

PACIFIC FORUM

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

EDITED BY

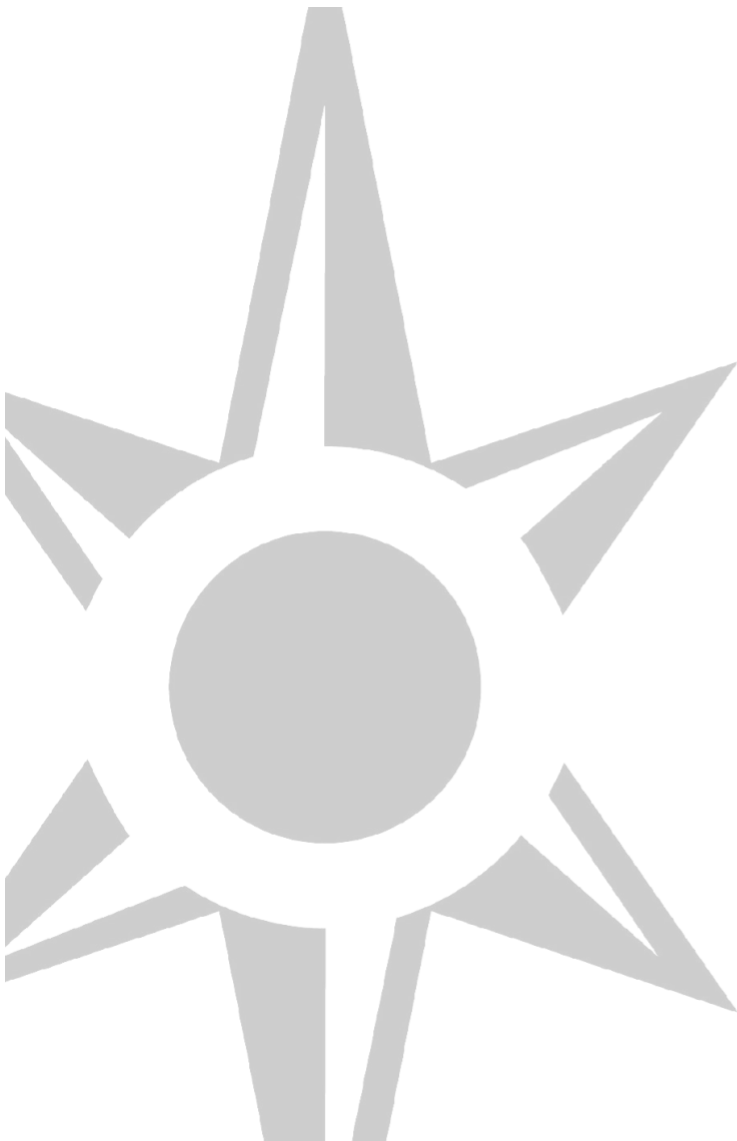
ROB YORK

BRAD GLOSSERMAN

MAY – DECEMBER 2024

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PACIFIC FORUM

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

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

A Board of Directors guides the Pacific Forum's work. The Forum is funded by grants from foundations, corporations, individuals, and governments. The Forum's studies are objective and nonpartisan and it does not engage in classified or proprietary work.

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C O N N E C T I O N S

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ROB YORK, PACIFIC FORUM
BRAD GLOSSERMAN, TAMA UNIVERSITY CRS/PACIFIC FORUM

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HONOLULU, HAWAII

COMPARATIVE CONNECTIONS

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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 RALPH COSSA, PACIFIC FORUM & BRAD GLOSSERMAN, TAMA UNIVERSITY CRS/PACIFIC FORUM

The “year of elections” culminated in the allegedly (but not actually) “too close to call” US presidential elections on Nov. 5, which resulted in Donald Trump’s scheduled return to the oval office on Jan. 20, 2025. Trump has wasted no time identifying his preferences for key leadership positions in his incoming administration, some surprising, some shocking, and a few somewhat disturbing (to us, at least), although most of his national security/foreign policy choices appear more mainstream. While we would not be bold (or foolish) enough to make firm predictions regarding future policy, we will speculate on expected trends and characteristics, while acknowledging at the onset that Trump prides himself on being unpredictable (and has largely succeeded in this quest).

While elections elsewhere have gone largely as expected, two unexpected domestic political developments promise to impact US policy and regional stability; namely, the failed attempt by Republic of Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol to declare martial law which resulted in his impeachment, and the political turmoil in Japan that has left the Liberal Democratic Party for the first time in decades finding itself at the helm of a minority government. Elsewhere (and largely overlooked), the usual spate of multilateral meetings took place in the second half of the year—the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders’ Meeting, the G20 gathering, the East Asia Summit and companion ministerial-level ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the BRICS Summit, etc. — amid enhanced military activity and enhanced trilateral/minilateral cooperation.

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

2024 closes with new governments primed to lead in the US and Japan. A surprise decision by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio to [step away](#) from leadership of his party in August led to an unprecedented race to succeed him. Nine members of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) fought for the chance to become president of the LDP on Sept. 27, and in a surprisingly tight race, Shigeru Ishiba [won the honor](#) and thus [became](#) the 102nd prime minister of Japan on Oct. 1. Within days, Ishiba [called](#) a Lower House election for Oct. 27. The LDP [lost](#) dramatically, and in the Nov. 11 vote in the Diet, Ishiba’s LDP and its partner Komeito [formed](#) a minority coalition government. The US similarly was in the throes of political contest. On Nov. 5, Donald Trump [won](#) a decisive victory in the presidential election, and in the days that followed, the Republicans were declared winners in both the House and the Senate as well.

While Trump’s inauguration will not be until January 2025, his transition team began immediately to announce candidates for his Cabinet and for the many political appointments needed to fill out his new

administration. There was little doubt that this would be a far more robust challenge to the status quo than Trump marshaled during his first term.

The US-Japan alliance continues to be a fundamental feature of US strategy in the Indo-Pacific. The bilateral agenda for strategic coordination has grown considerably, and significant changes in Japanese defense preparedness are underway. US forces, too, are adapting to the needs of the growing military imbalance in the region. Trilateral US-Japan-South Korea security ties have deepened, and a new trilateral with the Philippines seems promising. Across the region and globally, the US and Japan have joined in broader coalitions of strategic cooperation. And yet, there is concern that this burgeoning agenda of strategic cooperation could flounder as domestic priorities take center stage in both Washington and Tokyo.

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BY SOURABH GUPTA, INSTITUTE FOR CHINA-AMERICA STUDIES

US-China relations through 2024 remained marked by a paradox. On the one hand, ties displayed a distinct stabilization. The two sides translated their leaders' modest "San Francisco Vision" into reality. Cabinet officials and the numerous working groups met in earnest and produced outcomes, functional cooperation was deepened though differences emerged, sensitive issues were carefully managed, and effort was devoted to improving the relationship's political optics. US electoral politics, or threat of Chinese interference in the elections, did not materially impinge on ties. On the other hand, the negative tendencies in US-China relations deepened. With its time in office winding down, the Biden administration went into regulatory overdrive to deepen the "selective decoupling" of the two countries' advanced technology ecosystems. China methodically responded in kind using its now-robust economic lawfare toolkit. The chasm in strategic perceptions remained just as wide. Donald Trump's return to the Oval Office portends a period of disruptive unpredictability in ties, although "Tariff Man" Trump can reliably be expected to enact additional impositions on Chinese imports.

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

The last several reporting periods of Comparative Connections have featured little drama in US relations with the two Koreas. A lot of important changes happened—a burgeoning Washington-Seoul-Tokyo trilateral, Pyongyang's advancing nuclear weapons program, etc.—but these developments were mostly incremental. However, the June-December 2024 reporting period—the final Comparative Connections—has featured bombshells, both metaphorically and literally. The most spectacular event was South Korean president Yoon Suk Yeol going full rogue authoritarian and recklessly declaring martial law at 11pm on December 3 in order to carry out a military "self-coup d'état." That is, Yoon annulled democratic processes and civil constitutional protections, arrogated all political and executive power to himself and the military,

and attempted to suspend the national assembly. This shocking step toward tyranny—considered long-relegated to the distant past of South Korea’s developmental dictatorships of the 1950s-1980s—was as badly conceived as it was executed, farcically apart after less than three hours, when legislators (mostly from the opposition) breached the cordon of deployed soldiers around the national assembly, entered the plenary chamber, and voted 190-0 to revoke the martial law decree.

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BY AKHIL RAMESH, PACIFIC FORUM

In 2021, when President Biden took office, the US-India relationship was riding on the positive momentum created by successive US presidents since President George W Bush. Over the four years of the Biden administration, with few positive developments and several other tensions, the partnership was stress-tested across domains. For watchers of the US-India bilateral partnership, the Biden administration’s denouement vis-a-vis the partnership with India was disappointing and underwhelming. While several key supply chain diversification initiatives materialized, issues surrounding India’s position toward Russia—in the aftermath of the latter’s invasion of Ukraine—its alleged involvement in the killing of a Khalistan separatist and lastly Washington’s position on the interim government in Bangladesh highlighted the divergences between the two democracies. For the US-India partnership, President Biden’s term in office could be described as one that alienated an already allyship/treaty-averse India, pushing it further into groupings such as BRICS and other emerging non-Western multilateral institutions. The last eight months were no different. Nonetheless, domestic political developments in both India and the US could potentially set the stage for a recourse in the spiraling US-India bilateral partnership.

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BY CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

In the second half of 2024, Southeast Asia faced growing headwinds that challenged its longstanding principles of neutrality in external conflict and, above all, “ASEAN Centrality” in regional affairs. Maritime competition between the Philippines and China around the Second Thomas and Sabina Shoals intensified, causing Philippine President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr., to warn Beijing that there would be serious repercussions if Chinese naval vessels crossed a “red line” in the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Overtures from Moscow to several Southeast Asian nations for increased security cooperation presented two worrisome complications: a more pro-active Russian military role and the implications of the strengthening China-Russia alliance on the region’s security. A threat internal to the region, the civil war in Myanmar, developed new complications when China stepped up its diplomatic and security presence in the country to protect its economic interests. In Indonesia, however, an internal threat may be abating as the Jemmah Islamiyah publicly agreed to dissolve.

During these challenges, political shifts could color Southeast Asian responses to security threats. Political transition in Vietnam and Indonesia ushered in new leaders whose geo-political alignments are not yet

clear. Thailand underwent a peaceful shift of prime ministers, but the process demonstrated that the country could remain internally focused for the near-term. The political transition in Japan raised questions of whether Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru would continue Tokyo's growing security relations with its Southeast Asia partners. Throughout the summer and into the fall, US presidential politics loomed over the region. The election in November of Donald Trump raised concerns in Southeast Asia over Washington's future relations with its security partners; the impact on Southeast Asia of a stiffer US posture toward China; and blanket tariffs, which could erode bilateral relations and impede cooperation in security and other key policy areas.

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

China marked the end of 2024 and four years of often intense competition for regional influence with the Biden administration and its allies and partners by continuing strong opposition to outside interference and working to advance China's leading position among most Southeast Asian governments. The Biden government made significant gains at China's expense, notably in the Philippines, a contrast with the decline in US regional influence and China's ascendance that occurred during the first Trump administration. Looking forward, Beijing will seek to advance Chinese influence as a reliable partner and stabilizing presence amid widespread regional and global uncertainties caused by growing economic protectionism, wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and perceived negative implications of a second Trump administration.

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

Lai Ching-te insisted at his May inauguration that Taiwan is sovereign and not subordinate to China. Beijing reacted by increasing cross-Strait tensions. China's latest rounds of military exercises make clear that it is preparing to use force or at least gray-zone intimidation to effect reunification. Taiwan's opposition Kuomintang continued unofficial contacts with the Chinese Communist Party, seeking reconciliation but risking aiding China's efforts to fragment Taiwan. Taiwan's TSMC continues to expand in Taiwan and overseas in ways that keep it at the center of the global high-tech economy. Taiwan has increased its purchases of military equipment from the US and opened negotiations on a bilateral tax agreement. Beijing views US support for Taiwan as collaboration in Lai's separatism. US President-elect Donald Trump has said that Taiwan stole the production of semiconductors from the US and should pay for US military support. However, this animus may be balanced by the outspoken Taiwan supporters he has chosen for his national security team. Can Taiwan overcome its internal divisions and Trump's Taiwan

skepticism? Can China, Taiwan, and the US step back from a confrontational spiral? None of this will be easy, but failure may put Taiwan's future at risk.

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BY AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

Inter-Korean relations, already bad, got worse in 2024. North Korea launched a bizarre new campaign, sending balloons bearing trash. South Korea reacted by fully suspending the already defunct North-South military pact and resuming propaganda broadcasts at the DMZ. In August, ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol announced a new policy of unification under liberal democracy, which—despite offering dialogue—left no place for the DPRK or Kim Jong Un. The latter took umbrage at Seoul for exaggerating flood casualties in the North, but offered no figure of his own. It is unclear whether North Korea has revised its constitution to declare South Korea irredeemably hostile, as no text has been published. In October the North blew up inter-Korean road and rail links. In December, Yoon blew up his own presidency by briefly declaring martial law, plunging South Korea into political chaos. As of now the North has not taken advantage of this.

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SEE-WON BYUN, SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY

A rebound in China-ROK diplomacy raised optimism after a slow start to 2024, paving the way for the summit between Xi Jinping and Yoon SukYeol on Nov. 15. They met on the sidelines of APEC Peru before attending the G20 summit in Brazil. Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Cho Tae-yul met in Beijing on May 13, facilitating the China-ROK-Japan trilateral summit and Yoon's meeting with Premier Li Qiang in Seoul. As China-DPRK exchanges dwindled compared to the first third of this year, Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un's summits with Putin in May and June raised questions about the direction of China's Korea policy. Donald Trump's reelection in November intensified debate on the regional security and economic implications of US-China competition.

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BY JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

Signs of a possible improvement in Sino-Japanese relations followed a meeting between newly elected Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru and Xi Jinping on the sidelines of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)

gathering in Peru on November, with the two exchanging vague promises of cooperation. Separately, China softened its position on various issues, saying that an unexpected obstruction had accidentally pushed its spy plane into Japanese airspace, allowing the resumption of imports of Nishikigoi tropical fish that had been suspended since November 2023 and reinstating visa-free entry that had been suspended in the wake of COVID. The government also indicated that it will gradually resume imports of Japanese seafood and remove a buoy in what Japan considers its exclusive economic zone, though neither has happened yet. Japanese skeptics pointed out that with no resolution on these and a number of other issues such as the detention of Japanese nationals on vaguely worded charges and sporadic violent attacks against Japanese children, it is premature to speak of Xi's long-postponed state visit to Tokyo.

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

The year 2025 marks the 60th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Seoul and Tokyo. It was originally expected to be a milestone year for bilateral ties and a fitting culmination of nearly three years of hard work by two leaders: President Yoon Suk Yeol and former Prime Minister Kishida Fumio. But that outlook now seems hung in the balance, with new unknowns on the horizon—both expected and unexpected. In this final issue on Japan-Korea relations, we discuss the key factors that are likely to impact the future of bilateral ties and the Camp David trilateral in four major areas: 1) Trump 2.0, 2) political uncertainty in Seoul, 3) weak political support in Tokyo, and 4) resurfacing history issues. The final months of 2024 have brought new unknowns in the shape of leadership changes in the United States, Japan, and potentially South Korea. It is now possible that come January 2025, the leadership trio—President Biden, Prime Minister Kishida, and President Yoon that has made the Korea-Japan rapprochement and the unprecedented trilateral partnership possible will be gone from office.

What happens next is impossible to predict, but one hopes that the hard-fought and laboriously planned institutionalization of bilateral and trilateral ties will withstand these changes in leadership. This will be the first true test for Seoul-Tokyo-Washington trilateral partnership since the Camp David summit in August 2023.

Japan's new prime minister, Ishiba Shigeru, and President Yoon agreed in mid-November to "further elevate the bilateral relationship to new heights" towards 2025 and to promote comprehensive cooperation in areas such as "politics, security, economy, culture and social security." However, following President Yoon's declaration of martial law on Dec. 3, the future of Seoul-Tokyo relations faces a great deal of uncertainty. Given that it was President Yoon's political will that initially facilitated rapprochement, depending on what happens to his political future and who comes into office in South Korea, Seoul-Tokyo relations may experience challenges. While conflicts over long-standing history issues have been consciously minimized during this period of rapprochement, they have not gone away, as demonstrated by their inability to reach a consensus on a joint event on the controversial Sado mine.

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BY YU BIN, WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY

The election of Donald Trump as the 47th US president changed the chemistry between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing so much and yet so little. It was so much because the war-ending rhetoric of the president-elect was in sharp contrast to his predecessor's [steadfast support of Ukraine](#). It was so little because the war in Ukraine not only continued but even escalated after Trump's decisive electoral win in early November as the Biden administration rushed arms to Ukraine with much relaxed restrictions (on ATACMS, etc.). Meanwhile, Beijing-Moscow relations continued to broaden and deepen throughout 2024 despite Trump's repeated [vows to split](#) the Russia-China entente. Xi and Putin met three times in six months (May, July, and October). Their joint enterprises (SCO, BRICS, etc.) also expanded steadily while experiencing growing pains. Meanwhile, the two large powers considerably stepped up their mil-mil interactions with more exercises, exchanges, and joint patrols. It remains to be seen how Trump would operationalize his campaign rhetorics not just to capture a pivotal position within the Moscow-Beijing-Washington triangle, but more importantly, to avert the [Kissingerian dark prophecy](#) of a grave new world of WMD and AI racing toward World War III.

