Taiwanese tourist boat](#) in Taiwanese waters near Kinmen, inspecting the boat and its 34 crew and passengers.



Figure 3 The Taiwan Affairs Office in Beijing, responsible for managing relations across the strait, has endorsed the decision to increase coastguard patrols in order to safeguard the lives and property of fishermen. Photo: China Coast Guard

The death of the Chinese fishermen, so soon after Taiwan's elections, was opportune from China's perspective. It enabled China to blame the "malicious" incompetence of Taiwan's DPP government for the deaths as well as other problems between the two sides and then to intimidate Taiwan by increasing its military and law enforcement into areas controlled by Taiwan. These actions reinforced and expanded the impact of China's gray zone coercion through combat aircraft, naval vessels, and balloon incursions across the median line of the Taiwan Strait as well as balloon and civilian drone flights over or near Kinmen and other Taiwanese controlled islands. For a time, the confrontations off Kinmen appeared to be the prelude to another round of escalating tensions across the Taiwan Strait. When China rescued two Taiwan fishermen from their disabled boat a few days later, [it delayed the](#)

[return of one fisherman](#), reportedly because he was a Taiwanese soldier using a false ID. The sense of cross-Strait confrontation was exacerbated when China unilaterally moved M503, a major north-south commercial air route, closer to the median line of the Taiwan Strait. [Taiwan said the Chinese move "blatantly contradicts a consensus"](#) reached between both sides of the Taiwan Strait in 2015."

Despite such incidents, [the two sides have continued their pre-existing cooperation](#) in handling search and rescue for Chinese and Taiwanese fishermen along the Chinese coast. Shortly after the Kinmen incident, Taiwan was preparing to formally open an enlarged wharf on the South China Sea island of Taiping or Itu Aba, which it controls. Although some, including former President Ma, urged President Tsai to preside at the ceremonial opening of the wharf on Taiping Island, the Foreign Ministry and National Security Bureau (NSB) said they were opposed. [The NSB explained that there was a risk of interference](#) with the president's plane. Both sides were clearly trying to avoid anything that might exacerbate tensions in the transition period between Lai's election and inauguration.

Annual Chinese Meetings Repeat Familiar Themes

On March 5, Premier Li Qiang presented his Government Work Report to the annual plenary meeting of the National People's Congress (NPC). [Li addressed Taiwan in familiar terms:](#)

We will implement our Party's overall policy for the new era on resolving the Taiwan question, stay committed to the one-China principle and the 1992 Consensus, and resolutely oppose separatist activities aimed at "Taiwan independence" and external interference. We will promote the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations...

While Li spoke of "the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations," analysts were quick to wonder why he omitted "peaceful unification." However, other official statements during the two meetings, the NPC, and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), made it clear that peaceful reunification was still central to China's approach to Taiwan.

During the CPPCC [President Xi called on the Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang](#) to:

unite all patriotic forces at home and abroad, on and off the island, continue to expand the forces against "independence" and promote reunification, and jointly advance the process of peaceful reunification of the motherland. (translation courtesy of March 7 *Sinocism*)

At the conclusion of the NPC, Director of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Foreign Affairs Commission and Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#) captured the two conflicting messages from Chinese leaders: "Our policy is quite clear—we will continue to strive for peaceful reunification with the greatest sincerity...Whoever in the world connive[s] at and support[s] 'Taiwan independence' will get burned for playing with fire and taste the bitter fruit of their own doing."

What do the KMT Visits to China Mean?

On April 1, Ma Ying-jeou traveled to China with a group of students as he had done in March 2023. Once again, he visited the home of Sun Yat-sen, the revolutionary founder of the KMT, and then met with TAO Director Song Tao. He visited a temple honoring the Yellow Emperor, the mythical founder of China. Both events underscored his commitment to the KMT aspiration of seeing Taiwan and China reunify. Ma traveled to Beijing to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping, whom he last met in November 2015. [Xi told Ma](#) that "[e]xternal interference cannot stop the historical trend of reunion of the country and family." According to *China Daily*, [Ma said the 1992 Consensus](#) and opposing "Taiwan independence" constitute the common political foundation for the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations. In addition to Ma's high-profile visit, KMT Vice Chairman Andrew Hsia made his seventh trip to China in the past 12 months at the end of February. Hsia explained that he was traveling to help Taiwanese businesses in China resolve difficulties with the Chinese government. He also met, as had Ma, with TAO Director Song Tao. At the end of April, the KMT caucus leader in the Legislative Yuan, [Fu Kun-chi, traveled to Beijing](#), and returned home with a promise from Beijing to ease restrictions on Taiwan food products. He said on his return to Taipei that Taiwan's youth should not have to shed blood to defend the DPP.



Figure 4 Fu Kun-chi (center front), the legislative caucus leader of the main opposition Kuomintang, returns from the mainland. Photo: CNA

Ma's meeting with Xi in the wake of DPP candidate Lai's electoral victory, and Hsia and Fu's which followed, are the most recent in a series of such visits dating back to 2005, when then-President Jiang Zemin met KMT Chairman Lien Chan after he had been defeated by Chen Shui-bian. In each case, China has sought to question the legitimacy of the DPP president whom Taiwanese voters have elected and elevate the KMT as the voice of patriotic Taiwanese eager to be part of China. [This reflects the Communist Party's United Front strategy](#) that seeks to ally with one part of Taiwan's political parties to sow dissension. Ma's repeated emphasis on the KMT and his own vision of Taiwan becoming part of a united China reveals instead how far out of step they are with the overwhelming majority of Taiwanese, who want to remain separate from China. The trips of Hsia and Fu suggest that this dangerous dance with China may well remain a central element of the KMT's agenda.

Lai Assembles a Continuity Team

In his victory speech to the international media and his supporters on the evening of Jan. 14, [President-elect Lai promised continuity and stability](#):

"It is my important responsibility, as president, to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait...I will act in accordance with the constitutional order of the Republic of China, in a manner that is balanced and that maintains the cross-Strait status quo,"

Since then, he has been assembling a team of foreign policy, security, and cross-Strait officials that [exemplify that promise of continuity](#). Director of President Tsai's National Security

Council Wellington Koo will become minister of defense. Tsai's Foreign Minister Joseph Wu will return to his assignment under the first Tsai administration as secretary general of the National Security Council. Current Presidential Secretary General Lin Chia-lung will succeed Wu as Foreign Minister. Chiu Chui-cheng, a former vice-minister of the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) known for his non-hawkish stand, is tipped to return the MAC as its minister. Standing behind this national security team, Lai's Vice President Hsiao Bi-khim is particularly reassuring to Washington after serving there as Taiwan's de-facto ambassador from 2020 until she returned to Taipei to join Lai's campaign.

Biden Administration Seeks to Reassure; Beijing Does Not

Immediately after the election, and cognizant of Beijing's misgivings about Lai, the Biden administration sought to reassure Beijing. When asked about the outcome of Taiwan's election by reporters on the White House lawn on Jan. 13, Biden stated simply: "we do not support Taiwan independence." The White House [dispatched](#) a small delegation of former high-ranking US government officials to reassure Taipei, a move not without precedent. Former Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg and former National Security Advisor Steven Hadley met with Tsai, president-elect Lai, and as well as KMT and TPP figures on Jan. 15. The optics of the Steinberg-Hadley visit, signifying enduring US support for Taiwan's democracy during a political transition, was its substance. The following week, the US Navy destroyer *John Finn* [sailed through](#) the Taiwan Strait and made a subsequent [transit](#) on March 5.

Two weeks later in Bangkok, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan had extended discussions about Taiwan with PRC foreign affairs chief Wang Yi, according to [Sullivan](#). The US national security advisor reaffirmed the US commitment to a one-China policy, but also expressed concern about aggressive PLA activity around Taiwan. With groundwork laid by Sullivan and Wang, Biden and Xi spoke by phone on April 2. According to the PRC [readout](#), Biden underscored his pledge of not supporting Taiwan independence. Biden also [stressed](#) to Xi the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, according to the US readout.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken conveyed the same message in standard language to both

Foreign Minister Wang Yi and President Xi during his April 24-26 trip to China. [The State Department said](#):

The Secretary underscored the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and reiterated there has been no change to the US one China policy, which is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, the three Joint Communiqués, and the Six Assurances.

However, in the run-up to these meetings, [the Chinese side used bellicose language](#) to blame the US for increasing cross-Strait tensions and to warn that China may have no choice but to respond:

The biggest threat to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait is the "Taiwan independence" separatist activities and external encouragement and support for them; China is not going to sit on its hands.

We have become inured to this language, but, combined with China's handling of the Kinmen fishing boat incident and continuing People's Liberation Air Force and Navy gray-zone pressure on Taiwan, it may foreshadow China's willingness to take additional destabilizing measures in the near term.

Washington Writes a Check for Taiwan's Defense

In mid-February, the US Senate approved a package of military aid for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan. Whereas the Biden administration's initial request to Congress lacks a budget item exclusively for Taiwan, the Senate's [legislation](#) includes \$1.9 billion to backfill weapons provided to Taiwan from US stockpiles through September 2025. This pre-payment of presidential drawdown authority ensures that Taiwan will obtain weapons more quickly and free of charge compared with the arms sales process. In addition, the supplemental sets aside \$2 billion in cash for US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, including Taiwan, to purchase US military equipment through Foreign Military Financing.

The supplemental hit a roadblock in the GOP-controlled House of Representatives, where a small yet powerful group of isolationist Republicans stood opposed to the US taxpayer arming Ukraine. House Speaker Mike Johnson

ultimately broke the impasse in mid-April by splitting the Senate's bill into three smaller bills requiring a separate vote for each. The funding [bill](#) for the Indo-Pacific and Taiwan, amounting to \$8.1 billion, received the highest "yes" vote count and the least number of "no" votes compared with the Ukraine and Israel bills. President Biden signed the entire supplemental into law on April 24, with the upshot being Taiwan's elevation within US national security priorities.

Beyond the supplemental, the Biden administration is looking to other ways to secure defense dollars for Taiwan in fiscal year 2025. The Department of State has asked Congress for \$100 million in Foreign Military Financing for Taiwan in its 2025 [budget request](#). Before now, a budget item to support Taiwan's military had never been listed separately in the agency's budget. The Pentagon, in its 2025 [budget request](#) for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, has asked for \$500 million to replace weapons provided to Taiwan from DoD stockpiles. As the supplemental's \$1.9 billion fund for Taiwan remains active through the end of FY2025, Congress may feel it has already acted upon the Pentagon's request.

...And Wrestles with US Arms Sales Delays

But funding was not the only issue for the US. In February, the Biden administration [approved](#) a \$75 million upgrade package for a data communications system in use by Taiwan's military. With this new arms sale notification, the backlog of US deliveries for asymmetric weapons to Taiwan ticked upward to \$6.1 billion, according to the Cato Institute's [tracker](#). The overall backlog, including traditional platforms such as fighter jets and tanks, stands at over \$19 billion.

The Pentagon released its first-ever [National Defense Industrial Strategy](#) in January that aims to fix manufacturing delays and supply chain bottlenecks afflicting US arms suppliers. As the US is its sole foreign weapons provider, Taiwan has an outsized stake in the success of this strategy. Congress, too, is exploring creative ways to get weapons to Taiwan more quickly. Mike Gallagher and Raja Krishnamoorthi, the chair and ranking member of the House Select Committee on the CCP respectively, floated the idea of co-producing weapons with Taiwan during a late February visit to Taiwan. Under such a scheme, a key concern is Taiwan's ability

to prevent leaks of US IP to the PRC. According to a [Politico scoop](#), a bipartisan group of US lawmakers is planning to introduce a provision on US-Taiwan co-production into the 2025 NDAA.



Figure 5 Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen (right) meets with Rep. Mike Gallagher, the Republican chair of the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party (center) and Raja Krishnamoorthi (left) in Taipei, Taiwan, Thursday, Feb. 22, 2024. Photo: Taiwan Presidential Office via AP

The Blossoming US-Taiwan Commercial Relationship

The United States edged past China as Taiwan's top export market in the first quarter of 2024. As recently as 2021, China bought double what the United States imported from Taiwan, making a potential flip this year even more striking. Taiwan's exports of highly advanced chips for US data centers have soared dramatically in recent months on the AI boom. Meanwhile, Taiwan is barred from supplying AI chips to China due to US export controls. Taiwan's traditional exports to China fell sharply in 2023 by over 15% and have yet to rebound in 2024.

In February, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai and John Deng, Taiwan's minister without portfolio in charge of the Office of Trade Negotiations, agreed to press forward on unfinished areas of the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade, even during Taiwan's presidential interregnum. A large US delegation arrived in Taipei in late April for a formal negotiating round. In Congressional testimony two weeks prior, Tai [called](#) negotiations with Taiwan a "high priority" for her agency in 2024. USTR also released [summaries](#) of US proposals on agriculture, labor, and the environment just before Tai's appearance before Congress. Changes to Taiwan's longstanding regulations and removal of nontariff barriers, especially on more sensitive issues like agriculture and labor,

could arouse political controversy in Taiwan. Any new trade agreement with the United States will require the approval of the Legislative Yuan, where the DPP no longer holds a majority.

On April 8, TSMC [announced](#) it would increase its investment from the original commitment of \$40 billion to \$65 billion at its Arizona site to produce cutting-edge microchips at the 2-nm level beginning in 2028. The Commerce Department on the same day [announced](#) a \$6.6 billion cash subsidy for the Taiwanese chipmaker. This sizeable award, accounting for one-sixth of the \$39 billion fund established under the 2022 CHIPS and Science Act, gives the US government a major stake in TSMC's Arizona enterprise, now spanning three fabs and totaling \$65 billion. Even with this expanded investment, TSMC's much larger fabs in Taiwan are expected to play a dominant role in supplying the US market for the foreseeable future.

Looking Ahead—Will Rough Seas Buffet “Steady as She Goes”?

On May 1, China's Law on Guarding State Secrets went into effect. [Taiwan's MAC has warned](#) Taiwanese to reconsider traveling to China because of a risk that they may be detained. Is this a hiccup or a way for China to open another gray zone front, this time pressuring Taiwan students and businessmen in China?

Lai Ching-te will be inaugurated as president of the Republic of China on May 20. Lai's inauguration address will likely reiterate his commitment to the constitutional order of the Republic of China, although he will not make any acknowledgment of the ROC's origins as the government of all China. He will promise to defend the cross-strait status quo without provoking China. He will express his openness to dialogue with Beijing based on equality and mutual respect, but he will not make anything more than the most oblique reference to the 1992 Consensus, which Beijing insists on as the prerequisite to any cross-strait talks.

Beijing will almost inevitably reject Lai's inaugural olive branch, should he offer one. Will they do so with the disdain they exhibited toward President Tsai's 2016 speech, saying it merited an “incomplete grade?” Will Beijing look for additional opportunities—such as the Kinmen incident, or perhaps the attendance of senior Congressional or unofficial US visitors to Lai's inauguration—for gray zone coercion? Or will

China keep such intimidation to a minimum to avoid disrupting relations with the US, particularly in a US election year?

The DPP's loss of control of the LY means that Lai will face political challenges that Tsai did not, particularly in implementing defense reforms and increasing the defense budget. The KMT, with the implicit cooperation of the Chinese Communist Party, may look for further opportunities to imply that Lai and the DPP are not the true voice of Taiwan.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

JANUARY-APRIL 2024

Jan. 1, 2024: Taiwan's one-year compulsory military service for men goes into effect.

Jan. 10, 2024: Former KMT President, [Ma Ying-jeou, says](#) that "as far as cross-strait relations [go], you have to" trust Chinese leader Xi Jinping. KMT vice presidential candidate Jaw Shao-kong stresses that he and presidential candidate Hou Yu-ih do not agree with Ma's positions on cross-strait relations.

Jan. 13, 2024: [Lai Ching-te and Hsiao Bi-khim are elected](#) president and vice president of the Republic of China with 40% of the votes cast.

Jan. 13, 2024: Victorious DPP candidate for president [Lai Ching-te tells his supporters and international media](#), "As President, I have an important responsibility to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. I will act in accordance with the Republic of China constitutional order, in a manner that is balanced and maintains the cross-strait status quo. Under the principles of dignity and parity, we will use exchanges to replace obstructionism, dialogue to replace confrontation, and confidently pursue exchanges and cooperation with China."

Jan. 13, 2024: President Joseph [Biden says, "We do not support independence"](#) when asked to comment on the results of Taiwan's election.

Jan. 13, 2024: [China's Taiwan Affairs Office \(TAO\) responds](#) to the Taiwan election results: "The results of the two elections in Taiwan this time show that the Democratic Progressive Party does not represent the mainstream public opinion on the island. Taiwan is China's Taiwan. This election cannot change the basic pattern and development direction of cross-strait relations, nor can it change the common desire of compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait to get closer and closer, nor can it stop the general

trend that the motherland will eventually be reunified and will inevitably be reunified."

Jan 14, 2024: China's Ministry of State Security (MSS) [publishes a social media post](#) saying the Anti-Secession Law of 2005 "has become a veritable sword hanging over the heads of the "Taiwan independence" separatist forces." It warns Taiwan that "Riding on this "chariot of doom," willing to be the "pawn" and "vanguard" of the "Taiwan independence" separatist forces, committing unjust acts and practicing disobedience, there is only one ending, which is to be shattered and ruined."

Jan. 15, 2024: White House dispatches former US National Security Advisor Steven Hadley and Former Deputy Secretary of James Steinberg to Taiwan to meet President Tsai Ing-wen, President-elect Lai, and leaders of opposition parties in a show of US support for Taiwan after the election.

Jan. 15, 2024: Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesman [Mao Ning comments](#) on the Taiwan election results: "Whatever the results of the election, the basic fact that there is only one China in the world and Taiwan is part of China will not change; and the international community's prevailing consensus on upholding the one-China principle will not change. Both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one and the same China."

Jan. 15, 2024: South Pacific island nation of Nauru decides to sever diplomatic relations with Taiwan in favor of official ties with Beijing.

Jan. 24, 2024: US navy destroyer USS *John Finn* transits the Taiwan Strait.

Jan. 31, 2024: US House of Representatives approves legislation with a provision that would

prevent citizens and corporations from the US and Taiwan from being taxed twice.

Jan. 17, 2024: At Davos, US Secretary of State [Blinken congratulates Taiwan](#) and says that the Chinese approach to Taiwan is “totally counterproductive to their interests” by trying to exert economic, military, and diplomatic pressure.

Feb. 1, 2024: KMT legislator and 2020 presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu is elected speaker of the Legislative Yuan.

Feb. 8, 2024: In her annual Chinese New Year address, [President Tsai Ing-wen says](#), “Taiwan will keep working with our democratic partners to maintain peace and stability. We will pursue cooperation and prosperity, and make Taiwan one with the world.”

Feb. 14, 2024: Two Chinese fishermen die when their boat illegally fishing in Taiwan-controlled waters near Kinmen Island collides with a Taiwanese Coast Guard vessel trying to apprehend them.

Feb. 22, 2024: US Representative Mike Gallagher leads a bi-partisan delegation to Taiwan composed of members of the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party.

Feb. 22, 2024: Biden administration approves a \$75 million arms sale to upgrade a data communications system employed by Taiwan’s military.

Feb. 26, 2024: KMT Vice Chairman Andrew Hsia travels to China meeting with Taiwan businesses and the Director of China’s Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO), saying he will offer his condolences to the families of the two fishermen killed off Kinmen in an effort to de-escalate cross-Strait tensions.

March 8, 2024: In his State of the Union address, President Biden proclaims that the US is “standing up for peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.”

March 8, 2024: Media reports US Special Forces [Green Berets will deploy to Kinmen](#) island near Xiamen on the Chinese mainland to train Taiwan Forces.

March 11, 2024: [US State Department requests](#) \$100 million for “a historic investment” in Taiwan security. Defense Department requests \$500 million to replenish US munitions stockpiles drawn down to aid Taiwan through Presidential Drawdown Authority.

March 14, 2024: [Taiwan Coast Guard searches](#) for a missing PRC fisherman near Matsu Island at the request of Chinese authorities.

March 21, 2024: Adm. John Aquilino, outgoing commander of US Indo-Pacific Command, denies press reports that US military special forces are “permanently stationed” on Kinmen.

March 23, 2024: President Biden signs into law the US federal government’s Fiscal Year 2024 spending bill, which includes \$300 million in Foreign Military Financing loans for Taiwan under the State Department.

March 24, 2024: Taiwan’s Vice President-elect Bi-khim Hsiao concludes a visit to the European Parliament, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Lithuania. While en route to Europe, Hsiao stops over in Washington to collect personal belongings and to meet with US government officials.

March 27, 2024: [Taiwan inaugurates new wharf](#) on Taiping island (also known as Itu Aba), which it controls in the South China Sea. President Tsai does not attend despite calls for her to do so.

March 31 – April 11, 2024: Ma Ying-jeou visits China. He meets Chinese President XI and visits the temple of the Yellow Emperor, the mythical founder of China. During his visit he tells TAO Director Song Tao that he seeks to advance the “overarching interests of the Chinese nation.”

April 2, 2024: President Biden and President Xi speak by phone. [Xi Jinping stresses](#) that the

Taiwan question is the first red line that must not be crossed in China-US relations. In the face of “Taiwan independence” separatist activities and external encouragement and support for them, China is not going to sit on its hands. [Biden emphasizes](#) the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.

April 4, 2024: US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, in public [remarks](#) at the Center for a New American Security, says that additional nuclear-powered submarines in the Indo-Pacific under the AUKUS trilateral security partnership will help strengthen regional deterrence generally and especially with respect to the cross-Strait circumstance.

April 4, 2024: Taiwan Navy Commander Tang Hua attends US Pacific Fleet change of command ceremony.

April 4, 2024: KMT Vice-Chair Andrew Hsia begins a trip to the US during which he meets with AIT Chair Laura Rosenberger.

April 8, 2024: US Department of Commerce announces a \$6.6 billion subsidy and up to \$5 billion in loans to support TSMC’s new fab facility in Arizona.

April 10, 2024: Former Taiwan president and KMT elder Ma Ying-jeou meets President Xi in Beijing, their first meeting since November 2015, when they met in Singapore as Ma’s presidency drew to a close.

April 11, 2024: China bans senior executives from two US defense contractors, General Atomics Aeronautical Systems and General Dynamics Land Systems, in retaliation for US sales of their systems to Taiwan.

April 12, 2024: The spokesperson for the PRC’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs [condemns](#) the US-Japan-Philippines trilateral, calling it “an attack against China” and criticized statements by the three leaders on Taiwan as interference in China’s internal affairs.

April 19, 2024: China unilaterally moves its offshore civilian air route M503 eastward closer to the median line of the Taiwan Strait provoking protests from Taiwan.

April 19, 2024: Meeting in Washington, [G7 foreign ministers call peace and stability](#) across the Taiwan Strait “indispensable to security and prosperity for the whole international community,” and call for peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues. They add, “We support Taiwan’s meaningful participation in international organizations, including in the World Health Assembly and WHO technical meetings.”

April 20, 2024: [China’s Ministry of Commerce imposes anti-dumping duties](#) on polycarbonate imported from Taiwan for a period of five years.

Apr. 20, 2024: In a 385-34 vote, the US House of Representatives passes H.R. 8036, *The Indo-Pacific Security Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2024*, containing \$1.9 billion in weapons funding for Taiwan.

April 24, 2024: President-elect Lai Ching-te announces ministerial level appointments to his national security and cross-Strait team. Almost all are holdovers from President Tsai’s team, signaling again Lai’s stated commitment to continue Tsai’s policies.

April 25-28, 2024: Fu Kun-chi, KMT caucus convener in the Legislative Yuan, leads a delegation of KMT legislators at the invitation of China.

PACIFIC FORUM

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

MORTAL MENACE, OR MERE MIND GAMES?

AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

Kim Jong Un elaborated his radical new line on South Korea to the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) in January. It sounded just as nasty as when he first expounded it in December, but no more coherent. Though obscure, this is clearly very important. Hence most of this article is devoted to a detailed reading of what Kim said, in a bid to tease out what this means in practice for South Korea's security. While awaiting further specification in a promised Constitutional amendment, our provisional assessment is that this is more bark than bite. Buttressing that view, close analysis of the two Koreas' artillery shelling near the Northern Limit Line (NLL) in early January, and the barbs they also traded, highlights an element of performativity—especially from Pyongyang—that is somewhat reassuring. Despite much fiery rhetoric, and while vigilance and deterrence remain crucial, this does not look like a peninsula on the brink of war.

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Kim's New Stance on South Korea: What Does It Portend?

Without a doubt, this period's most important development is the new stand toward South Korea announced by Kim Jong Un at the end of 2023, and further adumbrated by him a fortnight later in mid-January. On its face, this upends Pyongyang's entire past policy—which means repudiating the legacies of his grandfather Kim Il Sung and father Kim Jong Il. Indeed, this may be the most significant event in all the years (over 20: this century, basically) that this author has been covering inter-Korean relations for *Comparative Connections*.

Accordingly, this article will focus on this topic. To assist the reader, and since *CC* in part aspires to be a journal of record, we reproduced the first tranche of Kim's new line as an Appendix in our last issue. (Pyongyang published this on the very last day of the year, so there was no time to analyze it in detail at that point.) This formed one section of a major and lengthy speech which Kim delivered at a major and lengthy meeting: formally, the 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th Workers' Party (WPK) Central Committee. As has become the norm in recent years, this was held at the year's end; it lasted five days (Dec. 26–30).

The section in question was headed “On the orientation of struggle in 2024,” one of the plenum's main themes. Following a review of how Party and state policies were implemented in the old year, Kim turned to the future in the new one. Despite the typically militant wording, most of what was covered under this heading concerned mundane economic policy: school uniforms, for instance. (In North Korea, everything is a struggle.)

Regarding South Korea, however, the militancy is no mere metaphor, and the orientation is a radical reorientation. Earlier Kim had laid out the usual DPRK perspective, in terms familiar to the point of cliché. He spoke of “the dangerous security environment in the Korean peninsula on the brink of a nuclear war...the US and its vassal forces have still perpetrated vicious anti-DPRK confrontational moves and the desperate efforts of the enemies have reached the extremes unprecedented in history...[they] more persistently instigated the south Korean puppets and Japs (sic), who are playing the role as the most faithful stooge and ‘running-dog’...[They are] openly talking about ‘end of regime’ in the DPRK.”

Beyond such generalities, a wealth of detail on specific US and alliance developments showed how Pyongyang pays close attention to the moves of its foes. Kim's conclusion: “The word ‘war’ is already approaching us as a realistic entity, not as an abstract concept.” Cue a section on tasks facing the munitions and missiles industries, among other weapons sectors.

Naturally, Kim also blasted “the anti-DPRK confrontation behavior of traitor Yoon [ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol] getting evermore offensive recently.” This was why, in his view, the Sept. 19 North–South Military Agreement, “which had been playing a feeble mission of preventing armed conflict just for form's sake, was scrapped.” (The accord's collapse was discussed in our [last issue](#).)

“A Decisive Policy Change in The Work Against The Enemy”

So far, so boilerplate. But then Kim moved on to posit “gigantic geopolitical changes in [the] international geo-political situation...and the external environment of the Korean peninsula.” Here came a first mention of “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.” His audience—those not in the know—must have wondered what was coming.

Beyond the peninsula, hence outside our remit here, Kim confirmed in doctrine what had already become evident in practice. “The field of external affairs [aka diplomacy] should “concentrat[e] the main efforts on the development of relations with the ruling parties of socialist countries.” That too is a major change, though—unlike on North–South relations—he did not spin it as such. One might even call this a farewell to *Juche*.

Gone are the days when Pyongyang pivoted nimbly between powers: Kim Il Sung balancing between Moscow and Beijing, never fully in either's pocket while pocketing aid from both; or Kim Jong Il playing off China and South Korea. Like his grandfather, Kim Jong Un has reverted to the DPRK's two original big brothers, and perhaps in part he is playing them off. Yet he seems keener to stress loyalty to this camp than to emphasize North Korea's autonomy. That is a big change.

What of the peninsula? Kim called for “a fundamental turnabout in...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...No one can deny the fact that the two states, the most hostile toward each other, are coexisting in the Korean peninsula at present.” This “abnormal situation is not a random phenomenon,” and of course it is all the South’s fault. For 50 years the North has pursued “most just, reasonable and fair” policies on national reunification. By contrast, even though “the puppet regime has changed more than [10] times so far,” their constant theme is “the collapse of the DPRK’s regime” and “unification by absorption.”

Hold it there, comrade. What about Kim Dae-jung or Moon Jae-in? Kim is having none of it: “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.’” Hence the party has concluded 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.”

But all this is a travesty, as any long-term reader of this journal knows. True, some—perhaps most—conservative ROK leaders thought in the way Kim describes. Not so the three liberals—‘DJ’ (1998-2003), Roh Moo-hyun (2003-08), and Roh’s protégé Moon (2017-22). Their vision was quite different, and much closer to Pyongyang’s own. This is fake history.

Kim then adduces a further example, while also shifting his ground:

“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.’”

True, South Korea’s Constitution does make that claim (in Article 3), whereas the North’s contains

no such territorial definition. (The closest it gets is in Article 9, which refers to “the northern half of Korea” and says the DPRK will strive to “reunify the country on the principle of independence, peaceful reunification and great national unity.”) But this is specious of Kim. From the beginning, neither Korean state has recognized the other. What the ROK rendered explicit was always implicit for the DPRK too. There is nothing “shameless” nor new about the South’s position. (If it was news to Kim, he hadn’t been paying attention.)

“Hemiplegic Malformation”

Moving swiftly on, Kim draws drastic conclusions (numbers added for convenience):

1. “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.
2. “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 US, just because of the rhetorical word the fellow countrymen.
3. “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 defence and security totally dependent on the US.
4. “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.”

A lot is being asserted here, but not much of it makes sense. Several comments are in order.

First, who or what exactly does Kim think “South Korea” is? He switches from government to territory to that peculiar “clan,” which prompts several questions. If the “clan” is unrepresentative—though freely elected, unlike north of the DMZ—then what of the Southern

people? Thus in paragraphs 1 and 2, if the “clan” is a colonial stooge or an untrustworthy partner, then surely the North should seek a non-stooge partner in the South? That is what it tried in the past, overtly or covertly: seeking stooges of its own, as a cynic might put it. Now, the implication is not only that Pyongyang has found no worthy interlocutors, but it never will—and has stopped looking.

Paragraph 3 gives another version of what South Korea is, and it ain’t pretty—nor remotely true. The distasteful disablist imagery that Kim bandies around here suggests an implicit political eugenics. Such a malformed, tainted, dependent entity is clearly unfit to be a dialogue partner. Does it even deserve to exist?

Another question: In what sense, if any, is Korea still one? Not at all, according to Kim. Like the fashionable view that sex and gender is all in the mind, he reckons “fellow countrymen” is merely a “rhetorical word.” In one sense it is: after almost 80 years apart, the two Koreas have evolved into utterly different societies. “Homogeneous” they are surely not. But Kim brackets this with “consanguineous,” which is different. Koreans remain related to one another, though what they choose (or are allowed) to make of it is another matter. The Leader himself is a case in point: Kim’s own mother Ko Yong Hui was born in Osaka to parents from southern Korea.

Paragraph 4. begs questions. Is it true that inter-Korean ties (at the level of states) are “fixed” into hostility? And regardless, what has that to do with either consanguinity or homogeneity?