AUSTRALIA-US/EAST ASIA RELATIONS

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BY GRAEME DOBELL, AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC POLICY INSTITUTE

Australia's politicians prepare for the national election that must be held by May. In judging the first term of Anthony Albanese's Labor government, the key concern for Australia voters is the cost of living, while international issues are bracketed by the United States and China—the return of President Donald Trump and the cooling of China's trade coercion of Australia. The Albanese government tells Australians they face “[fraught and fragile](#) global conditions” in a “a time of [great global uncertainty](#),” in “the most [complex and challenging](#) strategic environment since the Second World War.” Canberra's approach to the Trump administration will emphasize traditional alliance ties while reinforcing new elements: AUKUS nuclear submarines, the Quad, the increase of US forces on Australian soil, and steps toward free trade in defense equipment and technology to achieve more integration between US and Australian industries.

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Forum (ARF), the BRICS Summit, etc. —amid enhanced military activity and enhanced trilateral/minilateral cooperation.

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Trump Triumphs



Figure 1 PM Modi made the remarks at the G20 session on “Social Inclusion and the Fight Against Hunger and Poverty.” Photo: Prime Minister of India official webpage.

There should be no repeat of the Jan. 6, 2020 mayhem as Vice President Kamala Harris graciously accepted defeat and congratulated president-elect Donald Trump on his Nov. 6 victory. Trump was quick in identifying his [planned nominees](#) for key national security posts, including Sen. [Marco Rubio](#) of Florida to be secretary of state and Florida Republican Rep. [Michael Waltz](#) as National Security Advisor. Rubio is expected to sail through the Senate confirmation process and National Security Council members are not subject to ratification. This holds true as well for Trump’s choice of former State Department official [Alex Wong](#) to serve as deputy national security adviser. Wong served as deputy special representative for North Korea during the first Trump administration and was closely involved in arranging Trump’s summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

One thing Rubio and Waltz and other national security-related potential nominees, like [U.S. ambassador](#) to the United Nations nominee Congresswoman Elise Stefanik (R-NY) and CIA Director-designate (and former Director of National Intelligence) John Ratcliffe have in common is strong anti-China and anti-authoritarian views. Prospective Secretary of Defense (and former Fox News host) [Pete Hegseth](#) would join this chorus if his nomination is approved (which seemed somewhat likely but is by no means assured at this writing).

The real wild card on the national security team is former Hawaii Democratic Rep. [Tulsi Gabbard](#) who Trump has chosen to serve as his director of national intelligence, a job for which (in our not-so-humble opinions) she is uniquely

unqualified. At this writing she appears to be the candidate most likely to be rejected by the Senate.

On the economic front, Trump has identified hedge fund CEO [Scott Bessent](#) to be Treasury secretary and billionaire [Harold Lutnick](#) as Commerce secretary. Both are strong proponents of tariffs; Lutnick, among other duties, oversees the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative.

Still to come will be the under-secretaries and assistant secretaries for the various Asia-related posts who will be presenting their bosses with policy alternatives and assessments. They in turn will be guided by the new administration’s key strategy documents such as the White House-produced National Security Strategy and the Pentagon’s National Defense Strategy.

What we think we know . . .

. . . based on what he's done before.

Unlike most who have come before or since, Trump is more transactional, more unpredictable (which he sees as a virtue and many others see as a vice), more confrontational (with friends and potential foes alike), and more mercurial. When it comes to the promotion of democracy and values-based policies, however, he is much less ideological (some would say less sanctimonious) than many of his predecessors. His foreign policy approach is more trade-based (or more accurately deficit-based), than security-oriented. He is more unilateralist than multilateralist and places less value in alliances and like-minded security relationships than both Democratic and Republican predecessors.

His focus is primarily domestic, not international, and while his policies can have significant impact on others, “America First” means how does it impact the US’ (or his own personal) bottom line, with little concern for the consequences to others. He also seemingly rejects any belief in US exceptionalism and all the burdens and responsibilities that it creates.

Most importantly, we have learned that you can’t take what he says at face value. Normally, if the president says something, it is usually seen as a policy pronouncement. But with Trump, it may just be a bargaining point, or a wild random thought, or even a deliberate lie (or “alternative truth”). Then-President Trump once [referred to Chinese President Xi Jinping](#) as a “brilliant

leader” and “great man” only a few days after calling him an “enemy” who is ripping off America. When pressed about this inconsistency, he [responded](#): “Sorry. It’s the way I negotiate,” further noting that “it’s done very well for me over the years, and it’s doing even better for the country.” Separating when he is speaking as “commander-in-chief” from when he is acting as “negotiator-in-chief” has been, and will remain, no easy task.

Someone once said “Wagner’s music is not as bad as it sounds.” The same can be said for Trump’s foreign policy in his first administration, if you focus on what he actually did and on stated policies in documents like the National Security Strategy, not tweets. Countering this somewhat comforting thought, however, is the fact that many of the internationalists surrounding and advising Trump during his first administration, like former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, former-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and his former UN Ambassador (and main primary opponent) Nikki Haley are not likely to be involved in the upcoming administration.

... based on what he's saying and doing now.

While the world has changed in many ways since he was last president, there appears to be very little change in the way Trump sees the world. While his relentless focus on the bottom line for the US and the disregard for other nations’ interests is often derided, the same can be said about virtually every national leader; they are elected (or self-appointed) to look out for their own country’s national interests, first and foremost. Americans like to believe we have been held, and/or have held ourselves, to a higher standard. Trump, in this regard, is more like every other world leader, and less like the ideal picture we have painted for ourselves.

Trump is also doubling down on his America First mantra, based on the eclectic assortment of potential cabinet and other senior officials being proposed thus far (and remember, with the exception of his national security advisory staff, most face confirmation hearings, a task made easier, but by no means certain even with Republican control of the Senate). On the other hand, unlike many of his domestic-oriented choices, most of his national security choices, as noted above, are mostly internationalists who are more pro-alliance and pro-engagement, and more anti-authoritarian than Trump often appears to be.

Meanwhile, the hardening of anti-China sentiment, which grew during the first Trump administration and then was at least perpetuated if not intensified during the Biden administration, appears likely to continue to intensify, for economic and ideological reasons as well as security concerns. To be fair, a lot of this is driven not by US preferences or predetermination but by Chinese predatory practices and increased aggressiveness, which also seem destined to continue if not increase.

Even before the failed declaration of martial law (more on this below), South Koreans were nervously awaiting the onset of Trump 2.0. The sense of urgency that drove the Biden/Kishida/Yoon administrations (now all gone or going) to further institutionalize the Camp David agreements was to prevent backsliding if Trump were reelected. Koreans were also nervous about a possible renewed “bromance” between Trump and Kim Jong Un; Alex Wong’s selection as deputy national security advisor has added to this anxiety. Trump’s intentions and desires (or lack thereof) aside, one wonders if Kim would agree to another summit even if one were proposed. He’s already gotten what he desired most (international recognition) and is unlikely to agree on the next diplomatic step, which would be a visit to Trump’s home turf. It’s also hard to imagine Xi or Putin pressuring Kim to make nice with Trump, at least not while Ukraine is still boiling over and China-US relations remain strained.

Despite headlines to the contrary, what Trump plans to do about Ukraine is also unclear. His fascination with Putin aside, his pledge to end the Ukraine War on day one requires Putin’s acquiescence. Note that Trump spokesmen have claimed the two have spoken and Trump has told Putin not to make things worse, advice Putin has clearly ignored. While Trump is likely to cut back if not curtail US financial support to Ukraine, he is equally likely to remove remaining restrictions on Ukraine’s use of US-provided weapons if Putin drags his feet, thus making the great negotiator look bad. Only time will tell.

... but really don't know!

While all that we have just said may very well continue to hold true, we must caveat it all by saying that, when it comes to Trump’s future policies, we are all guessing. Everything we just

CHRONOLOGY OF REGIONAL OVERVIEW

MAY-NOVEMBER 2024

May 1, 2024: Australian officials [decline](#) to comment on reports that two Indian spies were secretly expelled from Australia four years ago.

May 1, 2024: South Korea [considers](#) sharing advanced military technology with the US, UK, and Australia through AUKUS.

May 2, 2024: US [sanctions](#) 20 companies from China and Hong Kong that have allegedly assisted Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

May 2, 2024: France and Japan [agree](#) to start formal talks on a reciprocal troop access deal.

May 2, 2024: South Korea's foreign ministry [raises](#) the terrorism alert level for five diplomatic offices in the region citing intelligence that North Korea may attempt to harm its officials.

May 2, 2024: Philippines [summons](#) a Chinese diplomat to protest Beijing's use of water cannons against Filipino vessels at a disputed shoal in the South China Sea.

May 2, 2024: Taiwan's defense ministry [says](#) that China has carried out a "joint combat readiness patrol" near the island for the second time in a week.

May 3, 2024: China [publicizes](#) what it claims is an unwritten 2016 agreement with the Philippines over access to South China Sea islands.

May 6, 2024: President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. [says](#) the Philippines will not use water cannons or any offensive weapons in the South China Sea.

May 6, 2024: Australia [says](#) that a Chinese fighter jet endangered an Australian military helicopter during an "unsafe" and

"unacceptable" confrontation over the Yellow Sea.

May 6, 2024: French President Emmanuel Macron and President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen [warn](#) China's Xi that the EU needs to protect itself from cheap Chinese imports to rebalance trade ties and urge him to curb support for Russia in its war in Ukraine.

May 6, 2024: President Macron [hosts](#) China's Xi for private meetings after a high-stakes state visit in Paris dominated by trade disputes and Russia's war in Ukraine.

May 9, 2024: The senior US official for North Korea [discusses](#) the country with Chinese counterpart in Tokyo and expresses concerns about the forcible repatriation of North Koreans from China.

May 9, 2024: India [replaces](#) 80 soldiers on the Maldives with civilians after a demand by President Muizzu who has pivoted the archipelago's ties toward China.

May 9, 2024: China's military [criticizes](#) a US destroyer's passage through the Taiwan Strait.

May 9, 2024: India [says](#) that Canada has shared no evidence to back its allegation that the Indian government was involved in the slaying of a Sikh separatist leader in Canada last year, despite the recent arrests of three Indian men in the crime.

May 10, 2024: Philippines' national security adviser [calls](#) for the expulsion of Chinese diplomats over an alleged leak of a phone conversation with a Filipino military official.

May 15, 2024: Top envoys from the US and China [talk](#) in Geneva to discuss ways to ensure

that emerging artificial intelligence technologies don't become existential risks.

May 16, 2024: Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi [agree](#) to deepen their "strategic partnership" while scolding the US for moves that they said threatened their countries.

May 16, 2024: South Korea's finance minister [says](#) Seoul and Beijing should seek better economic cooperation on the supply chain for raw materials.

May 17, 2024: North Korea [fires](#) suspected short-range ballistic missiles off its east coast, a day after South Korea and the US flew powerful fighter jets in a joint drill.

May 17, 2024: Cambodia and China [begin](#) 15-day military exercises as questions grow about Beijing's increasing influence in the Southeast Asian nation.

May 17, 2024: Sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, Kim Yo Jong, again [denies](#) that her country has exported any weapons to Russia, and labeled speculation on North Korea-Russian arms dealings as "the most absurd paradox."

May 19, 2024: China's commerce ministry [launches](#) an anti-dumping probe into POM copolymers, a type of engineering plastic imported from the EU, US, Japan, and Taiwan.

May 20, 2024: Philippines [challenges](#) China to open Scarborough Shoal to international scrutiny after it accused Beijing of destroying the shoal's marine environment.

May 20, 2024: Taiwan President Lai Ching-te [asks](#) China to stop its military and political threats, saying in his inauguration speech that peace was the only choice and that Beijing had to respect the choice of the Taiwanese people.

May 23, 2024: US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen [says](#) that she wants market-driven countries to present a "wall of opposition" to

China over its state-driven industrial policies, an issue she is pushing at a G7 finance meeting.

May 23, 2024: China's military [conducts](#) two-day exercises around Taiwan in response to "separatist" forces seeking independence.

May 24, 2024: Taiwan [tracks](#) dozens of Chinese warplanes and navy vessels off its coast, the second day of a large military exercise launched by Beijing to show its anger over the island's inauguration of new leaders who refuse to accept that Taiwan is part of China.

May 24, 2024: Philippines [says](#) it will continue to build security alliances and stage joint combat drills in disputed waters to defend its territorial interests.

May 24, 2024: Two men [are](#) to go on trial for allegedly helping Hong Kong authorities gather intelligence in the UK.

May 24, 2024: A former CIA [officer](#) and contract linguist for the FBI accused of spying for China for at least a decade pleads guilty Friday in a federal courtroom in Honolulu.

May 27, 2024: North Korean rocket [carrying](#) its 2nd spy satellite explodes shortly after launch.

May 28, 2024: North Korea's unsuccessful satellite [launch](#) likely involved a new rocket that uses a safer fuel, experts say, as the country advances its rocket technology with Russian assistance.

May 28, 2024: Taiwan opposition [passes](#) contentious bill to empower legislature to launch investigations and hit non-compliant individuals with a criminal "contempt of parliament" charge.

May 28, 2024: A US State Department spokesperson reiterates the [need](#) for China to play a "productive" role in countering North Korea's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs.

May 28, 2024: Hong Kong national security police [arrest](#) six people across the city under a new security law for alleged seditious intent, including a pro-democracy barrister already behind bars.

May 29, 2024: North Korea [launches](#) hundreds of balloons carrying trash and manure across the inter-Korean border, Seoul's military said Wednesday.

May 29, 2024: Japan's Kishida [meets](#) senior Chinese diplomat, pledges to “fully utilize” all available dialogue platforms with China.

May 29, 2024: Philippines and Brunei [sign](#) deal on closer maritime cooperation, with eye on Beijing in South China Sea.

May 29, 2024: South Korea and the United Arab Emirates [agree](#) to expand bilateral exchanges, in areas from energy to investment, as the two countries aim to strengthen their relationship.

May 30, 2024: Hong Kong court [convicts](#) 14 democracy activists in 'HK47' security case.

May 30, 2024: China [launches](#) four satellites from the sea in push to finish Internet of Things constellation by end of year.

May 30, 2024: Foreign governments and activists [criticize](#) Hong Kong security law verdicts, which China defends.

May 31, 2024: China and US defense chiefs [spar](#) over Taiwan at Shangri-la Dialogue.

May 31, 2024: North Korea [says](#) leader Kim Jong Un supervised drills simulating preemptive attacks on South Korea.

May 31, 2024: US [imposes](#) visa restrictions on Chinese, Hong Kong officials.

May 31, 2024: North Korea [conducts](#) GPS jamming attack for 3rd day. South Korea [warns](#) of “unendurable” actions against North Korea unless it stops provocations.

June 3, 2024: North Korea [says](#) it will stop sending trash-filled balloons into South Korea but will resume if South Koreans send anti-North leaflets over the border.

June 3, 2024: South Korea's National Security Council decides to [suspend](#) 2018 inter-Korean tension reduction pact following North Korea's trash-carrying balloon campaign.

June 4, 2024: South Korea [restores](#) all border military activities restricted under 2018 pact with North Korea.

June 4, 2024: China [expresses](#) “firm opposition” against South Korea for “erroneous” remarks on the Taiwan issue in trilateral discussions with the US and Japan.

June 4, 2024: India's Modi-led [alliance](#) clinches narrow win in elections.

June 4, 2024: China's Chang'e-6 [lifts](#) off from far side of the moon with rock samples.

June 5, 2024: South Korea's National Intelligence Service [detects](#) signs of North Korea demolishing part of Donghae inter-Korean railway.

June 5, 2024: Turkey [urges](#) Chinese authorities to protect cultural rights of Muslim Uyghurs.

June 5, 2024: Japan [approves](#) treaty for next-gen fighter development with the UK and Italy.

June 6, 2024: South Korea defector group [sends](#) leaflets to Pyongyang in defiance of North Korea's previous warnings.

June 6, 2024: Philippines [accuses](#) Chinese coast guard of “barbaric” blocking of medical evacuation.

June 6, 2024: Two British judges [resign](#) from Hong Kong court. One cites the city's “political situation.”

June 6, 2024: South Korea's Navy fleet to [leave](#) for Hawaii to join biennial RIMPAC exercise.

June 6, 2024: Japan, US, and South Korean coast guards [hold](#) first joint drill off Japan's coast as China concerns rise.

June 7, 2024: India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi is [elected](#) as leader of coalition and set to form new government.

June 7, 2024: North Korea, China, and Russia are [expanding](#) nuclear arsenals at "breakneck" pace, says Pranay Vaddi, senior director for arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation at the US National Security Council.

June 10, 2024: Indian PM Modi [names](#) Cabinet for his coalition government despite his party's losses in the most recent elect.

June 10, 2024: North Korea leader's sister [warns](#) of "new responses" against South Korea's loudspeaker broadcasts and leafleting.