Kim rounds off this farrago with two conclusions: bureaucratic, and then (more ominously) military. First, various organizations—not least, “the United Front Department of the Party Central Committee” need “readjusting and reforming” to “fundamentally change the principle and orientation of the struggle.” And lo it was done, in short order. On the very first day of 2024, Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui called a meeting “with officials concerned” to start implementing the organizational changes. Evidently MOFA—not always a high-status ministry in Pyongyang—will gain power and expand its bailiwick, as the formerly separate bodies (mostly under the WPK) which hitherto handled South Korea are summarily axed.

And then finally a concluding growl, which we quote in full before seeking to parse it:

“Solemnly declaring that if the US 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, [Kim] 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.”

Many questions arise. So the “territory” of the South can be subjugated—but only if the foe makes the first move? What about the Southern people: are they to be ‘subjugated’ too? And why is Kim, who ended his father’s military-first strategy (*Songun*) by restoring party control over the KPA, now in effect telling MOFA to spruce up and keep pace with the soldiers?

New Line, Part II: Kim Addresses SPA

All in all, Plenum delegates had plenty to ponder as they saw in the New Year. If any sought further clarification, it was not long coming. Despite the rigors of the season and a creaking transport system, why hold just one big meeting in the depths of the North Korean winter if you can hold two? Barely a fortnight after the WPK Plenum ended, many of the same people were recalled to Pyongyang for the 10th Session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) on Jan. 15. As often, a single day sufficed: saying yes does not take long.

North Korea’s rubber-stamp Parliament used to meet in balmy spring, but last year too it convened in January (and again in September). This makes some sense, as a major agenda item is the budget for the new as well as the old year; so it was odd when this used not to be promulgated till the year was already under way. The budget duly featured this time, but the main event was another big speech by you know who. This one was grandly titled: “On the Immediate Tasks for the Prosperity and Development of Our Republic and the Promotion of the Wellbeing of Our People.”

As that suggests, like at the Plenum the focus was once again on economic policy. That is not our concern here, but perhaps a comment may be allowed. This rather elderly writer has been reading such speeches, for his sins, for over half a century now—indeed since before the current North Korean leader was born. They are astonishingly and depressingly unchanged. Same sectors, same underperformance, same harangues. Same assumption that the state and party must run everything—“The Cabinet should make sure that no unit is out of its control”—when actually that is precisely the problem, not a solution.

Yet the latest Kim is honest about failure: “It is reality that the Party and the government yet fail to meet even the simple demand of the people in life, although they are said to be striving to live up to the people's deep trust without fail.” That is quite an admission, as is his call for “the people's living [to] be put on a normal track.” Evidently it is far from normal at present.

As in December, all this is context preceding Kim's remarks about South Korea. The full excerpt is below as an Appendix, Part II. (Part I is KCNA's report of remarks by Kim in similar vein to munitions workers a few days earlier: a handy summary of the new line.)

Addressing the SPA, Kim began with a warning about the worsening security environment. This included a sideswipe at Seoul: “the suicidal acts of such servile states as the ROK unconditionally submitting to the US inflame the enmity of our Republic and...offer reasonable and full justification for strengthening the military capability and more rapidly improving the overwhelming nuclear war deterrent.”

Ominously, he added that “preparations for a great event have become urgent reality and our army has been entrusted with the important mission of ensuring it through a powerful military action.” It is hard to see what this could mean, except reunification by force. Yet what basis can that have, given that the new line (as he goes on to say) involves “recognizing two states on the peninsula”? This is an odd kind of recognition. In the past, when Pyongyang (rarely) used the phrase Republic of Korea or ROK, this meant relations were improving. No longer. Kim now acknowledges this other state as a fact—but seems not to accept its right to exist.

Military threats loomed large in Kim's SPA speech. He reiterated the DPRK's longstanding non-recognition of the Northern Limit Line (NLL), the de facto maritime border in the West/Yellow Sea: “As the southern border of our country has been clearly drawn, the illegal ‘northern limit line’ and any other boundary can never be tolerated, and if the ROK violates even 0.001 mm of our territorial land, air and waters, it will be considered a war provocation.”

This stance and rhetoric are not new. The first phrase begs the question: Clearly drawn by whom? Kim then moves on to revising the Constitution. As in December, he is vexed that the ROK Constitution lays claim to the whole peninsula, whereas the DPRK's has no such provision. Therefore “it is necessary to take legal steps to legitimately and correctly define the territorial sphere where the sovereignty of the DPRK as an independent socialist nation is exercised.”

If that seems fair, what follows is startling: “In my opinion, we can specify in our constitution the issue of completely occupying, subjugating and reclaiming the ROK and annex it as a part of the territory of our Republic in case of (sic) a war breaks out” on the Korean Peninsula. Moreover “it is necessary to delete such expressions in the constitution as ‘northern half’ and ‘independence, peaceful reunification and great national unity.’” Likewise such linguistic remnants misinterpreting the north and the south as fellow countrymen as “3,000-ri tapestry-like land” and “80 million compatriots.” Instead, the constitution must specify that “education should be intensified to instill into [our people] the firm idea that ROK is their primary foe and invariable principal enemy.”

One hardly knows where to start. None of this makes any sense: it is profoundly incoherent, as well as outrageous. Kim cannot have it both ways. If the ROK is a wholly separate entity, such that “northern half” is a wrong term, then on what conceivable basis can the DPRK lay any kind of claim to it?—let alone the right to occupy, subjugate, reclaim, and annex it? He talks as if this were a matter of territory alone—but what of 52 million South Koreans, who (whatever he says) remain compatriots by kinship, language, culture, and history?

It will be interesting, to say the least, to see how the amended constitution tries to square all these

circles. We may not have long to wait, as Kim called for amendment to “be discussed at the next session of the Supreme People’s Assembly.” The SPA was due an election in March, when its five-year term expired, but nothing has been announced. So the existing Assembly will probably be reconvened later this year, to amend the Constitution according to Kim’s whims, before a new SPA is elected to approve whatever he comes up with next.

The new line also dictates practical tasks. Kim called for cross-border railways to be cut off, physically, completely, and “irretrievably” (Might they not come in handy one day for all that subjugating?). Furthermore, “we should also completely remove the eye-sore ‘Monument to the Three Charters for National Reunification’ [in] Pyongyang.” The monument—a rather striking road arch, representing two women from North and South joining hands—[seems](#) to have come down promptly, with the railway and other work following some months later.



Figure 1 The Monument to Three Charters of National Reunification South of Pyongyang, North Korea. Photo: Bjørn Christian Tørrissen

Kim ends in a welter of militancy and contradictions. The DPRK’s military buildup does not, he insists, presage any “preemptive attack for realizing unilateral ‘reunification by force of arms’...Explicitly speaking, we will never unilaterally unleash a war if the enemies do not provoke us.”

Ah, so this is purely for self-defense? “Absolutely not. I have already clearly mentioned the second mission of our nuclear force, in addition to its basic duty of deterring war.” This second mission reserves the right to make a preemptive nuclear strike. In other words, Kim

maintains the right to strike first if he feels threatened or provoked.

He concludes: “We do not want war, but we also have no intention of avoiding it. There is no reason to opt for war, and therefore, there is no intention of unilaterally going to war, but once a war becomes a reality facing us, we will never try to avoid it, and we will take perfect and prompt action we thoroughly prepared...The war will terribly destroy the entity called the Republic of Korea and put an end to its existence. And it will inflict an unimaginably crushing defeat upon the US.”

The tone here recalls a British patriotic song from the Victorian era: “We don’t want to fight but by Jingo if we do/We’ve got the ships, we’ve got the men, we’ve got the money too.” In both cases, the pro forma protestation of not wanting to fight seems belied by the glee with which the prospect is savored. Ponder Kim’s penultimate sentence. Not just “destroy,” but “terribly destroy.” Does that mean killing, or subjugating, 52 million South Koreans? And defeat the US as well? In your dreams, comrade. Unimaginable is indeed *le mot juste*.

Less Than Meets the Eye

What to make of all this? Any judgment at this stage risks being premature. We should no doubt await the promised constitutional amendments, and more broadly wait to see what North Korea does, if anything. The following analysis is thus inevitably preliminary; it may also sound complacent to some. That said, we offer some tentative initial thoughts.

First, this whole turn should be seen primarily as an event in DPRK domestic politics, rather than inter-Korean relations. It reflects Kim’s frustration, shared by his predecessors, at the fact that South Korea exists: right there, on his doorstep and in his face, ever more successful and infinitely more prosperous. That is a profound challenge on many levels. Any North Korean government must find a way to account for and handle the South, in theory and practice alike.

Second, I suspect this is Kim’s own idea. His visceral dislike for the ROK underlay an earlier episode: the razing of Southern-built facilities at the former Mount Kumgang tourist resort. True, they were decaying: something had to be done. Yet Kim’s remarks at the time betrayed a

seething anger at the very idea of South Korean property on Northern territory. He seemed to be against cooperation as such, not just annoyed at how this project had turned out.

Third, another reason to attribute this idea to Kim is the sheer incoherence noted above. It just doesn't add up. What does he mean by 'ROK': Regime? Territory? People? He slips between all three, especially the first two. And if ROK is a separate state, on what basis is the DPRK entitled to subjugate it?

Put another way, this bears the hallmark of Kim Ki Nam's retirement. If the master molder of DPRK ideology and propaganda over many decades had still been on the case—he died aged 94 on May 7, having retired some years earlier—such a crass idea would surely never have been approved. For it solves no problems but creates a number of new ones.

Those include cognitive dissonance on at least three fronts. Whatever Kim says, ordinary North Koreans know that South Koreans are in fact their kin, both in general and in particular. Highly publicized family reunions, whatever their inadequacies, are not a distant memory. People will be puzzled, to say the least, at now being told otherwise. Moreover, this runs directly counter to the line decreed by previous Kims. Jong Un's legitimacy rests largely on fidelity to his father and grandfather, so for him to openly defy this legacy must be risky.

Above all, the new line entails an immense Orwellian rewriting of history. This is well under way, starting in early January between Kim's two speeches. Most websites aimed at South Korea or focused on unification have [vanished](#); the best-known being *Uriminzokkiri*, often cited in past issues of this journal.

On Jan. 13, just before the SPA session, KCNA headlined what it termed a "Meeting of Officials in Charge of Affairs with Enemies" (only in North Korea!), which "readjusted" four named front organizations. The SPA [abolished](#) three more: the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country, National Economic Cooperation Bureau and Kumgangsan International Tourism Administration.

Some changes are relatively easy. From Jan. 16 KCTV changed its [maps](#) to stop highlighting South Korea along with the North. In February *NK News* [reported](#) that the national anthem had had

a phrase amended to remove an implicit reference to South Korea.

Others will be far harder. It is one thing to remove some websites, and purge others of articles which go against the new line. But what of the collected works of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, which contain multiple references to South Korea and reunification? Will they be rewritten? How long will that take? And who would dare undertake such *lèse-majesté*?

Moreover, the new line is a propaganda gift to South Korea, —which can now pose as the sole and undisputed champion of pan-Korean unity. ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol lost no time in condemning Kim's new doctrine as "anti-national and ahistorical"; he is correct. In soccer, this would be called an own goal for Pyongyang.

Also a hostage to fortune is Kim's deployment of fascistic health metaphors. (It is hard to avoid politically incorrect language here, but he started it.) He suggests that one Korean state is thriving and normal, while the other is wizened and deformed. That is true, actually, —but we all know which is which. Most South-North economic gaps are now too large even to fit on the same graph, unless a logarithmic scale is used. This does not seem wise terrain for Kim.

Bark or Bite?

Words are one thing, deeds another. We know what Kim now says, but what will he do? At risk of sounding complacent, my bet is: Nothing much. There are at least three reasons to think that this new line, while radical in theory, may not portend much change in practice and certainly not the lurid ostensible fantasies of subjugation and the like.

First, at the risk of sounding contrarian, another trend which has some analysts worried may make the peninsula safer. Kim's keenness to snuggle up to both Russia and China by no means creates a strong, united troika. For both Moscow and Beijing, North Korea has long been the comrade from hell. Behind the formal bonhomie, both Xi and Putin are wary that this Kim might emulate his grandfather and drag them into costly and distracting conflict. China, in particular, which holds the purse-strings, will not tolerate any peninsular adventurism.

A second point was succinctly made by South Korea's hawkish defense minister, Shin Won-

sik: “A barking dog does not bite.” If Kim seriously intended to cause trouble at the NLL, for instance, would he really give advance warning? Extreme and high-pitched as North Korean rhetoric can be, it is also highly performative. Hamas did not go around shouting like this before Oct. 7, nor warn that they planned to cut Israel’s border fence.

A third reason is Kim Jong Un’s record. Readers may recall (or can [look up](#)) the politically tempestuous summer of 2020. Pyongyang frothed with talk of marching south, though this was not billed as a change of line. It all ended explosively, but no one was hurt when the North blew up the (by then unoccupied) former inter-Korean liaison office near Kaesong.

Northern Shelling Nullifies Border Buffer Zones

That pantomime was four years ago, but arguably Pyongyang is still playing the same game. Consider the faux shooting match which unfolded in the gap between Kim’s two speeches.

The Korean People’s Army (KPA) began the new year with a bang. On the afternoon of Jan. 5, South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) reported that earlier in the day—from 0900–1100, to be precise—North Korea fired some 200 artillery shells into the sea, not far from the NLL.

According to the JCS, the shelling came from two locations near ROK-controlled islands in the West/Yellow sea, themselves close to the DPRK mainland. Jangsan Cape lies north of Baengnyeong, South Korea’s northernmost island, while Deungsan Cape is to the north of Yeonpyeong, itself further south and not far from North Korea’s Ongjin peninsula. Residents of both islands were told to evacuate: arguably an ambiguous term. It did not mean to leave the island—impossible anyway, since ferry services were suspended—but to seek shelter.

Hours later, the KPA General Staff confirmed part of their Southern counterparts’ analysis. They had indeed held a live-fire drill at the time stated, with 192 shells from 47 “cannons.” However, the KPA GS asserted, “the direction of naval live-shell firing doesn’t give even an indirect effect on Paekryong and Yonphyong islands” [as DPRK orthography renders them in English].” This exercise was a “natural countermeasure” to “military actions of the ROK (sic) military gangsters” (these were not specified). Warning of “tough counteraction” to any future Southern

provocation, the statement concluded: “The concept about the same nation and fellow countrymen has already been removed from our cognition.” (KPA political officers had evidently been quick to absorb Kim Jong Un’s new doctrine.)

Another day, another drill. On Jan. 6 and 7 KPA artillery were in action again, according to the ROK JCS. Or were they? Not so, according to Kim Yo Jong. In what was already her second press statement of a year just a week old, the first sister claimed that on Jan. 6 the KPA did no sea shelling, but rather “conducted a deceptive operation” with explosions on land—to see if Seoul could tell the difference: She added, with schoolgirl glee: “The ROK military gangsters quickly took the bait we threw.” The ROK JCS [dismissed](#) her claim as “psychological warfare.”

More briefly and soberly, the KPA General Staff [confirmed](#) that on Jan. 6 “the southwest coastal defence of the 4th Corps...conducted a deceptive operation simulating shelling”—and had pictures to prove it. Admitting they also held real shelling drills next day (Jan. 7), the KPA GS said this was just routine training—and not near the Military Demarcation Line: “any intentional threat was not exposed to an enemy state” (sic). *NK News* [noted](#) that the ROK JCS was vague as to the exact location of the North’s shelling on Jan. 6 and 7, having been very precise regarding Jan. 5.

So who really did what, and what does it all mean? Kim Yo Jong is playing mind-games: her claim of deception was itself meant to deceive. In fact, Seoul has several ways to distinguish between maritime and terrestrial explosions. For one thing, it can detect splashdowns.

But if the KPA had really fooled the ROK this time, would they boast publicly—or quietly log this gap in Seoul’s intelligence? Recall the media post mortem on the unfortunate [Lee Dae-jun](#), when ROK military intelligence squirmed not to confirm what was clear from what they revealed they knew: they were evidently listening in to the KPA’s communications. Serious military forces, primed for real hostilities, do not tell the foe how much they know.

Did any of this really matter? It is regrettable that the former maritime buffer zones near the NLL were de facto nullified by this shelling, both sides having already scrapped the 2019 military accord which created them. A military source [told](#)

Yonhap that some KPA shells landed “as close as 7 km” to the NLL. That is not very near. Had they crossed the line or fallen near the southern islands, that would have been much more serious.

Not that South Korea took this lying down. Following President Yoon’s somewhat alarming and mechanical [principle](#) of “multiple-times stronger punishment,” ROK marines on the two islands riposted on Jan. 5 with artillery fire of their own—but twice as much: 400 rounds, to the North’s 200. Yoon later [congratulated](#) them. More prudently, on Jan. 8 the ROK JCS, announcing that in response to the North’s action it too would resume live-fire drills, specified that this would not be on a tit-for-tat basis but “according to its own plan.”

None of this suggests a peninsula on the brink of war. Both sides are pushing the envelope, and the North’s new doctrine is alarming if taken at face value—but that is the nub. Kim Jong Un faces a mountain of problems at home. Threatening to subjugate the South solves none of them but may—or may not—briefly distract his people from their hardships. While vigilance remains essential, Kim’s lurid new stance looks very like a new variation on a very old theme of fire-breathing performativity.

Appendix: North Korea’s New Stance Towards South Korea

I. Extract from KCNA [report](#), “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Inspects Major Munitions Factories,” 10 Jan. 2024

He [Kim Jong Un] made an appraisal of the security environment of the DPRK and the regional situation, stating the necessity and validity of the sustained store of incomparably overwhelming strength.

Saying that the historic time has come at last when we should define as a state most hostile toward the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea the entity called the Republic of Korea (ROK) which has pursued a history of vicious confrontation with bloodshot eyes to overthrow our regime and social system for nearly 80 years, he stressed that our state should recognize this unavoidable and irrevocable reality as it is and

properly settle the historic problem of actively coping with the new phase of change and thoroughly countering everything.

Predicating that the ROK clan is our principal enemy, he said what the DPRK should prioritize in the relations with the hostile state running high fever in arms buildup while inciting the confrontation posture with the former is to bolster up the military capabilities for self-defence and the nuclear war deterrent first of all.

He said that we would by no means unilaterally bring a great event by the overwhelming strength in the Korean peninsula but we have no intention of avoiding a war as well. If the ROK dares attempt to use armed forces against the DPRK or threaten its sovereignty and security and such opportunity comes, we will have no hesitation in annihilating the ROK by mobilizing all means and forces in our hands, he said, affirming that we have such will, forces and capabilities and will continue to expand and strengthen them without delay in the future, too.

He noted that the DPRK will invariably take its vivid action based on the principle of righteous struggle, unless the gangster-like ruling quarters of the ROK realizes the mistake of the self-destructive anti-DPRK confrontation policy, which is running counter to the desire of mankind for peace and bringing misfortune on itself, and completely gives it up.

II. Excerpt from Kim Jong Un’s speech “On the Immediate Tasks for the Prosperity and Development of Our Republic and the Promotion of the Wellbeing of Our People”, given at the 10th Session of the 14th Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA), 15 Jan. 2024

Note: This passage comprised about a quarter of the speech, most of which (as per its title) focused on economic problems and tasks.

Comrade Deputies!

Our Republic is a peace-loving socialist state and remains unchanged in its desire for taking the road of independent

development in a peaceful and stable environment free from aggression and interference and we have paid dearly for it.

But our country's security environment has been steadily deteriorated, far from being eased, and today it has become the world's most dangerous zone with the risk of the outbreak of a war.

The frequent remarks made by the US authorities about the "end of our regime", vast nuclear strategic assets stationed in the peripheral area of the DPRK nearly all around the year, ceaseless war exercises with its followers staged on the largest scale, the military nexus between Japan and the Republic of Korea boosted at the instigation of the US, etc. are seriously threatening the security of our state moment by moment.

The policy of confrontation with the DPRK pursued by the US century after century and the suicidal acts of such servile states as the ROK unconditionally submitting to the US inflame the enmity of our Republic and at the same time offer reasonable and full justification for strengthening the military capability and more rapidly improving the overwhelming nuclear war deterrent.

The US and its stooges are now buoyed with war fever.

We should invariably cover the road of bolstering up our military capability for self-defence to ensure wellbeing of the country, the people and the posterity. The deputies present here should not regard the indiscriminate war holocaust in the Middle East as a matter of other but do their best to bolster up our military capability for self-defence to the maximum, cherishing the firm belief that military strength is the security, dignity and prestige of the state and people.

Once again, I emphasize that our army should keep a sharp watch on even the enemy's slight military move and make confident and full preparedness to thoroughly and mercilessly control and

frustrate provocative acts of any type through overwhelming counteraction, mindful of its noble mission which is to devotedly defend the security of the country and the wellbeing of the people.

As preparations for a great event have become urgent reality and our army has been entrusted with the important mission of ensuring it through a powerful military action, every level of the entire army should sincerely study and implement the spirit of the plenary meetings of the Eighth Party Central Committee and the Central Military Commission of the Party, intensify training under the simulated conditions of an actual war and, at the same time, direct great efforts to the political and ideological education as usual so as to prepare itself enough to surely win in the confrontation with the enemies by dint of political, ideological, military and technological superiority.

Kim Jong Un said that the People's Army's preparations for war are unthinkable without modernization of its military hardware.

He set forth the strategic tasks to be maintained and carried out by the munitions industry in its responsible struggle for bolstering up the DPRK's nuclear war deterrent and augmenting the national defence capacity this year as required by the prevailing situation and the developing revolution and referred to other issues.

[section omitted on bolstering civil defense]

Comrade Deputies!

Today the Supreme People's Assembly newly legalized the policy of our Republic toward the south on the basis of putting an end to the nearly 80 year-long history of inter-Korean relations and recognizing the two states both existing in the Korean peninsula.

As solemnly clarified at the 2023 December Plenary Meeting of the Party Central Committee, our Party, government and people had shown great magnanimity and tireless patience and

made sincere efforts always with the view that those of the ROK are still the fellow countrymen and compatriots in the long period of history and even discussed with them the great cause of national reunification in a candid manner.

But it is the final conclusion drawn from the bitter history of the inter-Korean relations that we cannot go along the road of national restoration and reunification together with the ROK clan that adopted as its state policy the all-out confrontation with our Republic, dreaming of the "collapse of our government" and "unification by absorption," and lost compatriotic consciousness, getting more vicious and arrogant in the madcap confrontational racket.

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. This is the present situation of the relations between the north and the south today caused by the heinous and self-destructive confrontational maneuvers of the ROK, a group of outsiders' top-class stooges, and the true picture of the Korean peninsula just unveiled before the world.

We have formulated a new stand on the north-south relations and the policy of reunification and dismantled all the organizations we established as solidarity bodies for peaceful reunification at the current session of the Supreme People's Assembly which discusses the laws of the DPRK. It can be said this is an indispensable process that should take place without fail.

As the southern border of our country has been clearly drawn, the illegal "northern limit line" and any other boundary can never be tolerated, and if the ROK violates even 0.001 mm of our territorial land, air and waters, it will be considered a war provocation.

In this regard, I think it is necessary to revise some contents of the Constitution of the DPRK.

I have already recalled at the recent plenary meeting that the so-called constitution of the ROK openly stipulates that "the territory of the ROK covers the Korean peninsula and its attached islands."

Recently I studied the constitutions of some other countries and found that they clearly stipulate the political and geographical definition of the territorial parts in which state sovereignty is exercised, the territorial land, territorial waters and territorial airspace in other word.

There is no provision specifying such definition in the existing constitution of our country. Since our Republic definitely defined the ROK as a foreign country and the most hostile state after completely eliminating the original concept contradictory to reality that the ROK is the partner for reconciliation and reunification and the fellow countrymen, it is necessary to take legal steps to legitimately and correctly define the territorial sphere where the sovereignty of the DPRK as an independent socialist nation is exercised.

In my opinion, we can specify in our constitution the issue of completely occupying, subjugating and reclaiming the ROK and annex it as a part of the territory of our Republic in case of a war breaks out on the Korean peninsula.

And I think it is right to specify in the relevant paragraph of our constitution that such linguistic remnants misinterpreting the north and the south as fellow countrymen as "3 000-ri tapestry-like land" and "80 million compatriots" are not used in the political, ideological, mental and cultural life of our people, and that education should be intensified to instill into them the firm idea that ROK is their primary foe and invariable principal enemy.

Besides, in my view, it is necessary to delete such expressions in the constitution as "northern half" and "independence, peaceful reunification and great national unity."

I think the constitution of the Republic should be revised in consideration of such matters and the issue should be discussed at the next session of the Supreme People's Assembly.

The constitutional revision should be followed by timely practical measures to get rid of the remnants of the past era which may be seen as symbols of "north and south Korea with consanguineous and homogeneous relations", "By Our Nation Itself" and "peaceful reunification."

For the present, we should take strict stepwise measures to thoroughly block all the channels of north-south communication along the border, including the one of physically and completely cutting off the railway tracks in our side, which existed as a symbol of north-south exchange and cooperation, to an irretrievable level.

We should also completely remove the eye-sore "Monument to the Three Charters for National Reunification" standing at the southern gateway to the capital city of Pyongyang and take other measures so as to completely eliminate such concepts as "reunification", "reconciliation" and "fellow countrymen" from the national history of our Republic.

Taking this opportunity, I would like to make clear once again the revolutionary character of the work for strengthening the self-reliant military capabilities, which our Republic firmly preserves as its own life, unfazed by any changes of situation.

I reaffirm that the strongest absolute strength we are cultivating *is not a means of preemptive attack for realizing unilateral "reunification by force of arms"* but the capabilities for legitimate self-defence pertaining to our right to self-defence,

which should be bolstered up without fail definitely to defend ourselves.

In the present world where jungle law prevails, and to our country located in the hot spot where the danger of war have lingered for decades, the possession of powerful military muscle is an inevitable process of struggle to be indispensably chosen to defend the destiny of our country and nation and a historic task to be accepted as a fate.

Despite the worst difficulties accompanied by the enemy's persistent pressure and sanctions, we have remarkably bolstered up our self-reliant military capabilities and nuclear war deterrent to be strongest without any slightest vacillation. As a result, any aggressor forces on the earth have long dared not push the situation to such worst phase as the outbreak of a war.

Explicitly speaking, we will never unilaterally unleash a war if the enemies do not provoke us.

The enemies should never misjudge this as our weakness.

Then, will we confine our national self-defensive capabilities to serving the purpose of only defending ourselves and preventing war?

Absolutely not.

I have already clearly mentioned the second mission of our nuclear force, in addition to its basic duty of deterring war.

A level-headed judgment of the special environment, in which the most hostile state, the Republic of Korea, exists in our nearest neighborhood, and of the situation, in which instability of the regional situation is soaring due to the US-led escalation of military tensions, has found that the danger of the outbreak of a war to be caused by a physical clash has considerably aggravated and reached a red line.

We do not want war, but we also have no intention of avoiding it.

There is no reason to opt for war, and therefore, there is no intention of unilaterally going to war, but once a war becomes a reality facing us, we will never try to avoid it, and we will take perfect and prompt action we thoroughly prepared in order to defend our sovereignty, security of the people and right to existence.

The war will terribly destroy the entity called the Republic of Korea and put an end to its existence.

And it will inflict an unimaginably crushing defeat upon the US

Our military capabilities, already in readiness to do so, are being rapidly updated.

If the enemies ignite a war, our Republic will resolutely punish the enemies by mobilizing all its military forces including nuclear weapons.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY-MAY 2024

Jan. 1, 2024: Official (North) *Korea Central News Agency (KCNA)* [reports](#): “Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui held a consultative meeting with officials concerned on [Jan.] 1 to thoroughly carry out the tasks given by the respected Comrade Kim Jong Un at the historic 9th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea to dismantle and reform the bodies in charge of the affairs related to the south and the struggle against enemy (sic) and change the fundamental principle and orientation of the struggle.”

Jan. 2, 2024: DPRK Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, issues a [press statement](#). Sarcastically, she thanks “President Yoon [Suk Yeol] [who], indeed, deserves to be granted the title of ‘special class hero,’ as he makes steady ‘contributions’...to bolster up the military muscle of the DPRK.” By contrast, she damns his liberal predecessor Moon Jae-in—South Korea's friendliest leader ever towards the North, who in 2018 first invited her to Seoul and then held three summits with her brother—as “crafty” and deceptive.

Jan. 2, 2024: South Korea's Ministry of Unification (MOU) [launches](#) a new early warning system to detect Northern defectors who need more support or are at risk. (See also Oct. 5 in our previous issue.)

Jan. 4, 2024: MOU [says](#) it will dissolve a foundation supporting the former joint venture Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), which Seoul shut down in 2016: “As the [KIC] has long been suspended, it is almost impossible for the foundation to normally carry out its...work.” Reports that the North is illicitly running 30 Southern-built and (nominally)—owned factories in the zone also influenced this decision. So [did](#) “operational inefficiencies”: running the foundation has cost the ROK government 58.4 billion won (almost \$45 million) since 2016.

Jan. 4, 2024: An unnamed MOU official [says](#) Pyongyang is “attempting to create tension on the Korean Peninsula and divide our society through threats and criticisms.” Specifically,

they accuse the party daily *Rodong Sinmun* of exaggerating or distorting facts in covering South Korean protest rallies; e.g. by using photographs which were actually of a different event.

Jan. 5, 2024: ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [says](#) that from 0900 to 1100 the DPRK fired some 200 shells into the sea from two locations: [Jangsan Cape](#), north of South Korea's northernmost island of Baengnyeong, and Deungsan Cape, north of the ROK's western border island of Yeonpyeong. Residents of both islands are [ordered](#) to “evacuate” (meaning seek shelter, not to actually get off the islands: regular ferry services are briefly suspended).

Jan. 5, 2024: (North) Korean People's Army (KPA) General Staff (GS) [admits](#) it held a live-fire drill between 0900–1100, with 192 shells fired from 47 “cannons.” However, “the direction of naval live-shell firing doesn't give even an indirect effect on Paekryong and Yonphyong islands [as DPRK orthography renders them in English].” Calling this exercise a “natural countermeasure” to (unspecified) “military actions of the ROK military gangsters,” the KPA GS warns of “tough counteraction” to any provocation, adding: “The concept about the same nation and fellow countrymen has already been removed from our cognition.”

Jan. 6, 2024: ROK JCS [report](#) a second day of KPA coastal artillery firing.

Jan. 7, 2024: Kim Yo Jong issues another [statement](#). She claims the KPA did no sea shelling yesterday, but rather “conducted a deceptive operation” with explosions on land—to see if Seoul could tell the difference: “The ROK military gangsters quickly took the bait we threw.” The ROK JCS [dismiss](#) this claim as “psychological warfare” More briefly and soberly, the KPA General Staff [confirms](#) that on Jan. 6 “the southwest coastal defence of the 4th Corps...conducted a deceptive operation simulating shelling.” They admit they also held real shelling drills next day, but say this was just routine training—and not near the Military

ROK JCS [dismiss](#) this claim as “psychological warfare” More briefly and soberly, the KPA General Staff [confirms](#) that on Jan. 6 “the southwest coastal defence of the 4th Corps...conducted a deceptive operation simulating shelling.” They admit they also held real shelling drills next day, but say this was just routine training—and not near the Military Demarcation Line (MDL, the de facto inter-Korean border): “any intentional threat was not exposed to an enemy state” (sic). *NK News* [notes](#) that the ROK JCS was vague as to the exact location of the North’s shelling on Jan. 6 and 7, having been precise regarding Jan. 5.

Jan. 7, 2024: A military source [tells](#) *Yonhap* that most of the recent KPA shells landed in the former maritime buffer zone, some as close as 7 km to the Northern Limit Line (NLL, the de facto maritime border, which Pyongyang does not [recognize](#)). The source adds: “As North Korea vowed to scrap the inter-Korean military pact and conducted live-fire drills near the maritime buffer zone, mutually agreed buffer zones that ban hostile acts no longer exist.”

Jan. 8, 2024: Experts consulted by *NK News* [agree](#) that Kim Yo Jong is playing mind-games: her claim of deception is itself meant to deceive. In fact Seoul has several ways to distinguish between maritime and terrestrial explosions. For one thing, it can detect splashdowns.

Jan. 8, 2024: ROK JCS [declare](#) that, since North Korea has resumed live-fire drills near the border, the South will do the same—not tit-for-tat, but “according to its own plan.”

Jan. 8, 2024: Visiting Drone Operations Command (DOC) in Pocheon, 52 km northeast of Seoul), ROK Minister of National Defense (MND) Shin Won-sik [calls for](#) a strengthened defense posture, given that “North Korea keeps raising the level of asymmetric threats by bolstering its drone capability and advancing its nuclear and missile programs.” The DOC was created in Sept., following a Northern drone incursion in Dec. 2022. Pyongyang has since rolled out new surveillance and attack drones; Dec. 2023’s Workers’ Party (WPK) Plenum vowed to build yet more.

Jan. 8-9, 2024: Kim Jong Un [visits](#) “major munitions factories” (unnamed) “to learn about the production of weapons and equipment.” Praising their achievements (while “pointing out some shortcomings”), he calls for “greater

leaping progress...by further elevating the surged spirit [sic].” He also summarizes his new hard line toward South Korea (see Appendix, I).

Jan. 9, 2024: MND spokesman Jeon Ha-kyu [confirms](#) that since Seoul regards Pyongyang’s recent artillery firing as [nullifying](#) the former buffer zones, it too will resume military drills—live fire, and field or marine maneuvers—near the DMZ. The ROK military regards these exercises as important for operational readiness.

Jan. 9, 2024: As it has done ever since 1996, the Korean Institute for National Unification ([KINU](#)), the ROK government’s main think-tank on North Korea, [releases](#) its annual *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea* (an English [translation](#) follows in May). Highlights—if that is the word—of this solid 800-page report include the first [confirmation](#), from recent defectors, of a public execution for violating COVID-19 regulations; no details are given. In general public executions are now [rarer](#), even as the number of capital offenses has grown. At the report’s launch, researcher Joung Eun-lee [highlights](#) sexual violence: a 2022 revision of 2015’s DPRK Criminal Code reduced maximum penalties for rape.

Jan. 10, 2024: Citing precedents from 2016 and 2020, ROK Vice Unification Minister Moon Seoung-hyun [warns](#) that with parliamentary elections upcoming in April, “North Korea will continue with its psychological warfare against the South to split public opinion and pressure the government.” (Looking back from May, it is far from clear whether Pyongyang even tried such tactics—much less succeeded.)

Jan. 11, 2024: In a wide-ranging [interview](#), MND Shin Won-sik tells *Yonhap*, South Korea’s quasi-official news agency, that Kim Jong Un’s recent inspection of munitions factories featured new close range ballistic missiles (CRBM) that can carry tactical nuclear weapons. Shin reckons Pyongyang may supply some to Russia. As of end-Dec North Korea has sent Moscow some 5,000 containers of weapons, which could hold 2.3 million rounds of 152 mm shells or 400,000 of 122 mm (sic). Going forward he expects new IRBM tests and non-lofted ICBM launches. Regarding the collapse of the inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA) in Sept, noting how quickly the KPA re-occupied its former guardposts in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), Shin speculates that they had only been

destroyed above-ground, with their underground structures remaining intact.

Jan. 11, 2024: *NK News* [reports](#) that several North Korean propaganda websites targeting South Korea went offline simultaneously. Sites affected include *Uriminzokkiri*, *DPRK Today*, *Arirang Meari*, *Tongil Voice*, and *Ryomyong*. This appears related to Pyongyang trying to work out Kim Jong Un's new line on South Korea. Four months later, all remain offline.

Jan. 11, 2024: Asked about seeming US-ROK analytical discrepancies, an embarrassed ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) [says](#) it has nothing to add. John Kirby, the US National Security Council coordinator for strategic communications, said yesterday the US is unaware of any military links between Pyongyang and Hamas. South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS), by contrast, had issued photographs of a North Korean F-7 rocket-propelled grenade launcher used by Hamas. (There is a simple explanation: Hamas probably acquired these weapons from Iran, its main sponsor, rather than directly.)

Jan. 11, 2024: Starting work as South Korea's 41st foreign minister, Cho Tae-yul—a career [diplomat](#), unlike his predecessor [Park Jin](#)—dismisses [calls](#) for peace talks: "I don't think it's that time yet...North Korea continues to advance its nuclear and missile capabilities, and we're not in the mood for dialogue." Besides, Pyongyang refuses to talk.

Jan. 12, 2024: At his first formal press conference, directly after being [sworn in](#), MOFA Cho [opines](#) that North Korea's recent shelling had "the intention of driving a wedge between [the ROK], the US and Japan." Seoul's response will remain "firm and very restrained," in consultation with Washington: focused on bolstering deterrence, while continuing efforts to a change Pyongyang's stance.

Jan. 13, 2024: *KCNA* [reports](#) that "officials in charge of affairs with enemies" (organizations were not specified, nor persons) met on Jan. 12 to implement Kim's "switchover in the policy towards the south." This is summarized as: "a firm viewpoint that the clays (sic) in the region of south Korean puppets who have pursued only the 'collapse of the DPRK's power' and unification by absorption' are the main enemy of the DPRK to be completely wiped out ., [while] making preparations for a great event...in keeping with

the powerful military action of the Korean People's Army to suppress the whole territory of the southern half of the Republic." On this basis, four named solidarity organisations are to be "readjusted."

Jan. 15, 2024: *KCNA* briefly [reports](#) that on Jan. 14 "the DPRK Missile Administration conducted a test-fire of an intermediate-range solid-fuel ballistic missile loaded with a hypersonic maneuverable controlled warhead." It adds: "The test-fire never affected the security of any neighboring country and had nothing to do with the regional situation." No flight details were given, but the ROK military [say](#) it was launched from the Pyongyang area and flew circa 1,000km (presumably eastward). This is a double threat: solid-fuel propelled missiles can be loaded and launched faster than liquid-fuelled; and hypersonic missiles are hard to intercept, flying at Mach 5 or more at low altitudes on unpredictable flight paths.

Jan. 15, 2024: In a lengthy [speech](#)—mainly economy-focused—to the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA, the DPRK's rubber-stamp Parliament), Kim Jong Un elaborates his new line on South Korea. This includes changing the Constitution to "specify ...the issue of completely occupying, subjugating and reclaiming the ROK and annex it as a part of the territory of our Republic in case of [sic] a war breaks out on the Korean peninsula." North Koreans must no longer think in terms of "consanguinity" and "80 million compatriots." Instead, "education should be intensified to instill into them the firm idea that ROK (sic) is their primary foe and invariable principal enemy."

Jan. 15, 2024: The SPA [abolishes](#) three bodies handling inter-Korean matters: the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country (CPRK), the National Economic Cooperation Bureau, and the Kumgangsán International Tourism Administration.

Jan. 16, 2024: Condemning Kim's stance as "anti-national and ahistorical," Yoon Suk Yeol [tells](#) his Cabinet: "The current ROK government is different from any previous [one]...Our military has an overwhelming response capability....Should North Korea provoke us, we will punish them multiple times as hard (sic)." Ironically, later in the meeting, apropos employer penalties under a new SME workers' safety law, he declares: "Punishment isn't everything."

Jan. 17, 2024: South Korea [sanctions](#) 11 vessels, two individuals, and three companies. Most are North Korean, and all have been named in UN Panel of Experts (PoE) reports as involved in ship-to-ship transfers of oil, coal and other products: violating UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions against the DPRK. These are Seoul's first ship sanctions [a great tongue-twister!] in eight years: Yoon's predecessor, Moon Jae-in (president 2017-22), eschewed such gestures. By contrast, this is the 15th set of sanctions imposed in the 20 months since Yoon became president in May 2022.

Jan. 18, 2024: MOU data [show](#) that North Korean defector arrivals almost tripled in 2023. From a high of 2,914 in 2009, numbers have [declined](#) since 2012 in the Kim Jong Un era—and then fell dramatically to just 63 in 2021 and 67 in 2022, amid Pyongyang's drastic anti-COVID border restrictions. In last year's cohort of 196, the great majority (164) were female.

Jan. 19, 2024: ROK opposition leader Lee Jae-myung [calls on](#) Kim Jong Un to “immediately stop missile provocations and put an end to hostile acts...so as not to undermine the efforts made by his predecessors...Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung.” Lee also criticizes Yoon's hard line: “If we respond to a neighbor throwing stones by throwing an even larger stone and cause greater harm, what benefit would that bring us?”

Jan. 19, 2024: A DPRK defense ministry MND press [statement](#), headlined “We will never tolerate the reckless military confrontation hysteria,” claims that in response to tripartite naval maneuvers off Jeju island by “military gangsters of the US, Japan and ROK” held on Jan. 15-17, “the Underwater Weapon System Institute under the DPRK Academy of Defence Science conducted an important test of its underwater nuclear weapon system ‘Haeil-5-23.’” No range claims are made nor any photographs [issued](#), unlike after the weapon's first [test](#) in April 2023. In March 2023 KCNA [trumpeted](#) an earlier model (*Haeil-1*) at length, boasting that it could “stealthily infiltrate...and make a super-scale radioactive tsunami through underwater explosion to destroy naval striker groups and major operational ports of the enemy.”

Jan. 21, 2024: Apropos the recently tested *Haeil-5-23*, the ROK Presidential Office [says](#): “We are weighing the possibility that North Korea's claim is exaggerated and fabricated.” It continues, bizarrely: “There is a very slim possibility that it

is a nuclear-powered system. There is no case of the development of a small reactor that can be fitted in a torpedo with a diameter of less than 1 meter.” No one suggests this craft is nuclear-[powered](#); the issue is whether it may be nuclear [armed](#).

Jan. 23, 2024: An unnamed MOU official [denies](#) reports that Pyongyang's new hostile stance is prompting Seoul to rethink its own unification blueprint. Formulated in 1994, among much else this includes the concept of a “Korean commonwealth.” (In fact, a rethink is indeed under way under Yoon, preceding the North's change of line; see March 8, 15, and 20 below.)

Jan. 24, 2024: After North Korea testfires several cruise missiles over the Yellow Sea, ROK MND Shin [tells](#) ROKAF 17th Fighter Wing, which operates 40 F-35 stealth fighter jets out of Cheongju Air Base (112 km south of Seoul): “If the Kim Jong Un regime opts for the worst choice of waging war, you should be at the vanguard of removing the enemy's leadership at the earliest possible time and put an end to the regime.”

Jan. 25, 2024: South Korea's Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) [says](#) that production of spy drones to monitor North Korea has begun, under a Won 471.7 billion (\$353.6 million) contract it signed in December with a consortium comprising Korean Air and two defense firms, LIG Nex1 and Hanwha Systems. 13m long and 3m high with a 25m wingspan, the new craft will fly at 10-12km altitude. It can take high resolution images from distances of over 100km.

Jan. 31, 2024: Not for the [first](#) time, MOU [says](#) it is considering suing North Korea for its illegal use of Southern-owned facilities in the defunct Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC). This follows a report by the Seoul daily *Dong-A Ilbo* that the ROK government plans to seek Won 400bn (\$300m) in damages from Pyongyang. Without commenting on the amount, MOU confirms that “we are closely reviewing legal aspects necessary for a lawsuit and preparing for it...We will decide on the specific timing...after taking into account the situation at the complex.” Like MOU's lawsuit last June over the North's destruction in 2020 of the joint liaison office at Kaesong, any such action would be purely symbolic.

Jan. 31, 2024: Cho Hyun-dong, ROK ambassador in Washington, [insists](#) that notwithstanding the DPRK's threats, bilateral cooperation—as well as

trilaterally with Japan—will only grow stronger: “We will never be perturbed [and] never bow to those provocations.” He terms Seoul’s approach “wholistic” (sic), involving “deterrence, dissuasion and dialogue” (MOU [calls](#) this 3D). The first two Ds will supposedly persuade Pyongyang to opt for the third.

Jan. 31, 2024: Introducing a screening of [Beyond Utopia](#), a high-profile US documentary about escapees from North Korea, MOU Kim Yung-ho [condemns](#) unspecified South Korean “liberal experts,” who reportedly told a forum at the National Assembly that “they can accept North Korea’s perspective of war for the purpose of peace.” Kim avers: “Their remarks made in the name of academic freedom carries (sic) an anti-state view that undermines the achievements and identity of the Republic of Korea. This cannot be tolerable.”

Feb. 1, 2024: South Korea [unveils](#) a new National Cybersecurity [Strategy](#). This criticizes the document it replaces, issued in 2019 under Yoon’s pro-engagement predecessor Moon Jae-in, for not “look[ing] squarely” at North Korea, “the biggest actual threat.” The new version stresses the need to be [pre-emptive](#): “simply reinforcing our defense capabilities has its limits...we must change our paradigm to respond offensively to North Korea.”

Feb. 1, 2024: MOU [publishes](#) a symbol—first [trailed](#) on Jan. 18—created for its [campaign](#) to raise awareness of South Koreans detained in North Korea. This consists of three blue forget-me-not flowers, representing respectively abductees, detainees, and unreturned POWs. [Ul:kin](#), a leading streetwear fashion brand, features the new motif in a collection shown at Seoul Fashion Week (Feb. 1-5).

Feb. 5, 2024: Denouncing MND Shin’s “worst ludicrous statements” (see Jan. 24), KCNA [warns](#) that such remarks could be a “catalyst” for a physical clash.

Feb. 7, 2024: SPA Standing Committee, which acts when the full Assembly is not in session (i.e., most of the time), [approves](#) a decree abolishing laws on north-south economic cooperation and the Mt Kumgang tourist zone, plus various related accords and regulations.

Feb. 9, 2024: Citing Safe and Secure World ([S2W](#)), a South Korean cyber threat intelligence firm, NK News [reports](#) new DPRK malware designed to steal data from ROK targets.

Feb. 14, 2024: South Korea’s presidential office [says](#) that the private email of a staffer, which he was also using for work (in violation of regulations), was hacked—“presumably” by North Korea—just before Yoon’s visits to the UK and France last Nov. “Necessary measures were taken,” and the office’s own security system was not compromised.

Feb. 15, 2024: DPRK media [report](#) that Kim Jong Un, at the test-firing of a new surface-to-sea missile named *Padasuri-6*—it means sea eagle—the previous day, termed the NLL “a ghost [line] without any ground in the light of international law.” Kim calls on the KPA Navy to “thoroughly defend the maritime sovereignty by force of arms and actions, not by any rhetoric, statement and public notice.” (Pyongyang’s stance, that the terrestrial MDL be extended westwards, takes no account of three ROK-controlled islands located north of that.)

Feb. 15, 2024: Responding to Kim, the ROK JCS [say](#): “The NLL remains our military’s unchanged maritime border. We will firmly respond to any provocations.”

Feb. 16, 2024: Ten years after a special UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) [found](#) the DPRK regime responsible for “widespread, systematic and gross” human rights violations, MOU [says](#) the situation remains “poor and dismal, with North Korean people not being guaranteed the minimum level of human rights amid the regime’s harsh surveillance and punishment.” MOU urges Pyongyang to “make the right choice.”

Feb. 20, 2024: NIS [says](#) it will ask the Korea Communications Standards Commission (KCSC) to block access to “Olivia Natasha,” a YouTube channel featuring a young North Korean woman. Google shut the account down last year, but new content has been posted, and [reuploads](#) can be found.

Feb. 21, 2024: MOU Kim [says](#) his ministry will push for July 14 to be designated an official day for North Korean defectors. On that date in 1997 a law protecting and supporting defectors came into effect. Ji Seong-ho, a defector and lawmaker of the conservative ruling People Power Party (PPP), had earlier [proposed](#) July 8: the date the Hanawon resettlement facility opened in 1999. Another PPP defector lawmaker, Thae Yong-ho, suggested Aug. 26, when the Soviet Red Army,

which liberated northern Korea, closed off the 38th Parallel in 1945

Feb. 23, 2024: Ko Young-hwan—a former North Korean diplomat who defected in 1991, now a special [adviser](#) to MOU Kim—[suggests](#) that Pyongyang may create a post of first vice foreign minister to handle South Korea in future, and might appoint Ri Son Gwon, head of the United Front Department (UFD) of the WPK. Lower UFD officials may similarly transfer to MOFA, which had previously handled inter-Korean relations until the mid-1990s. (Later reports suggest such a reorganization is indeed happening; see March 29 below.)

Feb. 25, 2024: MOU Kim [says](#) of Kim Jong Un's new line: "There's a high possibility that erasing the achievements of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, who are the basis for hereditary power, will create an ideological vacuum or confusion among North Korea's elite...If there is internal conflict, there's a high possibility [North Korea] will carry out a military provocation to overcome the crisis...Our government considers the situation very serious, and we have prepared thorough measures in response, including military deterrence measures."

Feb. 28, 2024: *Yonhap* [reports](#) that the DPRK [website](#) dealing with postage stamps has erased all reference to stamps with unification themes, including those issued to commemorate past inter-Korean summit meetings. Pyongyang has also removed images of the Korean peninsula from other websites, or blurred the southern half.

March 4, 2024: NIS [reveals](#) that DPRK hackers have broken into at least two ROK makers of chipmaking equipment. In December and February they stole photographs of facilities and drawings of product designs, using hard-to-detect "living off the land" (LOTL) techniques which take over legitimate tools installed within servers. Warning firms to be vigilant, the agency adds: "We believe that North Korea might possibly be preparing to produce its own semiconductors in the face of difficulties in procuring them due to sanctions."

March 4, 2024: *Yonhap* [says](#) KCNA has removed from its website most articles referring to unification and the like. (Everything can still be found as it was on [KCNA Watch](#))

March 4, 2024: *Freedom Shield*, a large-scale annual US-ROK military drill, [begins](#). It will last 11 days. Though a regular event, these are the first such maneuvers since the inter-Korean military accord collapsed in Nov. They include 48 field drills, over twice as many as last year—although none are near the DMZ. Personnel from 12 member states of the United Nations Command (UNC), including Australia, Britain, the Philippines, and Thailand, will also join, observed by the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC).

March 5, 2024: North Korea as usual [denounces](#) *Freedom Shield*. Warning that the US and ROK "will be made to pay a dear price for their false choice," a DPRK MND spokesman adds: "The large-scale war drills staged by the world's biggest nuclear weapons state and more than 10 satellite states against a state in the Korean [Peninsula] where a nuclear war may be ignited even with a spark, can never be called 'defensive.'"

March 6, 2024: [Visiting](#) "a major operational training base in the western area," Kim Jong Un [calls](#) for intensified "practical actual war drills" to counter the enemy's "slightest attempt to ignite a war."

March 7, 2024: In a second successive day of military-related activities, Kim Jong Un [guides](#) artillery drills, at front-line sub-units "who have put the enemy's capital in their striking range. *Yonhap* [deadpans](#): "The enemy's capital is believed to be referring to Seoul."

March 7, 2024: Dismissing recent threats by Kim Jong Un as an attempt to promote unity within North Korea's "unstable" internal system and sow division in the South Korea, ROK MND Shin—as often—returns fire with fire. Visiting a key military bunker operated by the Capital Defense Command in Seoul, Shin [tells](#) the troops: "Make all-out efforts for realistic practice and training to ensure the end of the Kim Jong Un regime in the shortest period of time, if the enemy invades the Republic of Korea."

March 7, 2024: They wouldn't put it this way, but Seoul follows Pyongyang's lead—see Jan. 1 and 13—with some reorganization of its own. ROK MOFA [says](#) it will abolish its Office of Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs, replacing it with a new Office of Diplomatic Strategy and Intelligence. As per its name, intelligence collection and strategic planning will be folded

into the new office: placing North Korea in a broader context, while also shifting the main focus from dialogue to deterrence. Critics [warn](#) that the long-term goal of peace and denuclearization should not be lost sight of, remote as these prospects may seem right now.

March 8, 2024: MOU [says](#): “In response to North Korea's policy shift into an anti-national and anti-historical stance, the year 2024 will be the most appropriate time to actively lay out our unification vision and lead the North's change.” In other words, Pyongyang's new stance facilitates Seoul proceeding with its own previously announced revisionism.

March 13, 2024: North Korea [reveals](#) a new battle tank (no name or model is mentioned) during a training competition. Kim Jong Un drives one, calling this “the most powerful [tank] in the world”. First paraded in 2020, the new tank [looks](#) to have been upgraded since. After “watching with satisfaction the fierce advance of tanks dashing ahead like wind”, Kim calls this the most satisfying of all the KPA exercises he has guided. He congratulates the winners, the Seoul Ryu Kyong Su Guards 105th Tank Division, noting that they are “a unit with the proud history and tradition of having occupied the enemy capital” (in June 1950). If all KPA units were this well prepared, “he would never worry about the preparations for war.”

March 13, 2024: Visiting Army Special Warfare Command in Icheon, 56 km southeast of Seoul, MND Shin [tells](#) his troops: “If Kim [Jong Un] starts a war, as a key unit of Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR), you must become the world's strongest special operations unit to swiftly eliminate the enemy leadership.” KMPR is the ROK's operational plan to take out the DPRK leadership if the North starts a war.

March 14, 2024: Freedom Shield [wraps up](#) with a live-fire [tank drill](#) near the DMZ involving US military engineers, *Yonhap* notes that North Korea did not launch any missiles during the 11-day exercise, as some expected. Kim Jong Un did guide other drills, including artillery and tanks. Suspected DPRK attempts to disrupt Global Positioning System (GPS) signals around the northwestern border islands were detected from March 5-7, but no damage was reported.

March 15, 2024: ROK's Unification Future Planning Committee (UFPC), an advisory body launched last year, [holds](#) its first meeting. UFPC

is tasked with drawing up a new vision of unification, which “espouses the principle of freedom” and reflects the changed security situation on the peninsula. (See also March 20, below.)

March 20, 2024: At a forum held in Seoul by the government's Korea Institute for National Unification, Cho Han-bum, a senior research fellow at KINU, [argues](#) that the 1994 National Community Unification Formula (NCUF) should be kept but recalibrated, since it is hard to obtain bipartisan consensus and this should not be politicized. The NCUF posits three stages: reconciliation and cooperation, the creation of a Korean commonwealth, and full unification. By contrast, Kim Hyun-wook, a director-general at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy, says the NCUF must be replaced, as stage two (commonwealth) “is not valid anymore.”

March 26, 2024: In a message to the commander of the ROKN frigate *Cheonan*—a newly commissioned warship, named after the corvette sunk by North Korea exactly 14 years earlier—MND Shin [says](#): “North Korea is claiming the NLL is a ghost line without legal grounds and is continuously trying to nullify it...Protect the Yellow Sea and the NLL that the comrades before you have defended by giving up their lives.” Cdr. Park Yeon-soo, who commands the new *Cheonan*, served on the old one and is a survivor of the 2010 attack.

March 27, 2024: Meeting relatives and advocacy groups, MOU Kim Yung-ho [denounces](#) North Korea's past abduction and continuing detention of thousands of South Koreans as “inhumane.” The new forget-me-not motif is much in evidence: President Yoon and other ministers also wore pin badges of this in Cabinet the previous day.

March 28, 2024: Noting that North Korea should have staged a parliamentary election this month (the last was held in March 2019), MOU [speculates](#) that the current 14th SPA may first be convened once more to formally scrap further inter-Korean agreements, and to approve the constitutional changes regarding South Korea which Kim Jong Un called for in January.

March 29, 2024: In line with surmise in Seoul (see Feb. 23), *Daily NK* [quotes](#) “a source in North Korea” as confirming that the UFD is essentially being shut down. The Party will retain a small specialist staff, but most functions are being

transferred—in two directions. MOFA is taking over strategic projects regarding South Korea, while activities in the South will fall to the KPA Reconnaissance General Bureau. (The RGB already handles those operationally, so the precise impact of this aspect of the reorganization is unclear.) The source claims it has not yet been decided which agency will take charge of pro-North sympathizers in South Korea.

April 7, 2024: It is a year since North Korea stopped picking up the phone, severing thitherto twice-daily liaison contact with the South. Yonhap [notes](#) that inter-Korean communications have an on-off history: Pyongyang broke contact in Feb. 2016, resumed it in Jan. 2018, broke it off again in June 2020, and resumed in July 2021. Kim's new line on the South suggests prospects are bleak this time. Absent direct contact, Seoul has two options: megaphone diplomacy, making announcements in public media; or more privately, via the US-led UN Command, which oversees the DMZ and thus has its own channels to the North.

April 7, 2024: ROK's second indigenous military reconnaissance satellite is [launched](#) by a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket from Kennedy Space Center in Florida; it goes into orbit 45 minutes later. Whereas its first spy satellite, launched in Dec., used electro-optical and infrared sensors, the new one has synthetic aperture radar (SAR) sensors; these use microwaves, and thus can gather data unaffected by weather conditions. South Korea's next three spy satellites, to be launched by 2025, will also have SAR sensors. By contrast, North Korea's so far solitary spy satellite—three more promised are yet to appear—which Seoul claims to be bothered by, lacks any technology approaching this sophistication.

April 8, 2024: Prosecutors in Suwon [seek](#) a 15 year jail term—plus a fine, confiscation of assets and legal costs—for Lee Hwa-yong. The former vice governor of Gyeonggi province, which surrounds Seoul, was indicted for bribery and illicit money transfers in October 2022 in a case centred on underwear manufacturer [Ssangbangwool](#). The firm is alleged to have sent \$5 million to North Korea in 2019 on behalf of Gyeonggi, whose then Gov. Lee Jae-myong—who now leads the liberal opposition DPK, and is himself facing [charges](#)—had hoped to visit Pyongyang and to support a smart farm project in the DPRK.

April 11, 2024: Visiting Kim Jong Il University of Military and Politics (some DPRK [media](#) style this Kim Jong Il Military and Political Academy), Kim Jong Un [says](#): “Now is the time to be more thoroughly prepared for a war than ever before.” KCNA's photos show blurred maps and a model, which appear to depict South Korea and central Seoul.

April 15, 2024: The ROK Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST) chooses DPRK founding leader Kim Il Sung's birthday to further [publicize](#) its campaign, symbolized by a three forget-me-nots motif, drawing attention to South Korean abductees, detainees and POWs held in North Korea. (See also Feb. 1 and March 27, above).

April 18, 2024: “A source” [tells](#) Yonhap that in March North Korea removed street lamps along two (notionally) cross-border roads: Gyeongui, which runs between Kaesong in the North and Paju in the South, and the Donghae east coast road. In Jan. the North mined both roads. Calling this a violation of the spirit of inter-Korean agreements, MOU also wants its money back: during 2002-08 Seoul lent Pyongyang \$133 million for inter-Korean works. As with every Southern loan ever, nothing was ever repaid.

April 22, 2024: South Korea's JCS [say](#) North Korea is preparing to launch a second military satellite, but this does not seem imminent. ROK MND Shin suggested a launch this month was highly possible. Pyongyang has said it will put three more satellites in orbit this year, after its first successful launch in November—which followed two failed attempts.

April 24, 2024: South Korea's National Police Agency (NPA) [says](#) that three different DPRK cyber groups—Lazarus, Andariel, and Kimsuky—have stolen data files from at least 10 ROK arms manufacturers, in campaigns which began in Nov. 2022. They especially target secondary defense subcontractors, whose systems may be more vulnerable.

April 29, 2024: An unnamed ROK military official [tells](#) Yonhap that “late last year” the Korean People's Army (KPA) laid mines on an unpaved road within the DMZ near Arrowhead Hill, in Cheorwon, 85 km northeast of Seoul. In 2018, in happier times, the two Koreas built the road to facilitate joint searches for MIA remains; this was the site of a major [battle](#) in the Korean War. In the event ROK troops conducted the

exhumations [alone](#). South Korea’s JCS rule out laying any mines in retaliation as “disproportionate.”

April 30, 2024: MOU [reports](#) that in the first quarter 43 North Korean defectors—eight men and 35 women—arrived in the South: fewer than in the previous quarter (57), but more than in the same period in 2023 (34).

April 30, 2024: South Korea’s defense and culture ministries announce 10 new peace-themed hiking trails at various locations along the DMZ. These will open to the public on May 13. The intrepid can sign up for tours at www.dmzwalk.com.

May 2, 2024: South Korea [raises](#) the alert status at its embassies in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, and its consulates in Shenyang and Vladivostok, all places where North Korea has a strong presence. Seoul [claims](#) to have [intelligence](#) suggesting a “high possibility of a terrorist attack.” In 1996 an ROK diplomat in Vladivostok, who monitored DPRK activities there, was [bludgeoned](#) to death; no conclusive link to Pyongyang was proven.

May 2, 2024: MOU [says](#) that North Korea appears to have dismantled a South Korean building near the former Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC). Never used, the facility was built by an ROK company “for investment purposes.” No further details are provided.

May 3, 2024: “Sources familiar with the issue,” doubtless military, [tell](#) *Yonhap* that in March (date unspecified) the ROK Marine Corps shot down an unidentified 2-meter balloon, which crossed the Northern Limit Line (NLL) near Baengnyeong, a front-line South Korean island in the West/Yellow Sea. A KA-1 light attack aircraft shot down the intruder; salvage efforts failed. It is assumed to have been North Korean, though it could also have been Chinese.

May 3, 2024: Two NGOs [tell](#) *NK News* that in April China forcibly [returned](#) some 260 North Koreans. Jang Se-yul, head of the North Korean People’s Liberation Front, says that on April 26 about 200 were repatriated from Changbai Korean Autonomous County in Jilin province. The same day, according to Lee Young-hwan, executive director of the Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG), a further 61 were sent back from Tumen, Hunchun, and Dandong. MOU vice-spokesperson Kim In-nae comments: “The

[ROK] government maintains the position that under no circumstances should North Korean defectors residing abroad be forcibly transported against their will.”

May 3, 2024: MOU Kim Yung-ho [meets](#) Carsten Schneider, Germany’s minister of state for East Germany and equivalent living conditions, after the annual session of the Korea-Germany Unification Advisory Committee, founded in 2011. Kim asks for Berlin’s support for the ROK’s “unwavering commitment to pursuing a peaceful unification of the two Koreas based on liberal democracy.”

May 11, 2024: A joint probe by South Korea’s police, prosecution and National Intelligence Service (NIS) [finds](#) that over a two-year period in 2021-23, the North Korean hacking group Lazarus stole a total of 1,014 gigabytes (GB) of data and documents from an ROK court computer network. The report did not name this, nor say how the breach was effected.

PACIFIC FORUM

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

NEW CHAPTERS, OLD DILEMMAS

SEE-WON BYUN, SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY

China-ROK relations reached critical junctures across political, security, and economic fields. China-ROK relations had a bad start in 2024 with discord over regional security priorities. The inaugural US-Japan-ROK Indo-Pacific Dialogue in Washington on Jan. 5, a deputy foreign minister-level initiative emerging from the August 2023 Camp David summit, reignited frictions with Beijing. The resulting tensions constrained anticipation about their own trilateral summit with Tokyo. The shifting China-ROK trade structure and Chinese e-commerce practices emerged as central points of economic debate.