June 10, 2024: US ambassador to Japan [urges](#) Tokyo to help quickly replenish US missile inventory.

June 11, 2024: China [urges](#) broader BRICS role as Western sanctions mount.

June 11, 2024: Hong Kong's chief executive [fires](#) back after a UK judge warns of "totalitarian" turn, claiming some officials seek to "weaponize" UK influence.

June 11, 2024: Four US instructors at a Chinese university are [stabbed](#) in park.

June 11, 2024: Taiwan's Lai [sends](#) legislative power bill back to opposition on grounds that it is unconstitutional.

June 11, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korea announce they will [launch](#) trilateral coordination body this year.

June 12, 2024: India [urges](#) Russia to return its citizens recruited by Russia's army after two die in Ukraine.

June 13, 2024: Chinese Premier Li Qiang and New Zealand's Prime Minister Christopher Luxon [hail](#) close ties as they sign trade deals in Wellington.

June 14, 2024: South Korea and Uzbekistan [sign](#) a critical mineral supply chain agreement.

June 14, 2024: Japan and Ukraine [sign](#) a deal for long-term support at the G7.

June 14, 2024: Chinese journalist who [promoted](#) #MeToo movement is sentenced to five years in prison.

June 14, 2024: South Korea calls on Japan to [address](#) the "entire history" of Sado mine in UNESCO Heritage application.

June 17, 2024: Indian suspect in plot to [kill](#) Sikh separatist pleads not guilty in US court.

June 17, 2024: Philippines pledges to [resist](#) China's "reckless behavior" in South China Sea.

June 17, 2024: Chinese premier [agrees](#) with Australia to "properly manage" differences.

June 17, 2024: NATO chief [calls](#) for close ties with Indo-Pacific partners amid Russia's alignment with North Korea and China.

June 18-19, 2024: Russian President Vladimir Putin [visits](#) North Korea as ties deepen.

June 18, 2024: Philippine officials [say](#) Chinese forces seized two navy boats in disputed shoal, injuring sailors.

June 18, 2024: Thailand's former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra [indicted for royal](#) defamation.

June 18, 2024: South Korean soldiers [fire](#) warning shots after North Korean troops cross border, apparently in error.

June 18, 2024: China [accuses](#) US of “malign intention” to discredit its COVID vaccines following revelations that the US spread information questioning the efficacy of China’s vaccines in the Philippines.

June 19, 2024: Malaysia [reaffirms](#) one China policy and rejects Taiwan independence.

June 20, 2024: US and China [hold](#) high-level talks on anti-narcotics cooperation.

June 20, 2024: North Korean soldiers [cross](#) border for third time in June, according to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

June 20, 2024: Putin [signs](#) at least a dozen deals with Vietnamese counterpart and offers to supply fossil fuels, including natural gas, in bid to shore up ties in Asia to offset Moscow’s growing isolation.

June 21, 2024: Philippines says it did not [consider](#) invoking US pact over South China Sea clash.

June 21, 2024: China [threatens](#) death penalty for “diehard” Taiwan separatists.

June 21, 2024: Taiwan opposition [rejects](#) review of controversial legislative power bill.

June 21, 2024: South Korea [summons](#) Russian ambassador as tensions rise with North Korea.

June 21, 2024: China [says](#) Japan has “no right to intervene” in sea dispute with Philippines.

June 21, 2024: Putin [warns](#) South Korea's arms supply to Ukraine would be “very big mistake.”

June 21, 2024: China and Australia announce that they will [issue](#) five-year visas for tourism and business.

June 24, 2024: South Korea and US [sign](#) a MOU on diplomatic intelligence cooperation.

June 24, 2024: US report [returns](#) South Korea to Tier 1 group for human trafficking elimination efforts.

June 24, 2024: UN aviation agency [voices](#) grave concern over North Korea's GPS signal jamming.

June 24, 2024: North Korea [sends](#) trash-carrying balloons again to South Korea.

June 24, 2024: Philippines [accuses](#) China of using “illegal force” to deliberately disrupt resupply mission.

June 25, 2024: India’s foreign minister expresses [concern](#) about violence in Myanmar in a meeting with his Burmese counterpart and urges early democratic transition.

June 25, 2024: Taiwan [reports](#) that China has conducted a “combat patrol” near the island as Beijing vows to hunt independence “diehards.”

June 25, 2024: Interfax says Russia will [resume](#) direct passenger trains to North Korea in July.

June 26, 2024: North Korea [says](#) it successfully conducted multiple warhead missile capability test.

June 26, 2024: North Korean missile launch [ends](#) in mid-air explosion amid possibility of hypersonic missile test.

June 26, 2024: North Korea [sends](#) trash-carrying balloons to South Korea for third day.

June 26, 2024: Sri Lanka [reaches](#) \$5.8bn debt restructuring deal with Japan, India, and others.

June 27–Aug. 1, 2024: 29th iteration of Exercise Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) takes place around the Hawaiian Islands, involving 29 nations, 40 surface ships, 3 submarines, 14 national land forces, more than 150 aircraft, and 25,000 personnel.

June 27, 2024: South Korea and US [wrap](#) up 4th round of talks on defense cost sharing.

June 27, 2024: South Korean military [dismisses](#) North Korea's claim of successful multiple-warhead missile test.

June 27, 2024: South Korea [slaps](#) sanctions on North Korea's Missile Administration, 4 Russian vessels for violating UN resolutions.

June 27, 2024: South Korea, US and Japan [hold](#) 1st trilateral "Freedom Edge" exercise.

June 28, 2024: US, UK and France [clash](#) with Russia at UN over allegations that Moscow has violated arms embargo North Korea.

June 28, 2024: Yoon vows to [overcome](#) North Korean threats through cooperation with the US and Japan.

June 28, 2024: South Korea and US chip lobby groups [discuss](#) ties in technology and the supply chain.

June 28, 2024: South Korean military [unveils](#) video of North Korean missile exploding in midair, a dismissal of North Korea's claim of a successful test of a multiple-warhead missile.

June 28, 2024: Australian diplomat [describes](#) adding AUKUS partners as "complicated," suggesting additional members will not be added to the tripartite pact.

June 28, 2024: North Korea [claims](#) successful multi-warhead missile test

June 28, 2024: Japan [protests](#) sex assault cases involving US military on Okinawa and their delayed disclosure.

June 30, 2024: Japan successfully [launches](#) advanced Earth observation satellite on new flagship H3 rocket.

June 30, 2024: Surveys [show](#) Chinese economy growing but at modest pace.

June 30, 2024: North Korea test-[launches](#) two ballistic missiles, after end of new US-South Korea-Japan drill.

July 1, 2024: North Korea [says](#) it test-fired new tactical ballistic missile capable of carrying super-large warhead.

July 1, 2024: South Koreans [surge](#) to sign online petition to impeach president, resulting in delays and disruptions.

July 2, 2024: CSIS report calls North Korea's [sending](#) of trash-filled balloons a "form of soft terrorism."

July 2, 2024: South Korea [resumes](#) border artillery drills on land for the first time in six years.

July 2, 2024: China and Philippines [hold](#) talks to ease tensions after clash in disputed waters.

July 2, 2024: Taiwan says China [seizes](#) fishing boat near Chinese coast.

July 2, 2024: Indonesia announces hefty [tariffs](#) on Chinese-made goods.

July 2, 2024: Taiwan [raises](#) alert level for travel to China after new legal guidelines targeting "Taiwan Independence."

July 2, 2024: Malaysian court [tosses](#) jailed ex-Prime Minister Najib's bid to serve graft sentence in house arrest.

July 3, 2024: Leaders of Russia and China [meet](#) at a Central Asian summit in show of deepening cooperation.

July 3, 2024: Taiwan says it was [warned](#) by China to not interfere in the detention of Taiwanese boat crew.

July 3, 2024: Australia spy agency [moves](#) intelligence data to cloud in Amazon deal.

July 4, 2024: Man who [stabbed](#) South Korea's opposition leader Lee Jae-myung sentenced to 15 years in prison.

July 4, 2024: Philippines turns [down](#) US help amid South China Sea tensions - military chief.

July 7, 2024: Sister of North Korean [calls](#) South Korea's live-fire drills "suicidal hysteria."

July 8, 2024: Elite North Korea military trainees [visit](#) Russia amid deepening ties.

July 8, 2024: Yoon says Russia should choose whether South Korea or North Korea is more important.

July 8, 2024: Australia [pledges](#) more funds for Pacific banking amid China interest.

July 8, 2024: Philippines [rejects](#) China's accusation of environmental damage in South China Sea.

July 8, 2024: Putin [meets](#) Modi in Russia on his first visit since Moscow sent troops into Ukraine.

July 8, 2024: Japan and Philippines [sign](#) a defense pact in the face of shared alarm over China.

July 8, 2024: Chinese student pleads [guilty](#) to violating US espionage act.

July 9-11th: United States hosts the 2024 [NATO Summit](#) in Washington, DC.

July 9, 2024: Yoon pledges to [enhance](#) combined readiness with US against North Korea.

July 9, 2024: Chinese carrier [passes](#) close to Philippines on way to Pacific drills, Taiwan says.

July 9, 2024: Japan must [strengthen](#) NATO ties to safeguard global peace, PM Kishida says.

July 9, 2024: North Korea-Russia [arms](#) trade a global threat, says South Korea President Yoon.

July 10, 2024: Thailand [announces](#) new senate, replacing army-appointed lawmakers.

July 10, 2024: New top US envoy to Taiwan [pledges](#) to help the island with self-defense as threats from China loom.

July 10, 2024: NATO leaders strongly [condemn](#) North Korea's weapons exports to Russia.

July 10, 2024: China [launches](#) investigation in response to EU probes of solar, wind power, and other products.

July 10, 2024: NATO [labels](#) China a "decisive enabler" of Russia's war efforts.

July 11, 2024: US and South Korea [sign](#) agreement on integrated nuclear deterrence for Korean Peninsula.

July 11, 2024: Taiwan [monitors](#) Chinese military surge, calls China a threat to stability.

July 11, 2024: South Korea will [deploy](#) laser weapons to shoot down North Korean drones this year, becoming the world's first country to deploy and operate such weapons in the military, the country's arms procurement agency said.

July 11, 2024: China [criticizes](#) a communique from the NATO summit in Washington that described it as decisive enabler of Russia's war effort in Ukraine as biased and "sowing discord."

July 11, 2024: New Zealand PM [Luxon](#) says that his country needed to stand up for the international rules-based order as potential military flashpoints loom in the Indo-Pacific region.

July 11, 2024: Japan navy destroyer [enters](#) Chinese waters near Taiwan, prompting Beijing complaint.

July 12, 2024: Philippine Senate [orders](#) arrest of mayor probed for alleged Chinese crime ties.

July 12, 2024: US renews [call](#) on China to stop aggressive actions in disputed South China Sea.

July 12, 2024: Solomon Islands and China [strengthen](#) ties, worrying the US and its Pacific allies.

July 12, 2024: Australian army private and husband are [accused](#) of spying for Russia.

July 15, 2024: South Korea [warns](#) of end of North Korean regime if Pyongyang uses nuclear weapons.

July 15, 2024: North Korean leader's sister [bristles](#) at anti-Pyongyang leaflets, vows strong response.

July 16, 2024: China, Russia [kick](#) off live-fire naval exercises in South China Sea.

July 16, 2024: Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump says Taiwan should [pay](#) for its own defense, sending TSMC stock down.

July 16, 2024: Taiwan firms [shift](#) supply chains to India from China, trade body chief says.

July 16, 2024: Former North Korean diplomat [stationed](#) in Cuba defected to South Korea last year, Seoul's spy agency says.

July 16, 2024: Korean-American expert on North Korea, Su-Mi Terry, is [accused](#) of acting as agent for South Korea.

July 16, 2024: UN report [condemns](#) North Korea's "extensive, multilayered" system of forced labor.

July 17, 2024: South Korea's KHNP named [preferred](#) bidder to build nuclear plants in Czech Republic.

July 17, 2024: Vietnam files UN [claim](#) to extended continental shelf in South China Sea.

July 17, 2024: China says it has [halted](#) arms-control talks with US over Taiwan.

July 17, 2024: CCP [charts](#) technology- and security-focused development for reviving the economy.

July 18, 2024: US [opens](#) embassy in Vanuatu in latest step in China competition in the Pacific.

July 18, 2024: South Korea [conducts](#) loudspeaker broadcasts at North Korea.

July 18, 2024: North Korea leader Kim [discusses](#) military cooperation with Russian official, KCNA says.

July 18, 2024: Taiwan says it is [committed](#) to strengthening defense after Trump's comments.

July 18, 2024: Japan and the Pacific Islands will [boost](#) security ties as China's influence grows.

July 18, 2024: Jokowi [appoints](#) President-elect Prabowo's nephew as Indonesia vice finance minister.

July 21, 2024: Taiwan [starts](#) annual war games, aiming to closely mimic actual combat.

July 22, 2024: China, Philippines [agree](#) on "provisional arrangement" for South China Sea resupply missions, Manila says.

July 22, 2024: Sirens sound and streets are [deserted](#) as Taiwan simulates Chinese missile strike.

July 22, 2024: Philippine president [orders](#) shutdown of Chinese-run online gambling industry employing thousands.

July 22, 2024: Leader of Myanmar's army government is [named](#) acting president so he can renew state of emergency.

July 23, 2024: Belarus' foreign minister [arrives](#) in North Korea for talks expected to focus on Russia cooperation.

July 23, 2024: Trash [dropped](#) by a North Korean balloon falls on South Korea's presidential compound.

July 23, 2024: Japan protests [against](#) Russia's entry ban on 13 mostly business leaders over sanctions.

July 24, 2024: NORAD says it [tracked](#) Chinese and Russian long-range bombers off Alaska.

July 24, 2024: Japan's population [falls](#) for 15th year with record low births and record high deaths.

July 24, 2024: Philippines and Singapore [broaden](#) defense ties with a new agreement.

July 25, 2024: US [sets](#) up \$10 million reward for info on North Korean malicious cyber actor.

July 25, 2024: China issues rare [praise](#) to Philippine president for ban on Chinese online gambling operators.

July 25, 2024: Ethnic armed groups in Myanmar [claim](#) capture of regional military headquarters and gem mining center.

July 25, 2024: North Korean hackers are [stealing](#) military secrets, the US, UK, and South Korea say in joint statement.

July 25, 2024: India and China agree to [approach](#) border issues with urgency.

July 25, 2024: European Union and Singapore [conclude](#) a digital trade agreement designed to ease cross-border data flows and shape global rules for data.

July 26, 2024: US tells Philippines it [made](#) "missteps" in secret anti-vax propaganda effort.

July 26, 2024: Southeast Asian diplomats [meet](#) with China as friction mounts over Beijing's sweeping maritime claims.

July 26, 2024: Eighty nations strike [deal](#) over e-commerce despite lack of US backing.

July 26, 2024: China and South Korea should [avoid](#) external interference, Chinese foreign minister says.

July 27, 2024: East Asia Summit takes place in Vientiane, Laos. President Biden does not attend, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken in attendance instead.

July 30, 2024: Philippines and US [hold](#) 2+2 foreign and defense ministers' dialogue.

July 30, 2024: Malaysia formally [applies](#) to become a member of BRICS.

July 30, 2024: US [hands](#) \$500 million military aid boost to Philippines amid China tensions.

Aug. 1, 2024: During the 30th round of border talks held in New Delhi, China and India [agree](#) to speed up negotiations over border disputes.

Aug. 3, 2024: Vietnamese President Tô Lâm is [named](#) general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, the nation's top position, replacing Nguyen Phu Trong, who died two weeks earlier.

Aug. 6, 2024: Indian President Droupadi Murmu [visits](#) Fiji, New Zealand, and Timor-Leste as a symbolic visit that includes the first visits to Timor-Leste and Fiji by an Indian head of state.

Aug. 6, 2024: New Zealand Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Winston Peters will lead a delegation to [visit](#) Fiji, Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and Palau.

Aug. 7, 2024: US military [eyes](#) Australian-owned Cocos Island for a new Pacific Deterrence Initiative.

Aug. 8, 2024: China [launches](#) its first batch of satellites in a major step toward its own version of SpaceX's "Starlink" network.

Aug. 9, 2024: Pacific Islands Forum Foreign Ministers Meeting [commences](#) ahead of the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting.

Aug. 10, 2024: A drone [attack](#) on Rohingya fleeing Myanmar kills dozens of people, including families with children, several witnesses said.

Aug. 11, 2024: Revamped AUKUS agreement [reveals](#) that the US or the UK could pull out of the submarine deal with a year's notice if either nation decides it weakens their own nuclear submarine programs.

Aug. 12, 2024: Super Garuda Shield, a series of joint military exercises led by Indonesia and the United States, [commences](#). The drills are expanded this year with troops from Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea—important US allies in the Indo-Pacific region.

Aug. 14, 2024: Japan Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [announces](#) that he will not run in the party's presidential election scheduled for late September.

Aug. 16, 2024: US State Department [approves](#) exemptions from ITAR controls for Australia and the United Kingdom that will allow defense contractors in the two countries to build US military technology without a lengthy licensing process.