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Against a lull in Beijing–Seoul diplomacy, the China–DPRK Friendship Year catalyzed high-level contacts, envisioning a wider and more durable partnership. China and North Korea’s revived economic and cultural exchanges were clouded by global attention to human rights issues in wider violation of UN resolutions. The end to the UN monitoring panel on DPRK sanctions in April heightened unease about the future of North Korea diplomacy amid Pyongyang’s growing partnership with Moscow.

Seoul Balances Disapproval and Reassurance toward Beijing

As a “new chapter” in trilateral partnership, the [January 2024 Dialogue](#) cited “recent dangerous and escalatory behavior supporting unlawful maritime claims by the PRC in the South China Sea,” “opposed any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion anywhere in the waters of the Indo–Pacific,” and supported “peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as indispensable to security and prosperity in the international community.” China’s foreign ministry on Jan. 8 [opposed](#) the joint statement as a move to form “exclusionary groupings” and “interfere in China’s internal affairs.” At a [Council on Foreign Relations event](#) a day later, minister of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) International Department Liu Jianchao reiterated Taiwan’s place at the “very core of the core interests...the red line that mustn’t be crossed.” [Taiwan’s Jan. 13 election](#) of Lai Ching-te, a pro-US, Democratic Progressive Party leader and China’s “trouble-maker,” raised questions for peninsula security. South Korean observers called for “[crisis management](#) with North Korea,” as Taiwan’s leadership transition could [test China–ROK relations](#) given the “need to strike a balance between Beijing and Washington.”

This need arose when Seoul [hosted](#) the [3rd Summit for Democracy](#) on March 18–20 advancing the Biden administration’s [Commitment to Democratic Renewal](#). In a ministerial session themed “AI/Digital Technology and Democracy,” Taiwan’s Minister of Digital Affairs Audrey Tang delivered a video message in a “private capacity.” South Korea’s foreign ministry told the press that the summit was “not aimed at a specific country” and [affirmed](#) Seoul’s “unchanged” position

“respecting the One China policy.” Such signals of reassurance to Beijing balanced Seoul’s earlier disapproval of China’s intervention in the South China Sea. The foreign ministry voiced concerns about Chinese and Philippine coast guard [clashes](#) on March 5, when Chinese water cannon blasts injured at least four Filipino crew.



Figure 1 Fans wait to bid farewell to Fu Bao, who is to be returned to China under an international agreement, on April 3, 2024. Photo: Yonhap

China and South Korea’s own territorial disagreements surfaced later in March. Local complaints of illegal Chinese fishing prompted President Yoon Suk Yeol to order a special crackdown on March 25–31 around the Yellow Sea’s inter-Korean maritime border and southern Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). While the initiative led to the seizure of Chinese vessels, Yoon [ordered](#) tougher responses while inspecting an Incheon Coast Guard station on April 9. China–ROK maritime frictions rose after persistent clashes over competing historical identities. China’s successful push to list “Mount Changbaishan” as a new [UNESCO Global Geopark](#) on March 27 was closely monitored by the ROK foreign ministry, and drew public backlash. As Asan Institute for Policy Studies president Choi Kang warned in an April 25 *Dong-a Ilbo* op-ed on the “[Sinicization of Baekdu Mountain](#),” “foreigners who do not know Korean history will think it belongs to China.” Korean [academics](#) called the initiative China’s “2nd northeast project” extending Chinese regional history narratives from 2002, the source of Beijing and Seoul’s first major diplomatic dispute since normalization.

China-DPRK Friendship Year Boosts Bilateral Exchange

In their [exchange](#) of New Year messages, Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un launched China-DPRK Friendship Year as a “new chapter” in bilateral relations. Their 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties was the driving theme of state and party exchanges from January. On Jan. 25–26, PRC Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong met Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui and DPRK counterpart Pak Myong Ho in Pyongyang, about 10 days after North Korea initiated a series of weapons tests. China’s foreign ministry [called](#) Friendship Year “an opportunity to strengthen strategic communication at all levels, deepen traditional friendship and practical cooperation, strengthen multilateral coordination and cooperation, and push forward the sustained development of China-DPRK relations.” Sun and Choe [agreed](#) to “defend the common core interests” according to the DPRK state media. Days earlier, PRC Vice Premier Liu Guozhong and DPRK Vice Foreign Minister for international organizations Kim Son-kyong met in Uganda on the sidelines of multilateral summits advancing “[collective interests](#)” in Global South development.

Party leaders reinforced the China-DPRK friendship in March. International department director Kim Song-nam led a Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) delegation to Beijing, kicking off his three-nation tour to China, Vietnam, and Laos. Kim met top CCP leaders including fourth-ranking Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Huning and Chinese counterpart Liu Jianchao on March 21, and Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Director and PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi on March 23. As China’s Foreign Ministry [reported](#), Wang Yi reaffirmed “traditional friendship” and “pragmatic cooperation,” while Kim Song-nam pledged to “also support China’s measures taken on issues related to Taiwan, Xinjiang and Hong Kong, among others.”

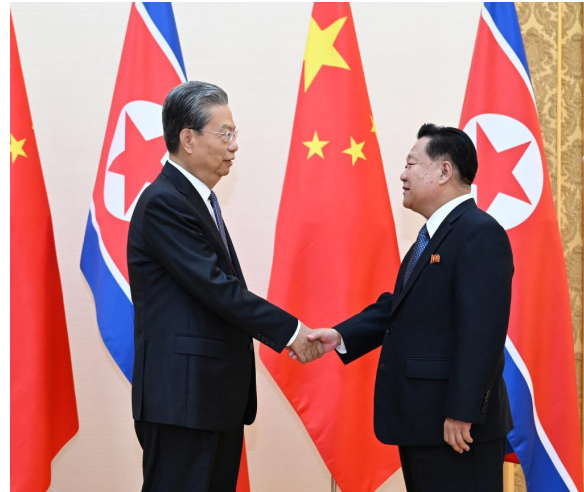


Figure 2 Zhao Leji, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of China's National People's Congress Standing Committee, holds talks with Choe Ryong Hae, a member of the Presidium of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). Photo: Xinhua

National People’s Congress (NPC) Chairman and third-ranking CCP leader Zhao Leji led China’s participation in 75th diplomatic anniversary events in Pyongyang in April. Zhao was China’s most senior official to visit North Korea since the 2018–2019 Xi-Kim summits and post-pandemic break in bilateral exchanges. He met Kim Jong Un and top legislator Choe Ryong-hae, leading a [delegation](#) of CCP, NPC, foreign affairs, military, commerce, foreign aid, and culture and tourism officials. The state media captured the visit’s significance through images of Choe [greeting](#) Zhao at Pyongyang International Airport on April 11, their joint [opening](#) of [Friendship Year](#) on April 12, and Kim Jong Un’s welcoming embrace and final send-off after a luncheon [meeting](#) on April 12. Kim’s meeting with Zhao emphasized “multi-faceted exchange” and “durable traditions of friendship.” To facilitate such ties, Zhao and Choe signed agreements on April 11 covering diplomatic visa waivers, customs and quarantine, and cultural and media cooperation.

South Korean officials projected a growing [momentum](#) in China-DPRK ties, as seen after the 60th diplomatic anniversary in 2009. Recent exchanges envisioned the partnership’s expansion to broader functional interests, and a more sustainable traditional friendship. They also reflected the consolidation of wider socialist

solidarity, South-South cooperation, and ties with Moscow since the Ukraine war. WPK international department director Kim Song-nam's March visit to Beijing was his first reported trip abroad since appointed in 2021 to oversee party ties with socialist counterparts. Addressing the [19th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement](#) in Jan. 19-20, DPRK representative Kim Song-kyong [cited](#) threats to "a sovereign country's rights to independence" on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's Foreign Minister Choe met Minister Sun on Jan. 26 soon after meeting President Putin and Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov in Moscow. The South Korean media framed these meetings through the lens of Pyongyang's tightening alignment with China and Russia, against US-Japan-ROK security cooperation.

Debating Conflict on the Korean Peninsula

While the China-DPRK friendship reached a post-pandemic high, the April 30 end of the UN's enforcement mechanism for DPRK sanctions since 2009 marked a low point in multilateral diplomacy. On March 28, Russia vetoed a draft Security Council resolution renewing the experts panel for monitoring sanctions implementation, while China abstained from voting. South Korea joined the United States, France, Japan, and the UK to condemn Russian actions, [stating](#) the veto "emboldens the DPRK to continue its unlawful activity with a sense of impunity. China, through its abstention, sends a signal too." During US State Secretary Antony Blinken's April 24-26 [China visit](#), satellite imagery of a US-sanctioned Russian ship docked at a Chinese port since February [heightened](#) speculation about Beijing's role in the Ukraine war.



Figure 3 Zhao Leji presents a floral basket to the China-DPRK Friendship Tower in Pyongyang. Photo: Xinhua

Pyongyang's UN sanctions violations from January acted out Kim Jong Un's rhetoric signaling readiness for war, and plans to advance DPRK military capabilities this year. In its latest sanctions violation on April 2, Pyongyang tested a "new-type intermediate-range solid-fueled ballistic missile" carrying maneuverable warheads. Kim [claimed](#) it successfully proved "three principles of building missile armed forces for rapidly, accurately, and powerfully striking any enemy target." [Maritime exercises](#) on April 11-12 showed US-Japan-ROK forces "are ready to respond to any contingency." Pyongyang's Jan. 14 missile launch led to previous joint [naval drills](#) on Jan. 15-17, and another test of a claimed underwater nuclear attack drone on January 18.

The Washington Post asked on Jan. 19, "[Does North Korea want to start a war?](#)" The paper [warned](#) the Biden administration five days later, "ignoring is not working." But as such reports suggest, the debate on the risks and likelihood of conflict remains divided. While Pyongyang has typically relied on military threats as a tool of diplomatic leverage or internal power, the fragmentation of dialogue and sanctions mechanisms drives pessimism. But Kim is more constrained by his domestic development priorities, and Beijing and Moscow's uncertain support. Despite their shows of alignment, as President of the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul Yang Moo-jin [indicated](#) in January, "disrupting stability on the Korean Peninsula is not necessarily in the interest of the North's allies, especially China."

Historic Shifts in China-ROK Trade

Totaling \$268 billion, South Korea's trade with China by the end of 2023 reached three turning points. First, South Korea confronted its first trade deficit with China since diplomatic normalization in 1992, amounting to \$18 billion, [1.8 times greater](#) than South Korea's overall trade deficit. Second, South Korea's share of China's total imports reached the lowest point since 1993, representing 6.3%. Third, in December 2023, the United States replaced China to become South Korea's biggest export market for goods since 2003, led by autos. ROK exports to China in 2022-2023 declined by 20% to \$124.8 billion, narrowing the gap with exports to the United States, which grew by 5% to \$115.7 billion. Semiconductor exports to China fell by 31%, despite recovering global demand by 2024. External structural and policy shifts drive these trends, reinforced by China's domestic innovation drive and competition with the United States.



Figure 4 Zhao Leji and Choe Ryong Hae pose for a group photo with artists of art troupes from both countries after watching their performance in Pyongyang. Photo: Xinhua

In January, Korean public debate on [shifting trade with China](#) traced the record deficit to “[Beijing's push for local manufacturing](#),” implying tougher competition in Chinese and global markets where South Korea has traditionally led intermediate goods exports. US technology export and investment restrictions on China magnified attention on the reconfiguration of China-ROK trade. As Industry Minister Ahn Duk-geun [indicated](#) before

meeting US officials and lawmakers in Washington in April, Seoul is “moving in the same direction” as allies while “stabilizing” economic ties with China. The meeting coincided with South Korea's April 10 parliamentary elections, where the semiconductor industry, representing a fifth of ROK exports, was a priority focus of Yoon's ambitious policy plans since January. Marking “a fresh round in the [global chip competition](#),” US-EU supply chain initiatives from April 5 renewed public concern about South Korea's “[vigilant and at times vulnerable](#)” position.

In addition to competitive pressures in high-tech trade, China's rising influence in e-commerce is another point of China-ROK debate. South Korea's Personal Information Protection Commission Vice Chairperson Choi Jang-hyuk met industry representatives in Beijing on April 11 to promote regulatory compliance, amid soaring public complaints about Chinese practices. The [launching](#) of the Korea-China Center for Internet Cooperation during his visit was a step toward enhancing governance mechanisms in data protection. Before the visit, the Korea Fair Trade Commission (FTC) initiated inspections of AliKorea and Temu in March and April for consumer protection violations and unfair business practices. On April 8, the Seoul municipal government also announced the discovery of toxic substances in AliExpress' top-selling childrens products exceeding safety levels.

Since market entry in 2018, AliExpress has become South Korea's second biggest online shopping platform after Coupang in terms of user numbers. While the number of monthly users in South Korea more than [doubled](#) in February 2023-2024 to 8.18 million, consumer dissatisfaction has outpaced this growth. Complaints to the Consumers Union of Korea and FTC against AliExpress [grew](#) five times in 2022-2023. Already South Korea's fourth biggest online marketplace after entering the country in July 2023, Temu has drawn similar criticism over [aggressive marketing](#) strategies. In April, a Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry [survey](#) of AliExpress, Temu, or Shein users in the past year showed that 81% of customers experienced poor services, citing delivery delay, product quality,

and extreme advertising as the biggest sources of dissatisfaction.

Human Rights Abuses Cloud China-DPRK Economic and Cultural Reengagement

Recent high-level diplomacy projects a wider resumption of China-DPRK trade and cultural exchanges since Pyongyang's partial border reopening in August 2023. In January, China's foreign ministry delegation traveled to Pyongyang via land route linking Dandong and Sinuiju, the hubs of cross-border trade awaiting fuller reactivation. China-DPRK trade this January-March totaled 3% below the level in the first quarter of last year. It more than doubled in 2022-2023 to \$2.3 billion but remained 18% below the 2019 pre-pandemic level. North Korea's widening trade deficit with China and inability to diversify exports constrain trade prospects. As the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy reported, DPRK imports from China in 2023 reflected the "[maximum achievable](#)" without the full reopening of land trade routes. Raw materials, food, agricultural, and construction goods led DPRK imports from China, while wigs and hair products drove 57% of exports. But as the UN experts panel reported last year, North Korea's illicit trade features an expansion in [maritime smuggling](#) in coal exports through the East China Sea and Taiwan Strait, and more sophisticated sanctions evasion tactics in oil imports. The panel's [final report](#) in March 2024 concluded that North Korea's missile advancement [still depends](#) on illicit imports despite increased self-sufficiency for production.

Although tourism remains restricted since Pyongyang's COVID-19 lockdown, the China-DPRK Friendship Year catalyzed official cultural exchanges. DPRK Sports Minister Kim Il Guk led a sports delegation to China in January. A Chinese art ensemble traveled to Pyongyang in April Friendship Year performances, amid preparations for North Korea's Spring Friendship Art Festival that month engaging Russian and Mongolian artists to celebrate Kim Il Sung's 112th birth anniversary.

Official cultural exchanges mask human rights issues in China-DPRK relations, and wider violations of UN resolutions. Ambassador Yun Seong-deok raised ROK concerns in his report for

the UN's [Universal Periodic Review on China](#) in January. A February *New Yorker* article on North Korea's [forced labor](#) program prompted the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China to [call for](#) halting US seafood imports from Chinese firms employing DPRK workers. From January, South Korean sources drew global media attention to a rise in North Korean [labor unrest](#) in northeast China. The protests indicated mounting grievances over unpaid wages and poor working conditions worsened by pandemic lockdowns. Reported cases included worker riots at factories in Helong, Jilin province in January, and walkout in Dandong, Liaoning province in February. Although the incidents prompted DPRK consular intervention according to media reports, China's foreign ministry claimed it was "not aware" of the problem.

The recent outbreak of protests highlights tensions between Pyongyang's reliance on overseas earnings, and China's obligations under a 2017 Security Council resolution requiring the repatriation of DPRK workers by the end of 2019. According to the US State Department's [2023 Trafficking in Persons Report](#), the DPRK government withholds up to 90% of overseas wages, and an estimated 20,000 to 100,000 North Korean workers remain in China.

Conclusion

China-ROK engagement in the first third of 2024 amounted to verbal exchanges balancing reassurance and disapproval, in sharp contrast with Beijing's busy leadership exchanges with Pyongyang. US-China competition and the erosion of multilateral diplomacy will continue to constrain the space for cooperation on key areas of trade and peninsula security.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY - APRIL 2024

Jan. 1, 2024: President Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un exchange New Year messages.

Jan. 23, 2024: South Korean amusement park Everland announces giant panda Fu Bao's planned return to China in April.

Jan. 24, 2024: PRC Vice Premier Liu Guozhong and DPRK Vice Foreign Minister for international organizations Kim Son-kyong meet on the sidelines of multilateral summits in Uganda.

Jan. 26-27, 2024: PRC Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong meets DPRK Vice Foreign Minister Pak Myong Ho and Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui in Pyongyang.

Jan. 29, 2024: A Chinese cultural delegation from Liaoning province arrives in Pyongyang for new year celebrations.

Feb. 6, 2024: PRC and ROK foreign ministers Wang Yi and Cho Tae-yul hold [telephone talks](#).

Feb. 27, 2024: PRC Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong delivers a video message [launching](#) ASEAN+3 "Young Ambassador" exchange.

Feb. 29, 2024: South Korea's Korea Consumer Agency announces the finding of illegal preservatives in children's clay products imported from China.

March 12, 2024: PRC and ROK nuclear envoys Liu Xiaoming and Lee Jun-il meet in Switzerland on the sidelines of a Northeast Asia security forum.

March 13, 2024: North Korea's IT Industry Minister Ju Yong-il meets PRC Ambassador to North Korea Wang Yajun in Pyongyang.

March 21-23, 2024: Workers' Party international department director Kim Song-nam leads a party delegation to China.

April 3, 2024: South Korea's Everland amusement park holds a farewell ceremony for giant panda Fu Bao before her departure to China.

Apr. 3-4, 2024: ASEAN+3 Finance and Central Bank Deputies' Meeting is held in Laos.

April 6 and 9, 2024: Chinese art troupes arrive in Pyongyang for a joint performance opening China-DPRK Friendship Year.

April 11-12, 2024: China's top legislator Zhao Leji arrives in Pyongyang to meet Kim Jong Un and DPRK counterpart Choe Ryong Hae, and attend Friendship Year events.

April 18, 2024: South Korea's Personal Information Protection Commission Vice Chairperson Choi Jang-hyuk meets Chinese e-commerce industry leaders in Beijing.

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JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

SULLEN STASIS

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

Though regarded as a weak ruler and despite low approval rates and his party's problems with a funding scandal and ties with the Unification Church, Kishida [surpassed](#) Tanaka Kakuei to become Japan's 10th longest-serving prime minister in the postwar era. Still, his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) [lost](#) all three seats in a special election at the end of April that has been interpreted as punishment for the corruption scandal. As the report period closed, a poll [showed](#) the disapproval rate for his Cabinet at a record high of 69%. While there were no noticeable concerns in Washington about the China policy of who, if anyone, will succeed Kishida, there were concerns in Tokyo regarding the 2024 US election. In February, Japanese officials reportedly [met](#) with sources close to Trump to ask them to urge him not to upend years of collective efforts to reign in Beijing. They view a China-US- trade or security deal, which Trump has mentioned, as potentially emboldening Beijing and undermining efforts by G7 nations to counter China and weaken support for Taiwan.

Meanwhile, China's National People's Congress [affirmed](#) the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Xi Jinping thought. While they did not personally interact, both leaders were active diplomatically, with their relations with the other country an important factor in the visits.



Figure 1 Prime Minister Kishida's Official Visit to Washington. Photo: Andrew Harnik/Getty Images

Kishida's April trip to Washington was primarily about defense (as discussed below). In a rare address to a joint session of Congress, Kishida bluntly [stated](#) that "China's current external stance and military actions present an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge, not only to the peace and security of

Japan but to the peace and stability of the international community at large," for which he received a standing ovation. His meeting was followed immediately by a trilateral summit with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos and Biden, also hosted by the White House. Like Japan, Marcos' government has been struggling with progressive encroachment by China, in this case on islands within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Supply chain strengthening to [reduce](#) reliance on China was also on the agenda, with the three agreeing to a framework for a stable supply of nickel under which resource-rich countries and high-consumption countries in Europe, Africa, and other regions would work together to share information and invest in developing critical minerals. Plans were discussed to expand the refining process to extract the metal from nickel other than that from China. The Philippines is the world's second-largest producer of nickel ore after Indonesia, though Indonesia and China have a larger market share of smelted and refined nickel. While Indonesia has banned the export of minerals, China is acquiring mining rights and interests in Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries, increasing its influence in the international market and acquiring concessions in Africa and other regions as well as holding a high share of the refined products of critical minerals such as lithium and cobalt. In a clear rebuff to Beijing, the three leaders [affirmed](#) their alignment as maritime democracies by insisting that the South China Sea should be governed by international law.

Xi Jinping was also active diplomatically, receiving a steady stream of visitors from developing states such as [Indonesia](#) whose newly elected president, Prabowo Subianto pledged to continue friendly ties and received promises of Chinese investment, Nonetheless, Subianto signaled his desire to pursue a middle of the road policy by immediately proceeding to visit Japan and the Philippines. High-level contacts [included](#) a visit from Germany's Olav Scholz, although trade tensions, dissatisfaction for China's tacit support of Russia in the war in Ukraine and Berlin's [arrests](#) of individuals suspected of spying for the PRC, meant it was not an especially cordial visit. Xi is scheduled to [visit](#) Paris, Belgrade, and Budapest in May, and is [expecting](#) a visit from Russian President Putin shortly thereafter.

The two sides' foreign ministers were active in soliciting support for their countries' positions. Among other visits, Wang Yi [met](#) French President Emanuel Macron in February in Paris to discuss setting up a strategic dialogue and went to Indonesia and Papua New Guinea in late [April](#). China's deepening ties with South Pacific nations have aroused concerns in Japan as well as in the United States, Australia, and France, the last-named having possessions (French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Wallis, and Futuna) in the area. Kamikawa Yoko [met](#) with Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, with the two pledging cooperation in defense and security for the realization of a free and open Indo-Pacific. In the last week of April, Kamikawa [visited](#) five countries in Africa and Asia (Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, and Nepal) to strengthen bilateral ties as China increases its presence in these regions. In August 2025, Japan will host leaders of African countries and hold the eighth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD). A preparatory ministerial meeting for the event will take place in August 2024 and Kamikawa plans to ensure good communications with key persons in major African countries ahead of the ministerial meeting. The Foreign Ministry is to assign "wide-area economic officers," who will be in charge of helping Japanese businesses expand into Africa, to six diplomatic missions in Africa and other regions where Japanese companies have offices to supervise operations in Africa, such as Europe and the Middle East. The officers will be stationed at Japanese embassies in South Africa, Britain, India, and Turkey, as well as Japanese consulates general in Istanbul and Dubai.

The war-related Yasukuni Shrine remains a perennial sore point, though not as salient as it was since Japanese prime ministers ceased visiting there in person in 2013. After reports surfaced that groups of Self-Defense Forces (SDF) members had visited, the center-left *Asahi*, essentially taking China's view, [editorialized](#) that such visits not only breached the constitutional principle of separation of religion and politics but also raised suspicions that the SDF has not broken with the imperial Japanese military as it is supposed to have done, rejecting the explanation that they attended of their own free will. Oddly, there was no discernible reaction to the shrine's [choice](#) of a former Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) commander, Adm. Otsuka Umio, as chief priest.

The last retired military officer appointed as chief priest was in 1978 when Nagayoshi Matsudaira enshrined 14 prominent convicted war criminals including World War II-era Prime Minister Hideki Tojo alongside the 2.5 million war dead. Chinese reaction was muted when Kishida [donated](#) ritual *masakaki* sprigs to the shrine on the first day of its spring festival -- in his capacity as prime minister -- but did not attend himself. Lower House Speaker Nukaga Fukushima and Upper House President Otsuji Hidehisa also offered *masakaki*. Shindo Yoshitaka, minister in charge of economic revitalization, explained that he visited "out of reverence and respect for the souls of those who worked for the country with all their might in the past."

As measured by not necessarily reliable social media, public opinion in China was negative on Japan. In March, online nationalists [accused](#) Zhong Shanshan, said to be China's richest man, of covertly promoting Japan. They interpreted a pagoda on the design of his Nongfu Springs green tea label as resembling that of Tokyo's Sensoji Temple; the design of the label on bottled water as looking like Mount Fuji and its red cap to resemble the Japanese flag; a third design was said to show Japanese *koinobori* carp streamers. Hu Xijin, the nationalist former editor of *Global Times*, wrote in a March 7 post that the extremity of the backlash against Zhong was "vulgar and ridiculous" and an "insult to patriotism" but later deleted his post. On the other hand, the Chinese government said it was willing to help Japan in the wake of its January earthquake and state television [suspended](#) an anchor after he suggested that Japan's earthquake disaster was punishment for Japan's discharge of nuclear waste water. The comments had gone viral. In Japan, a Cabinet office survey in late January [found](#) that respondents who "feel no affinity" or "would rather not feel affinity" toward China reached 86.7%, up 4.9 percentage points from the previous year. A separate poll [conducted](#) by center-right *Yomiuri* found that 91% of respondents considered China a threat, up five points from last year; 71% were in favor of strengthening Japan's defense capabilities.

Japan continued what appeared to be carefully crafted efforts to move incrementally closer to Taiwan, eliciting complaints from Beijing after each. Immediately after Japan's New Year's Day earthquake, Taiwan's foreign minister [announced](#) a \$420,000 donation for relief and

rebuilding. After Foreign Minister Kamikawa congratulated Lai Ching-te, Beijing's least favorite candidate, on his victory in the island's January election, the Chinese embassy in Japan, without mentioning Lai's name, [said](#) it "resolutely opposes" her statement and that Japan should refrain from sending any "wrong signals" to "Taiwan independence" forces. Several Japanese newspapers [covered](#) the election and its aftermath on their front pages, and Diet members Furuya Keiji, Kaneko Yasushi, and former member Ohashi Mitsuo [visited](#) Taiwan to offer their personal congratulations. Furuya also chairs the Japan-ROC Diet Members' Consultative Council while Ohashi heads the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association. The three met with President Tsai Ing-wen at the presidential office building and with President-elect Lai Ching-te at his party's headquarters in Taipei with Ohashi [commenting](#) that Japan is looking forward to continuing to deepen cooperation and exchanges with Taiwan's future government. In February, Tokyo Gov. Koike Yuriko, on her first [visit](#) to Taiwan since taking office in 2016, spent two days there "to strengthen ties with the island's leadership." She met separately with Tsai, Lai, Digital Affairs Minister Audrey Tang, and Taipei Mayor Chiang Wan-an, the great-grandson of Chiang Kai-shek. To the Chinese foreign ministry's statement of opposition to any official interactions between Japan and Taiwan, Koike replied that "Cooperation between cities is crucial for urban diplomacy."

Economic

China's economy continued to struggle while Japan's boomed, albeit with significant [doubts](#) that the boom could continue. China's consumer prices [rose](#) in February, ending four straight months of declines though economists warned that the return of some inflation does not mean that deflation has ended. In March, China's manufacturing purchasing index [rose](#) for the first time in a year, buoyed by rising export orders, but the PRC's National Bureau of Statistics cautioned that companies suffered from "insufficient market demand," requiring further state support. Leading Chinese economic magazine *Caixin* [reported](#) that as global investors continue to seek alternatives to the PRC, Japan stocks were rapidly recovering the ground they lost to their Chinese peers in the early years of the pandemic. The gap between the market capitalization of the Chinese mainland and Japan

has shrunk to \$2.7 trillion, the smallest since July 2020. The last time Japan commanded a higher market capitalization value than China was in early 2019.

China's trading partners worry that the country's industrial overcapacity will spill over into export markets. Meanwhile, Japan's largest employers [announced](#) record pay increases, signaling a break from the deflationary mindset that led to the country's prolonged period of low economic growth known as the "lost decades." However, the yen remained weak, [trading](#) at one point at 160 to the US dollar down 11% on the year. Such a drop had not occurred since Japan's economic bubble burst in 1990 and it was not helped by the Bank of Japan's decision to raise interest rates for the first time in 17 years. A decision is still pending, but in the end the Ministry of Finance may be compelled to intervene.

The slowdown in Chinese economic growth caused difficulties for some Japanese enterprises. The country's trade deficit with China [expanded](#) for the second straight year to reach ¥6.7 trillion as exports fell 6.5%. Japan's seafood exports to China in fiscal 2023 [fell](#) 57% due to the ban triggered by the wastewater discharge from the Fukushima nuclear power plant, their lowest level since comparable data became available in fiscal 1988. Cosmetics maker Kao [blamed](#) the water release for a 1.2% sales decline in its sales to China in 2023.

Japanese investment in China continued to fall for several reasons. The prolonged economic slump in China was one, and the need to break away from excessive trade dependence on China for security reasons was another. It is understood that this would not be easy: as the world aims to decarbonize, the spread of solar power, offshore wind power, and electric vehicles is essential, yet supplies of many of the necessary raw materials and components, including key minerals, are dependent on China. According to the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry's [survey](#) of the economy and business environment in China, 23% of respondents said they did not invest in China in 2023, while 25% said they reduced their investment from 2022, together accounting for about half of total responses. On the business outlook in China, 44% answered it was worsening or slightly worsening, 45% said it stayed flat, and 11% saw it slightly improving or improving. 21% of respondents said they were

not treated equally to Chinese companies, 73% said they were treated, and 5% said they were treated preferentially. Thirty-eight percent said they invested the same amount as in the previous year, while 15% said they increased or significantly increased investment.

Another factor dampening China-Japan economic relations was the security of Japanese nationals in China—there is still no [disposition](#) of the case of the Astellas employee who was arrested in March 2023 and accused of engaging in espionage activities—and two Chinese academics [employed](#) at Japanese universities have separately disappeared as well. The ambiguities of a newly passed espionage law heightened [concerns](#), with a Japanese national working in China at a specialized trading company telling *Nikkei* that that fewer people were willing to work in China, which is affecting staffing, and another said that he wants to go back to Japan as soon as possible.

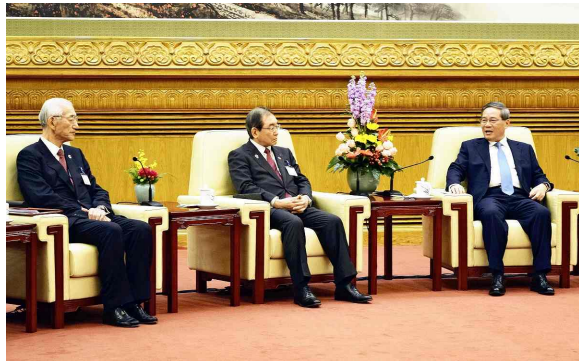


Figure 2 Japan Business Delegation, Chinese Premier Li Meet; Both Sides Tout Importance of Bilateral Economic Ties, Kosei Shindo, who leads a delegation of the Japan-China Economic Association, left, and Masakazu Tokura, chairman of the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren), center, meet with Chinese Premier Li Qiang at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Thursday. Photo: The Yomiuri Shimbun/pool photo

Chinese government officials were at pains to show that Japanese investment was welcome. Chinese Ambassador to Japan Wu Jianghao [sought](#) to allay growth and security concerns in the Japanese business community, saying the two sides should explore opportunities in emerging industries while warning that although Tokyo has an alliance with Washington, it had a responsibility to maintain stable ties with Beijing under their treaty of peace and friendship. Japanese businesses were receptive to such overtures. An usually large delegation from the

Japan-China Economic Association visited Beijing in January but [returned](#) home having received little beyond Premier Li Qiang's vague pledge to improve the business environment for foreign firms. In their roughly hourlong meeting with Li, the Japanese representatives raised several thorny issues, including concern about the safety of their citizens in China and bans on the import of seafood and other food products. In a separate meeting with Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao, the delegation raised concerns such as China's anti-espionage law, difficulties on bidding for government contracts, and rules on cross-border data transfers, according to a briefing for journalists by representatives of the Japanese association. Later in the same day, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejected concerns about the anti-espionage law, with spokesman Wang Wenbin saying "as long as companies are operating in accordance with the law, they should be worry free."

Some Japanese companies continued to do well. Fast fashion retailing chain Uniqlo [reported](#) a large, though unspecified, increase in revenue and profits in revenue and profits in China in 2023 and announced plans to open more outlets in China in 2024 to add to its 931 store presence.

Problems in the Chinese economy notwithstanding, its resilience should not be underestimated. Vehicle sales are robust, with EV sales by BYD [surpassing](#) former industry leader Tesla. In January, BYD launched three new passenger models in Indonesia as a Japanese government official lamented the declining market share of Japanese car brands there due to their lagging EV sales. There are widespread fears in Europe and the US, however, that China is seeking to export its overcapacity in production, with discussions taking place on how to limit imports of cars and other commodities.

Despite China's disapproval of Japan's closer ties with Taiwan, the effect on the Japanese economy has been beneficial. Taiwanese company TSMC, the world's leading producer of high-end computer chips, has built one foundry in Kumamoto and broken ground on a second. At the ceremony to open the plant, which will provide 1,700 new jobs, TSMC founder Morris Chang [predicted](#) a chip renaissance in Japan as it attempts to regain the chipmaking glory it enjoyed in the 1980s. Kumamoto's economic [boom](#) has led to interest from other Taiwanese

companies and plans for a “Taiwan town” and a shopping mall.

However, as the report period closed, the International Monetary Fund [predicted](#) that India will overtake Japan in nominal gross domestic product in dollar terms in 2025 due to a combination of the weak yen and India’s own rapid economic growth. As Japan was overtaken by Germany in 2023, this would mean Japan will become the world’s fifth largest economy.

Defense

China [announced](#) an increase of 7.2% in its defense budget, to \$236.1 billion, about the same rate of increase as last year and in line with annual increases for the past several years. China now has the world’s second-largest defense budget, after the United States, one that is four times higher than Japan’s, but actual expenditures are apt to be substantially higher than reported. The Stockholm International Peace Institute estimates that the actual defense budget is 27% higher than officially reported. Among other [items](#), China’s space program, which is managed by the military; defense mobilization funds; provincial military base operating costs; military pensions and benefits; dual-use research and development efforts; and paramilitary organizations like the People’s Armed Police and the Coast Guard are not incorporated into the defense budget.

The Japanese Cabinet [approved](#) a record 16.5% increase to \$55.9 billion (7.95 trillion yen) in its defense budget for fiscal year 2024, which began April 1. This is expected to increase until it reaches \$62.5 billion (8.9 trillion yen) in FY 2027. Though polls show that most Japanese recognize the threat from China and favor the need for a more robust defense, center-left publications like *Asahi* continue to [oppose](#) them, generally on the grounds that there has been insufficient public consultation, and LDP coalition partner Komeito, with its long [history](#) as a pacifist party, has had to be cajoled into approval. A particular point of contention has been whether Japan should be allowed to approve the sale of the sixth-generation fighter plane it is developing in conjunction with the UK and Italy. After protracted negotiations, Komeito leaders [agreed](#) to allow the exports but for this specific model of fighter jet only rather than all internationally co-developed defense equipment. Potential importers of the aircraft

are restricted to nations with relevant agreements with Japan and countries currently engaged in military conflict are also excluded. The Cabinet must approve each case before a jointly developed fighter jet is exported to a third country in the future. The next-generation aircraft will replace the Air Self-Defense Force’s F-2 fighter jets whose decommissioning is expected to start around 2035.



Figure 3 Japan-Italy-UK Joint Fighter Program Takes a Step Forward With New Treaty Japan, Britain, and Italy agreed to establish a joint organization to develop a new sixth-generation fighter jet. From left to right: Italy’s Defense Minister Guido Crosetto, Japan’s Defense Minister Kihara Minoru, and British Defense Secretary Grant Shapps shake hands after the signing of the treaty at the Japanese defense ministry in Tokyo on December 14. Credit: Takahashi Kosuke

With Chinese coast guard and fishing vessels frequently in and around waters that Japan considers part of its territorial waters, Japan has [heightened](#) its deterrence capabilities in coordination with other countries in the Indo-Pacific region. The SDF took part in multinational joint exercises 56 times last year, 18 times the figure in 2006 when the Joint Staff Office was founded to manage the three forces. One of these [included](#) the annual *Iron Fist* exercise to practice recapturing remote Japanese Islands, indicating that the strategy is to retake rather than defend the islands from initial attack. Maj. Gen. Hajime Kitajima, commander of the GSDF Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, told a joint news conference at Kin Blue Beach in Okinawa that the exercises were designed to “show to the world that any attempt to invade Japan will end in failure in the face of the Japan-US alliance.” Held since 2005, they were until 2022 held in the US, and have been broadened to include Britain, Germany, France, and Australia as observer participants as they had in the last fiscal year. This year for the first time the Philippines and the Netherlands also observed with the obvious intent being to strengthen cooperation with like-

mindful nations. Making explicit what had always been known, the joint US-Japan command post exercises in February named China as the enemy for the first time, even though the Japanese Defense ministry had classified the scenario as a “specially designated secret” under Japan’s secrecy law. China’s *Global Times* [responded](#) that what had been described as a leak was in fact intentional since multiple government officials had revealed the name to the media at the same time.



Figure 4 US, Japan Accelerate War Drills to Deter China. U.S. Marines execute command and control from a combat operations center during Keen Edge 22 at Camp Hansen, Japan, Jan. 31, 2022. The U.S. and Japan finished Keen Edge 24, a biannual bilateral command post exercise, Feb. 8, 2024. Photo: U.S. Marine Corps

In February, the Defense ministry [announced](#) that it had been deploying an airborne early warning and control system (AWACS) planes and other aircraft into the air defense identification zone (ADIZ) which China has unilaterally declared over an area of the East China Sea, for surveillance of Beijing’s constant deployment of warships near the boundaries of the ADIZ. Also showing the Kishida government’s concern, Japanese officials [moved](#) up the purchase of US *Tomahawk* missiles by a year, which China Daily [called](#) “a dangerous move deserving the full alert of the region and beyond,” since it means that Japan will have acquired long-range precision strike capacity.

Multiple efforts were [made](#) to shore up the defense of the remote islands, including stationing weaponry and troops thereon, hardening defenses and population shelters against attack, and evacuating civilians. Underground shelters capable of accommodating residents for about two weeks in times of emergency in islands including Yonaguni and Ishigaki near Taiwan, are being built. To make the shelters strong enough to withstand blasts from missiles, the doors of the shelters must open outward and their outer walls

made of reinforced concrete no less than 30 centimeters thick. There are to be three liters of drinking water per day for each person. An exercise in January indicated that all 1,700 residents of Yonaguni could be [transported](#) to Kyushu in one day, though the matter of how to support the evacuees after they had arrived had yet to be resolved. Should the evacuation be prolonged, schools and new jobs would be needed.

After a leak revealed that a Chinese cyber-attack had penetrated Japan’s Foreign ministry telecommunications network, Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko [told](#) the Budget Committee of the House of Representatives that the government must deepen relations with allies and friendly nations to expedite measures against cyber-attacks. The United States has been concerned about this for some time, making it reluctant to share intelligence with Tokyo. Improving cyber defenses will, however, entail [revision](#) of a wide range of laws, prolonging the period of vulnerability.

The report period closed with an incident with major consequences for peace in the region: Chinese Coast Guard vessels stopped a Japanese survey off the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the Japan Coast Guard intervened. Chinese sources then stated that Japanese lawmakers including former Defense Minister Inada Tomomi had landed on one of the islands, which the Japanese government, anxious to avoid provocation, has forbidden. China lodged a formal diplomatic protest and a day later, on April 29, the Shanghai Maritime Safety Administration declared an area of the East China Sea off-limits to traffic from May 1 through 9 for military activities. On May 1 the PRC’s newest aircraft carrier, the *Fujian*, began its first sea trials. A blog post by political commentator Su Hao [suggested](#) the timing was not a coincidence since designating the operations as military activity rather than training could allow more targeted countermeasures against Japan.



Figure 5 Two Japan Coast Guard vessels on guard to block a Chinese Coast Guard vessel, center, from approaching the research vessel off the coast of the Senkaku Islands on Saturday. Uotsuri Island is seen in the background. Photo: Yomiuri Shimbun

The Future

As concerns about the future of China and its now all but completely assimilated Special Economic Zone of Hong Kong rise, Japan is gaining from uncertainties of the PRC. While Chinese stock markets decline, the Nikkei reached its highest level since the financial bubble burst in 1990, and investors, including a number from China, and tourists are flocking in. The country's technological expertise, extensive industrial base, impressive infrastructure, and large accumulation of savings remain formidable assets. Yet major unresolved issues between China and Japan remain, and the PRC has not only the largest and best equipped military in Asia but arguably in the world. Both countries face declining populations, and declining economic growth in China has negative consequences for Japan. Neither government can be optimistic about what the future holds for them or for their relations with each other.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

JANUARY-APRIL 2024

Jan. 1, 2024: *China Military Online* [characterizes](#) Japan's lifting its ban on the export of lethal weapons as entering an era where it is part of the international arms supply network and likely to become more involved in regional conflicts.

Jan. 2, 2024: *China Daily* says it is [highly improper](#) for Japanese Consul General in Hong Kong Okada Kenichi to urge the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region to lift the ban on seafood imports to show "a stark contrast between the mainland and Hong Kong."

Jan. 3, 2024: Chinese foreign ministry says the country is [willing](#) to provide necessary help to Japan in the wake of the massive earthquake that struck the country on New Year's Day.

Jan. 3, 2024: Chinese TV [suspends](#) an anchor after he suggested that Japan's earthquake disaster was punishment for Japan's discharge of nuclear waste water. The comments had gone viral.

Jan. 4, 2024: *Japan Forward* [advocates](#) deepening ties with Taiwan and India to counter common threats from China.

Jan. 5, 2024: *Global Times* [editorializes](#) that US Ambassador Rahm Emanuel is trying to drive a wedge between China and Japan.

Jan. 5, 2024: An opinion piece in *South China Morning Post* [notes](#) that, contrary to Beijing's rhetoric about Asian states opposing Japan's increase in military spending and easing of rules on the export of rules on the export of lethal weapons, many Asian countries in fact welcome [Japan's](#) growing deterrence posture in curbing what they perceive as China's increased attempts at economic and military coercion

Jan. 5, 2024: *China Daily* [cites](#) Japanese experts' views that the majority of Japanese people do not want missiles deployed toward China in their areas and that doubts and dissatisfaction

with the government are growing in various municipalities.

Jan. 8, 2024: An annual parachuting drill including forces from eight countries including Britain, France, Germany, the US, and Japan's 1st Airborne Brigade [features](#) the recapturing of an island that had been occupied by an unnamed enemy force.

Jan. 8, 2024: Showing Chinese uneasiness with closer relations among Japan, South Korea, and the US, foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning [expresses](#) "serious concern" over a joint statement issued by the US, Japan, and the Republic of Korea about Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Jan. 10, 2024: Nikkei [ends](#) at its highest in 34 years as technology shares tracked overnight gains in US peers while a weaker yen boosted exporters. Meanwhile, a downbeat [assessment](#) of the Chinese economy prevails, as does an uptick in outlook on India and Japan.

Jan. 11, 2024: Aso Taro, LDP vice-president and former prime minister, [speaks](#) to the US Congress and, separately, to reporters saying that the Japanese government may regard a contingency in Taiwan as a situation threatening the existence of Japan, thus implying that Japan may exercise the right of collective self-defense based on 2015 national security legislation.

Jan. 11, 2024: Fast fashion retailing chain Uniqlo [reports](#) a large, though unspecified, increase in revenue and profits in revenue and profits in China in 2023, Uniqlo has 931 outlets in China, more than in Japan, and plans to open more in 2024.

Jan. 11, 2024: *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) on the need to pay close attention to a prolonged economic slump in China as well as the need to break away from excessive trade dependence on it. As the world aims to decarbonize, the spread of solar power, offshore wind power, and electric vehicles is essential, but supplies of many of the

necessary raw materials and components, including key minerals, are dependent on China.

Jan. 12, 2024: Mazda [plans](#) to launch a plug-in hybrid vehicle to be jointly developed with Chinese state-owned partner Changan Automobile. Production could start as early as 2025. Plug-in hybrids are growing popular given their advantage over electric vehicles in terms of range and convenience in charging. The two automakers will also work together to develop electric vehicles.

Jan. 12, 2024: Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko and US counterpart Antony Blinken [agree](#) to cooperate closely in dealing with issues relating to China and on the importance of peace and stability around Taiwan and discuss a state visit by Kishida to Washington.

Jan. 14, 2024: The Chinese embassy in Japan, without mentioning Lai Ching-te's victory in the Taiwan presidential race, [says](#) it "resolutely opposes" Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa's statement congratulating Lai on his victory and that Japan should refrain from sending any "wrong signals" to "Taiwan independence" forces.

Jan. 15, 2024: Diet members Furuya Keiji, Kaneko Yasushi, and former member Ohashi Mitsuo [visit](#) Taiwan to offer congratulations on Saturday's election.

Jan. 15, 2024: [According](#) to the *Financial Times*, "Chinese chipmakers are taking group tours to network with their Japanese counterparts, as the semiconductor industry adapts to increasingly stringent export controls introduced by the US and its allies."

Jan. 16, 2024: *Global Times* [charges](#) that Japan and Australia's discussions of cooperation in military contingencies are stirring up troubles and adding new factors of instability into the region.

Jan. 18, 2024: BYD, China's largest electric vehicle maker, [launches](#) three passenger models in Indonesia as a Japanese government official laments the declining market share of Japanese car brands in Indonesia due to their lagging behind in EV sales.

Jan. 18, 2024: Leading Chinese economic magazine *Caixin* [reports](#) that as global investors continue to seek alternatives to the PRC, Japan stocks are rapidly recovering ground they lost to Chinese peers in the early years of the pandemic.

Jan. 19, 2024: Aiming to [respond](#) quickly to possible cyberattacks and disinformation plots by countries such as China and Russia, Japan and NATO hope to establish a secure dedicated communication line for quickly sharing sensitive security information.

Jan. 19, 2024: Responding to its perception of threats from China and North Korea, the Japanese government [agrees](#) to purchase up to 400 *Tomahawk* cruise missiles a year earlier than planned.

Jan. 21, 2024: A Japanese Cabinet office survey [finds](#) that respondents who "feel no affinity" or "would rather not feel affinity" toward China reached 86.7%, up 4.9 percentage points from the previous year. By contrast 52.8% of respondents "feel an affinity with South Korea," including "would rather feel affinity," up 6.9 percentage points from the previous year, presumably due to improved bilateral relations under South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol.

Jan. 21, 2024: *China Daily* [terms](#) Japan's decision to move up its purchase of *Tomahawk* missiles by a year "a dangerous move deserving of the full alert of the region and beyond."

Jan. 21, 2024: Trade statistics released by Chinese customs authorities [show](#) that exports of graphite and related products to Japan decreased by over 40% on a quantitative basis or 59% in monetary terms in December compared to the previous month.

Jan. 22, 2024: Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry's [survey](#) on the economy and business environment in China reveals that 23% of respondents said they did not invest in China in 2023, while 25% said they reduced their investment from 2022, together accounting for about half of the total responses.

Jan. 22, 2024: Likely prompted by concerns over China's hegemonic activities, Vietnam accelerates its efforts to [strengthen](#) its relationship with Japan and the United States.

Jan. 24, 2024: Aiming to strengthen [cooperation](#) between Japan and Australia with China's aggressive maritime expansion in mind, the Australian and Japanese defense departments have begun a four-year joint research project on unmanned underwater vehicles for underwater mine detection and unspecified other activities.

Jan. 24, 2024: A newly released report says ASDF [scrambled](#) fighter jets 555 times from April to December 2023, of which 392 or about 70% of which were against Chinese aircraft, down by 70 scrambles year on year.

Jan. 24, 2024: Japan's trade deficit with mainland China [expanded](#) for the second straight year to reach ¥6.7 trillion (\$44 billion) as exports fell 6.5% reflecting a slowdown of China's economy.

Jan. 24, 2024: Japan's December exports to China logged their first [rise](#) in more than a year as its exports surged to record highs, with shipments to the US reaching their strongest-ever level

Jan. 24, 2024: In its first [visit](#) to Beijing in about four years, a delegation from the Japan-China Economic Association seeks to improve relations.

Jan. 25, 2024: An usually large delegation from the Japan-China Economic Association that sought to improve Sino-Japanese relations [returns](#) home with no results save Premier Li Qiang's pledge to improve the environment for foreign firms.

Jan. 26, 2024: *New York Times* financial analysts state that a [change](#) in perception among investors about China and Japan is one of the biggest themes in the markets right now. Japan's stock market, overlooked by investors for decades, is making a furious comeback.

Jan. 27, 2024: CCTV [reports](#) that a Japanese fishing vessel and several patrol boats illegally entered the territorial waters of the Diaoyu (Senkaku) islands on the 27 and that the Chinese coast guard took the necessary control measures against them and warned them away.

Jan. 28, 2024: China is [deploying](#) multiple warships around the clock in waters near the

borders of the air defense identification zone that it has unilaterally established.

Jan. 29, 2024: Referencing China's stationing of warships and recent efforts to defend its claimed ADIZ, *Yomiuri* [states](#) that the Japanese government needs to maintain a sense of urgency and continue to demonstrate that it will not tolerate China's attempts to change the status quo.

Jan. 30, 2024: Japanese government sources [reveal](#) that four Chinese warships have been constantly deployed around Taiwan, likely aiming to block US and other forces by using the ships in conjunction with other warships nearby.

Jan. 30, 2024: Foreign Minister Kamikawa [pledges](#) to promote a "mutually beneficial" relationship with China and make it "constructive and stable" through dialogue.

Jan. 31, 2024: According to Japanese customs data, Japan [exported](#) 5.97 million vehicles last year while PRC customs data reported that China sold 5.22 million vehicles. Other media [report](#) that Chinese exports exceeded those of Japan by almost 500,000. Toyota remains the world's largest automobile company by unit sales.

Feb. 1, 2024: Japanese Defense Industry [announces](#) that it has been deploying an airborne early warning and control system (AWACS) planes and other aircraft into the ADIZ which China has unilaterally declared over an area of the East China Sea, for surveillance of Beijing's constant deployment of warships near the boundaries of the ADIZ.

Feb. 2, 2024: Reuters, [citing](#) interviews with six Japanese officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the issue's sensitivity, reports that the Japanese government has quietly attempted to engage with people close to Trump to warn against striking any deal with China that could upend years of collective efforts to rein in Beijing and risk the region's fragile peace.

Feb. 4, 2024: Self-Defense Forces and the US military [name](#) China as a hypothetical enemy for the first time in their joint command post exercise amid rising concerns over a potential invasion of Taiwan by Beijing in the future.

Feb. 6, 2024: *Global Times* [accuses](#) Japan of hypocrisy with regard to the confidentiality of Japan-US exercises.

Feb. 6, 2024: *Yomiuri* [reports](#) that China's cyber-attack on the foreign ministry's telecommunications network has exposed vulnerabilities in Japan's security measures, leaving the United States hesitant to share defense-related information with Japan.

Feb. 6, 2024: Kishida [stresses](#) the urgent need to improve Japan's ability to mount an active cyberdefense saying he will "speed up discussions to pass related bills as soon as possible."

Feb. 6, 2024: Referencing Kishida's meeting with Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni, Professor Cui Hongjian of Beijing Foreign Studies University [says](#) that "In recent years, the major trend of Japan's diplomacy is to strengthen contact and cooperation with European countries due to the impact of the [US'] Indo-Pacific strategy, while at the same time, the G7 has gradually become an important platform and tool for the US' strategy against China."

Feb. 6, 2024: Kyodo [reports](#) that Chinese Coast Guard vessels have been warning Japanese military aircraft to leave airspace over and around the Japanese-administered Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Tokyo has lodged a protest with Beijing through diplomatic channels

Feb. 8, 2024: Cosmetics maker Kao [blames](#) Beijing's opposition to Japan's releasing treated radioactive water for its 1.2% sales decline in China in 1923.

Feb. 9, 2024: Kishida, meeting Kenyan President William Ruto in Tokyo, [announces](#) fiscal reconstruction aid for Kenya, which faced a worsening debt situation due to loans from China.

Feb. 9, 2024: On her first [visit](#) to Taiwan since taking office in 2016, Tokyo Gov. Koike Yuriko spends two days in Taiwan "to strengthen ties with the island's leadership."

Feb. 9, 2024: A former Japanese Defense Ministry intelligence officer [believes](#) that the

Chinese military wants to eventually deploy *Tang*-class [Type 096] nuclear ballistic missile submarines equipped with the next-generation JL-3 submarine-launched ballistic missile to the Sea of Japan, posing a new security risk for Japan.

Feb. 9, 2024: Japan's current account [surplus](#) was up 92.5% in 2023 from 2022. Exports grew 1.5% while imports declined 6.6%.

Feb. 10, 2024: After a Chinese cyber-attack leaked Japan's diplomatic cables, Foreign Minister Kamikawa [tells](#) the Budget Committee of the House of Representatives that the government must deepen relations with allies and friendly nations to expedite measures against cyber-attacks.

Feb. 10, 2024: In light of overseas developments such as China's military expansion in recent years, the Japanese government [intends](#) to strengthen integrated operations of the SDF, including in new domains such as space and cyber.

Feb. 11, 2024: Komeito is [refusing](#) to agree to the LDP's desire to supply allies with the next-generation fighter jet being developed with Britain and Italy.

Feb. 11, 2024: Slowing Chinese economy has started [affecting](#) Japanese companies, mainly manufacturers. Motor maker Nidec Corp. lowered its full-year net profit outlook due to falling electric vehicle prices in China, while chemical maker Asahi Kasei Corp. partly blamed weaker demand there for a decline in its operating profit.

Feb. 12, 2024: Defense Ministry [tries](#) to reassure residents of Uruma, to be the site of a GSDF training site as part of the "southwest shift" of Japan's defense capabilities, with China in mind.

Feb. 15, 2024: Japan's GDP unexpectedly [shrinks](#) for a second straight quarter; its economy slipping behind Germany to become the world's fourth largest. At the same time, the Nikkei stock average [rises](#) more than 4,000 points, hovering about 38,000.

Feb. 20, 2024: *Asahi* [editorializes](#) against "rushing" to increase SDF forces in Okinawa. The Defense ministry plans to increase

personnel of the GSDF's 15th Brigade based in Naha, and upgrade it to a division.

Feb. 24, 2024: *Nikkei Asia* [discloses](#) that officials from the Japanese foreign ministry and METI were among those taking part in an unannounced meeting with Chinese officials earlier this year. Japan and China have held working-level meetings on Fukushima wastewater before.

Feb. 24, 2024: Using such foreign organizations as the US Defense Department's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) or the DoD affiliated Defense Innovation Unit (DIU), as models, Japan announces it will [launch](#) a research institute for innovative technology development this autumn. Fifty of its 100 staffers are to be recruited from outside the defense ministry such as from companies and universities.

Feb. 24, 2024: At the ceremony to open TSMC's first chip production plant in Japan, TSMC founder Chang [predicts](#) a chip renaissance in Japan as it attempts to regain the chipmaking glory it enjoyed in the 1980s.

Feb. 26, 2024: *Asahi* [editorializes](#) that recent visits of groups of SDF members to Yasukuni Shrine not only breach the constitutional principle of separation of religion and politics but also raised suspicion the SDF have not broken with the imperial Japanese military as they are supposed to have done.

Feb. 26, 2024: Supreme Allied Europe (SACEUR) Commander Gen. Christopher Cavoli [visits](#) Tokyo.

Feb. 27, 2024: Kyoto-based control system manufacturer Omron is to [cut](#) 2,000 jobs in Japan and overseas in response to China's economic slump.

March 1, 2024: China, Japan, and South Korea which account for 20% of world trade by value [agree](#) to reuse shipping pallets and make efforts to implement license plates usable in both the country of departure and the country of arrival to smooth the flow of goods among the three countries.

March 1, 2024: Government data [reveal](#) that Japan's industrial production fell 7.5% in

January from the previous month due mainly to lower automobile output, the fastest decline since May 2020 in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

March 2, 2024: SDF will [create](#) a new sea transport joint force in 2025.

March 2, 2024: *Global Times* [warns](#) that South Korea's closer relations with Japan are its "Achilles heel" since they may trigger another wave of anti-Japanese sentiment across the country.

March 3, 2024: Chinese Ambassador to Japan Wu Jianguo [seeks](#) to allay growth and security concerns about China in the Japanese business community, saying the two sides should explore opportunities in emerging industries while warning that although Tokyo has an alliance with Washington, it has a responsibility to maintain stable ties with Beijing under the treaty of peace and friendship between the two sides.

March 3, 2024: [Heightening](#) deterrence capabilities in coordination with other countries in the Indo-Pacific region as China builds up its military strength and North Korea continues launching missiles, the SDF took part in multinational joint exercises 56 times last year, 18 times the figure in 2006 when the Joint Staff Office was founded to manage the three forces.

March 5, 2024: [Speaking](#) at a press conference Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi Yoshimasa says that China's rapidly expanding military power is a "serious concern" for Japan and the international society.

March 6, 2024: Kishida [warns](#) that Japan's defense will be negatively impacted if the country is not allowed to export finished defense equipment developed jointly with Britain and Italy to third nations.

March 6, 2024: *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) against China's planned 7.2% increase in its military budget—4.4 times the size of Japan's proposed defense budget for the next fiscal year---even as the PRC economy faces problems. The editorial describes the Xi administration's attempts to change the status quo by force through unbridled military expansion as absolutely unacceptable.

March 6, 2024: An *Asahi* editorial [urges](#) Beijing to reconsider scrapping the premier's news conference that has always been held on the final day of the legislative sessions, describing the decision as tantamount to abandoning its responsibility as a superpower by shutting down communication with the international community.

March 6, 2024: In an exclusive interview with *China Daily* Chinese Ambassador to Japan Wu [reiterates](#) familiar points: the two nations should “focus on the fundamental interests of the two peoples and the region's need for peace and stability, and earnestly implement the important consensus of their leaders.”

March 7, 2024: Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar [meets](#) counterpart Kamikawa, with the two pledging cooperation in defense and security for the realization of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

March 8, 2024: Japan's trade deficit [halves](#) after a halt in the price of materials. Exports grow 7.6% year on year while imports fall 12.1%.

March 9, 2024: In another indication of warm relations between Japan and Taiwan, Kyushu Railway's Nichinan station has [become](#) the sister station of Taiwan's Rinan station, with the two sharing the same kanji, as do 31 other stations. The Nichinan municipal government plans to hold events such as Taiwan-style night markets to make its citizens feel closer to Taiwan.

March 11, 2024: On the 13th anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake, Japanese students in Taiwan [hold](#) their annual event to thank the Taiwanese people for their generous donations, this year adding thanks for donations to areas hit by the New Year's day quake on the Noto Peninsula.

March 11, 2024: An *Asahi* [editorial](#) takes China to task for its “extremely incoherent” attitude of describing itself as a “staunch force for peace, stability and progress of the world” while failing to take a resolute stance against a war of aggression and threatening neighboring countries with its own military buildup.

March 13, 2024: SDF and US Marine Corps [conduct](#) the annual *Iron Fist* exercise to practice recapturing remote Japanese Islands.

March 13, 2024: Japan's largest employers including Nippon Steel, Toyota, Hitachi, and Toshiba [announce](#) record pay increases on Wednesday, signaling a break from the deflationary mindset that led to the prolonged period of low economic growth known as the “lost decades.”

March 13, 2024: A self-described patriotic blogger [sues](#) Mo Yan, the first Chinese to have won the Nobel Prize in Literature (2012), for “beautifying soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army and insulting Mao Zedong.”

March 15, 2024: LDP and Komeito [agree](#) to allow exports of next-generation fighter jets to be jointly developed with Britain and Italy but for this specific model of fighter jet rather than all internationally co-developed defense equipment.

March 15, 2024: Yasukuni Shrine [picks](#) retired MSDF commander and former Ambassador to Djibouti Otsuka Umio as its chief priest.

March 15, 2024: Zhong Shanshan, said to be China's richest man, is [accused](#) by online nationalists for covertly promoting Japan.

March 18, 2024: Kobe Gakuin University [discloses](#) that professor of Chinese literature and linguists Hu Shuyin has been missing since last summer when he temporarily returned to China.

March 20, 2024: Foreign Minister Kamikawa, aiming to [create](#) an encircling net around China as part of efforts to increase momentum for nuclear disarmament, takes the initiative in creating a group of nations that support negotiations for the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty at a UN meeting.

March 20, 2024: Foreign Ministry Press Secretary Kobayashi Maki [reiterates](#) the Japanese government's grave concern that the tough national security bill passed by Hong Kong lawmakers “will further undermine the confidence in the ‘one country, two systems’ framework.”

March 20, 2024: Japanese Coast Guard [states](#) that a fleet of Chinese ships sailed in the territorial waters of the Diaoyu Islands on March 20.

March 21, 2024: According to government [data](#), Japan's exports rose 7.8% in February, as shipments continued to expand in cars and electrical machinery while its trade deficit sank to 379 billion yen (\$2.5 billion).

March 23, 2024: Japanese government announces [plans](#) to build underground evacuation shelters capable of accommodating residents for about two weeks in times of emergency in remote islands near Taiwan, including Yonaguni and Ishigaki.

March 23, 2024: Kyodo [states](#) that Japan has conducted its first-ever cybersecurity exercise with five Pacific island countries Feb. 18–26.

March 26, 2024: After months of disputes, the Japanese government [approves](#) revised guidelines to its strict defense equipment transfer rules, enabling the export of next-generation fighter jets jointly developed with the UK and Italy under the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP).

March 27, 2024: Air Self-Defense Force [scrambles](#) fighters after a Chinese WZ-7 reconnaissance drone flies over the Sea of Japan for the first time though does not intrude into Japanese territorial airspace.

March 27, 2024: Chinese foreign ministry expresses grave [concern](#) over Japan's latest step away from the pacifist constitution by approving a plan to sell next-generation fighter jets to other countries.

March 27, 2024: *Asahi* [editorializes](#) against the government's decision to lift the nation's export ban on fighter jets which it sees as executed in the absence of public discourse and coming on the heels of the revision of the three strategic documents— the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy and the Defense Buildup Program.