Aug. 16, 2024: Asian Development Bank's Pacific Economic Monitor (PEM) [projects](#) that the Pacific region's economy will grow by 3.3% in 2024 and 4.0% in 2025.

Aug. 18, 2024: Japan Prime Minister Kishida, US President Biden, and President of the Republic of Korea Yoon Suk Yeol [issue](#) the Japan-US-ROK Joint Leaders' Statement to commemorate the progress in the trilateral cooperation over the past year.

Aug. 18, 2024: President of Vietnam Tô Lâm [arrives](#) in China for a three-day state visit, Tô's

first overseas visit since becoming president and general secretary.

Aug. 19, 2024: China's coast guard [accuses](#) the Philippines of deliberately crashing one of its ships into a Chinese vessel in a new wave of increasing confrontations on the South China Sea.

Aug. 22, 2024: Thousands of Rohingya have [fled](#) from their homes in Myanmar and escape on dangerous boat journeys after being targeted by armed rebels, a UN official announces.

Aug. 23, 2024: During a meeting in Kyiv, Prime Minister Modi [urges](#) Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to end the Russo-Ukrainian War and volunteers to act as a mediator in talks between Zelenskyy and Russia.

Aug. 23, 2024: US Treasury [unveils](#) a massive tranche of sanctions that targets 400 people and entities from Russia and China who allegedly support the Russian supply chain and defense base.

Aug. 26, 2024: Japan's Ministry of Defense [announces](#) the first incursion into its airspace of Chinese military aircraft after a Shaanxi Y-9 surveillance plane flies over the Danjo Islands in Nagasaki Prefecture.

Aug. 26-30, 2024: Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Leaders Meeting [starts](#) in Tonga with more than 1,000 attendees expected for the week-long event.

Aug. 28, 2024: Myanmar junta [launches](#) major counteroffensive in southern Kachin State to battle anti-regime forces controlling the nearby towns of Momauk and Mansi.

Aug. 30, 2024: Taiwan [assists](#) Marshall Islands climate resilience efforts and advances a bid by the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Sept. 2, 2024: Japan's defense ministry [requests](#) a record budget allocation for next fiscal year as

it aims to ramp up its military capabilities at a time of heightened regional tensions.

Sept. 4, 2024: China [started](#) a five-day joint maritime exercise with Singapore to “promote practical exchanges and cooperation” between the two countries, Chinese defense ministry said.

Sept. 5, 2024: Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said the country will not [stop](#) its oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea despite claims by Beijing that Malaysia was infringing on its territory.

Sept. 5, 2024: PM Modi [meets](#) with Singaporean counterpart Lawrence Wong, sealing a series of deals to strengthen collaboration in semiconductors and digital technologies with India's largest foreign investor.

Sept. 6, 2024: Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn [swears](#) in Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and 35 Cabinet ministers, ushering in a new government in Southeast Asia's second-largest economy after a period of political turmoil.

Sept. 7, 2024: US and Indonesia on Friday [concludes](#) two-week-long joint military exercises that include the recapture of remote islands, with Japan, South Korea, and other countries taking part to show a deeper unity toward stability in the region, including South China Sea.

Sept. 9, 2024: Head of Bangladesh's interim government, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus, [calls](#) for fast-tracked third-country resettlement of Rohingya Muslims living in his country, as a new wave of refugees flees escalating violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state.

Sept. 10, 2024: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [said](#) Pyongyang is moving to steadily increase its nuclear arsenal, claiming that the country is a “responsible” nuclear state.

Sept. 13, 2024: South Korea's military recently [removed](#) about 1,300 Chinese-made surveillance cameras installed at its bases, concerned about potential security risks, *Yonhap* reports.

Sept. 17, 2024: US State Department said on Sept. 16 that it had [approved](#) a possible sale to Taiwan of military spare parts valued at about \$228 million, which Taiwan's military said will help it maintain combat readiness in the face of China's gray-zone intrusions.

Sept. 17, 2024: Hong Kong's leader [warned](#) that US businesses will suffer if Washington adopts a bill to shut the city's US trade offices.

Sept. 19, 2024: North Korea [tests](#) new tactical ballistic missiles using super-large warheads and modified cruise missiles on Sept. 18 led by leader Kim Jong Un, who called for stronger conventional weapons and nuclear capabilities, state news agency *KCNA* reports.

Sept. 20, 2024: China and Japan [reach](#) an agreement in a yearlong dispute over treated wastewater released from the latter's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

Sept. 21, 2024: Cambodia has [withdrawn](#) from a decades-old regional economic development deal with Vietnam and Laos, Prime Minister Hun Manet said in a surprise concession to critics concerned about the kingdom losing territory to its neighbors.

Sept. 21, 2024: Russia and China [started](#) naval exercises in the Sea of Japan on Saturday, Russian news agencies cited Russia's Pacific Fleet as saying.

Sept.23, 2024: Former Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko [won](#) leadership election of Japan's main opposition party, which is gearing up for a possible snap election likely to be called by the winner of the ruling party's presidential contest later this week.

Sept. 25, 2024: China publicly acknowledges that it successfully [launched](#) an intercontinental

ballistic missile into the Pacific Ocean, in a move likely to raise international concerns about the country's nuclear build-up.

Sept. 25, 2024: Indonesia [requests](#) to join the Trans-Pacific trade pact to widen its export markets, says its chief economic minister.

Sept. 26, 2024: Taiwan's Defense Ministry says that it [detected](#) a surge of Chinese warplanes flying off its east, west and south coasts, in what a security source said was China simulating attacks to prevent foreign forces helping during a conflict.

Sept. 26, 2024: US President Joe Biden [meets](#) Vietnamese President Tô Lâm for talks on Wednesday, aiming to deepen relations with the Southeast Asian country and manufacturing hub and counter its ties with China and Russia.

Sept. 26, 2024: Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force vessel [sailed](#) through the Taiwan Strait for the first time on Wednesday, in a move likely to anger Beijing.

Sept. 27, 2024: China's coast guard says the Philippines [sent](#) a civilian ship to ferry daily necessities to a warship at the Second Thomas Shoal that Beijing says is illegally "beached" in the disputed waterway of the South China Sea.

Sept. 27, 2024: Ishiba Shigeru [wins](#) presidency of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party, succeeding prime minister Kishida Fumio.

Sept. 27, 2024: Fijian President Ratu Wiliame Katonivere [called](#) for "respect for our region" and a stop to missile tests in the Pacific Ocean after China launched an intercontinental ballistic missile.

Sept. 28, 2024: Five countries including Japan, the US, and the Philippines [hold](#) a joint maritime exercise in the South China Sea, as tensions with China remain high in the region, Japan's Defense Ministry says.

Sept. 28, 2024: China [carries](#) out joint naval and air exercises around the Scarborough Shoal on Saturday, as US and Philippine forces took part in five-way military maneuvers in the South China Sea within Manila's exclusive economic zone.

Sept. 29, 2024: Taiwan's Defense Ministry [said](#) on Sept 29 that it was on alert after detecting "multiple waves" of missile firing deep in inland China, days after Beijing said it had carried out a successful test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile.

Oct. 2, 2024: Japan's new Prime Minister Ishiba [vows](#) to push a strong defense under the Japan-US alliance.

Oct. 18, 2024: North Korea [sends](#) troops to fight with Russia in Ukraine.

Oct. 19, 2024: At least seven killed as MILF factions [clash](#) in Maguindanao del Norte.

Oct. 20, 2024: Indonesia [swears in](#) former Gen. Prabowo Subianto as president.

Oct. 21, 2024: Gunmen [kill](#) seven people working on a key tunnel project in India's Kashmir.

Oct. 21, 2024: Philippines [jails](#) 17 Abu Sayyaf kidnapers who were members of an Islamic State-linked militant group for life over Malaysia resort abductions.

Oct. 21, 2024: Vietnam [appoints](#) army general Luong Cuong as new president.

Oct. 23, 2024: India and China [reach](#) agreement on military disengagement along their border.

Oct. 23, 2024: Chinese leader Xi [calls](#) for strengthening communication between India and China as Modi welcomes the India-China border agreement.

Oct. 27, 2024: Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba's ruling coalition [loses](#) majority in the 465-seat lower house in parliamentary election, a

punishment by voters over the party's extensive financial scandals.

Oct. 29, 2024: US [announces](#) \$8 million in new funding for the modernization of the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) following a bilateral military dialogue.

Oct. 30, 2024: European Union [slaps](#) tariffs on Chinese electric vehicle to as high as 45.3%.

Oct. 31, 2024: 18 [dead](#) in MILF clash over land row in Maguindanao Sur.

Oct. 31, 2024: North Korea [conducts](#) the longest intercontinental ballistic missile test to date as a warning to enemies threatening the country's security, according to KCNA state news agency.

Oct. 31, 2024: Chinese navy [holds](#) first dual aircraft carrier drills in South China Sea.

Oct. 31, 2024: Vietnam [urges](#) China to "immediately release the fishermen and fishing vessels that were illegally detained" in the South China Sea.

Oct. 31, 2024: Indonesia to "[respond](#) appropriately to secure its territory" in South China Sea.

Oct. 31, 2024: India and China troop [disengagement](#) "almost complete" after historic border pact.

Nov. 1, 2024: North Korea [moves](#) 8,000 troops that may engage in combat to the Ukraine border as assessed by the US.

Nov. 1, 2024: North Korea to [stand](#) by Russia until victory in Ukraine, will expand its nuclear arsenal.

Nov. 1, 2024: North Korea's foreign minister [accuses](#) US and South Korea of plotting a nuclear strike against her country.

Nov. 1, 2024: Thailand [set](#) to be the first country to join both Chinese and US-led space initiatives.

Nov. 1, 2024: Japan and EU [announce](#) a security and defense partnership as regional tensions rise, the first security partnership that the EU has concluded with an Indo-Pacific country.

Nov. 2, 2024: Chinese EV makers [see](#) EU sales slump as tariff row deepens.

Nov. 2, 2024: South Korean ministers [say](#) all scenarios under consideration for aiding Ukraine.

Nov. 2, 2024: US [sanctions](#) five Singapore-based firms for 'enabling' Russia's war in Ukraine.

Nov. 2, 2024: US and South Korea [express](#) concerns over China's recent "provocative actions," military drills around Taiwan.

Nov. 3, 2024: Taiwan reports [rise](#) in Chinese military activity as US elections nears.

Nov. 3, 2024: US nuclear bomber [joins](#) military drills with South Korea, Japan, after Pyongyang missile test.

Nov. 3, 2024: Indonesia's Prabowo [visits](#) Papua to oversee a key food estate project.

Nov. 4, 2024: EU's foreign policy chief [visits](#) South Korea amid alarm over North Korean troops in Russia.

Nov. 4, 2024: Malaysia [sends](#) complaint letter to Vietnam over South China Sea reef expansion, a rare bilateral escalation not including China.

Nov. 4, 2024: Indonesia, Russia navies [hold](#) first joint military training drills in Java Sea following newly inaugurated President Prabowo's pledges of closer ties with Russia on defense.

Nov. 4, 2024: China [urges](#) France to push the EU toward palatable electronic vehicle trade solution.

Nov. 4, 2024: Australia [cancels](#) multi-billion dollar military satellite project with Lockheed Martin to instead shift its focus to a multi-orbit system.

Nov. 4, 2024: Ukraine [attacks](#) North Korean troops near Russia's border, according to officials.

Nov. 5, 2024: China is [building](#) new villages on its remote Himalayan border with Bhutan, some appear to have crossed the line.

Nov. 5, 2024: Philippines [renews](#) demand that Beijing pay \$1 million for South China Sea clash damages, China yet to respond.

Nov. 5, 2024: North Korea [fires](#) at least seven short-range ballistic missiles, condemns military drills.

Nov. 5, 2024: G7 and allies [warn](#) Russia over use of North Korean troops in Ukraine.

Nov. 5, 2024: Taiwan must [show](#) new US president it is determined to defend itself, says defense minister.

Nov. 5, 2024: South Korea [fines](#) Meta about \$15 million over the collection of user data.

Nov. 5, 2024: Former President Donald Trump defeats Vice President Kamala Harris, will become 47th president of the US in January.

Nov. 6, 2024: China officially [unveils](#) its new 5th-generation stealth fighter, the J-35A, at the Zhuhai Air Show.

Nov. 7, 2024: Japan defense chief [boards](#) visiting South Korean warship, the first time Japan's defense minister has boarded a South Korean military vessel.

Nov. 7, 2024: Philippine forces [practice](#) retaking island in mock combat as China's navy watches.

Nov. 7, 2024: China [congratulates](#) Trump, says it respects America's choice.

Nov. 7, 2024: Philippines envoy expresses [confidence](#) in US alliance under Trump amid China tensions.

Nov. 7, 2024: China and Solomon Islands [agree](#) to mutual visa-free arrangement.

Nov. 7, 2024: Putin [suggests](#) Russia could hold military drills with North Korea.

Nov. 7, 2024: Ukrainian President Zelenskyy [says](#) North Korean troops have suffered losses in clashes.

Nov. 7, 2024: France [summons](#) North Korea's general delegate to protest the deployment of troops in Russia.

Nov. 7, 2024: Thai PM [meets](#) Myanmar junta chief on sidelines of a regional summit in China.

Nov. 7, 2024: NATO chief [says](#) North Korea-Russia ties are also a threat to US security.

Nov. 8, 2024: Philippine President Marcos [signs](#) new laws to assert South China Sea rights, China lodges "stern protest."

Nov. 8, 2024: Peru and China to [sign](#) strengthened free-trade agreement during Xi's APEC visit.

Nov. 8, 2024: China [summons](#) Philippines ambassador to express objection to new maritime laws.

Nov. 8, 2024: Taiwan coast guard to [harness](#) "people power" to report Chinese activity at sea, including warships or submarines.

Nov. 8, 2024: Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co will [suspend](#) production of

advanced AI chips for China, *Financial Times* reports.

Nov. 8, 2024: South Korea [says](#) pro-Russia hacking groups responsible for cyberattacks after North's troop dispatch.

Nov. 8, 2024: Putin [says](#) China is Russia's ally, backs its stance on Taiwan.

Nov. 9, 2024: North Korea [jams](#) GPS signals, affecting ships, civilian aircrafts for the second consecutive day.

Nov. 9, 2024: China [increases](#) military flights near Taiwan by 300%, according to US general Kevin Schneider.

Nov. 9, 2024: Europe [seeks](#) "normal, fair" China trade ties in wake of Trump win, says EU envoy Jorge Toledo.

Nov. 9, 2024: President Xi [urges](#) Indonesian leader Prabowo to join China in leading Global South.

Nov. 11-17, 2024: APEC summit [takes place](#) in Lima, Peru, ultimately producing a statement that in support of deeper global trade but revealing tensions over environmental policy, China's influence, and other matters. On the sidelines, Biden and Xi [meet](#) for the final time on Nov. 17, where Xi signals that he is prepared to work with Trump.

Nov. 10, 2024: Putin [signs](#) into law a mutual defense treaty with North Korea.

Nov. 10, 2024: Chinese EV makers [look](#) to Africa as rivalry with US and Europe heats up.

Nov. 10, 2024: US [orders](#) Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. (TSMC) to halt shipments of advanced chips to Chinese customers.

Nov. 10, 2024: China [unveils](#) "Killer Whale" stealth drone ship.

Nov. 10, 2024: Indonesia [calls](#) for collaboration with China after signing \$10 billion in new deals at a business forum.

Nov. 11, 2024: Taiwan [considers](#) big US defense purchases, including Patriot missiles, an Aegis destroyer and possibly F-35 fighter jets, as overture to Donald Trump.

Nov. 11, 2024: Japan's Parliament [re-elects](#) Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru.

Nov. 11, 2024: Indonesia [insists](#) that it has no overlapping South China Sea claims with China.

Nov. 11, 2024: South Korea introduces legislation to [aid](#) chipmakers to avert potential threats from the US market.

Nov. 11, 2024: Russian and Indonesian navies [hold](#) joint counter-terrorism drills.

Nov. 12, 2024: Philippines [says](#) China is pushing it to cede claims in South China Sea.

Nov. 12, 2024: Vietnam's Communist Party head Tô Lâm [congratulates](#) Trump on election win and discusses ways to boost economic ties.

Nov. 13, 2024: Chinese embassy [warns](#) Philippines over new maritime laws, to cease any "unilateral actions."

Nov. 13, 2024: Indonesian President Prabowo meets Biden and speaks with Trump, [pledging](#) cooperation.

Nov. 13, 2024: China [says](#) TSMC chip curbs undermine interests of Taiwan companies.

Nov. 14, 2024: Indonesian President Prabowo [vows](#) to safeguard sovereignty in South China Sea.

Nov. 14, 2024: South Korea, the US, and Japan [kick off](#) 2nd trilateral Freedom Edge exercise.

Nov. 14, 2024: Malaysia to [protest](#) to the Philippines over its new maritime laws.

Nov. 14, 2024: Taiwan central bank chief expresses [doubts](#) that Trump administration will penalize Taiwan.

Nov. 14, 2024: China and Philippines [spar](#) over baseline drawings in the South China Sea.

Nov. 14, 2024: China's coast guard [circles](#) Scarborough Shoal after the Philippines stakes its legislative claim.

Nov. 15, 2024: North Korean leader [orders](#) mass production of suicide drones.