March 29, 2024: *Xinhua* takes [note](#) of the record-high 2024 Japanese defense budget of about \$52.53 billion and its focus on enhancing

the country's counterstrike capabilities and strengthening missile defense systems.

March 30, 2024: *Nikkei* commentator Akita Hiroyuki, referencing the confrontation between Chinese and Philippine vessels in the South China Sea as well as increased maritime pressures against Malaysia and Vietnam and in the East China Sea against Japan, argues that he strategy of making concessions to China on territorial and other sovereignty issues will never work.

March 31, 2024: According to Japan's Coast Guard, two Chinese Coast guard ships [stay](#) in Japanese waters near the contested Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands for more than two days before leaving on the 30th.

March 31, 2024: in response to China's growing naval presence in the South China Sea, Japan [plans](#) to take part in a joint training exercise with the United States and the Philippines.

March 31, 2024: *Nikkei* comments on the new GDF unit that became operational in March with the mission of electronic combat intercepting enemy communications and jamming radar.

April 2, 2024: Japanese government [designates](#) 16 airports and ports in seven prefectures where the SDFs and the coast guard will be granted peacetime use, as part of efforts to boost the country's defenses.

April 2, 2024: With an eye on China, the US and Japanese governments are [working out](#) subsidy rules for strategic goods such as semiconductors, storage batteries and permanent magnets.

April 3, 2024: Japan's industry ministry [approves](#) subsidies up to 590 billion yen (\$3.9 billion) for chip foundry venture Rapidus as Tokyo pushes forward with plans to rebuild the country's chip manufacturing base amid concerns over supply chain security.

April 10, 2024 “Defense industry cooperation between Japan and the United States, as well as with like-minded countries, are extremely important,” Kishida says in an interview with selected foreign media at the Prime Minister's Office.

April 11, 2024: Addressing a joint session of the US congress, Kishida [states](#) that “China's current external stance and military actions present an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge, not only to the peace and security of Japan but to the peace and stability of the international community at large.”

April 14, 2024: Aiming to [reduce](#) their reliance on China for critical minerals, Japan, the US and the Philippines agree to a framework for a stable supply of nickel under which resource-rich countries and high-consumption countries in Europe, Africa and other regions work together to share information and invest in developing critical minerals.

April 15, 2024: *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) in favor of close security cooperation among Japan, the US, and the Philippines to deter China's dangerous actions. It argues that provocative behavior of China Coast Guard vessels is especially reckless and could lead to a military clash.

April 16, 2024: Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, former special adviser to then-prime minister Abe Shinzo speaks of Japan's “China Reckoning,” [noting](#) that policies aimed at bolstering Japan's defense capabilities and expanding its alliance networks have become broadly popular.

April 16, 2024: Foreign Minister Kamikawa [announces](#) the publication of Japan's 67th Diplomatic Bluebook which, she says, focuses on the rule of law and human dignity, taking into account the situations in Ukraine and the Middle East.

April 18, 2024: *Global Times* [describes](#) Japan's latest Diplomatic Blue Book as following the cliché of smears against China by playing up the so-called China threat and interfering in China's internal affairs.

April 21, 2024: In his capacity as prime minister, Kishida [donates](#) ritual *masakaki* sprigs to the Yasukuni Shrine on the first day of its spring festival, but does not attend himself.

April 23, 2024: Asia University [discloses](#) that Professor Fan Yuntao, a Chinese national who specializes in international law and political science, has been unreachable since returning to China in February 2023 on leave.

April 24, 2024: Descendants of 18 Chinese “comfort women” who were sexually exploited by Japanese soldiers during World War II file [lawsuits](#) in the Shanxi High People's Court against the Japanese government.

April 24, 2024: Bloomberg [reports](#) that Japanese brands are poised to take advantage of electric-vehicle demand in North America as US protectionism and security fears stymie the overseas expansion of Chinese names like BYD and SAIC.

April 25, 2024: *China Military Online* [accuses](#) Japan of “false narratives.”

April 25, 2024: According to a survey conducted by *Yomiuri* in February and March, 84% of respondents feel that Japan is in a threatening security environment. Respondents who considered China a threat rose to 91%, up five percentage points from last year's survey.

April 26, 2024: Chinese media [describe](#) Japanese companies and industry groups as optimistic about the potential of the Chinese market for new opportunities, particularly its new-energy vehicle industry, robotics, health care, and eldercare.

April 27, 2024: An environmental survey of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and the surrounding waters is [conducted](#) by the municipal government in Ishigaki, Okinawa Prefecture, was forced to halt due to a Chinese Coast Guard vessel approaching within 1 kilometer.

April 27, 2024: *Asahi* [editorializes](#) that Japan-China ties are being hurt by the disappearances of Chinese scholars Fan Yuntao and Hu Shiyun deeming the Chinese foreign ministry's response that it “did not have a grasp of the situation” unacceptable.

April 28, 2024: China [lodges](#) solemn representations to Japan after five Japanese lawmakers reportedly trespassed into waters near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands for a maritime inspection.

April 29, 2024: Foreign Minister Kamikawa begins a [visit](#) to five countries in Africa and Asia (Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, and Nepal) to strengthen bilateral ties as China increases its presence in these regions.

April 29, 2024: Japan's seafood exports to China in fiscal 2023 [fall](#) 57% due to China's ban, reaching their lowest level since comparable data became available in fiscal 1988.

May 1, 2024: On April 29, a day after the Chinese government lodges a protest against Japanese lawmakers including former Defense Minister Inada Tomomi allegedly landing on one of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, the Shanghai Maritime Safety Administration declared an area of the East China Sea off limits to traffic from May 1-9 for military activities, and on May 1 the PRC's newest aircraft carrier, the *Fujian*, began its first sea trials.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

BUSINESS AS PLANNED AMID DOMESTIC CHALLENGES

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Following major turning points and breakthroughs of 2023, the start of 2024 has been steady, coordinated, and ordinary. In contrast to the highs and lows of the past five years, the rhythm of the relationship between Korea and Japan has settled to a welcome tone of “business as usual,” and business as planned. Both Prime Minister Kishida Fumio and President Yoon Suk Yeol faced serious challenges to their leadership with record low approval ratings and the conservative People Power Party’s defeat in Korea’s parliamentary elections. But for now, Japan-Korea relations are thriving as they follow through on commitments made at the Camp David summit. Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo continued to tick off their laundry list of promised deliverables from that summit. While they might no longer be meeting at the breathtaking pace of a trilateral meeting every 3.5 days, the three partners continued to meet almost bi-weekly at all levels, including the Cabinet level.

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Economic Security and Institutionalized Trilateralism

Trilateral cooperation [started](#) strong with the inaugural meeting of the Trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue on Jan. 5 in Washington, DC. According to the press release, this new assistant-secretary level dialogue initiated “a new chapter in our countries' partnership” and represented an “important step” to strengthen and closely align their policies globally, especially in coordinating their Indo-Pacific policies. Furthermore, the three sides reiterated their commitment to continue the dialogue and agreed to hold it annually. This solidified the new trilateral—[highlighted](#) prominently in the Camp David statement—as an important entry in an expanding calendar of regular trilaterals.



Figure 1 South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul meets with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa on the margins of the G20 ministers meeting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on Feb. 22, 2024 in this pool photo released by the Associated Press. Photo: Yonhap

On Feb. 22, the first trilateral foreign minister meeting—under new South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul—[took](#) place on the sidelines of the G20 foreign ministers meeting in Brazil. The three top diplomats highlighted the importance of trilateral cooperation for dealing with Russia and North Korea, as well as Taiwan and Gaza. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken shared that they have “upheld commitments to consult with each other” and have done so “expeditiously” while coordinating responses whenever there is a “shared security challenge.” Foreign Minister Cho pointed out the “symbolic milestone” of the meeting, which took place on the 30th anniversary of the first trilateral in 1994. Not only was this their first trilateral in South America, he said the meeting was also “emblematic” of their global outreach and their

commitment to meet whenever and wherever. Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko reiterated the importance of “strategic coordination” on challenges to the free and open international order.

In late February, the first trilateral Commerce and Industry Export Control Dialogue [took](#) place in Tokyo. This director-level dialogue is [aimed](#) at aligning export controls for critical and emerging technologies, coordinating Russia controls, and cooperating on outreach to Southeast Asian countries. Thea Rozman Kendler, US assistant secretary of Commerce for Export Administration, said the trilateral relationship creates a “trusted ecosystem” that allows for emerging technologies to develop safely. This new dialogue promises to be an important trilateral channel to coordinate dual-use export controls and prevent “key and new technologies” from falling into the wrong hands.

In mid-March, the three continued discussions on economic security when they [held](#) the third trilateral economic security dialogue in Busan, South Korea. This dialogue precedes the Camp David summit—the first meeting was in February 2023—and has long been a shared interest for the three partners, especially in diversifying away from China. The Busan meeting focused on improving cooperation in critical mineral supply chains, emerging technologies, and artificial intelligence governance. While a tangible outcome is still in the works, they mentioned continuing cooperation through the Minerals Security Partnership (MSP) and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. South Korea and Japan are both members of the US-led MSP, which [held](#) a principals' meeting in Toronto on March 3 and discussed establishing a MSP Forum and boosting support for 23 MSP projects in the works to diversify critical mineral supply chains.

On March 29, the 2nd Trilateral Diplomatic Working Group Meeting on North Korean Cyber Threats was [held](#) in Washington to continue discussion on trilateral coordination to disrupt North Korean cyber activities and IT workers that generates revenue to support its WMD and ballistic missile programs. They also shared concerns of a new growing trend of North Korean IT workers using fraudulent IDs to win contracts from global IT companies.

Two days earlier, the US and South Korea [coordinated](#) sanctions against these IT workers

by sanctioning two companies related to Chinyong Information Technology Cooperation Company (tied to North Korea's Ministry of Peoples' Armed Forces), which are involved in dispatching and operations of these IT workers abroad. They sanctioned one individual (Jon Yon Gun) who was a team-lead for one of the new sanctioned companies, the UAE-based Pioneer Bencont Star Real Estate company. A day before, on March 26, three Japanese government agencies jointly [released](#) a public statement warning domestic companies about contracting North Korean IT workers who are posing as Japanese nationals. A senior Japanese official confirmed there have been cases in Japan and the "threat is increasing."

A week later, the three partners once again partnered to discuss the North Korean threat, but this time on the international stage. They [co-hosted](#) an informal UN Security Council meeting (also known as an Arria formula meeting) on April 4, marking the first such meeting to discuss this issue. At the meeting, their three top representatives to the UN highlighted the challenges and danger of North Korea's cyber activities, including a warning from South Korean Ambassador Hwang Joon-kook that over 50 countries have already been directly affected. It is important to remember that South Korea is currently [serving](#) as a nonpermanent member of the UNSC for the 2024-2025 term, along with the US (permanent) and Japan (nonpermanent, ending 2024). With Russian and Chinese blockage of new UNSC resolutions and the Russian [veto](#) of the UN Panel of Experts' mandate in late March, this year represents a unique opportunity for the three partners to mobilize action at the UN, possibly at the UN General Assembly.

In mid-April, the three partners ticked off another promised deliverable from the Camp David summit when the first Trilateral Korea-US-Japan Finance Ministers Meeting was [held](#) in Washington. During the meeting they issued a rare warning when they acknowledged "serious concerns" over the "sharp depreciation" of the Korean won and Japanese yen. They also agreed to work together to mobilize financing for resilient supply chains, including through the new [Partnership for Resilient and Inclusive Supply-chain Enhancement](#) (RISE), a \$50 million Japan-World Bank initiative, with support by Korea and others, to "help emerging markets and developing countries (EMDCs)" to play a bigger role in the midstream and

downstream in supply chain of clean energy products. This will help diversify the global mineral supply chains. Lastly, while not naming China, they pointed to "non-market economic practices of other countries, including economic coercion" as an important point of cooperation.

Bilateral Friendship and New Faces

The bilateral Korea-Japan relationship continues to grow and mature in the second year after reconciliation. Year-end tourism data that came out in January showed that the neighbors have become each other's largest source of tourism, with South Koreans [making](#) up 28% (6.95 million) of Japan's 25.06 million tourists in 2023, and Japanese [totaling](#) 21% (2.32 million) of 11 million tourists in Korea. People-to-people ties are often the first victim of bilateral downturns, but the positive data shows that this important element of bilateral ties is back on track.



Figure 2 Tourists arrive at Kansai International Airport in Osaka. Photo by Arisa Moriyama

As noted in the previous issue, a shuffle among top diplomatic posts in Korea and Japan in the latter half of 2023 brought new characters into the mix for the next stage of the relationship—consolidation, institutionalization, and implementation. South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul finally [met](#) his counterpart, Kamikawa Yoko, on the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Brazil on Feb. 21. This meeting took place a day before the trilateral foreign minister summit described above.

Aside from expected talking points on fostering a future-oriented bilateral relationship, Cho also suggested communicating closely on Japan-North Korea relations. This alludes to [recent comments](#) by Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio to restart dialogue with North Korea "without any preconditions" and to resolve the abduction issue, aiming for the first Japan-North Korea summit in 20 years. The outreach was

initially received positively by Pyongyang, with Kim Yo Jong, the influential sister of Kim Jong Un [commenting](#) that it was a positive thing, before being flatly [ruled](#) out by the North a month later. Kishida's comments might have caused consternation in Seoul and Washington over a potential breach in trilateral policy coordination.

Washington reportedly [told](#) its Japanese counterparts that while it welcomed any engagement between Japan and North Korea—something it has tried to no avail under the Biden administration—it clarified that this should be done under the condition that Tokyo smoothed over issues with Seoul first. Cho's comments in his bilateral meeting in Brazil reflect similar concerns from the Yoon government, though [comments](#) a month later from a senior South Korean government official seemed to indicate that this has been ironed out. Regardless of future developments on Japan-North Korea reconciliation, this would continue to test trilateral policy coordination as both Japan and South Korea have interests that are not identical in diplomacy with the North.

When it comes to coordination and the nitty-gritty of diplomacy, individuals matter, and aside from the leader and the top diplomat, the next most important person is arguably the ambassador. The ambassador is often the first person to be summoned when the host country publicly expresses disapproval and is also the key person managing important communications with the host country while keeping pulse of the situation on the ground. Therefore, it has been imperative that the ambassador in both Tokyo and Seoul have the wherewithal to handle this complex and sensitive relationship. This post—Japanese ambassador to South Korea and South Korean ambassador to Japan—arguably ranks in the top three in terms of diplomatic importance for both countries, behind the US and China.

In early April, news emerged that there will be a new Japanese ambassador in Seoul. *Kyodo News* [reported](#) that Mizushima Koichi, Japan's ambassador to Israel since 2021, has been appointed to replace Aiboshi Koichi as the new top envoy to Seoul. Both were coincidentally ambassadors to Israel prior to their Seoul assignment, and both come to the job with experience at the embassy in Seoul. Furthermore, Mizushima will come into his new position with useful experience under his belt, having served in Seoul between 2017 and 2019, some of the most difficult years in the bilateral relationship in

recent memory. By tapping a seasoned veteran for this post, Tokyo has the right personnel to smooth over any potential bilateral issues.

In South Korea, the results of the 22nd general election on April 10 [led](#) to the creation of a new class of foreign policy experts and diplomats in the new National Assembly, including Wi Sung-rak, former South Korean ambassador to Russia, Kim Gunn, former special representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs, and Kim Joon-hyung, former chancellor of the Korea National Diplomatic Academy. Their expertise, which is dispersed across both sides of the aisle, would likely make them voices in South Korean foreign policymaking as the last remaining years of Yoon's single term are locked in with an emboldened opposition majority.

Domestic Politics and Steady Signals from the Top

Having regular meetings on a variety of issues is a good sign and healthy indicator of a cooperative relationship. Equally important is for the top leadership to publicly reaffirm the continuity of its policy. This is important for internal and external audiences, especially at times of domestic unpopularity, to signal that policy is here to stay, as well as for optics—showing that a big foreign policy event like summit meetings is not just a photo-op or empty statement.

In his second March First Independence Movement Day speech—a symbolic day for Korean independence from Japan—President Yoon Suk Yeol again [used](#) this platform and opportunity to signal that the two countries are no longer enemies. He sought to convey the message that Korea and Japan have become partners with “common interests” of global peace and prosperity that are now working toward a “new world” built upon “mutual understanding and empathy.” He also emphasized how the two are making strides in building a “closer partnership in industry, finance and cutting-edge technologies,” and called out the 60th anniversary of normalization next year as an opportunity to take the relationship to an even higher level.

South Korean presidents have typically approached their March First Independence Movement Day speech as an occasion to highlight and commemorate the history of Korean resistance to Japan's colonial rule as a way of strengthening group cohesion among

Koreans. Two things are notable about this year's [speech](#). First, President Yoon did not mention the forced labor issue—which was at the center of bilateral disputes over history until recently—for the second consecutive year. Second, he spoke about Korean unification as an effort toward expanding universal values such as freedom and human rights for North Koreans who live under the totalitarian regime. Japanese media outlets such as [Yomiuri Shimbun](#) welcomed Yoon's speech. In South Korea, some, mostly from the opposition, [criticized](#) the speech for lacking reflections on history and urged him to “discontinue humiliating diplomacy with Japan.” Others [countered](#) that the spirit of the March First Independence Movement does not necessarily mean South Korea should take an “anti-Japan” position today.



Figure 3 President Yoon Suk Yeol of South Korea casting his early vote for the parliamentary election, in Busan. Photo: Yonhap

To his credit, President Yoon has been steadfast since the beginning of his presidency in his desire—in some people's eyes, obstinacy—to build a better relationship with Japan, even when it was a low-reward, unpopular decision. In the first months of 2024, it was the political will and efforts of the governments in Seoul and Tokyo that disagreements over history issues would not be turned into bigger diplomatic conflicts. Unsurprisingly, they expressed disapproval of the other's position on the history issues even as they tried to manage bilateral relations. Regarding the forced labor issue, in January, a South Korean Supreme Court [upheld](#) an appellate court's ruling that ordered Nippon Steel Corp. to provide compensation for the family of a South Korean wartime labor victim. In response, the Japanese Foreign Ministry [said](#) it was “extremely regrettable and totally unacceptable.” Later that month, the South Korean Supreme Court [upheld](#) lower court decisions that ordered Nachi-

Fujikoshi Corp. to provide compensation for wartime labor victims. The Japanese government [called](#) the ruling “extremely regrettable and totally unacceptable.” During a TV interview, President Yoon [stated](#) that “such similar rulings would continue to come out (in ongoing cases) and [he] wishes to see cooperation between businesspeople of the two countries who wish to improve relations between Korea and Japan.”

In late January, in [response](#) to Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa's annual Parliament speech on the government's foreign policy objectives, South Korea [said](#) it “strongly protests against the Japanese government's repeated unfair territorial claims over Dokdo.” On Feb. 22, as Japan's Shimane Prefecture [held](#) the annual “Takeshima Day” with participation by a Cabinet Office parliamentary vice minister, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned Mibae Taisuke, the deputy chief of mission at the Japanese embassy in Seoul to lodge a protest. In March, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs [summoned](#) Japanese Ambassador to South Korea Aiboshi to [protest](#) historical and territorial-related revisions in middle school textbooks. In April the South Korean government [protested](#) Japan's “unjust claims over Dokdo” in its Diplomatic Bluebook.

With the results of the 22nd general election in South Korea on April 10 being unfavorable for the ruling People Power Party, the reconciliation President Yoon spoke about in his March First Independence Movement Day speech possible will likely require a lot more political capital. In South Korea, the People Power Party's defeat in parliamentary elections was a big blow to Yoon, which led to the resignation of key officials of his government including Prime Minister Han Duck-soo. In the nation's highest turnout since 1992—67 %—South Korean voters expressed dissatisfaction with Yoon's performance, especially on the economy and matters of their livelihood. The opposition Democratic Party, which won a majority of 175 seats in the National Assembly, has been critical of Yoon's foreign policy, including his Japan policy. But we do not expect an abrupt change in South Korea's foreign policy in the remaining years of Yoon's presidency.



Figure 4 Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida walks past Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno at the end of a news conference at the prime minister's office in Tokyo, Japan, 13 Dec 2023. Photo: Reuters

Prime Minister Kishida's low approval rating has created uncertainty over his political future as he faced challenges of political reform amid a slush funds scandal that negatively impacted public trust in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). According to a Kyodo News [poll](#) on April 15, Kishida's approval rating was as low as 23.8%, remaining in the 20% range for months now. In April, the LDP lost three seats in House of Representatives by-elections, which many [view](#) as a "harsh indictment" of the party. Amid the opposition's demand for dissolving the Lower House, Kishida [said](#) that he had no intention to do so, even while acknowledging the political funds scandal led to the defeat. Kishida has apologized for the scandal, promising to discontinue such fundraising parties. The LDP took disciplinary action toward 39 members involved in the scandal, which [was](#) most extensive since 2005. However, according to [Yomiuri Shimbun](#)'s polling in late April, 69% of respondents were not convinced by such measures.

North Korea and Beyond Security

North Korea wasted no time in launching its first provocation of the year when it launched a solid-fuel intermediate-range ballistic missile carrying a hypersonic warhead into the sea between Korea and Japan on Jan. 14. As part of a new norm, the US, Korea, and Japan [responded](#) the day after with a three-day trilateral naval exercise involving a US aircraft carrier to show a combined posture against North Korea. The three partners will continue to host joint exercises together for the next few months, part of the new multi-year joint exercise plan created by the Camp David summit. This includes a naval

exercise in [mid-April](#) involving another US aircraft carrier conducting anti-submarine warfare drills and maritime interdiction exercises.

In a speech in late January, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [called](#) the security dimension the "source of propulsion" for pulling the three partners together. The security aspect of the trilateral relationship, especially in dealing with the common North Korean threat—something we have emphasized repeatedly in previous issues—has been the guide for trilateral cooperation in the past three years. Even as the partnership expands to other nonsecurity domains, security will likely continue to gird the relationship as long as the threat from Kim Jong Un remains.

In that same speech, Sullivan rightly pointed out that the relationship has expanded beyond security and beyond the Korean Peninsula, to issues like economic coercion and technology and to places like Ukraine. He called out the "huge amount of complementary capacity" across economics, technology, and national security in the three countries, as well as shared values and global reach. Furthermore, he reminded the audience that trilateral cooperation remains a "work in progress" and listed some homework, including aligning ODA budgets for greater impact in the developing world. His most memorable line of the speech came when he boldly called the trilateral US-Korea-Japan trilateral partnership a "vision for the world."

Looking Ahead

If 2022 and 2023 were characterized by North Korean provocations that brought about unprecedented trilateral military cooperation, 2024 seems likely [headed](#) the same way because of North Korean tendencies to ramp up provocations during a US presidential election year.

Trilateral cooperation will continue to go strong as they expand the range of issues they try to coordinate and discuss on a global scale. In March, press reports [emerged](#) of preparations for a trilateral leaders' meeting on the sidelines of the NATO summit in July. According to a diplomatic source, the three leaders are expected to discuss Russia, defense cooperation, Chinese economic coercion, and the North Korean threat, including cybersecurity. An expanded agenda has

become normalized—initial consultations three years ago focused primarily on North Korea. Their trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the 2022 Madrid Summit was fittingly their first trilateral, and if the July NATO meeting in Washington takes place, it would be their fifth trilateral in three years.

Following his State Visit to Washington, Prime Minister Kishida [held](#) a telephone call with President Yoon to brief him on the outcomes of his recent meetings. This is a good sign that the two leaders are committed to close coordination at the highest level.

Looking ahead to 2025, which would be the 60th anniversary of the normalization of Korea–Japan relations, some South Korean officials have [signaled](#) expectations that the two leaders would issue some sort of joint statement to cement “future-oriented commitments” for the relationship. We expect that Seoul and Tokyo’s political commitment to further improving bilateral relations will continue. But the key factor to watch will be these neighbors’ domestic political dynamics.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2024

Jan. 4, 2024: Kurt Campbell, NSC Coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs, [holds](#) a video conference with Japanese and South Korean counterparts to discuss North Korea’s possible arms transfer to Russia and the need for trilateral cooperation.

Jan. 5, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korea [hold](#) the inaugural Trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue in Washington, DC, an outcome of the 2023 Camp David Summit, and release a [Joint Statement](#).

Jan. 5, 2024: South Korean Minister of Foreign Ministers Park Jin [holds](#) call with Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko to discuss the bilateral relationship and to [express](#) condolences for Japan’s recent earthquake.

Jan. 11, 2024: South Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs [announces](#) the country will deliver humanitarian assistance worth \$3 million to Japan to support recovery from the earthquake in Ishikawa.

Jan. 11, 2024: South Korean Supreme Court [upholds](#) appellate court’s ruling that orders Nippon Steel Corp. to provide compensation for the family of a South Korean wartime labor victim. The Japanese Foreign Ministry [says](#) this is “extremely regrettable and totally unacceptable.”

Jan. 11, 2024: 30th annual meeting between Japan’s Keidanren and South Korea’s Federation of Korean Industries (FKI) [takes](#) place in Tokyo.

Jan. 15, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korea [launch](#) a three-day joint naval exercise to strengthen “deterrence and response capabilities” in response to North Korea and to respond to “maritime security threats.”

Jan. 17, 2024: Japan’s National Tourism Organization [reports](#) 25.06 million foreign visitors in 2023, with South Korean tourists accounting for the largest percentage at 28% (or 6.95 million).

Jan. 17, 2024: South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Kim Gunn and Japanese Director-General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Namazu Hiroyuki [meet](#) to discuss North Korea.

Jan. 18, 2024: US Senior Official for the DPRK Jung Pak [meets](#) with Japanese and South Korean counterparts in Seoul for the Trilateral Special Representative [consultations](#) on North Korea.

Jan. 18, 2024: US, Japanese, and South Korean National Security Advisors [release](#) a statement congratulating the University of Chicago, University of Tokyo, and Seoul National University’s [signing](#) of an MOU to [cooperate](#) on quantum science and technologies.

Jan. 21, 2024: Korea Trade Commission [announces](#) that anti-dumping duties placed on Japanese, Spanish, and Indian stainless steel bars will be [lifted](#) from January 22, 2024.

Jan. 22, 2024: South Korean President Yoon [agrees](#) to extend the ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission’ [until](#) May 2025 to investigate human rights abuses connected to previous military governments including cases during Japan’s occupation of South Korea.

Jan. 23, 2024: Newly appointed South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul [holds](#) a phone call with Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa to [discuss](#) the bilateral relationship, US-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation, and North Korea.

Jan. 25, 2024: South Korean Supreme Court [upholds](#) lower court decisions that order Nachi-Fujikoshi Corp. to provide compensation for wartime labor victims. The Japanese government [called](#) the ruling “extremely regrettable and totally unacceptable.”

Jan. 28, 2024: Data from the Korea Customs Service [shows](#) South Korea’s imports of Japanese fish and shellfish in 2023 decreased by 12.8% on-year, the biggest decline since 2012.

Jan. 29, 2024: Following North Korea’s submarine-launched cruise missile (SLCM) [test](#), a US Department of Defense spokesperson [says](#) the US will continue to cooperate with South Korea and Japan on North Korea’s threats.

Jan. 30, 2024: In [response](#) to Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa’s annual Parliament speech on the government’s foreign policy, South Korea [says](#) it “strongly protests against the Japanese

government's repeated unfair territorial claims over Dokdo.”

Jan. 30, 2024: Korea Tourism Organization [reports](#) over 11 million foreign visitors in 2023, with Japanese tourists accounting for the largest number (2.32 million).

Jan. 31, 2024: US National Security Advisor Sullivan [speaks](#) at an [event](#) on “The Future of US-China Relations,” calling the US-Japan-ROK partnership a “vision for the world.”

Feb. 1, 2024: Japanese local government [completes](#) removal of a memorial stone, located in Gunma Prefecture, for South Korean wartime labor victims. The Korean government previously [stated](#) they hope the issue is “resolved in a way that does not undermine” bilateral relations.

Feb. 1, 2024: Seoul High Court [issues](#) a retrial order to the Seoul Central District Court, which had dismissed a damages suit in June 2021 against 16 Japanese companies by 85 South Korean forced labor victims and their families because the court had ruled they did not have litigation rights because of the 1965 normalization agreement.

Feb. 1, 2024: US, South Korean, and Japanese officials meet on the sidelines of the ASEAN-ROK Digital Ministers' Meeting in Singapore to [discuss](#) digital cooperation.

Feb. 8, 2024: Following Korean Supreme Court rulings upholding lower court decisions that order Japanese firms to compensate wartime labor victims, President Yoon [states](#) he “wish[es] to see cooperation between business people of the two countries” on the issue to improve bilateral ties.

Feb. 9, 2024: South Korean Unification Minister Kim Yung-ho [says](#) when the government questions North Korean defectors that have been abducted about their nationality, they will add Japan to the list of potential responses and share information with the Japanese government.

Feb. 14, 2024: South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs [says](#) Japan cannot unilaterally develop the continental shelf in the East China Sea without Korea's consent, even if the bilateral Korea-Japan Continental Shelf Agreement expires in June 2028.

Feb. 15, 2024: Gwangju District Court [rules](#) in favor of 15 families of South Korean wartime

labor victims and orders Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Ltd. to provide compensation.

Feb. 16, 2024: 17th Japan-ROK Consultation on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Issues is [held](#) in Tokyo.

Feb. 18, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korea release a [Joint Statement](#) ‘Commemorating the Ten Year Anniversary of the UN Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.’

Feb. 20, 2024: Japan's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism and South Korea's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport [hold](#) their 12th high-level meeting on transportation, marking the first such meeting in eight years.

Feb. 20, 2024: South Korea's Ministry of National Defense [expands](#) the scope of its examination into the December 2023 recalled troop education material that listed Dokdo as disputed territory.

Feb. 20, 2024: Family of a South Korean wartime labor victim [withdraws](#) compensation of 60 million won (about \$44,000) from Hitachi Zosen Corp., marking the first time that a wartime labor victim accepts a Japanese company's compensation. In response, the Japanese government summoned Korean Ambassador to Japan Yun Duk-min to [protest](#).

Feb. 21, 2024: South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Cho Tae-yul meets with Japanese counterpart in Brazil on the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting, [marking](#) their first in-person meeting since Cho's appointment.

Feb. 22, 2024: US Secretary of State Blinken, Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa, and South Korean Foreign Minister Cho [hold](#) a trilateral [meeting](#) on the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

Feb. 22, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korea [hold](#) their first director-level Commerce and Industry Export Control Dialogue in Tokyo.

Feb. 22, 2024: Japan's Shimane Prefecture [holds](#) annual “Takeshima Day” with participation by a Cabinet Office parliamentary vice minister. The South Korean ministry of foreign affairs summoned Mibae Taisuke, deputy chief of mission at the Japanese embassy in Seoul, to lodge a protest.

Feb. 27, 2024: US Secretary of State Gina Raimondo meets South Korean Minister of Trade, Industry and Energy Ahn Dukgeun during which both sides [discuss](#) planning for the inaugural Trilateral Commerce/Industry Ministerial Meeting.

March 1, 2024: South Korean President Yoon [delivers](#) a [speech](#) to mark the March First Independence Movement Day, noting South Korea and Japan can “usher in a new and brighter future” for the bilateral relationship by cooperating and working to resolve historical challenges.

March 8, 2024: South Korean Deputy Finance Minister Choi Ji-young and Japanese Vice Finance Minister Masato Kanda [meet](#) in Tokyo for the second Finance Deputies’ Dialogue and [agree](#) to hold the next meeting in South Korea.