Nov. 15, 2024: South Korean opposition leader [receives](#) suspended jail sentence for violating election law.

Nov. 16, 2024: China to [tighten](#) export curbs on critical metals ahead of Trump's return.

Nov. 16, 2024: Thailand [detains](#) 70 migrants believed to be Rohingya from Myanmar.

Nov. 16, 2024: South Korea's Yoon [tells](#) China's Xi cooperation needed on Russia and North Korea.

Nov. 16, 2024: Biden [meets](#) South Korean and Japanese leaders for pre-Trump huddle on risk.

Nov. 17, 2024: India successfully [tests](#) domestically developed long-range hypersonic missile.

Nov. 17, 2024: Japanese troops to [train](#) with Australian and US militaries in Darwin.

Nov. 17, 2024: Taiwan's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) representative [invites](#) Biden to visit the island.

Nov. 17-18, 2024: 2024 G20 Rio de Janeiro summit [takes place](#), producing a statement that condemns war without casting official blame. Russian President Vladimir Putin, facing an arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court, does not attend.

Nov. 18, 2024: North Korea may [send](#) 100,000 troops to Russia, as Kim tells military to "go all out."

Nov. 18, 2024: Philippines and the United States [sign](#) military intelligence-sharing deal.

Nov. 18, 2024: South Korean foreign minister says he is "strongly confident" US alliance will [thrive](#) under Trump.

Nov. 18, 2024: Chip powerhouse Taiwan [calls](#) for economic partnership deal with the EU.

Nov. 19, 2024: China [rebuffs](#) meeting with US defense secretary.

Nov. 19, 2024: New Zealand to [tighten](#) espionage laws against foreign interference.

Nov. 19, 2024: South Korea [pledges](#) 45% increase in World Bank fund contribution.

Nov. 20, 2024: Northern Mariana Islands governor [backs](#) \$800 million US military upgrade amid China threat.

Nov. 20, 2024: Japan says it will [watch](#) China's military activity after Beijing admits violating Japanese airspace.

Nov. 20, 2024: US State Department [approves](#) sale of F-15 aircraft upgrade to South Korea.

Nov. 21, 2024: South Korean police [confirm](#) that hackers linked to North Korea's military intelligence agency were responsible for an Ethereum cryptocurrency heist in 2019.

Nov. 21, 2024: Putin [gifts](#) zoo animals, including lions and bears, to North Korean zoo.

Nov. 21, 2024: Military help for Ukraine "too sensitive" but a representative office remains a goal, [says](#) Taiwan envoy.

Nov. 21, 2024: Hong Kong democracy activist Jimmy Lai [denies](#) inciting hatred toward China in trial.

Nov. 21, 2024: China and Myanmar's law enforcement agencies [claim](#) "wipe-out" of large telecom fraud centers in northern Myanmar.

Nov. 21, 2024: China [blames](#) US policy on Taiwan for defense leaders not meeting.

Nov. 21, 2024: US [backs](#) Philippine forces in South China Sea with a special task force.

Nov. 22, 2024: China declares willingness to [talk](#) with the US to push forward bilateral trade.

Nov. 22, 2024: Weeks after Trump's election, Kim Jong Un [accuses](#) US of stoking tension and warns of nuclear war.

Nov. 22, 2024: South Korean official [says](#) Russia provided anti-air missile to North Korea.

Nov. 23, 2024: Philippine VP [says](#) she would have President Marcos assassinated if she were killed.

Nov. 23, 2024: North Korea [condemns](#) US military drills with South Korea and Japan.

Nov. 24, 2024: Japan and US to [form](#) a missile plan in case of Taiwan emergency.

Nov. 24, 2024: Philippine VP's assassination threat against president to be [treated](#) as "a national security matter" by the Philippines security council.

Nov. 25, 2024: South Korean opposition leader [cleared](#) of forcing witness to commit perjury.

Nov. 25, 2024: Philippines' ex-president Duterte [urges](#) military to correct Marcos' "fractured" governance.

Nov. 25, 2024: South Korea and Malaysia to [boost](#) cooperation in the defense industry.

Nov. 25, 2024: Taiwan [reports](#) Chinese balloon over the sea to their north for the first time since April in what Taiwan views as a "pattern of harassment."

Nov. 26, 2024: China sends naval and air forces to [shadow](#) US plane over Taiwan Strait.

Nov. 26, 2024: Myanmar rebel army says it is [ready](#) for dialogue with junta, with China's help.

Nov. 27, 2024: Vietnam PM [urges](#) US to lift high-tech export restrictions.

Nov. 27, 2024: ICC prosecutor [seeks](#) arrest warrant for Myanmar military leader over Rohingya campaign.

Nov. 27, 2024: Russia to [respond](#) if the US places missiles in Japan.

Nov. 27, 2024: China [warns](#) New Zealand against joining AUKUS.

Nov. 28, 2024: China says it will [defeat](#) secessionism ahead of Taiwanese president's trip to Hawaii.

Nov. 28, 2024: Russia to [use](#) all weapons at its disposal if Ukraine acquires nuclear weapons.

Nov. 28, 2024: China's military to [conduct](#) air and sea patrols around the disputed Scarborough Shoal in South China Sea.

Nov. 29, 2024: US [approves](#) \$358 million worth of arms sale to Taiwan.

Nov. 29, 2024: US [sets](#) tariffs for solar panels from Southeast Asian nations.

Nov. 29, 2024: Chinese and Russian militaries [conduct](#) joint air patrol over the Sea of Japan. Chinese and Russian military planes [enter](#) South Korea's air defense zone.

Nov. 29, 2024: Russia's defense minister [visits](#) North Korea.

Nov. 29, 2024: South Korea [completes](#) ballistic missile interceptor to counter any threat from the North.

Nov. 30, 2024: Myanmar navy [fires](#) at Thai fishing boats and detains 31 fishermen.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

US-JAPAN RELATIONS

ONCE AGAIN, LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS CHALLENGE US-JAPAN ALLIANCE

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

2024 closes with new governments primed to lead in the US and Japan. A surprise decision by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio to [step away](#) from leadership of his party in August led to an unprecedented race to succeed him. Nine members of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) fought for the chance to become president of the LDP on Sept. 27, and in a surprisingly tight race, Shigeru Ishiba [won the honor](#) and thus [became](#) the 102nd prime minister of Japan on Oct. 1. Within days, Ishiba [called](#) a Lower House election for Oct. 27. The LDP [lost](#) dramatically, and in the Nov. 11 vote in the Diet, Ishiba's LDP and its partner Komeito [formed](#) a minority coalition government. The US similarly was in the throes of political contest. On Nov. 5, Donald Trump [won](#) a decisive victory in the presidential election, and in the days that followed, the Republicans were declared winners in both the House and the Senate as well.

While Trump's inauguration will not be until January 2025, his transition team began immediately to announce candidates for his Cabinet and for the many political appointments needed to fill out his new administration. There was little doubt that this would be a far more robust challenge to the status quo than Trump marshaled during his first term.

The US-Japan alliance continues to be a fundamental feature of US strategy in the Indo-Pacific. The bilateral agenda for strategic coordination has grown considerably, and significant changes in Japanese defense preparedness are underway. US forces, too, are adapting to the needs of the growing military imbalance in the region. Trilateral US-Japan-South Korea security ties have deepened, and a new trilateral with the Philippines seems promising. Across the region and globally, the US and Japan have joined in broader coalitions of strategic cooperation. And yet, there is concern that this burgeoning agenda of strategic cooperation could flounder as domestic priorities take center stage in both Washington and Tokyo.

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A Fall Full of Elections

The fall brought national elections in both Japan and the US, though under notably different circumstances. In Japan, a [snap election](#) came as a surprise, following Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's resignation, the subsequent LDP leadership race that elevated Shigeru Ishiba to power, and Ishiba's abrupt decision to dissolve the Lower House. In contrast, the date of the US election may have been fixed and known, but the political landscape otherwise offered little predictability. President Joe Biden's late decision not to seek reelection paved the way for Vice President Kamala Harris to step in as the Democratic nominee, only for former president Donald Trump and the Republicans to reclaim not only the presidency but also control of both the House and Senate.



Figure 1 Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and U.S. President Joe Biden shake hands at the White House on Friday. Photo: Masanori Genko / The Yomiuri Shimbun.

On Aug. 14, Prime Minister Kishida [announced](#) that he would not run for reelection in September's LDP leadership race, setting the stage for a [fiercely contested](#) and unusually open competition. The race initially featured nine candidates but quickly narrowed to three frontrunners: Koizumi Shinjiro, who would have been Japan's [youngest](#) prime minister; Takaichi Sanae, vying to become the first [female](#) prime minister; and Ishiba Shigeru, a seasoned politician marking his fifth bid for party leadership. Ishiba consistently led public opinion polls, reflecting strong grassroots support, but he had long struggled to win backing from fellow Diet members. In the Sept. 27 election, Takaichi emerged as the top candidate in the first round of voting, but in the second round, Ishiba [narrowly secured victory](#). His unexpected win highlighted divisions within the LDP but also marked an

effort among some members to turn the page on recent scandals and rebuild public trust.

On Oct. 1, Japan's parliament [formally elected](#) Ishiba as prime minister. Just over a week later, on Oct. 9, Ishiba [surprised many](#) by calling a snap election for Oct. 27, a move that appeared aimed at capitalizing on his initial popularity, taking advantage of a fragmented opposition, and securing a stronger mandate for his leadership. However, the gamble backfired. On Oct. 27, voters handed the ruling coalition of the LDP and its junior partner Komeito [a decisive defeat](#). The LDP [lost power](#) for the first time in 15 years, marking only the third time since 1955 that the party has been out of government. While the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ), led by former Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, gained significantly, much of the attention was drawn to the unexpected rise of the Democratic Party for the People (DPP) and its leader Tamaki Yuichiro, whose strong performance underscored the shifting political landscape.

The failure of any party or coalition to secure a majority of seats in the Lower House left uncertainty about the shape of Japan's next government. On Nov. 11, Prime Minister Ishiba won a parliamentary vote to remain in office, making him the leader of Japan's first minority government in three decades. Governing without a legislative majority [presents significant challenges](#). The opposition now controls key committees, including the influential Budget Committee, which could complicate efforts to secure funding for next year's priorities. Public approval of Ishiba's Cabinet [remains low](#), though it has improved slightly from 32% in late October to 40% in mid-November, according to Kyodo polling. Questions abound about how Ishiba will [navigate this precarious political environment](#), including the extent to which smaller parties like the DPP will influence his policy agenda. With Upper House elections looming in July 2025, Ishiba's ability to maintain leadership and deliver results will be closely watched, both at home and abroad.

In the US, the 2024 election campaign began with an air of familiarity, as it initially appeared to be shaping up as a rematch of 2020 between Biden and Trump. On July 15, the Republican Party officially [selected](#) Trump as their presidential nominee, alongside Senator JD Vance (Ohio) as his running mate. Trump had been the presumptive nominee since March 12, when he

secured enough delegates in the Republican primary race. Despite unprecedented challenges—including his [conviction](#) on May 30 for 34 felony counts of falsifying business records to cover up a sex scandal tied to his 2016 campaign—Trump solidified his hold on the party. His path to the nomination was further punctuated by two [assassination attempts](#), the most prominent of which occurred just days before the Republican National Convention. On July 13, Trump was shot and wounded in his right ear during a public appearance but was released from the hospital shortly thereafter and attended the convention as scheduled. A second attempt on Sept. 15 in Florida, while Trump was golfing, was thwarted before the would-be assassin could get close to him.

As the incumbent, President Biden initially appeared to have a clear path to securing the Democratic Party nomination, facing no primary challengers. However, his [performance](#) in the first debate on June 27 raised serious concerns among voters and within his party. Biden appeared visibly unwell, with a strained voice and moments of hesitation that [cast doubts about his age](#) and ability to serve another term—despite being less than four years older than Trump. These concerns quickly translated into declining public support and growing unease among Democratic leaders. On July 21, Biden announced he would [not seek reelection](#), citing the need for new leadership and endorsing Vice President Kamala Harris as the party's nominee.

On Aug. 2, Vice President Kamala Harris officially [secured](#) the Democratic nomination at the party's national convention, becoming the first woman of color to lead a major party's presidential ticket. Four days later, she [announced](#) Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz as her running mate, a choice seen as an effort to balance the ticket with a Midwestern governor who had garnered bipartisan support in his state. Initial polling [suggested strong public enthusiasm](#) for Harris, with many Democratic voters rallying behind her historic candidacy and optimism about her chances in the general election.

However, the Nov. 5 election saw Donald Trump ultimately [emerge victorious](#), defeating Harris by a vote margin of 312 to 226 in the Electoral College. Trump carried all the key swing states, including Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, flipping several districts that had

narrowly supported Biden in 2020. Nationwide, most areas showed a [pronounced shift toward the right](#). The Republican Party not only reclaimed the presidency but also gained control of both the House and Senate, signaling a significant shift in American politics.

Looking ahead to US-Japan relations in 2025, new teams in both countries will take the lead in managing the alliance. In Japan, Prime Minister Ishiba, a former defense minister, has signaled his focus on defense by [appointing](#) four former defense ministers to key posts, including Takeshi Iwaya as foreign minister and Gen Nakatani as defense minister. On the US side, Trump's cabinet nominees reflect a mix of experience and controversy. Senator Marco Rubio of Florida has been nominated for secretary of state, while former Army National Guard officer and *Fox News* host Pete Hegseth is Trump's choice for secretary of defense. Rubio's nomination is expected to sail through Senate confirmation, but Hegseth's has [drawn significant scrutiny](#) over past allegations of sexual misconduct, excessive drinking, and financial mismanagement.

These new teams will inherit a complex and demanding alliance agenda, spanning bilateral priorities, regional security challenges, and pressing global issues.

The US-Japan Security Agenda

Bilateral security cooperation is burgeoning. Japan's security review in 2022 produced a massive increase in security-related investments, including new conventional strike capability, improved operational integration and readiness for the Self Defense Force, and a new program of overseas security assistance. In January, the Japanese government agreed to purchase 400 land-based Tomahawk missiles, and in April, the Maritime Self Defense Force [began training for their use](#). Deployment is [expected](#) in Japanese fiscal year 2025, which begins in April 1, a year earlier than originally planned.



Figure 2 South Korea, the US and Japan began their first trilateral multi-domain exercise on June 27, 2024, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said, amid efforts to deepen security cooperation against threats from North Korea, recently emboldened by its deepening ties with Russia. Photo: Yonhap.

A new Joint Permanent Operational Command will also be stood up in the coming fiscal year, a first for Japan's three branches of armed forces. This will [integrate](#) Japanese military operations to respond jointly to aggression and will place a single combatant commander in charge of Japan's military readiness. To match this Japanese move to enhance operational integration, the US Forces Japan will gradually [match operational requirements](#) to provide smooth integration of operations between Japanese and US forces.

Finally, the Japanese government has begun to [provide overseas security assistance](#) to its neighbors in an effort to enhance their capacity to meet the growing instability in the region. By the end of the Japanese fiscal year 2023, this assistance [included](#) support for surveillance, radar, and patrol boats provided to the armed forces of the Philippines, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Fiji.

All told, the Japanese government committed to enhancing its spending to 2% of GDP by 2027 when the current five year build up plan will be complete. In its third year, the plan will require consistent revenue if it is to be successful. A new defense tax is under consideration in the Diet, and preliminary cooperation between the LDP, DPP, and Ishin no Kai [has been reached](#).

The US has also led efforts to institutionalize trilateral military cooperation between the Japanese, South Korean, and US forces in multidomain exercises named Freedom Edge. These were initiated after a bilateral Japan-South Korean defense agreement was [reached](#) in June at the Singapore gathering of the IISS Shangri-La

Dialogue. Two of these trilateral exercises have been held since then, one in [June](#) and another in [November](#), bringing the air, maritime, and space forces of all three allies together for a combined exercise dedicated to cooperation in case of a contingency on the Korean peninsula.

Keeping the US and Japan in Regional and Global Alignment

Much of the bilateral effort over the past several years has been focused on building coalitions of like-minded countries to cope with the growing challenge to the rules-based order. Two sets of relationships were emphasized by the Biden Administration. The first was the recovery of the Japan-South Korea bilateral relationship and the strengthening of institutionalized trilateral cooperation between the US and its two northeast Asian allies. Consultations between National Security Advisors, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Intelligence heads bolstered a shared vision of strategic cooperation. Presidents Yoon and Biden and Prime Minister Kishida also committed to a set of shared strategic principles, outlined in the [Spirit of Camp David joint statement](#) in 2023, that were then [amplified](#) in November 2024 in a second leader's meeting with Prime Minister Ishiba attending on the sidelines of the APEC meeting in Peru. In addition to the regular trilateral military exercises, noted above, the three leaders agreed to create a secretariat designed to facilitate trilateral cooperation.



Figure 3 US President Joe Biden hosted Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida for the latest summit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in Wilmington, Delaware on

September 23, 2024. Photo: South China Morning Post.

Second, Japan and the US worked closely on building stronger ties among the Quad nations: US, Japan, Australia, and India. Leaders' summits [began](#) in 2020 virtually but then became annual in-person meetings in 2021. In 2024, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese joined Japanese Prime Minister Kishida in Wilmington, Delaware to honor President Biden's [support of the Quad](#). A full agenda of Quad projects has developed over time, largely focused on aiding the Indo-Pacific nations in the provision of healthcare, infrastructure development, maritime domain awareness, and other collective goods required for regional stability. India is expected to host the 2025 Quad Leaders meeting.

Of course, concerns loom large over the fate of Taiwan. The US and Japan will continue to consult on the increased Chinese military exercises around Taiwan. Much of this is interpreted as pressure on President William Lai Ching-te. For example, a recent [surge](#) of Chinese military activity around Taiwan occurred shortly after Lai's [first overseas trip](#), which included visits to Pacific Island nations and transit stops in Hawaii and Guam—moves that were widely expected to elicit a strong response from Beijing.

But the growing assertiveness of China's military beyond the Taiwan Straits continues to prompt enhanced security cooperation among US, Japanese, and other national forces. Chinese maritime pressure on the Philippines has also grown, challenging their maritime defenses and drawing a US restatement of its commitment to the US-Philippine alliance. During his fourth visit to the Philippines in November 2024, Secretary of Defense Austin [announced](#) the establishment of an information sharing agreement with the Philippines, designed to enhance the ability of the US and the Philippines to have real-time information on the activities of Chinese forces. Over the course of 2024, the PLA Navy has also increased its activity in and around Japanese waters, and Chinese-Russia strategic exercises have also increased. In August, Chinese government survey vessels [intruded repeatedly](#) into Japanese waters.

Conclusion

As the Ishiba Cabinet seeks to navigate its difficult position in the Japanese Diet, a second Trump Administration prepares to take the reins in the US. Trump's Cabinet picks have created controversy already, and there is a sense that a major shakeup is coming to Washington. How this will affect US foreign policy remains to be seen, and personnel responsible for the day-to-day management of US Asia policy have yet to be identified. On the surface, however, there is little to suggest that the US-Japan alliance will suffer from a second Trump Administration.

Two issues will likely be of deepest interest to alliance watchers. The first is President-elect Trump's position on tariffs and on trade more broadly. His announcement after his electoral victory that he is [looking to place](#) 25% tariffs on Canada and Mexico and "an additional 10% tariff, above any additional tariffs" on China will, of course, have spillover effects for many countries. Japan's automakers have a stake in however the Trump Administration seeks to revamp the USMCA trade agreement, [up for review](#) in 2026. More short term, the political hot potato of the purchase of US Steel by Nippon Steel [will be determined](#) by the CFIUS decision expected on Dec. 18. President-elect Trump has stated he [will reject the deal](#).



Figure 4 Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida meets with U.S. President Joe Biden and other Group of Seven leaders at NATO Headquarters in Brussels in March. Photo: REUTERS

Burden-sharing will also likely be on the agenda for the US-Japan alliance, as it will for the NATO allies. Already, there are rumors that the NATO commitment to spending 2% of GDP on defense [might be raised](#) to 3% in a new Trump administration, again with possible spillover effects for US Indo-Pacific allies. The five-year

Host Nation Support agreement between the US and Japan is [set to expire](#) in 2027 and thus will need to be renegotiated during the next administration.

But it is likely the larger questions of US strategy under the Trump administration that will be of most concern. Three foreign policy areas are particularly important for Japan. First, US strategy toward China will be of deepest import to Tokyo. Given that Japan has identified China as its gravest strategic threat, Washington's choices and how much Japan's interests will be considered in those choices are paramount. Second, how the US decides its role in Ukraine and in the larger context of European security remains to be seen. Japan has committed extensive resources to Ukraine and to the effort to rebuild the nation. Similarly, Japan, like other G7 nations, has imposed sanctions on Russia, drawing retaliation from Moscow. Finally, Japan has a deep stake in the global economy and relies on a free and open global order. A retreat to mercantilist practices would have devastating effects on Japan's future economic prosperity. Of course, the LDP will face yet another election next year, and Prime Minister Ishiba will have to juggle pressures from within to keep on top of the domestic dynamics at play in Tokyo even as he seeks to ensure a strong US-Japan partnership under a second Trump Administration.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-JAPAN RELATIONS

MAY-DECEMBER 2024

May 21, 2024: US, Japan, and the Philippines [launch](#) the Luzon Economic Corridor Steering Committee to Drive Infrastructure Investment on the sidelines of the Indo-Pacific Business Forum in Manila.

May 30, 2024: Former president Donald Trump is [convicted](#) of 34 felony counts.

May 31, 2024: US-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Foreign Minister-Level Dialogue is [held](#) in Washington, DC.

May 31, 2024: US-Japan-South Korea Vice Foreign Minister-Level Dialogue is [held](#) in Washington, Virginia.

May 31, 2024: First US-Japan Strategic Diplomacy and Development Dialogue is [held](#) in Washington, DC.

June 13-14, 2024: US-Japan Extended Deterrence Dialogue is [held](#) at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

June 14, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida and President Biden [meet](#) on the sidelines of the G7 Apulia Summit in Italy.

June 24, 2024: Senior Official for the DPRK Jung Pak, Assistant-Minister for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Namazu Hiroyuki, and Korean Vice Foreign Minister for Strategy and Intelligence Cho Koo-rae [speak](#) by telephone.

June 26, 2024: Ninth US-Japan Cyber Dialogue is [held](#) in Washington, DC.

June 27, 2024: President Biden and former president Trump [hold](#) their first presidential debate.

June 27-29, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korea [hold](#) the inaugural Freedom Edge trilateral multi-domain exercises.

July 3, 2024: US-Japan-Australia-Indiana Senior Officials' Meeting is [held](#) via videoconference.

July 5, 2024: Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Masataka Okano [meets](#) with Ambassador Rahm Emanuel in Tokyo.

July 10-11, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [visits](#) Washington, DC to attend the NATO Summit.

July 10, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [attends](#) a dinner hosted by President Biden during the NATO Summit.

July 11, 2024: President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida [meet](#) on the sidelines of the NATO Summit.

July 11, 2024: Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi and Governor of Texas Greg Abbott [meet](#) in Tokyo.

July 11, 2024: Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa and Governor of Texas Greg Abbott [meet](#) in Tokyo.

July 15, 2024: Republican Party officially [selects](#) Donald Trump as their presidential nominee and JD Vance as the vice-presidential nominee.

July 21, 2024: President Biden [announces](#) he will withdraw from the 2024 presidential election and instead endorses his vice president, Kamala Harris, for the Democratic Party nomination.

July 28, 2024: Secretary of State Blinken, Secretary of Defense Austin, Foreign Minister Kamikawa, and Defense Minister Kihara [convene](#) a US-Japan ministerial meeting on extended deterrence in Tokyo.

July 28, 2024: Japan-US Security Consultative Committee (Japan-US “2+2”) is [held](#) in Tokyo.

July 28, 2024: Foreign Minister Kamikawa and Secretary of State Blinken [meet](#) in Tokyo on the sidelines of the 2+2 meeting.

July 29, 2024: Foreign Minister Kamikawa, Secretary of State Blinken, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, and Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar [hold](#) a Japan-US-Australia-India (Quad) Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Tokyo.

July 29, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) with Secretary of State Blinken, Australian Foreign Minister Wong, and Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar in Tokyo.

July 29, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) with Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of Defense Austin in Tokyo.

Aug. 2, 2024: Democratic Party officially [selects](#) Kamala Harris as their presidential nominee.

Aug. 6, 2024: Vice President and Democratic Presidential Nominee Harris [selects](#) Minnesota Governor Tim Walz as her running mate.

Aug. 9, 2024: Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink, Director General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Namazu Hiroyuki, and Korean Vice Foreign Minister for Strategy and Intelligence Cho Koo-rae [speak](#) by telephone.

Aug. 14, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [announces](#) he will resign in September and not run for a second term as LDP president.

Aug. 27, 2024: Foreign Minister Kamikawa [meets](#) with the delegation led by US Congressman John Moolenaar, Chairman of the House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party.

Aug. 28, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) with the with the delegation led by US Congressman John Moolenaar.

Aug. 28, 2024: Seventeenth US-Japan Joint Working-Level Committee Meeting on Science and Technology Cooperation is [held](#) in Washington, DC.

Aug. 30, 2024: Foreign Minister Kamikawa [meets](#) with the delegation led by Senator and former US Ambassador to Japan William Hagerty.

Aug. 30, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) with the delegation led by Senator and former US Ambassador to Japan William Hagerty.

Sept. 6, 2024: Third US-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Diplomacy Working Group for Foreign Minister Cooperation on North Korea’s Cyber Threats is [held](#) in Seoul.

Sept. 21, 2024: President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida [meet](#) in Delaware at President Biden’s private residence.

Sept. 21, 2024: President Biden, Prime Minister Kishida, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi [hold](#) a Quad Leaders’ Meeting in Delaware.

Sept. 23, 2024: Former Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda is [elected](#) to lead the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan.

Sept. 26, 2024: Japan-US Economic Policy Consultative Committee (Economic “2+2”) is [held](#) in a hybrid format.

Sept. 27, 2024: Shigeru Ishiba [wins](#) the LDP leadership race.

Sept. 30, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [meets](#) with Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel in Tokyo.

Oct. 1, 2024: Japan’s parliament [elects](#) Shigeru Ishiba as prime minister.

Oct. 2, 2024: Prime Minister Ishiba and President Biden [speak](#) by telephone.

Oct. 2, 2024: Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya and Secretary of State Blinken [speak](#) by telephone.

Oct. 3, 2024: Prime Minister Ishiba [meets](#) with Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel in Tokyo.

Oct. 7, 2024: Foreign Minister Iwaya [meets](#) with Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Samuel Paparo.

Oct. 9, 2024: Prime Minister Ishiba [dissolves](#) parliament and calls for an election on Oct. 27.

Oct. 9, 2024: Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific Daniel Kritenbrink, Assistant-Minister and Director-General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Namazu Hiroyuki, and South Korean Vice Minister for Strategy and Intelligence Cho Koo-ra [speak](#) by telephone about North Korea.

Oct. 13, 2024: Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Masataka Okano, and South Korean First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kim Hong-kyun [meet](#) in Seoul.

Oct. 15, 2024: Foreign Minister Iwaya [meets](#) with Deputy Secretary of State Campbell in Tokyo.

Oct. 15, 2024: Vice Minister Okano [meets](#) with Deputy Secretary of State Campbell in Tokyo.

Oct. 16, 2024: Foreign Minister Iwaya [meets](#) with Commander of US Forces Japan and Fifth Air Force Lieutenant General Stephen Jost in Tokyo.

Oct. 16, 2024: Vice Minister Okano, Deputy Secretary of State Campbell, and First Vice Minister Kim [meet](#) in Seoul.

Oct. 18, 2024: First US-Japan-Philippines Cyber-Digital Dialogue is [held](#) in Singapore.

Oct. 24, 2024: Foreign Minister Iwaya [meets](#) with Senator Jerry Moran and Senator John Hoeven in Tokyo.

Oct. 25, 2024: US-Japan-Philippines Trilateral Discussion on Economic Resilience is [held](#) in Manila.

Oct. 27, 2024: Japan's ruling LDP and Komeito coalition [loses](#) their majority in the House of Representatives election.

Oct. 31, 2024: Deputy Director-General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Akihiro Okochi, Director for Korea and Mongolia Affairs and Deputy Special Representative for the DPRK Seth Bailey, and Director-General for the Korean Peninsula Policy Lee Jun-il [speak](#) by telephone.

Oct. 31, 2024: Foreign Minister Iwaya, Secretary of State Blinken, and Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul [speak](#) by telephone.

Oct. 31, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korea [release](#) a Joint Statement on the DPRK Launch of an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile.

Nov. 5, 2024: US [holds](#) presidential, House, Senate, and local elections. Former President Trump [wins](#) the presidential election.

Nov. 7, 2024: Prime Minister Ishiba and President-elect Donald Trump [speak](#) by telephone.

Nov. 7, 2024: State Minister for Foreign Affairs Kiyoto Tsuji [meets](#) with Idaho Governor Brad Little in Tokyo.

Nov. 11, 2024: Prime Minister Ishiba [wins](#) parliamentary vote to remain as prime minister.

Nov. 13-15, 2024: US, Japan, and South Korea [hold](#) the second Freedom Edge exercise.

Nov. 14, 2024: Secretary of State Blinken and Foreign Minister Iwaya [meet](#) in Lima, Peru on the sidelines of the APEC Ministerial Meeting.

Nov. 15, 2024: President Biden and Prime Minister Ishiba [meet](#) in Lima, Peru.

Nov. 15, 2024: President Biden, Prime Minister Ishiba, and Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol [meet](#) in Lima, Peru.

Nov. 20, 2024: Deputy Director-General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Akihiro Okochi, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Robert Koepche, and Korean Deputy Director-General for North American Affairs Yi Wonwoo [hold](#) the inaugural Japan-US-South Korea Trilateral Coordinating Secretariat Meeting.

Nov. 20-2024: Second Japan-US-Australia-India Quad Counterterrorism Working Group Meeting is [held](#) in Tokyo.

Nov. 21, 2024: Deputy Secretary of State Campbell [meets](#) with Japanese Special Advisor to the Prime Minister Akihisa Nagashima.

Dec. 2, 2024: President-elect Trump [says](#) he will block Nippon Steel's proposed acquisition of US Steel upon taking office.

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

US-CHINA RELATIONS

Trump's Return Scrambles Outlook

SOURABH GUPTA, INSTITUTE FOR CHINA-AMERICA STUDIES

US-China relations through 2024 remained marked by a paradox. On the one hand, ties displayed a distinct stabilization. The two sides translated their leaders' modest "San Francisco Vision" into reality. Cabinet officials and the numerous working groups met in earnest and produced outcomes, functional cooperation was deepened though differences emerged, sensitive issues were carefully managed, and effort was devoted to improving the relationship's political optics. US electoral politics, or threat of Chinese interference in the elections, did not materially impinge on ties. On the other hand, the negative tendencies in US-China relations deepened. With its time in office winding down, the Biden administration went into regulatory overdrive to deepen the "selective decoupling" of the two countries' advanced technology ecosystems. China methodically responded in kind using its now-robust economic lawfare toolkit. The chasm in strategic perceptions remained just as wide. Donald Trump's return to the Oval Office portends a period of disruptive unpredictability in ties, although "Tariff Man" Trump can reliably be expected to enact additional impositions on Chinese imports.

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Two years to the day that they met on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Bali, Indonesia to place a floor under their troubled relationship and initiate a process of emplacing guardrails, Joe Biden and Xi Jinping met for their [third in-person meeting](#) as presidents in Lima, Peru, on the sidelines of the APEC Economic Leaders Meeting. In Lima, the two presidents took stock of the gradual rehabilitation of ties over the past two years, despite its early interruption by the [balloon incident](#), and [pledged to consolidate](#) the fragile stability and make the relationship more predictable. They also patted themselves for harvesting some of the low-hanging fruit since their summit in Woodside, California, 12 months ago. US-China relations have made important incremental progress over the past 18 months, starting with Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to Beijing in June 2023 (Blinken [returned](#) to Beijing again this April). In Spring 2023, aside from meetings of their senior-most officials, there was practically no active communication channel between the two sides. Fast forward to today and there are more than 20 dialogue frameworks that span the range from diplomacy, security, economy, trade, fiscal affairs, finance and military to counternarcotics, law enforcement, agriculture, climate change, and people-to-people exchanges.



Figure 1 US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping greet one another prior to a bilateral meeting on Saturday, Nov. 16, 2024 in Lima, Peru. Photo: Official White House Photo by Oliver Contreras

In Spring 2023, the US Treasury Department was sanctioning Chinese entities for their involvement in supplying chemical precursors to US-bound fentanyl trafficking networks. Today, 55 dangerous synthetic drugs and precursor chemicals have been class scheduled by Beijing, online platforms and pill presses shut down, and arrests connected to the illicit chemical industry

made. Reciprocally, China's Ministry of Public Security-linked Institute for Forensic Studies has been delisted from the Entity List—a rare case of an adversary state entity being delisted without any underlying change in the listed reason for its blacklisting.

In Spring 2023, US-China people-to-people as well as academic ties were frail, having suffered body blows stemming from the polemics associated with the origins of the COVID-19 virus and the Justice Department's earlier "China Initiative." There were only 12 weekly roundtrip passenger flights in service. Today, the two sides are on the [verge of renewing](#) their landmark Science and Technology Agreement (STA), the first major agreement to be signed by the two governments following the re-establishment of diplomatic relations in January 1979, pandas [are returning](#) to zoos in San Diego, Washington, DC and San Francisco, the number of roundtrip passenger flights [has risen](#) to 50 (prior to COVID-19, the number exceeded 150), and the health authorities of the two countries [recently held](#) their first ministerial-level dialogue in over seven years. The cases of "wrongfully detained" Americans have [been resolved](#) (although many others remain on exit bans), reciprocal repatriations of [illegal migrants](#) and [fugitives](#) have been conducted, and the Mainland's Level 3 travel advisory status (Reconsider Travel) has [been lowered](#) to Level 2 (Exercise Increased Caution) by the State Department. For his part, President Xi [has committed](#) to inviting 50,000 young Americans to China on exchange and study over the next half-decade.