March 13, 2024: A South Korean government official reportedly [anticipates](#) South Korean and Japanese leaders to issue a joint statement “with future-oriented commitments” next year in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the bilateral relationship.

March 13, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korean national security officials convene in Busan to [hold](#) their third economic dialogue and discuss cooperation in areas such as emerging technologies and supply chains.

March 14, 2024: South Korean Ministry of Unification [announce](#) new plans to cooperate with the US and Japan to address the issue of detainees, abductees and prisoners of war (POWs) in North Korea.

March 22, 2024: South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs [summons](#) Japanese Ambassador Aiboshi to [protest](#) historical and territorial related revisions in their middle school textbooks.

March 26, 2024: Japan and South Korea [sign](#) a memorandum of cooperation to collaborate in developing satellite navigation systems.

March 27, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korean chiefs of defense [meet](#) virtually ahead of their in-person meeting this summer to discuss security issues including North Korea.

March 29, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korea [hold](#) their [second](#) ‘Trilateral Diplomacy Working Group for Foreign Ministry Cooperation on North Korea’s Cyber Threats.’

March 30, 2024: Seoul Central District Court [holds](#) a hearing on compensation lawsuits filed against Japanese companies, Nippon Steel Corp. and JX Metals Corp., by families of wartime labor victims, thereby resuming court proceedings for the first time in over two years.

March 31, 2024: Japanese press reports the US is considering a US-Japan-ROK trilateral leaders’ summit in July on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Washington, DC.

April 4, 2024: US, Japan and South Korea [co-host](#) an informal UN Security Council meeting to highlight the North Korean cyber threat.

April 9, 2024: Japanese Government [appoints](#) Koichi Mizushima as Ambassador to South Korea.

April 12, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korea [conclude](#) two-day naval exercise to strengthen response capabilities against the North.

April 16, 2024: South Korean government [protests](#) Japan’s “unjust claims over Dokdo” in its Diplomatic Bluebook.

April 17, 2024: South Korean President Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida [hold](#) a phone call to [discuss](#) bilateral and US-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation as well as Kishida’s visit to Washington, DC.

April 17, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korean financial ministers [hold](#) their inaugural ministerial [meeting](#) as a follow up to the 2023 Camp David Summit.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

“MARCH MADNESS” IN MOSCOW AND BEYOND . . .

YU BIN, WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY

The concert hall massacre near Moscow on March 22 was a source of shock and awe for Russia and the world. The incident, which resulted in the deaths of [144 people and 551 wounded](#), was the largest since the [2003 Beslan school siege](#) (where more than 330 hostages died). Its timing cast a long shadow over major developments in the first few months of 2024, particularly the fifth term of President Vladimir Putin, who won [87.28%](#) of the vote just five days prior. It also made any effort to end the two-year Ukraine war more difficult, if not impossible. As a result, much of China’s mediation 2.0 (March 2–12) was in parking mode. The Sino-Russian strategic partnership, too, was tested by two different priorities: Moscow’s need for more security coordination on one hand and China’s interest in stability in the bilateral, regional, and global domains on the other. Whatever the outcome, the stage was set for more dynamic interactions between the two large powers in the months ahead.

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Normal Relations in Abnormal Times

Russia-China interaction was in “[high-tempo](#)” mode at the onset of 2024, as both sides adjusted to the new norm of a two-year war and persistent, albeit low-yield, peace efforts by China.

On Jan. 10, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov initiated a phone conversation with Chinese counterpart Wang Yi. Several “[priority items on the international agenda](#)” were discussed, including the Ukraine war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Korea, and the BRICS issues. In the age of “global geopolitical instability,” Lavrov and Wang noticed the “importance of Russian-Chinese strategic interactions” for “Eurasian security.”

2024 happened to be the 75th anniversary of the Sino-Russian/Soviet diplomatic relations and the commencement of the China-Russia Years of Culture (2024-25). For this, both sides were willing to enhance diplomatic coordination and high-level exchanges as they reviewed the [schedule](#) of these activities.

Beyond this, [Wang](#) reportedly said that “China firmly believes that Russia will be able to successfully complete its important domestic political agenda, and maintain national stability and development.” Lavrov, in turn, told Wang that “Russia firmly adheres to the one-China principle” when Taiwan’s 2024 presidential election was just 72 hours away and a high likelihood that DPP’s pro-independent candidate Lai Ching-te would win. Immediately after Lai’s victory, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman [Maria Zakharova](#) reiterated Russia’s “principled position” on the Taiwan issue.

A key issue in the Lavrov-Wang phone conversation was coordinating BRICS, which is chaired by Russia for 2024. In 2023, the group doubled its ranks by accepting [five new members](#) (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, and Ethiopia) and more than 30 countries indicated interest in joining. Formed in 2006, BRICS has grown from a loose concept, coined by then Goldman Sachs Asset Management chairman Jim O’Neill for foreign investment strategies, into a thriving intergovernmental forum primarily for the Global South. Its more diverse matrix, however, means a more complex and challenging situation for internal cohesion and growing geopolitical constraints. Already the

West had imposed heavy sanctions against some BRICS states (Russia and Iran) while becoming increasingly hostile toward the BRICS’ economic heavyweight (China). An enlarged BRICS would have to navigate between at least three vastly different sets of interests and goals: Moscow’s anti-West stance, India’s growing ties with the [US-led Indo-Pacific strategic framework](#), and China’s “[Community of Shared Future for Mankind](#)” which aims to still work with the existing liberal international order.

Enter Dragon’s Year

February kicked off the Year of the Dragon, which is one of the 12 Chinese zodiac signs. The only imaginary animal symbol for the Chinese Lunar calendar, the [dragon](#) is anticipated to bring auspicious opportunities and exciting advancements for all. In his “[extensive telephone conversation](#)” with President Xi Jinping on the Chinese New Year’s Eve, Russian President [Putin](#) noted that the dragon represents wisdom and strength in Chinese culture (the Kremlin [readout](#) did not mention this).

The two heads of state discussed a range of global, regional, and bilateral issues, including the BRICS, SCO, Ukraine, and Israeli-Palistine conflicts. Satisfied with the Russia-China partnership, both vowed to work together for the 75th anniversary of Sino-Russian/Soviet diplomatic ties and the “Years of Cultural Exchanges” (2024-25) between the two nations. They “[specifically stressed](#) that close Russia-China interaction is an important stabilizing factor in world affairs.”

Putin reiterated Russia’s “one-China principle” regarding Taiwan. For Xi, the two sides should work hard to explore new areas of cooperation while maintaining existing production chains. Meanwhile, cultural/humanitarian exchanges needed to be both practical and sincere, leading to enduring people-to-people connections ([连民心、接地气、有温度](#)). The explosive growth of Chinese consumer products, particularly automobiles, in Russia following massive Western economic sanctions required both constant management and societal acceptance.

The Kremlin readout was brief about the Putin-Xi “extensive” phone talks. Seventeen hours later, the Kremlin released the full text of Putin’s interview with US conservative political commentator [Tucker Carlson](#). Much of the two-

hour interview was about Russia's long and bitter history with the West, as well as the "sources" of the Ukraine conflict. Putin respectfully disagreed with Carlson's "China threat" narrative also held by conservatives in America. Russia is used to coexisting with China, Putin remarked as he responded to Carlson's claim that China was increasingly dominating the BRICS. "You cannot choose neighbors," continued Putin. China's foreign policy, however, "is not aggressive. Its idea is to always look for compromise." And the US was "hurting itself" by limiting cooperation with China, according to Putin.

The Carlson interview was released on Chinese New Eve, when downtown Moscow kicked off a 10-day celebration (Feb. 9-18) featuring more than 300 separate events/shows as part of the Years of Culture of Russia and China in 2024-25. Chinese New Year became more popular among Russians despite the fact that there is not a Chinatown in Moscow, or in St. Petersburg, or anywhere else in Russia. Unlike almost any big city in the world, there are no "other" ethnic enclaves in Russian cities. The "[broad celebration](#)" of the 2024 Chinese New Year in Moscow was the first ever organized by Moscow's authorities. Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, whose [250-page doctoral thesis](#) in Moscow's People's Friendship University was about Chinese New Year celebrations, joined Chinese Ambassador to Russia Zhang Hanhui in launching the 10-day festivity.



Figure 1 Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman [Maria Zakharova](#) and Chinese Ambassador to Russia Zhang Hanhui gesture during the celebrations of Chinese Lunar New Year's Eve, Feb. 9, 2024 in Moscow. Photo: Contributor/Getty Images



Figure 2 This photo taken on February 9, 2024 shows Chinese Lunar New Year decorations on a street in Moscow, Russia. Photo: Xinhua/Bai Xueqi

The official promotion of the 2024 Year of the Dragon in Russia—shortly after two Russian New Year celebrations on Jan. 1 and 14—may add more elements of normalcy for Russians during a [state of war de jure](#) with the "collective West." Beyond this, there were positive signs for the Russians at the onset of the Dragon Year. In 2023, Russia's GDP increased by [3.6%](#), a sharp turnaround from the 1.2% loss in 2022 and outpacing the [0.5%](#) growth of the EU. Meanwhile, Russia-China trade in 2023 hit a record [\\$240 billion](#), a 26.3% increase from a year earlier.

MSC 2024: Wang Engaging the "Collective West"

The strategic town of Afidiivka in Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine was taken by the Russian forces on Feb. 17, 2024, after long and costly ground operations since October 2023 ("...a lot of blood has been shed" according to the [Russian account](#)). On the same day, Chinese Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#) said in his speech at the annual Munich Security Conference (MSC) that "China has never given up on promoting peace or slackened its efforts to facilitate talks." Referring to President Xi Jinping's "in-depth exchanges with...Russian and Ukrainian leaders," Wang stressed that the "only one goal that China hopes to achieve...is to build consensus for ending the conflict and pave the way for peace talks."

On the MSC sidelines, Wang Yi met Ukraine FM Kuleba at the [latter's request](#). The two "discussed "bilateral relations, trade, and the necessity of restoring a just and lasting peace in Ukraine," according to the [Ukraine sources](#). Wang reportedly told Kuleba that Beijing would remain neutral in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and not sell weapons to either side. "Even if there is only a glimmer of hope for peace, China will not give up its efforts," Wang added.

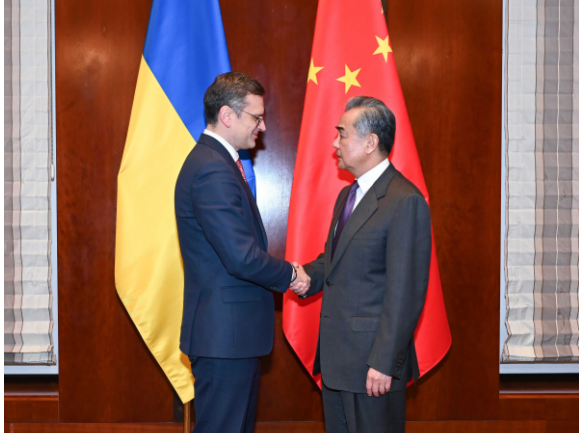


Figure 3 Wang Yi Meets with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on Feb. 18, 2024. Photo: Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The Wang-Kuleba talks were the first high-level meeting between the two sides since Ukrainian President Zelenskyy failed to schedule a meeting with Chinese Premier [Li Qiang](#) at the World Economic Forum in Davos (Jan. 15–19). Beijing also appeared uninterested in [Ukraine's invitation](#) in late January for joining the Kyiv-sponsored Global Peace Summit in Switzerland. It was unclear if this caused the blacklisting of 14 Chinese firms on Ukraine's "[international sponsors of war](#)" list, which led to China's immediate demand for de-listing.

On Jan. 29, Ukraine's ambassador to China Pavlo Riabikin requested a meeting with Chinese Vice FM [Sun Weidong](#). The Chinese readout indicated that the two discussed the "Ukraine crisis and other issues of mutual interest and concern." Riabikin reportedly told Sun that Ukraine attaches great importance to developing relations with China and stay committed to the one-China principle. [Sun](#), in his turn, said that the two countries "should take a long-term view, respect each other and treat each other with sincerity to promote the steady and long-term development of bilateral relations."

At least for China, the "Ukraine crisis"—a standard Chinese usage for the war in Ukraine—was not the only issue between Beijing and Kyiv. Despite the war, [China continued to import](#) large amounts of Ukrainian grain, sunflower oil, and iron ore (some [30%](#) of Ukraine's maritime exports were shipped to China). After a steep decline in bilateral trade in the first two years of the war (60% and 10.8% for 2022 and 2023 respectively), Chinese-Ukrainian trade volume in January–February 2024 grew by [46.6%](#) year-on-year to \$1.5 billion.

For Wang and other senior Chinese diplomats, the priority was to slow and/or reverse the escalation momentum of the two-year conflict when Western support to Ukraine became increasingly hampered by both domestic hurdles and the deficiency of the Western arms industry. Mixed messages from the West regarding Ukraine's possible NATO membership, too, contributed to Kyiv's increasing frustration. "We are confronted with a nuclear power. Either we will become a member of NATO, allied with a nuclear power, or we should restore our nuclear status," Ukrainian lawmaker [Oleksiy Goncharenko](#) said during the MSC. In Munich, Wang Yi reiterated that [nuclear weapons](#) must not be used, nuclear wars must not be fought, and that all parties should work jointly to guarantee the security of nuclear materials and facilities. China, he said, "has honored its pledge and undertaken its international obligations in this regard."

"Catch-24" (Уловка-24) Only for Russia?

It was unclear how Wang Yi's reiteration of China's minimalist nuclear posture (no-first-use) at the 60th MSC would impact the Ukraine conflict. Following his extensive diplomatic interaction with European counterparts in Munich and beyond (his subsequent official visits to France and Spain), FM [Wang Yi](#) was deeply impressed, if not shocked, by the growing pessimism in Europe regarding the prospects of both the Ukraine war and global system.

The post-MSCEurope, however, was torn by an even more alarming gap between unambiguous defeatism on the one hand and an initial but persistent call for direct NATO intervention in the Ukraine war on the other. Twice in late February ([Feb. 26](#) and [29](#)), French President Macron called for possible NATO's direct presence in Ukraine. In testimony to the US House Armed Services Committee on Feb. 29, Defense Secretary [Lloyd Austin](#) said (at 1:48:40...) that Russia and NATO could come into a direct military conflict if Ukraine fell. For these ominous signs of the "possibility of deploying NATO military contingents to Ukraine," Russian President [Putin](#) explicitly warned in his Feb. 29 address to the Russian Federal Assembly that "[T]oday, any potential aggressors will face far graver consequences. They must grasp that we also have (nuclear) weapons—yes, they know this, as I have just said—capable of striking targets on their territory." "Putin has never been so directly and so seriously talked about the

possible use of nuclear weapons,” commented [Hu Xijin](#), an influential media commentator in China.

The only remote glimpse of hope for an “end” of the two-year conflict was a column by [Fyodor Lukyanov](#), editor-in-chief of the influential *Russia in Global Affairs* on Feb. 24. In the “[How does the Russia-Ukraine conflict end?](#)” titled by RT in the English translation two days later, Lukyanov pointed to a “package solution” of the conflict that Moscow “may have to face in the near future” even if “the pendulum has swung in Moscow’s favor and last year’s Western confidence has disappeared.” For Russia, this “very important moment” with both military and political dimensions meant a “Catch-24” (Уловка-24)—the original title of Lukyanov’s column—between various scenarios: freezing (suspension of hostilities), the West German scenario (NATO membership for Ukraine first and territorial recovery at the first opportunity), and a stable stalemate (a restrained Ukraine by its NATO membership not to provoke Russia), etc. None of these scenarios, however, were feasible for Russia now even if the Russian military had regained momentum in Ukraine. Indeed, Russia’s military success “may have the opposite effect of raising the stakes” for both sides. And the “hiccup” in US aid to Ukraine, once resolved, would lead to both a “quantitative and qualitative surge” of Western supplies, including more powerful long-range weapons for Ukraine. “The heat of the confrontation is already such that a further rise in temperature will bring it to a full boiling point, i.e. close to a direct confrontation between Russia and NATO,” warned Lukyanov.

Lukyanov’s “Catch-24” was predicted two months before by Professor [Wan Qingsong](#), deputy director of Russia and Eurasian Institute at the East China Normal University in Shanghai. “Russia won’t easily freeze the conflict. Nor will it want to be ‘trapped’ in Ukraine.” To a large extent, this “to-be-or-not-to-be” dilemma may be a headache for all sides at the onset of the third year of the conflict: no one can win but no one can afford to lose. Hence a drift toward escalation.

Ambassador Li Hui’s Mediation 2.0

It was against this backdrop of an increasingly possible NATO-Russian direct confrontation that China’s Special Representative on Eurasian Affairs [Li Hui](#) traveled to Europe (Russia, Poland,

Ukraine, Germany, and France) on March 2–12 for his second round of talks on the peaceful settlement of the Ukraine conflict.

In Moscow, Li had “an in-depth exchange of views” on the evening of March 2 with Russian Deputy FM Mikhail Galuzin. “Any conflict in the end has to be settled through negotiations. The more acute the conflict is, the more important it is not to give up efforts for dialogue,” [Li](#) stated in the meeting. Galuzin reportedly agreed. He nonetheless [stressed](#) that “any discussion of the settlement in Ukraine is impossible without Russia’s participation and taking into account its security interests.”

In his six-hour stay in Kyiv (due to “[train schedule problems](#)”) on March 7, [Li](#) held “frank and friendly talks” with President’s Office Head Andriy [Yermak](#), First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy Yulia Svyrydenko and Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba. Unlike the broad topics (Russian participation in peace talks) discussed in Moscow, Li’s talks with Ukrainians were packed with specific issues ranging from the battlefield situation, the work of the black Sea grain corridor, POW, Kyiv’s peace formula, and preliminary work for the Switzerland peace summit. Li was also asked to assist Ukraine in several key issues, including the return to Ukraine of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, nuclear safety, alleged Ukrainian children taken to Russia, etc. Li’s group was also shown fragments of North Korean missiles and other weapons from third countries. It was unclear if these arrangements were part of the preconditions for starting a negotiated piece or issues that would be eventually addressed during and after a negotiation. “We value our partnership with China and hope that today’s talks will be another step towards deepening and strengthening our relations,” Yermak reportedly told Li.

Three days after the end of his shuttle mediation in Europe, Li Hui returned to Moscow as head of China’s delegation to observe Russia’s presidential election on March 17. In a meeting the day after the election, [Li](#) briefed Foreign Minister Lavrov about his European tour. Lavrov reaffirmed that Russia was “open to a negotiated solution.” Moscow, however, would not take part in any events on the so-called “Zelenskyy formula.” And any “negotiating process needs to be preceded by the elimination of Kyiv’s self-ban on talks with Moscow, the cessation of arms supplies, and a clear signal of a willingness to

consider current realities and Russia's lawful interests," said Lavrov. It was unclear if Lavrov's strong wording related to Putin's post-election statement that Russia planned to create a "[buffer zone](#)" against Ukraine's long-range strikes and cross-border raids. A more confident Putin, and Russia, appeared less likely to compromise.

In a briefing to diplomatic envoys stationed in China from 78 countries on March 22, [Li](#) expressed pessimism about any ceasefire or ending the conflict. Instead, "the danger of further escalation is increasing," warned Li. There was also a huge gap regarding the peace negotiations, said Li. All parties, however, appreciated China's efforts for a greater constructive role and said China could—as "a common friend" of both Russia and Ukraine—facilitate communication and consensus building toward peace talks, recalled Li.

As to China's absence from international conferences on the Ukraine issue after the August 2023 [Jeddah conference](#) in Saudi Arabia, [Li](#) stated that China supported the timely convening of an international peace conference recognized by both Russia and Ukraine, with equal participation by all parties, and fair discussion of all peace proposals. The goal of such a conference had to be result-oriented, not to support or oppose any side, stressed [Li](#).

March: Putin's Fifth Term and the Moscow Terror Massacre

Li Hui's briefing in Beijing was attended by [both Russian and Ukrainian diplomats](#), a rare occasion when the two warring parties were together in the same room. Li also chose the occasion to clarify any "fallacy" regarding problems in China's relations with Ukraine. "In my talks (in Kyiv), the Ukrainian side refuted the fallacy that 'China deliberately alienates Ukraine,' emphasized that China-Ukraine relations have not been affected by the crisis, and expressed its appreciation of China's balanced stance on the crisis," stated Li.

Beijing's friendly gesture toward Ukraine was soon overtaken by events. Just a few hours later, Moscow, and the world, were shocked by the [terror attack](#) at the Crocus City Hall music venue in Krasnogorsk, Moscow Oblast, Russia. The attack killed 144 people and injured 551, according to Russian authorities at the [end of March](#), making it among the worst terror attacks in Russia's post-Soviet history.

Immediately after the attack, [ISIS](#) claimed responsibility. Moscow was unconvinced. "We know whose hands were used to commit this atrocity against Russia and its people. We want to know who ordered it," President [Putin](#) said in a meeting with Russian security services on March 25. On March 26, chief of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) [Alexander Bortnikov](#) told the media that the US, UK, and Ukraine "are behind the terrorist attack." Both Ukraine and the US quickly denied any involvement in the attack. Whatever the case, the terror attack cast a long shadow over the Ukraine conflict, including China's effort to mediate between the warring parties for a possible end of the conflict. President Xi sent his [condolence message](#) to Putin on March 23, just five days after his [message](#) to the Russian president for his reelection.

China's "Goldilocks" for Russia's Bear

The March 22 Moscow terror massacre apparently prompted Russian FM Lavrov's April 8-9 visit to Beijing for talks with both FM Wang Yi and President Xi. In "extensive talks" in Beijing, Wang and Lavrov worked out specifics for Putin's official visit to China in mid-May, the SCO summit in Astana in June, and the BRICS summit in Kazan in October. "Summit diplomacy," according to [Wang](#), provided "strategic guidance" for relations between the two powers.

While talks with Wang covered "a broad range of issues," Lavrov seemed to push for "[a new security structure in Eurasia](#)" vis-à-vis the Euro-Atlantic mechanisms of the "collective West." He also revealed in the joint press conference with Wang that China agreed "to begin a dialogue on this matter." Wang's remarks did not touch on the subject but said that the two sides should uphold a non-aligned principle and posture, which required careful maintenance. The Chinese-language [readout](#) recorded that as "a responsible major power" China would always make decisions independently based on the circumstances regarding specific issues. Nor did the Chinese side reciprocate Lavrov's "potential initiatives for marking the 80th anniversary of Victory over German Nazism and Japanese militarism" in 2025.

Russia's desire for stronger security coordination with China was understandable, given mounting stress in fighting a de facto two-front war after the March terror attack: a

“Western civil war” 2.0 with the “collective West” and a “civilization clash” with Islamic extremism. Russia in the 21st century is simultaneously confronting both whether or not there is any connection between the two-year Ukraine war and the Moscow terror attack on March 22.

Beijing understood Russia’s difficulties because China, too, was between a rock (Western hostility) and a hard place (Islamic extremism), albeit to a somewhat lesser degree. The steady rise of China since 1979, nonetheless, was accomplished within the existing liberal international order. In the past 45 years, China has adapted itself to it while transforming itself into a profoundly conservative actor in the world and values stability, predictability, and economic development perhaps more than any other major power. “In constructing a world order, evolution, peace, reform, and dialogue are better than revolution, violence, de-link, and confrontation,” said [Prof. Zhao Huasheng](#), one of the most prominent Russologists in China in early March. A separate Eurasian security arrangement with Russia with the sole purpose of confronting the Euro-Atlantic system may not serve China’s interests for an inclusive global “community with a shared future for humanity.”

In the short term (May 5-10), Xi was scheduled to travel to France, Serbia, and Hungary, and would have a joint meeting with Macron and President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen. The goal was to promote a [“sustained, steady, and sound development](#) of China-Europe relations.

Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#) apparently joined the top diplomats’ talks at a certain point (right photo below), which was quite unusual. Xi stressed that China supported the Russian people in following a development path that suited their national conditions, and supported Russia in combating terrorism and maintaining security and stability. In the area of foreign policy coordinations, Xi stated that the two countries should work together in uniting countries in the Global South in building a community with a shared future for humanity.

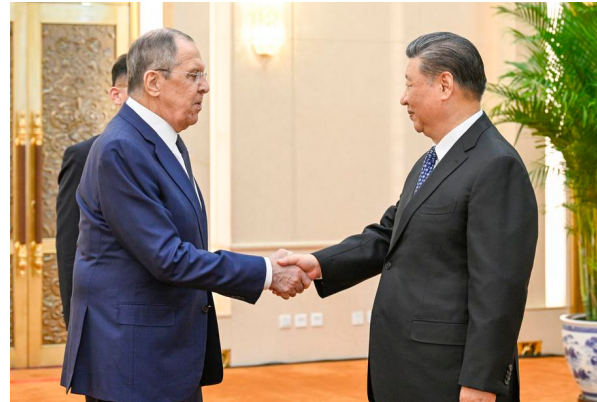


Figure 4 Chinese President Xi Jinping meets with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, April 9, 2024. Photo: Xinhua

Xi’s emphasis on the Global South did not necessarily mean that Beijing ignored Moscow’s security interests. In the first two years of the war, most southern and eastern countries including China chose to be neutral while favoring an early end of the conflict. Xi seemed to suggest to Lavrov, albeit indirectly, that Russia needed to more effectively engage the bigger and more dynamic world beyond the West, given the stalemate of the Ukraine conflict.

In his phone talks in early January 2024 with Lavrov, [Wang Yi](#) stressed that as two responsible major countries, China and Russia should strengthen strategic communication, build more strategic consensuses, and carry out more strategic cooperation on the future of mankind and the world as the means for “intensifying China-Russia strategic coordination (underlining added by author).” Wang did not specify the definition of “strategic.” The phrase, however, contrasts with concepts such as “short-term,” “secondary,” “immediate,” “transient,” etc.

More recently, [Prof. Zhao Huasheng](#) of Fudan University argued more explicitly that strategic opportunities needed to be taken whenever they appeared. Short-term benefits, however, should not be obtained at the expense of the long-term, holistic, and strategic interests. It was extremely important to avoid sharp turns and roller-coasting in bilateral relations particularly in times of radical changes in the world. Zhao’s remarks were made in March at the annual “2024 Russian-Chinese Dialogue” cosponsored by Fudan University in Shanghai and the Russian International Affairs Council led by Andrey Kortunov, director of the Russian International

Affairs Council. At the end, Zhao went as far as to suggest that a stable and more resilient relationship between two large powers such as China and Russia required some “free space” between them.

“Friendship between gentlemen is as light as water (君子之交淡如水),” said China’s most respected ancient philosopher Zhuang Zi (庄子, 369–286 BC). A normal relationship in abnormal times, similar to the timeless “Goldilocks” choice for the middle position, may be the essence of the current Sino-Russian strategic partnership. The stage, however, was set for more dynamic interactions between Beijing and Moscow in the months ahead.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

JANUARY-APRIL 2024

Jan. 2, 2024: China's Vice Foreign Minister [Sun Weidong](#) meets Russian Ambassador to China Igor Morgulov in Beijing. They discuss issues the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations and the Years of Culture between China and Russia (2014-15). The two sides also exchange views on issues of mutual interest and concern.

Jan. 10, 2024: Chinese FM Wang Yi and Russian counterpart Lavrov have a phone conversation initiated by the Russian side. They discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, BRICS issues, etc. [Wang reportedly says](#) that "China firmly believes that Russia will be able to successfully complete its important domestic political agenda, and maintain national stability and development."

Jan. 13, 2024: Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman [Maria Zakharova](#) says Russia regards Taiwan as an integral part of China, a reiteration of Russia's "principled position" on the issue. Russia's pronouncement comes immediately after Taiwan's presidential election. China's foreign ministry spokeswoman [Mao Ning](#) expressed appreciation for Russia's remarks on Jan. 15.

Jan. 18, 2024: FM [Lavrov](#) says in a news conference on Russia's foreign policy performance in 2023 that relations with China "are stronger, more reliable and superior to the military alliance of the Cold War era."

Jan. 29, 2024: China's Vice FM Sun Weidong meets in Beijing with Ambassador of Ukraine to China Pavlo Riabikin [at the latter's request](#). [Riabikin](#) invites Chinese President Xi Jinping to participate in the upcoming Global Peace Summit in Switzerland aimed at building support for the Ukrainian peace formula presented by Ukraine President Zelenskyy in November 2022. [A press release](#) by the Chinese Foreign Minister does not mention the invitation.

Jan. 29-30, 2024: Chinese Executive Vice FM [Ma Zhaoxu](#) visits Russia to hold consultations with Russian counterparts First Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Vladimir Gennadievich Titov and Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov Sergey Alexeevich. They have "an in-depth exchange of views" on strategic stability, BRICS cooperation, and international and regional hotspot issues. Russian FM [Lavrov](#) meets Ma on Jan. 30. Ma also joins the first session of the [BRICS](#) in Moscow.

Feb. 6, 2024: Russian President Vladimir Putin gives an interview to US journalist Tucker [Carlson](#). Putin dismisses the view that China threatens other BRICS members, points out the importance of cooperating with a country that Russia shares a long border, and emphasizes that China's economy is already the largest in the world in PPP terms.

Feb. 8, 2024: President Putin has "an [extensive](#) telephone conversation" with Xi Jinping two days before Chinese New Year (Feb. 10). Their talks cover bilateral, regional, and global issues.

Feb. 9, 2024: Downtown Moscow kicks off a 10-day Chinese New Year celebration featuring more than 300 separate events/shows. This "[first broad celebration](#)" of the Chinese New Year in the Russian capital city is the first of a series of events as part of the Years of Culture of Russia and China in 2024-25. It also marks the 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties.

Feb. 16-17, 2024: [Liu Jianchao](#), head of the CCP's Liaison Department, travels to Moscow for [the first "For the Freedom of Nations" International Forum](#) of Supporters of the Struggle Against Modern Practices of Neocolonialism. The forum is launched by the "United Russia" party chaired by Dmitry Medvedev, [who meets Liu](#) on the sidelines of the forum. More than 400 participants from over 55 countries join. Russian FM Lavrov also speaks at the forum.

Feb. 17, 2024: Chinese FM [Wang Yi](#) delivers a keynote speech at the annual Munich Security Conference (MSC). He reiterates China's commitment to promoting peace talks for the Ukraine crisis. He also urges that nuclear wars must not be fought. Wang also maintains that Sino-Russian relations contribute to [strategic stability](#) in the world. In Munich, Wang also meets with [Ukraine FM Kuleba](#) on the sidelines of the MSC.

Feb. 28, 2024: Vice FM [Sun Weidong](#) holds consultations in Moscow with Russian Deputy FM Rudenko Andrey Yurevich on China-Russia relations, the SCO and Asia-Pacific affairs. Sun meets with Russian FM Lavrov.

March 2-8, 2024: China's Special Representative on Eurasian Affairs [Li Hui](#) travels to Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Germany, and France for his second round of talks on the peaceful settlement of the Ukraine conflict. He holds talks with Russian Deputy FM Mikhail Galuzin on March 2 and meets FM Lavrov the following day. Li travels to [Kyiv](#) by train on March 7 and left in the evening after talks with Ukrainian Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine Yermak Andriy Borysovych, First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy Yulia Svyrydenko and Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba.