Figure 2 A screenshot from a Smithsonian National Zoo video showing the FedEx truck driving through Washington, DC transporting two pandas newly arrived from China on October 15, 2024. Photo: National Zoo via X/Twitter

In Spring 2023, US-China climate change discussions—a mutually beneficial area of cooperation - were at a standstill and would only resume after the visit to Beijing by Special Climate Envoy John Kerry in July 2023. Today, the US-China bilateral Working Group on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s has [met twice](#) and, in keeping with their [Sunnylands Statement](#) of November 2023, the two parties jointly hosted a Methane and Other Non-CO2 Greenhouse Gases Summit at COP 29 in Baku, Azerbaijan. In Spring 2023, the idea of hosting exchanges on AI hadn't even been broached, even as US and Chinese organizations were moving forward with transformative breakthroughs in Generative AI. Today, the two sides have begun a constructive and candid policy dialogue on AI, co-sponsored each other's resolutions on AI at the UN General Assembly, and affirmed the need to ensure that unsupervised AI must not be allowed to dictate command-and-control of critical weapon systems - especially the [decision to use](#) a nuclear weapon. The fear that China would be treated as a political football during the US election season or that it would interfere in the elections using disinformation operations [did not materialize](#) either (although there may have been interference [in down-ballot races](#)).

For all the positives that have flowed from their newly established or restarted dialogue frameworks, not all conversations ended in constructive outcomes. This is understandable. As the “new normal” in US-China relations takes shape, there is no one typology of interaction that can cut across the various “baskets” of US-China issues. A complex relationship demands complex choices that are built as much on ideology and values as much on interests, objectivity and realism.

Mil-Mil Conversations Go Sideways on Strategic Arms Proliferation Concerns

The decision to restart mil-mil communications at the Biden-Xi Woodside summit in November 2023 was a bright spot in bilateral ties, to the extent that “jaw-jaw” is vastly preferable to “war-war.” Mil-mil ties had been suspended by China, it bears remembering, following Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taipei in August 2022. This included the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) talks, an operational safety dialogue between US INDOPACOM and PLA naval and air forces, which had convened regularly since 1998. The full range of institutionalized

high-level mil-mil communications stand restored as of this writing.

In January and September 2024, the 17th and [18th editions](#) of the Defense Policy Coordination Talks, an annual deputy assistant secretary level policy dialogue, were respectively conducted. The [MMCA working group](#) met earlier in April and again in November, and a [theater commanders video-teleconference](#) featuring the Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command and the PLA's Southern Theater Commander was held in early-September (the two [met later](#) in September at the Indo-Pacific Chiefs of Defense Conference in Hawaii). Topping these engagements was the first in-person meeting between the two countries' defense chiefs, Secretary Lloyd and Minister Dong, in a year-and-a-half on the margins of the Shangri La Dialogue (SLD) in late-May. While both sides had tough words for the other in their SLD remarks, they also [agreed to convene](#) a crisis communications working group by the end of 2024. For added measure, National Security Advisor Sullivan was [afforded the opportunity](#) to meet the Vice-Chairman of the Party's Central Military Commission (CMC), Zhang Youxia, during his late-August visit to Beijing, the first such NSA-CMC vice chair meet [in eight years](#).

The mil-mil communications were wholesome but could not mask the wide chasm between the two sides on strategic arms-racing and deterrence concerns. It [was reported](#) in August that Biden had reoriented a highly classified US nuclear strategic plan, the Nuclear Employment Guidance, in March 2024 to account for an era of multiple nuclear-armed adversaries in the context of China's [rapidly growing](#) nuclear arsenal. Whether linked or not, China [discontinued](#) the bilateral arms control and nonproliferation consultations in July (lame-ly using Taiwan arms sales card as an excuse) and, later that month, unleashed broadsides against [AUKUS' nuclear submarine cooperation pillar](#) as well as NATO's [nuclear sharing](#) arrangements (it issued a [No-first-use Nuclear Weapons Initiative](#) too). It also conducted its first ICBM test [in 44 years](#) in late-September, with the projectile splashing down in the South Pacific. The US and China also clashed over the deployment of the *Typhon* Mid-Range Capability missile system in the Philippines. The US side cautioned the PLA for its dangerous, coercive, and escalatory tactics in the South China Sea which [could trigger](#) Article V of the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty; the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson

admonished the US side for the [first deployment](#) of a strategic offensive weapon system outside its territory and in the Asia-Pacific since the end of the Cold War.

Careful Management on Taiwan Amidst Lobbing of Rhetorical Salvos

The Taiwan Question remained a bone of contention in US-China relations during the mid and latter part of 2024, to nobody's surprise. In early-May, China's foreign ministry spokesperson [blasted](#) Secretary Blinken's [encouragement](#) as well as that of [seven other allied nations](#) to the WHO to invite Taiwan as an observer at the 77th World Health Assembly meeting. Later that month, the ministry spokesperson "[deplored](#) and [opposed](#)" Blinken's note of [felicitation](#) to Lai Ching-te on his inauguration as president of the self-governing island. Lai had angered Beijing by noting that "the PRC and the ROC are not subordinate to each other" in his inaugural address. He was called out by name; treatment that took Beijing three years to mete out to his predecessor Tsai Ing-wen.

The Biden administration, for its part, was [critical](#) of the PLA's Joint Sword 2024 A and B military exercises that were conducted in the wake of Lai's inaugural address in May and his "Double Ten Day" address in October, respectively. Joint Sword 2024-A had focused on seizing the initiative in the Taiwan Strait battlefield, with the training content aimed at precision strikes on critical land, air and sea targets; Joint Sword 2024-B featuring the PLA Navy and the Coast Guard sought to [execute a blockade](#) of ports and other key locations. The exercises were [denounced](#) as "irresponsible, disproportionate and destabilizing." The Biden administration also strongly condemned the June 2024 [judicial guidelines](#) issued by China's Supreme People's Court which imposes criminal punishments on "diehard Taiwan independence separatists" for conducting or inciting secession, [noting](#) that threats and legal warfare would not achieve peaceful resolution of cross-strait differences. And in conjunction with like-minded ANZUS, NATO and Japanese government allies, the US State Department sought to [develop a common front](#) to debunk China's conflation and "mischaracterization" of UNGA Resolution 2758 with its "One China Principle." China's foreign ministry was [having none of it](#), and political parties at the National Assembly in Taipei too were [unable to arrive](#) at a consensus on

this point. All along, the Biden administration maintained a consistent clip of arms sales to the island, including by [utilizing](#) presidential drawdown authority, as well as periodic transits through the Taiwan Strait in international waters and airspace. China, for its part, built out its Taiwan arms sales-related list of sanctioned US parties under the framework of its Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law.

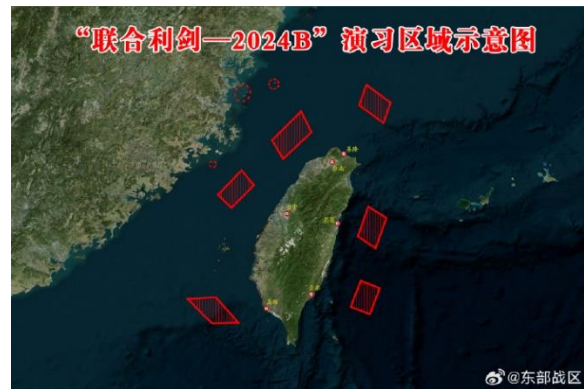


Figure 3 A schematic diagram of the area of the military exercise "Joint Sword 2024B," released by the Eastern Theater Command. Photo: Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, Public Domain

Tit-for-tat skirmishes between the two sides were not the whole story on the Taiwan Question. In Lima, Peru, Biden again assured his counterpart that the US does not support Taiwan independence (Xi had [attempted—unsuccessfully](#)—in Woodside to alter the phraseology to "oppose Taiwan independence") and added that the US [does not use](#) the Taiwan card to compete or contain China. More broadly, Biden yet again reemphasized his "Five Noes": that the US does not seek a Cold War with China; 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. Whether believed or not in Beijing, these assurances offer a steadying framework for future-oriented ties.

Playing Cleanup on Advanced Technologies Decoupling

In an important speech in September 2022, NSA Jake Sullivan [had listed](#) three "families of technologies"—computing related technologies; biotechnologies and biomanufacturing; clean energy technologies—as "force multipliers" that would define the geopolitical landscape of the 21st century. Given

their foundational nature, the US would seek to “maintain as large a lead as possible” over adversary nations, including by resorting to a “small yard, high fence” approach on strategic trade controls. Following the speech, the US Commerce Department issued an expansive regulation that instituted controls on China’s access to advanced computing chips as well as semiconductor manufacturing equipment essential to producing such chips.

With the clock winding down on its term in office, the Biden administration maintained its frenetic rulemaking pace, issuing a number of regulations in quick succession to deepen the “selective decoupling” of the two economies’ advanced technology ecosystems. On Sept. 23, the administration [released](#) a Proposed Rule to secure the supply chain for connected vehicles, which prohibits the import of Chinese hardware and software integrated into vehicle connectivity system (VCS) and software integrated into automated driving system (ADS). VCS is the set of systems that allow the vehicle to communicate externally, including telematics control units, Bluetooth, cellular, satellite, and Wi-Fi modules. The ADS includes the components that collectively allow a highly autonomous vehicle to operate without a driver behind the wheel. The Proposed Rule follows an Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPRM) [issued earlier](#) this February.

On Oct. 29, the US Justice Department [issued](#) a massive 422-page proposed rule to prevent access to Americans’ bulk sensitive personal data as well as government-related data by countries of concern, such as China. The rule proposes to establish a new national security-based regulatory regime governing the collection and transfer of personal data. Two types of commercial transactions between a “US person” and a “country of concern” are to be prohibited – transactions involving “data brokerage” (with the term defined broadly) and transactions involving human genomic data. The proposed regulation contains an exemption for certain data transfers in connection with biopharmaceutical clinical investigations and post-marketing surveillance data. The Proposed Rule follows a White House [executive order](#) accompanied by an ANPRM [issued earlier](#) this March. It also follows instances of damaging cyberespionage breaches by China-linked hackers, which include the infiltration of US broadband providers’ networks to [sweep up](#) the private communications of hundreds of thousands of Americans as well as [access](#) the

“lawful intercept” system maintained by the Justice Department to place wiretaps on suspected Chinese spies in the US. Earlier in July, the “Five Eyes” countries, joined by Germany and Japan and South Korea for the first time, had issued a rare [joint advisory](#) attributing malicious cyber activities to China. President Xi, for his part, [disavowed](#) any such conduct in his Lima meeting with Biden, with his foreign ministry spokesperson having earlier [thrown the ball back](#) into the US’ court.

Also on Oct. 29, the US Treasury Department [released](#) a voluminous final rule to prohibit outbound investment in semiconductors and microelectronics, quantum information technologies, and AI systems to China. The purpose of the Outbound Order is to [shut down](#) a pathway for Beijing to exploit the “intangible benefits” – including enhanced standing and prominence, managerial assistance, investment and talent networks, market access, and enhanced access to additional financing – that accompany the flow of US investments to China. The order marks the first instance of the US government controlling outbound capital flows for national security reasons. And while the regulation is framed as addressing capital flows, it effectively regulates the coverage of “greenfield” and “brownfield” investments in these national security technologies and products, too. The Final Rule follows a White House Executive Order [issued](#) in August 2023 and a Proposed Rule [issued earlier](#) this July.

Finally, on Dec. 2, the US Commerce Department [issued](#) a final rule that upgrades the existing controls on China’s access to semiconductor manufacturing equipment so as to impair its capability to produce advanced node semiconductors. Twenty-four types of semiconductor manufacturing equipment and three types of software tools are to be additionally denied to Chinese end-users. Beijing response to the measure was swift. On Dec. 3, it announced a ban on several minerals essential to semiconductor, communications and military technologies, as well as a prohibition on exports of dual-use items to US military end users. Alongside the semiconductor manufacturing equipment rule, the US Commerce Department also imposed controls on the transfer of high-bandwidth memory (HBM) chips, which are crucial for accelerating AI training and inference as well as added [140 entities](#) spanning tool companies, chip fabs and investment firms to the Entity List. Earlier this May, a number of Chinese

quantum technology companies and research institutes had been [added](#), too, to the List. Overall, the number of Chinese entities placed in the Entity List during the 2018–2023 period have [increased over 300%](#) (from 218 to 787). As for license applications submitted that involve a Chinese Entity List-ed party, they increased from five in 2018 to a high of 1,751 in 2021, with approximately 33 percent of applications either denied or revoked.

In addition to these advanced technologies and data flow controls, successive rounds of sanctions were enforced on China for its [policies on “forced labor”](#) in Xinjiang and [support for Russia’s war](#) in Ukraine. This included the first US sanctions imposed on a Chinese entity for joint development and production of a [complete weapon system](#) (the *Garpiya* series long-range attack unmanned aerial vehicle) with the Russians. No Chinese financial institutions have as yet been sanctioned, despite Secretary Blinken’s threat to do so in his late-April meetings in Beijing. To the contrary, the US Treasury Department and China’s Finance Ministry maintain a cordial working dialogue that [spans the range](#) from financial sector operational resilience to debt relief for low-income countries to central bank scenario testing of climate change risks. Earlier in April, the two sides had [established](#) dedicated workstreams on Balanced Growth in the Domestic and Global Economies and on Cooperation and Exchange on Anti-Money Laundering under the aegis of their financial and economic working groups.

“Small yard, high fence” export controls has been one component of the Biden administration’s toolkit to vigorously compete with China in the advanced technologies of tomorrow. Alongside, the administration also passed landmark legislation, such as the CHIPS and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), as well as employed an impressive array of industrial policy authorities, such as the Defense Production Act, Buy American Act and the Bayh-Dole Act, to incentivize the expansion of domestic productive capacity in key strategic and high value-added manufacturing industries. To this end, and in its waning days in office, the administration aggressively pushed out CHIPS Incentives Awards totaling in the many billions to the likes of [Intel](#), [BAE Systems](#), [GlobalFoundries](#), and [TSMC](#). There are uncertainties whether this industrial buildout will continue under President Trump and a Republican Congress, particularly with regard to

the proposed IRA project investments (fully 80% of announced Korean and Japanese investments are [tied to IRA money](#)). Trump had vowed to “terminate” the IRA on the campaign trail and no Republican supported passage of the legislation in 2022. On the other hand, three-quarters of announced investments are in Republican-controlled districts and 65% of them located in counties that voted for Trump.

China Responds in Kind

China was active on the “selective decoupling” front too in 2024, having methodically built a robust economic lawfare toolkit over the past five years. These include the Unreliable Entities Regulation (Sept. 2020), the updated National Security Review Mechanism (Dec. 2020), the Unjustified Extraterritorial Measures Regulation (Jan. 2021), the Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law (June 2021), and more lately, a new Dual-Use Export Control Regulation (September 2024) under the framework of its Oct. 2020 Export Control Law. Having absorbed blow after blow of US technology denial measures, China began deploying these tools in earnest in 2024. In March 2024, new procurement guidelines were introduced phasing out foreign operating systems, microprocessors and database software from government PCs and servers. In May, the Cyberspace Administration of China [banned the use](#) of the US semiconductor firm Micron’s products in China’s critical information infrastructure following a failed cybersecurity review. There have been calls for a cybersecurity review of Intel too and more lately, a coordinated advisory issued by four Chinese industry bodies to discontinue the usage of US-made chips given that they are “[no longer safe](#).”

In August, the Ministry of Commerce (MofCom), [announced](#) export controls on antimony, a critical mineral with military and civilian applications including battery storage. The antimony controls follow on the heels of controls on gallium, germanium, and high-purity natural and synthetic graphite materials introduced in 2023. These controls were effectively [upgraded](#) in early-December 2024 to a full ban “in principle” vis-à-vis the US following the latter’s imposition of export controls on China-destined semiconductor manufacturing equipment. Controls on “superhard materials” such as industrial-grade diamonds and tungsten carbide, used in chip manufacturing-related cutting, grinding, and polishing processes, is anticipated to be the next export control shoe to

drop. In September, MofCom announced an investigation into the US parent company of Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger under its Unreliable Entity List mechanism for its exclusion of Xinjiang-originating cotton from supply chains. And in October, sales of key Chinese battery components to the largest US [drone maker, Skydio](#), was revoked under the Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law for its role in arms sales to Taiwan, forcing Skydio to [ration batteries](#) to one per drone to customers.

Wave-upon-wave of Taiwan arms-sales related countermeasures against US military companies and senior executives were imposed too in [April](#), [May](#), [June](#), [July](#), [September](#), and [December](#) by China's foreign ministry under its Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law. For added measure, General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, General Dynamics Land Systems, and Boeing Defense, Space & Security were separately added to the Commerce Ministry's Unreliable Entities List in May. In February 2023, Lockheed Martin and Raytheon Missiles & Defense became the first US entities to be placed on this list for their role in arms sales to Taiwan. The upshot is clear: China's countersanctions and reciprocal export control regime is being ramped up which will inevitably lead to more US (and foreign) companies being caught in the crossfire between the US and Chinese regimes.