March 17, 2024: President Putin officially wins his fifth presidential term with [87.28%](#) of the vote. Chinese envoy [Li Hui](#) leads a Chinese observer delegation to Russia on March 15-18. Putin is to be sworn in May 7. President [Xi Jinping](#) congratulates Putin on reelection on March 18. Xi says China stands ready to maintain close communication with Russia to promote the sustained, sound, stable, and in-depth development of a China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era to benefit the two nations and their people.

March 22, 2024: Unidentified gunmen conduct [a terrorist attack](#) in Crocus City Hall in Krasnogorsk in the Moscow Region, killing [143 people](#) and wounding more than 80. [Xi Jinping](#) extended condolences to Putin on March 23. Xi

says that China opposes all forms of terrorism, strongly condemns terrorist attacks, and firmly supports the Russian government's efforts to maintain national security and stability.

March 25, 2024: Chairman of China's National People's Congress (NPC) [Zhao Leji](#) meets with Deputy Chairman of the Russian State Duma Alexander Babakov in Beijing.

March 28, 2024: FM [Lavrov](#) says that China's 12-point peace proposal should be a basis for negotiations because it means equal security to all participants in this process. Meanwhile, negotiations cannot be based on the "peace formula" proposed by Ukrainian President Zelensky and promoted by Europe and the United States.

March 29, 2024: China's top legislator [Zhao Leji](#) meets Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexey Overchuk in Boao where Overchuk attends the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2024.

April 3, 2024: China's Assistant Foreign Minister [Miao Deyu](#) holds consultations with Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Vershinin Sergey Vasilievich in Beijing on the UN affairs.

April 8-9, 2024: FM Lavrov visits Beijing for talks with Chinese counterpart Wang Yi. They discussed global, regional and bilateral affairs, as well as the Ukraine war issue. Lavrov also meets with President Xi.

April 16-18, 2024: China Coast Guard (CCG) sends a working group to Vladivostok to participate in China-Russia Coast Guard [working-level talks](#). This is the first working-level talks between the two agencies after signing the memorandum of understanding last year.

April 16-18, 2024: [Chen Wenqing](#), head of the Commission for Political and Legal Affairs of the CCP Central Committee, travels to Russia to attend the 12th International Meeting of High Representatives for Security Issues and visit Russia at the host's.

April 17, 2024: China's Minister of Education [Huai Jinpeng](#) visits Russia for the China-Russian University Forum and the SCO annual session of education ministers in Moscow. Huai presides over agreements signing ceremony between Moscow State University and seven Chinese leading universities.

April 24-26, 2024: China's Defense Minister [Dong Jun](#) attends the SCO Defense Ministerial meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan. He also pays an official visit to Kazakhstan.

PACIFIC FORUM

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

JAPAN-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

STRATEGIC DYNAMISM: 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF RELATIONS AND NEW SECURITY TIES

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Japan-Southeast Asia relations marked two milestones in 2023-24. The first was the 50th anniversary of Japan-ASEAN Relations, during which Japan and ASEAN emphasized an equal partnership by adopting the keyword “co-creation” to promote economic prosperity and security stability in Southeast Asia and beyond. The second is strengthening Japan-Philippines bilateral strategic ties, not only bilaterally, but also trilaterally with the United States and quadrilaterally with Australia. Japan continuously engages with other Southeast Asian states and strengthens ties with ASEAN to reinforce ASEAN Centrality and unity, yet a challenge remains: how Japan can design a regional architecture in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific by clarifying the roles and division of labor among those institutions.

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50th Anniversary of Japan-ASEAN Friendship and Cooperation



Figure 1 Leaders pose for a commemorative photo at the Commemorative Summit for the 50th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation on December 17, 2023. Photo: The Government of Japan.

Japan and ASEAN held the [Commemorative Summit](#) for the 50th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation on Dec. 17, 2023. While Japan was not an ASEAN dialogue partner in 1973, the two began in-depth diplomatic engagements due to Japan's synthetic rubber exports, which threatened Southeast Asia's natural rubber industry. Given Southeast Asian suspicion of Japan stemming from the legacy of World War II, this dialogue did not originate from a positive relationship. However, over time, Japan and ASEAN member states cultivated positive partnerships through many initiatives, most notably the Fukuda Doctrine of 1977. The commemorative summit represents Japan's regional engagements and its willingness to enhance this trend, building on previous commemorative summits in [2003](#) and [2013](#).

At the summit, Japan reiterated its respect for ASEAN Centrality and unity, promising to mainstream the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP), and synthesizing Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and AOIP. At the same time, Japan and ASEAN introduced [three new pillars](#) to enhance relations: 1) "Heart-to-Heart Partners across Generations"; 2) "Partners for Co-creation of Economy and Society of the Future"; and 3) "Partners for Peace and Stability." The first pillar focuses on human exchange, building on the [Fukuda Doctrine](#)'s aim of deepening a "heart-to-heart" understanding between Japan and Southeast Asian countries, expressing a resolution to further people-to-people exchanges in a variety of fields, including both intellectual and cultural exchanges.

Through this shared vision, the Japan-ASEAN relationship entered a new phase in two significant ways. First and foremost, Japan and ASEAN recognized that they have become more equal partners politically and economically. Although similar areas of cooperation have been discussed over the past two decades, the new vision statement's keyword, "co-creation," emphasizes the importance of collaborative effort. ASEAN's socio-economic developments have been remarkable, and Japan now relies more on these for its own peace and prosperity in fields such as business startups and human resources. In this context, "co-creation" implies a new relationship of truly equal partners.

Second, Japan and ASEAN look beyond a bilateral relationship and show their intent to contribute to shaping a regional order in the Indo-Pacific region. This is represented by the "Partners for Peace and Security," which calls of them "to promote a rules-based Indo-Pacific region that is free and open, [embracing] key principles such as ASEAN's unity and centrality..." Previously, both focused specifically on improving Japan-ASEAN relations, but did not clearly state their international contribution through enhanced regional cooperation, albeit their [consideration](#) of regional and global security. Under the current strategic circumstances, they have begun to explore ways both can collaboratively contribute to international peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

These shared interests and visions culminated in interactions between Japan and ASEAN in 2023. Given ASEAN's institutional norm of "consultation and consensus," Japan has comprehensively engaged with ASEAN members through track-1 and track-2, illustrating the recommendations produced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ([MOFA](#)) and the Ministry of Economic, Trade and Industry ([METI](#)). Functionally, Japan began to revitalize activities toward ASEAN. In the defense arena, Japan conducted the [Fourth](#) and [Fifth Japan-ASEAN Ship Rider Cooperation](#) for the first time in four years in March and September. Japan's Ministry of Defense also launched a new concept, [JASMINE](#) (Japan-ASEAN Ministerial Initiative for Enhanced Defense Cooperation), under its "Vientiane Vision 2.0" in [November](#). Japan pushed the establishment of the "Asia Zero

Emission Community” (AZEC), aiming to achieve economic growth, energy transition, and decarbonization simultaneously, resulting in the [AZEC Leaders’ Joint Statement](#).

Meanwhile, Japan and ASEAN decided to elevate relations to the “[Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#),” following China, the United States, and Australia. While largely symbolic, this status indicates that their relationship is as important as other regional major powers, creating political momentum for furthering Japan-ASEAN functional cooperation. This underscores that ASEAN remains one of the most important diplomatic actors for Japan in the Indo-Pacific as the institution has been key to shaping a regional order. In the next phase, it is important to see the extent to which Japan and ASEAN can follow through the broad range of [implementation plans](#) for the next decade.

Emergence of New Bilateral, Trilateral, and Quad (“Squad”): The Philippines

In 2023-24, the Kishida administration focused on the enhancement of Japan’s strategic relationship with the Philippines. When Ferdinand Marcos Jr. became president in 2022, taking over from the China-leaning Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines attempted to strike a delicate balance in its relationship with China and the United States. This posture became increasingly difficult as China’s assertive behavior in the South China Sea continued, particularly in regard to Second Thomas Shoal and the Scarborough Shoal. ASEAN and China’s negotiations over the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea have been slow and insufficient to deter unilateral actions or the creation of fait accompli by claimant states. ASEAN members have long faced difficulty in maintaining a united front, frustrating the Philippines, and as Japan faces a similar security situation in [the East China Sea](#), both Japan and the Philippines have deepened strategic cooperation in three ways.

First, Japan and the Philippines began to facilitate closer bilateral engagement. In February 2023, Prime Minister Kishida and President Marcos issued the “[Japan-Philippines Joint Statement](#),” envisioning coordination and cooperation on infrastructure development, disaster management, energy transformation, security cooperation. This includes the Foreign

and Defense Ministerial Meeting (2+2), the Vice-Ministerial Strategic Dialogue, and a variety of joint military exercises such as Japan’s participation in the Philippines-US “KAMANDAG” and “SAMA-SAMA” exercises, as well as Japan’s provision of coastguard cutters to the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG). On Nov. 4, Kishida visited the Philippines and made a speech at the Joint Session of the Philippine Senate and House of Representative, “[Heart-to-heart ties for the Next Generation](#),” referencing the Fukuda Doctrine initiated in Manila in 1977. Kishida attempted to advance this doctrine for promoting Japan’s relations with ASEAN, explaining Japan’s four pillars of the new plan for a FOIP. At the same time, he emphasized Japan’s initiative to comprehensively engage with the Philippines through [the Official Security Assistance](#) (OSA), infrastructure development, decarbonization, and trilateral cooperation with the United States. The [summit](#) meeting also highlighted the commencement of the negotiations on a Japan-Philippines reciprocal access agreement (RAA).

Second, Japan and the Philippines intensified trilateral cooperation with the United States. Beginning with the first-ever trilateral coast guard joint exercise in June 2023, and sharing strategic perspectives in the Indo-Pacific, particularly on the South China Sea, a series of trilateral meetings were held in 2023 and 2024. There were five important formal and informal meetings for policy coordination: the [Trilateral National Security Advisors meeting](#) on June 16, 2023, the [Trilateral Foreign Ministers’ Meeting](#) on July 14, 2023, the [Informal Meeting](#) between Prime Minister Kishida, President Marcos, and US Vice President Kamala Harris on Sept. 6, 2023, another [Foreign Minister’s Meeting](#) on Sept. 22, 2023, and the [Trilateral Vice Ministers’ Meeting](#) on March 21, 2024. These efforts culminated in the [Trilateral Summit](#) on April 11.

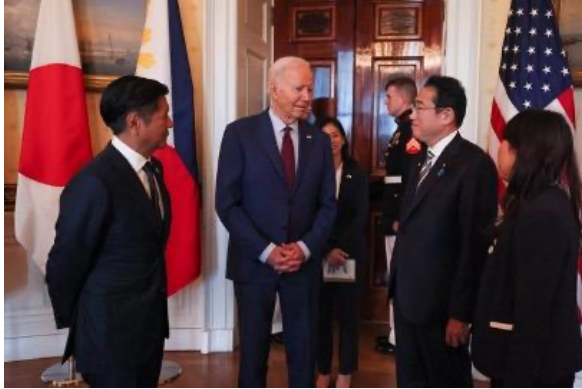


Figure 2 The first meeting of the Japan-Philippines-US Trilateral Summit on April 11, 2024. Photo: Prime Minister's Office of Japan.

This summit demonstrated their commitment to comprehensive cooperation, resulting in several tangible outcomes, such as the launching the Luzon Economic Corridor—the first economic corridor in the Indo-Pacific under the “Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment Partnership” promoted by G7—the establishment of the trilateral Cyber and Digital Dialogue, and regularization of joint exercises and training between three coastguards as well as between defense forces.



Figure 3 The second meeting of the Japan-Philippines-US Trilateral Summit on April 11, 2024. Photo: Prime Minister's Office of Japan.

Third, new quadrilateral cooperation between Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and the United States, informally called “the [Squad](#),” began to emerge. In June 2023, the four defense ministers held the [first ministerial meeting](#) alongside the Shangri-La Dialogue. Although this was ad-hoc and there was no commitment to regularize the ministerial meeting, their defense cooperation

and regular interactions gained political momentum as their bilateral and trilateral relationships developed. A [quadrilateral joint naval exercise](#) was conducted in April 2024, and subsequently, in May 2024, the second quadrilateral defense ministers’ meeting was held in Hawaii. This meeting issued a [joint readout](#), indicating that the four shared security concerns over the East and South China Seas, particularly regarding China’s actions despite the “final and legally binding 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal Award.”

These efforts aim to nurture networks of the US “hub-and-spokes” system, which US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has termed the “[latticework of cooperation](#).” US allies, including Japan, Australia, and the Philippines, are strengthening bilateral and trilateral strategic cooperation to independently bolster defense capabilities and align to aggregate defense and deterrence capacities in the Indo-Pacific region. Nevertheless, those frameworks have only recently emerged and have yet to be institutionalized or formalized, allowing room for evolution.

In fact, although the four share similar strategic perspectives, they do not necessarily align completely. For instance, the Taiwan issue has been a prominent topic in dialogues, yet the extent of cooperation among US allies remains unclear. Their policies toward the South China Sea have been more coordinated. Consequently, there is potential for these relationships to evolve into either an AUKUS-like strategic minilateralism or a Quad-like functional minilateralism. In addition, an important challenge lies in determining how these frameworks will align with ASEAN. Despite expressing respect for ASEAN Centrality and unity, clarifying the institutional division of labor with ASEAN and ASEAN-led institutions would be imperative to assure other ASEAN member states in the future.

Japan’s Comprehensive Engagement through the “Free and Open International Order”

Japan's Southeast Asian policy exhibits strong continuity as well, especially when it comes to active bilateral engagements. Japan’s diplomatic, economic, and defense engagements with other Southeast Asian states remained

constant. The only notable change in Japan's diplomatic approach was a slight shift in strategic narratives. Since 2016, Japan has been promoting the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" narrative at the international stage, including Southeast Asia. However, given the prolonged war between Ukraine and Russia and increasing uncertainty about the conflict between Israel and Hamas, along with diverging perspectives on them among the Global South, it became clear that an international order is not solely shaped by events only in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, while the Indo-Pacific region remains central to Japan's strategic focus, the Japanese government began to emphasize not only the FOIP but also the "Free and Open International Order based on the Rule of Law (or International Law)" in engagements with Southeast Asian countries. This shift became more pronounced in the second half of 2023.

In this context, Japan diplomatically reinforced its bilateral relationship with Southeast Asian states by upgrading its ties with several states to "comprehensive strategic partnerships," generally on significant anniversaries. While ASEAN and Japan concluded the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in September 2023, these bilateral partnerships include a "[Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#)" with Cambodia in January 2023 at the occasion of the 70th anniversary of Japan-Cambodia diplomatic relations; a "[Comprehensive and Strategic Partnership](#)" with Indonesia in December 2023 at the occasion of the 65th anniversary of Japan-Indonesia diplomatic relations; a "[Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#)" with Malaysia in December 2023; and a "[Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia and the World](#)" with Vietnam in November 2023 at the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Japan-Vietnam diplomatic relations. Also, as Japan and Brunei approached the 40th anniversary of their diplomatic relations in 2024, plans were made to elevate relations to a "[strategic partnership](#)."

Consequently, among the 10 ASEAN member states, only three member states do not have strategic partnership relations with Japan: Myanmar, Brunei, and Singapore. Japan's engagement with Myanmar faces diplomatic difficulties because of the 2021 military coup.

Brunei is now considering elevation of its relationship with Japan, and Singapore already has substantial diplomatic, economic, and defense ties with Tokyo, exemplified by the Japan-Singapore Partnership Programme for the 21st Century (JSPP21), the Japan-Singapore Economic Partnership Agreement, and the Agreement of the Japan-Singapore Defense Equipment and Technology Transfer. While no clear set of characteristics defines strategic partnerships, making it sometimes difficult to ascertain the strategic depth of these relationships, the designation nonetheless provides [opportunities](#) for Japan and Southeast Asian states to hold high-level meetings, engage comprehensively with each other at different levels, and legitimize their relationships to avoid overdependence on any particular great power.

Economically, Japan's recent focus has been on the establishment of the AZEC, which includes Australia and all ASEAN members except for Myanmar. This initiative reflects a broad understanding of the decarbonization process, encompassing issues from critical minerals and infrastructure development to critical and emerging technologies. While regional collaboration through the AZEC is essential for facilitating this process in Southeast Asia and East Asia, diverse levels of economic development in each regional state make bilateral engagements crucial for addressing specific needs such as human development, technology transfer, and rules-making dialogues. In this connection, Japan introduced the "[Co-Creation for Common Agenda Initiative](#)," based on the [revised Development Cooperation Charter](#) in June 2023. This initiative aims to set development goals and create realistic plans alongside Southeast Asian states and their private sectors. Under this scheme, Japan has agreed to cooperate in the digital sector with Cambodia and agricultural sector with Thailand.

Japan has revitalized its defense diplomacy in Southeast Asia through capacity-building programs and OSA. Japan conducted the fourth and fifth Japan-ASEAN Ship Rider Cooperation Program, as mentioned above. Between May 2023 and April 2024, it offered 12 [capacity building programs](#) to Southeast Asian states,

including Timor Leste, covering various fields, such as cyber security, humanitarian assistance/disaster relieve (HA/DR), civil engineering, Japanese language training, underwater UXO clearance, and vessel maintenance. Additionally, as an annual exercise, Japan conducted the Indo-Pacific Deployment 2023 (IPD23) by dispatching maritime self-defense force fleets, including JS *Izumo*, JS *Samidare*, and JS *Shiranui*, to participate in Indo-Pacific naval exercises and port calls in Southeast Asian states, namely Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam.

Furthermore, Japan has begun to use OSA to provide military equipment to boost the capabilities of partner states in the region, although it does not intend to provide lethal weapons. In 2023, Japan identified the Philippines and Malaysia along with Bangladesh and Fiji as priority recipients of OSA and included Vietnam in November. Assistance included the provision of coastal radars to the Philippines and rescue boats to Malaysia to enhance their maritime domain awareness. Although the OSA budget for fiscal year 2023 was modest—providing approximately \$4 million to the Philippines and \$2.5 million to Malaysia—it is subject to change, depending on Japan’s economic situation and demands from Indo-Pacific states.

Japan continues to utilize Official Development Assistance (ODA) to empower law-enforcement capabilities of Southeast Asian states. For example, in December 2023, Japan exchanged the [note](#) to provide a large patrol vessel to the Indonesian Coast Guard Agency. However, ODA remains primarily focused on socio-economic development and is characterized as non-security-oriented assistance. Although patrol ships can be provided through ODA, no military equipment is transferred under this arrangement. OSA was launched to complement ODA by addressing security needs that ODA does not cover.

Among these cooperative efforts, Myanmar remains an outlier. Japan has suspended formal diplomatic interactions with Myanmar since the [2021](#) coup, although it regularly provides humanitarian aid through international organizations and nongovernmental

organizations and cooperates with ASEAN. Instability in Myanmar has also impacted Japan’s broader Southeast Asian engagement, such as the Japan-Mekong Cooperation, which consists of Japan and all Mekong countries, including Myanmar, and has not convened since 2021.

Southeast Asian Perceptions toward Japan

It is widely recognized that Japan is the most trusted major power in the Indo-Pacific region among ASEAN member states. According to “[The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report](#),” an annual survey conducted by the Yusof-Ishak ISEAS, Japan consistently ranks as the most trusted among other major powers, such as the United States, the EU, China, and India. Since the survey’s inception in 2019, Japan has maintained this top position, illustrating its success in engaging Southeast Asia positively despite the historical legacy of World War II. However, there are two caveats to consider.

First, Japan is not perceived as a strategic threat to Southeast Asia, either economically or strategically. The ISEAS Survey shows that while Japan is ranked fourth in terms of economic influence—following China, ASEAN, and the United States—and similarly in political and strategic influence, there is a significant gap between Japan and the top three, China, the United States, and ASEAN. More specifically, Japan scored 3.7% in terms of economic power compared with China’s 59.5%, ASEAN’s 16.8%, the United States’ 14.3%. In political and strategic terms, Japan also scored 3.7%, while China, the US, and ASEAN scored 43.9%, 25.8%, and 20%, respectively. These figures suggest that from ASEAN’s perspective, Japan lacks the material capabilities to significantly influence the region. Still, Japan’s continual engagement has consolidated its position as the most trusted state, though the primary players in the region remain China, the United States, and ASEAN.

Second, being the “most trusted country” does not necessarily mean that Japan is considered a strategic option for ASEAN member states. Survey responses indicate a trend where Japan is not seen as the leading force in maintaining a rules-based order or upholding international law; these roles are more likely attributed to the United States (27.9%), ASEAN (26.9%), the EU

(16.9%), and even China (11.5%), with Japan ranking far behind (8.8%). Furthermore, when participants were asked to identify which actor could be considered a “third party” in the context of the US-China strategic competition, the EU was preferred (37.2%) over Japan (27.7%). It is quite understandable that the EU is viewed more favorably by ASEAN members, given its multilateral nature and representation of multiple states. However, countries such as Brunei, Indonesia, and Singapore still regard Japan as the preferred third party. This preference may be less about Japan’s material and strategic capacities and more about its considerable soft power as it is the second most favored place to live or work and tops the list as the most popular place to visit.

These survey results position Japan uniquely in Southeast Asia—strategically harmless, economically beneficial, and culturally attractive. Although Japan’s strategic importance may not match that of other major powers, namely the US and China, it is more diplomatically accessible to ASEAN members. This accessibility stems from Japan’s traditional focus on socio-economic engagement. However, Japan has been gradually assuming a more active security role in empowering Southeast Asia. For example, since the 2010s, Japan has concluded defense equipment and technology transfer agreements with six ASEAN members: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, and invented OSA to grant defense equipment. Japan may play a more strategic part in ensuring stability in Southeast Asia in the future.

Looking Ahead

From 2023 to 2024, Japan made progress in two significant areas: celebrating the 50th anniversary of ASEAN-Japan relations and enhancing ties with the Philippines, showcasing both traditional and new approaches. On the one hand, Japan reaffirmed its commitment to Southeast Asia and ASEAN, moving beyond mere socio-economic assistance to emphasize an equal partnership aimed at advancing regional stability and prosperity in Southeast Asia and beyond. On the other hand, recognizing the limitations of existing institutional frameworks to adequately address regional tensions and confrontation in areas such as the East and South

China Seas and the Taiwan Strait, Japan actively engages with regional states, particularly US allies. From May 2023 to May 2024, Japan, along with the United States, focused on the Philippines, nurturing the Japan-US-Philippine trilateral framework as well as the new Quad with Australia.

This evolving diplomatic engagement contributes to gradual changes in a regional architecture of Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Indo-Pacific. However, managing these new institutional frameworks poses several challenges. One issue is their lack of consolidation or formalization, which leaves room for institutional evolution. As with the evolution of the “Quad,” other new frameworks such as the “Squad” may shift objectives and functionalities. While the strategic environment’s fluidity makes flexibility advantageous, excessive ambiguity could undermine the strategic and functional validity of these frameworks.

Another issue is how these new arrangements would impact ASEAN, particularly in terms of ASEAN Centrality. These new frameworks have been created to manage regional challenges that existing institutions, including ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms, cannot manage. That said, without clear communication, ASEAN might view these developments as undermining its diplomatic influence in East Asia and beyond. This is particularly so given Japan’s growing role in strategic affairs in the Indo-Pacific region and its efforts to counter China’s assertiveness.

Looking ahead, Japan’s engagement with Southeast Asia from 2024 to 2025 will unlikely undergo abrupt changes. The major variable for Japan in 2024, the result of the US presidential election in November, will certainly impact alliance politics and management. Nevertheless, Japan-Southeast Asia relations are expected to maintain their course unless a larger structural shock occurs. The task for Japan in 2024-25 is to articulate a vision for a new regional architecture in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific, leveraging its unique position to reassure ASEAN and strengthen ties with Southeast Asia.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

MAY 2023–APRIL 2024

April 20–Sept. 2023: Indo-Pacific Deployment 2023 (IPD23) is [conducted](#).

May 5, 2023: Japan–Singapore Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

May 20, 2023: Japan–Indonesia Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and President Joko Widodo.

May 21, 2023: Japan–Vietnam Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh.

May 25, 2023: FM Hayashi [holds](#) meeting with Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Tran Luu Quang. Japan–Laos Summit [takes](#) place between FM Kishida and President Thongloun Sisoulith. Japan–Laos Foreign Ministers’ Meeting is also [held](#) between Hayashi and Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith.

May 26, 2023: Singapore Finance Minister Lawrence Wong makes a [courtesy call](#) on PM Kishida.

June 3, 2023: Japan and Singapore sign the [agreement](#) concerning the Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology.

June 15, 2023: FM Hayashi and Philippine National Security Advisor Eduardo Ano [hold](#) a dialogue. The Japan–Philippines–US National Security Advisor dialogue is [conducted](#) between National Security Advisors Takeo Akiba, Eduardo Ano, and Jake Sullivan.

June 17–23, 2023: Japanese Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako make a [state visit](#) to Indonesia.

July 12, 2023: Japan–Brunei Foreign Ministers’ Meeting is [held](#) between FM Hayashi, and Foreign Minister Erywan. Japan–Malaysia

Foreign Ministers’ Meeting is [held](#) between FM Hayashi and Foreign Minister Zambry Abdul Kadir.

July 14, 2023: 30th ASEAN Regional Forum is [held](#). The 13th East Asia Summit (EAS) Foreign Ministers’ Meeting is also [held](#). Japan–Philippines–US Foreign Ministers’ Meeting [held](#) between FM Hayashi, Secretary for Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Aug. 29, 2023: 14th Japan–Philippines High Level Joint Committee on Infrastructure Development and Economic Cooperation is [held](#).

Aug. 30, 2023: 12th Japan–Cambodia Human Rights Dialogue is [held](#).

Sept. 6, 2023: 26th ASEAN+3 Summit is [held](#). Japan–Malaysia Informal Leaders’ Talks [held](#) between PM Kishida and Prime Minister Anwar bin Ibrahim. Japan–Timor–Leste Informal Summit Talks [took](#) place between PM Kishida and Prime Minister Kay Rala Xanana Gusmao. Japan–Vietnam Informal Summit Talks also [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and PM Pham. PM Kishida [held](#) informal talks with Philippines President Marcos and US Vice President Kamala Harris.

Sept. 7, 2023: 18th EAS is [held](#). Japan–Indonesia Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and President Widodo. Japan–Cambodia Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and Prime Minister Hun Manet. Japan–Laos Informal Summit Talks [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone.

Sept. 19, 2023: Japan and Indonesia Foreign Ministers Meeting is [held](#) between FM Kamikawa and Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi.

Sept. 22, 2023: Japan–Philippines–US Foreign Ministers’ Meeting is [held](#) between FM

Kamikawa, Foreign Secretary Manalo, and State Secretary Blinken.

Oct. 9, 2023: Japan-Brunei Foreign Ministers' Meeting is [held](#) between FM Kamikawa and FM Erywan.

Oct. 10, 2023: Japan-Vietnam Foreign Ministers' Meeting is [held](#) between FM Kamikawa and Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son.

Oct. 11, 2023: Japan-Laos Foreign Ministers' Meeting is [held](#) between FM Kamikawa and DPM/FM Kommasith.

Oct. 12, 2023: Japan-Thailand Foreign Minister's Meeting is [held](#) between FM Kamikawa and Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-nukara.

Oct. 30, 2023: Japan-Cambodia Foreign Minister's Telephone Talk is [held](#) between FM Kamikawa and Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Sok Chenda Sophea.

Nov. 3, 2023: Japan-Philippines Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. Japanese Ambassador Koshikawa Kazuhiko and Foreign Secretary Manalo exchange [notes](#) for 600 million yen in Official Security Assistance (OSA), providing coastal radar systems.

Nov. 4, 2023: PM Kishida delivers a speech, "[Heart-to-heart ties for the Next Generation](#)," at the Joint Session of the Philippine Senate and House of Representatives.

Nov. 5, 2023: Japan-Malaysia Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and PM Anwar.

Nov. 10, 2023: Japan-Laos Foreign Ministers' Meeting [held](#) between FM Kamikawa and DPM/FM Kommasith.

Nov. 15, 2023: 8th ASEAN-Japan Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting is [held](#). Japan-Thailand Summit [took](#) place between PM Kishida and Prime Minister/Minister of Finance Srettha Thavisin. Japan-Philippines Foreign Ministers' Meeting is [held](#) between FM Kamikawa and FS Manalo.

Nov. 16, 2023: 10th ADMM (ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting)-Plus is [held](#).

Nov. 20, 2023: 1st Japan-Cambodia Foreign Senior Officials Talks is [held](#) between Funakoshi Takehiro, senior deputy minister, and Tuot Panha, secretary of State of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

Nov. 27, 2023: Japan-Vietnam Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and President Vo Van Thuong, elevating their relationship to the "[Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia and the World](#)."

Dec. 16, 2023: Japan-Brunei Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and Sultan Hassanal Bokiah. Japan-Laos Summit [took](#) place between FM Kishida and PM Siphandone. Japan-Indonesia Summit between PM Kishida and President Widodo [takes](#) place, elevating the bilateral relationship to a "[Comprehensive and Strategic Partnership](#)" and FM Kamikawa and FM Retno Marsudi exchange [notes](#) about the provision of a large patrol vessels for Indonesian Coast Guard Agency. Japan-Malaysia Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and PM Anwar, elevating their relationship to a "[Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#)." Japan-Singapore Summit and Foreign Minister's Meeting are held [between](#) PM Kishida and PM Lee and [between](#) FM Kamikawa and Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, respectively. Japan-Vietnam Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and PM Pham. Japan-Malaysia Foreign Ministers' Meeting is also [held](#) between FM Kamikawa and Foreign Minister Mohamad bin Hasan and exchange [notes](#) on OSA grant aid, provision of equipment for activities such as monitoring and surveillance. Japan-Philippines Foreign Ministers' Meeting is [held](#) between FM Kamikawa and FS Manalo.

Dec. 17, 2023: Commemorative Summit for the 50th Year of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation is [held](#). Japan-Philippines Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and President Marcos. Japan-Thailand Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and PM/FM Srettha. Japan-Cambodia Foreign Minister's Meeting is [held](#) between FM Kamikawa and DPM/FM Sok Chenda Sophea.

Dec. 18, 2023: Japan-Cambodia Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida and PM Hun Manet. Japan-Brunei Foreign Ministers' Meeting was [held](#) between FM Kamikawa and FM Erywan.

Jan. 26, 2024: 16th Japan-Singapore Vice Ministerial Policy Dialogue is [held](#) between Funakoshi Takehiro, senior deputy minister for Foreign Affairs, and Albert Chua, permanent secretary.

Feb. 1, 2024: FM Kamikawa [issues](#) a statement, "The Situation in Myanmar Three Years After the Coup d'Etat."

March 6, 2024: Japan-Cambodia Public-Private Roundtable is [held](#).

March 11, 2024: PM Kishida [holds](#) a meeting with Burmese Crown Prince and Senior Minister Al-Muhtadee Billah.

March 21, 2024: Japan-Philippines-US Vice Ministers' Meeting is [held](#) between Okano Masataka, vice minister for Foreign Affairs, Undersecretary of Bilateral Relations and ASEAN Affairs Maria Theresa P. Lazaro, and Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell.

April 3, 2024: Indonesia President-elect Prabowo [makes](#) a courtesy call on PM Kishida.

April 11, 2024: Japan-Philippines-US Summit [takes](#) place between PM Kishida, President Marcos, and President Joe Biden. Japan-Philippines Foreign Ministers' Meeting is also [held](#) between FM Kamikawa and FS Manalo.

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