Doubling-down on Section 301 Tariffs

Trade frictions returned to the fore in US-China relations during the latter half of 2024. The first shot of this new great power rivalry, it bears remembering, was fired in the trade policy arena in the Summer of 2018 when the Trump administration introduced Section 301 List 1 tariffs on \$34 billion of Chinese imports. In total, \$370 billion of Chinese imports spread across four lists were thereafter subjected to tariffs, with China imposing lesser retaliatory tariffs also. On May 14, 2024, following a statutory four-year review of the Trump-introduced tariffs, the Biden administration not only retained the tariffs but [selectively augmented](#) them to the tune of \$18 billion for semiconductors, electric vehicles, batteries, battery parts and critical minerals, solar cells, and certain personal protective equipment (final modified rates were [notified](#) in September). Concurrently, the White House and the [Treasury Secretary](#) accused China of engaging in non-market practices that was creating excess supply to the detriment of industry and workers abroad. China was failing to meet its industrial

subsidies-linked notification requirements at the WTO too, especially regarding proliferation of sub-central level "public-private investment funds" which were driving this structural overcapacity. The additional Section 301 tariffs were justified, in the administration's telling, [to protect](#) the historic Chips Act and IRA investments in strategic sectors (semiconductors, batteries, EVs, solar, medical equipment) from being unfairly undercut by Chinese exports.

The administration's accusations are not without merit. China's domestic savings remains excessively high. The fear that these excess savings (and domestic under-consumption) will macroeconomically manifest itself in the form of overproduction that is dumped overseas is genuine. And because a component of this overproduction is the product of non-transparent industrial subsidies, this would amount to unfair trade-distorting competition in international markets. Beijing [rejects](#) this characterization. In its view, the current global production landscape is the result of market competition and the international division of labor. Within China, competition in its new energy marketplace is intense; as such, only the fittest survive and therefore tend to prosper in international markets. Export volumes too should not be taken as a benchmark for determining overcapacity either. US, Japan, and Germany's auto exports for instance account for 23%, 75%, and 50%, respectively, of domestic production; China's EV exports by comparison account for only 12.5% of production. Besides, there is a huge demand for new energy products in global markets, and it is the fragmentation of global industrial and supply chains due to the adoption of discriminatory subsidy measures by the West that is the primary contributor to "[so-called overcapacity](#)," Beijing counters. China's subsidy programs adhere to fair competition and non-discrimination rules, are mainly for R&D, are targeted at the consumption end, and are not contingent upon export performance. The [WTO secretariat](#) and the European Commission might [beg to differ](#) with some of these contentions.



Figure 4 A Donald Trump impersonator standing in front of the White House in Washington, DC in a mask and pointing at the camera. Photo: UnSplash, CC2.0

The Return of “Tariff Man” and the Uncertain Future of Bilateral Ties

“I am a Tariff Man. When people or countries come in and raid the great wealth of our Nation, I want them to pay for the privilege of doing so. It will always be the best way to max out our economic power. We are right now taking \$billions in Tariffs. MAKE AMERICA RICH AGAIN.”

So tweeted President Donald Trump, three days after a [tense but positive](#) meeting with President Xi on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in December 2018 as the two sides tried to head-off tit-for-tat tariffs on billions of dollars of bilateral trade.

Trump may be notorious for his unpredictability and embellishment. But on the issue of trade and tariffs, he has been a pillar of consistency. From his formative 1980s days as a young Manhattan real estate developer, it has been his cardinal belief that goods consumed in the US must be produced at home using US workers. To the extent that some of these goods are imported, an equivalent dollar amount of US goods should be purchased by that country. At day’s end, bilateral trade must be balanced. Anything less is a “loss” for the US. And hence his dislike of the large bilateral trade surpluses run by China and his sense of personal affront when run by allies, such as Japan and Germany originally and South Korea and the Europeans today, which doubly happen to benefit from expensive treaty-underwritten US defense guarantees.

As president-elect in 2016, Trump vowed to withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement; renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement under threat of withdrawal; label China a currency

manipulator; bring cases against China at the WTO; and use every lawful presidential power to remedy trade disputes with China and other countries, including the application of tariffs consistent with Section 201 and 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 and Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962. Each vow was fulfilled. With Trump now promising to impose tariffs of at least 60% on all Chinese goods (he had threatened China with 45% tariffs during his 2016 political campaign and ended up imposing 25% tariffs), the president-elect deserves to be taken not just seriously but (quite) literally.

Be that as it may, Beijing is not likely to be in any hurry to flatter the president-elect, having learnt from bitter experience of the limits of its own flattery. Within three months of Trump’s inauguration in 2017, Xi had snagged a high-profile meeting in Mar-a-Lago, which delivered a [shiny 100-Day Action Plan](#) under the framework of the US-China Comprehensive Economic Dialogue. Later that November, Trump was feted with a “state *plus*” visit to Beijing where he became the first foreign leader since the founding of the People’s Republic to dine inside the Forbidden City. None of this flattery prevented his national security team from listing China as a “[revisionist power](#)” and inaugurating a new era of great power rivalry just a month later in its National Security Strategy of December 2017. Or prevented his trade policy team from slapping Section 301 tariffs in Summer 2018 and launching the trade war.

It is not lost on Xi’s China either that engaging “dealmaker” Donald Trump has the potential to backfire, should the attempt at dealmaking fail. The US-China technology war, with its initial focus on kneecapping Huawei, [almost-literally dates back to the day](#) in May 2019 when the “90 Day [trade] talks”—that the two leaders initiated at the December 2018 G20 Buenos Aires summit – formally collapsed. China’s drive toward technological “self-reliance” can be specifically dated to this collapse, too. Xi Jinping reportedly observed to his closest confidants that he had considered the 90-Day talks to be an economic matter and “[demonstrated utmost sincerity](#)” but the Trump administration deliberately scuppered the negotiation (by insisting that Beijing sign an unfair bargain) to pursue its true objective: complete suppression of China. China would not succumb to pressure, Xi noted. “We have to come together to survive this situation.”

Where this leaves US-China engagement, remains to be seen. At minimum, the two sides will approach the other warily during the likely-chaotic first year of the second Trump presidency. Almost none of the senior officials who had played a major role in charting the outlines of China policy during Trump's first term—Secretary of State Pompeo, NSA Robert O'Brien, Deputy NSA Pottinger, and USTR Robert Lighthizer—will be returning in Trump 2.0. Some were even sanctioned by Beijing [on their way out](#) in January 2021. One thing is fairly certain though. The multitude of working groups that the two sides had successfully stumbled upon during the Biden-Xi years will be disbanded. In Trump 1.0, the clunky and top-heavy Obama-era Strategic and Economic Dialogue was discarded in favor of four newly established dialogue mechanisms in the areas of diplomacy and security, economic and trade, law enforcement and cybersecurity, and people-to-people exchanges. In Trump 2.0, the wheel will once again be reinvented.

From a longer-term policy standpoint though, the overarching approach toward China will more-or-less remain the same. Two weeks before the first Trump administration left office, NSA O'Brien [had declassified](#) the administration's overarching strategy document for the Indo-Pacific region, titled the US Strategic Framework for The Indo-Pacific. The strategy document featured five elements: (1) advance economic decoupling and prevent China's industrial policies and unfair trading practices from distorting global markets and harming US competitiveness; (2) maintain US industry's innovation edge over China; (3) promote US values and influence in the Indo-Pacific and counter Chinese models of governance, coercive behavior and influence operations; (4) maintain an intelligence advantage over China, and against Chinese intelligence activities; and (5) deter China from using military force against the US and its allies and partners by maintaining the capability to deny China sustained air and sea dominance inside the first island chain in a conflict, defending the first island chain nations, including Taiwan, and dominating all warfighting domains outside the first island chain. These elements will continue to guide China policy in Trump 2.0. And Beijing, for its part, will continue to pursue its interests reactively but firmly within this framework.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-CHINA RELATIONS

MAY-NOVEMBER 2024

May 1, 2024: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [releases](#) a statement encouraging the World Health Organization to reinstate an invitation to Taiwan to participate as an observer at the 77th World Health Assembly.

May 1, 2024: US Department of the Treasury [announces](#) new actions to degrade Russia's military-industrial base with nearly 300 new sanctions, expressing particular concern about entities based in the PRC.

May 2, 2024: US Department of Justice [sentences](#) the leader of one of the largest counterfeit trademark cases ever prosecuted in the US, whose lengthy operation introduced “tens of thousands of counterfeit and low-quality devices trafficked from China into the US supply chain, jeopardizing both private-sector and public-sector users, including highly sensitive US military applications like the support platforms of US fighter jets and other military aircraft.”

May 2, 2024: US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin [co-convenes](#) a United States-Japan-Australia Trilateral Defense Ministerial Meeting in Hawaii with his counterparts during which they discuss the “concerning and destabilizing conduct” by China in the South China Sea and reject any attempts to unilaterally change the status quo in the East and South China Seas.

May 2, 2024: Secretary of Defense Austin [meets](#) with Australian, Japan and Philippine counterparts in Hawaii, during which they emphasize their commitment to support “regional security and stability” and call on China to “abide by the final and legally binding” 2016 South China Sea Arbitration.

May 6, 2024: US Department of State [releases](#) the “International Cyberspace and Digital Policy Strategy: Towards an Innovative, Secure, and Rights-Respecting Digital Future,” in which China is called the “broadest, most active, and most persistent cyber threat” to US networks, being made up of both state-sponsored activity and PRC-linked actors who are also working to reshape norms governing cyberspace amidst surveillance and disinformation campaigns.

May 6-10, 2024: US Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Richard Verma

[travels](#) to China, alongside a visit to the Philippines, to visit the US Embassy in Beijing, the US Consulates General in Shenyang, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, and members of the US business community.

May 8, 2024: Guided-missile destroyer USS *Halsey* (DDG 97) [conducts](#) a routine transit through the Taiwan Strait “in accordance with international law.”

May 8, 2024: US Department of State Spokesperson Matthew Miller, in response to questions regarding the Hong Kong authorities banning the song “Glory to Hong Kong,” [says](#) the US remains “seriously concerned about the continued erosion of protections for human rights and fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong, including the freedom of expression.”

May 8-9, 2024: US Senior Advisor to the President for International Climate Policy [John Podesta](#) and PRC Special Envoy for Climate Change [Liu Zhenmin](#) co-lead a meeting of the US-China Working Group on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s in Washington, DC

May 9, 2024: US Department of Defense [releases](#) its annual Freedom of Navigation Report for Fiscal Year 2023, in which five “Excessive Maritime Claims” are listed against the People's Republic of China—two more claims than any other claimant listed—all five of which are associated with “multiple operational challenges” and one of which being the only claim in this list noted as challenged jointly with international partners and allies.

May 9, 2024: US Senior Official for the DPRK [Jung Pak](#) meets PRC Special Representative on Korean Peninsula Affairs [Liu Xiaoming](#) in Tokyo, Japan, as a follow up to Secretary of State Blinken's visit to China in late April 2024.

May 10, 2024: US Navy destroyer USS *Halsey* (DDG 97), as described in a comparatively extensive notice, [asserts](#) navigational rights and freedoms in the South China Sea near the Paracel Islands and continues operations with a freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea.

May 13, 2024: US National Economic Advisor Lael Brainard, speaking in a background press call on

Biden administration efforts to protect US workers and business from China's unfair trade practices, [says](#) "China is simply too big to play by its own rules."

May 13, 2024: US President Biden [issues](#) an order arguing the real estate acquisition by MineOne Partners Limited, a company majority owned by Chinese nationals, is a national security threat as the company prepares to conduct "specialized cryptocurrency mining operations in close proximity" to Frances E. Warren Air Force Base on that real estate.

May 13, 2024: US Consul General Gregory May at the US Consulate General Hong Kong & Macau [provides](#) keynote address at event on the erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy since 2020, during which he describes the US relationship with Hong Kong as having three components: "very good people-to-people ties...productive business and trade cooperation, and...a very challenging relationship with the Hong Kong government."

May 14, 2024: President Biden [initiates](#) actions to protect US workers and business from "China's unfair trade practices concerning technology transfer, intellectual property, and innovation," [leading to](#) the increase of tariffs on \$18 billion of imports from China. Directly after his announcement, he [gives](#) lengthy remarks which include comparisons of the US and Chinese markets and a conversation with President Xi Jinping on the issue.

May 14, 2024: Office of the US Trade Representative [releases](#) a four-year review of the actions taken in the Section 301 investigation against China's technology transfer-related acts, policies, and practices, summarizing that these actions have been "effective," especially in diversifying the supply chain, but, "[i]nstead of pursuing fundamental reform, the Government of China has persisted and even become more aggressive, particularly through cyber intrusions and cybertheft, in its attempts to acquire and absorb foreign technology."

May 14, 2024: Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Technology and National Security Tarun Chhabra and Department of State Acting Special Envoy for Critical and Emerging Technology Seth Center [lead](#) interagency US delegation to meet a [PRC delegation](#) in Geneva, Switzerland to discuss artificial intelligence risk and safety.

May 15, 2024: Secretary Blinken, responding to a question during a joint press conference with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, [clarifies](#) that Washington's concern is "not about China providing weapons to Russia for use in Ukraine...China's held back from that," but is about the "support that China's providing to Russia to rebuild its defense industrial base"—namely, machine tools and microelectronics—in ways that are making a difference to Russia's campaign against Ukraine.

May 16, 2024: Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner [speaks](#) via teleconference with PRC Maj. Gen. Li Bin, director of the Central Military Commission Office for International Military Cooperation, to discuss issues of mutual concern and maintain "open lines of communication in defense channels to reduce the risks of miscommunication."

May 16, 2024: National Economic Advisor Brainard [delivers](#) remarks at a Center for American Progress event centered around responding to the challenges of China's industrial overcapacity.

May 17, 2024: US Department of Homeland Security [adds](#) 26 additional PRC-based textile companies to Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act Entity List, with Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas noting that the US will continue to "hold the PRC accountable for their exploitation and abuse of the Uyghur people."

May 19, 2024: Secretary Blinken [releases](#) a congratulatory message to Dr. Lai Ching-te on his inauguration as Taiwan's fifth democratically elected president and commemorating President Tsai Ing-wen for her role in strengthening US-Taiwan ties.

May 21-23, 2024: Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Industry & Analysis Grant Harris [participates](#) in the 14th annual United States-China Tourism Leadership Summit in Xi'an, China, making him the highest-ranking official ever to lead the US delegation to this summit, which Harris calls "an important vehicle" in enhancing tourism back to pre-pandemic levels.

May 22, 2024: US naval forces [conduct](#) operations in the South China Sea in partnership with the Royal Netherlands Navy as part of efforts to maintain "stability and free use of vital sea lanes in the Indo-Pacific."

May 23, 2024: US Department of State China Coordinator and Deputy Assistant Secretary for China and Taiwan Mark Lambert and PRC Director-General for Boundary and Ocean Affairs Hong Liang [hold](#) the second round of consultations on bilateral maritime affairs virtually to [discuss](#) the “current situation in the South China Sea and East China Sea, as well as other maritime issues,” and to reaffirm the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.

May 23, 2024: US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen, speaking ahead of the G7 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors Meetings, [lists](#) “China’s industrial overcapacity” as one of three priority areas for the US, adding that it is “not a bilateral issue between the US and China.”

May 23, 2024: Robert Silvers, undersecretary for strategy, policy, and plans at the Department of Homeland Security, [releases](#) a blog post discussing the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) in which he announces the Forced Labor Enforcement Task Force’s plans to “further scale up” efforts to expand the UFLPA Entity List.

May 24, 2024: Office of the US Trade Representative [extends](#) certain exclusions in the Section 301 tariffs investigation, extending them through May 31, 2025.

May 24, 2024: US Department of Justice [announces](#) guilty plea of a Hong Kong-born, naturalized US citizen and former Central Intelligence Agency officer who admitted to, along with a co-conspirator, gathering and delivering “a large volume of classified US national defense information” to the People’s Republic of China Shanghai State Security Bureau starting in 2001.

May 25, 2024: US Department of State [releases](#) a statement expressing deep concern over PLA joint military drills in the Taiwan Strait and around Taiwan, urging Beijing “to act with restraint” and reiterating the US commitment to its “longstanding one China policy.”

May 29-30, 2024: US Ambassador to China [Nicholas Burns](#) and Chinese Ambassador to the US [Xie Feng](#) provide video remarks to the US-China High-Level Event on Subnational Climate Action, hosted by the California-China Climate Institute in Berkeley, California, each encouraging bilateral collaboration and exchanges on climate.

May 30, 2024: Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell [hosts](#) PRC Executive Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu for an official visit in Washington, DC during which they mutually reaffirmed the importance of open channels of communications at all times and discussed a variety of “regional and global issues, including areas of difference and areas of cooperation that matter most to the American people and the world.”

May 31, 2024: SecDef Austin [meets PRC](#) Minister of National Defense Dong Jun in Singapore on the margins of the Shangri-La Dialogue to discuss bilateral defense relations and communicate points of concern and cooperation.

June 4, 2024: US Department of State [releases](#) a statement in commemoration of the 35th anniversary of the “Tiananmen Square massacre,” reaffirming the US commitment to promoting “accountability for PRC human rights abuses both within and outside its borders.”

June 5, 2024: FBI Cyber Division Assistant Director Bryan Vorndran, delivering a keynote address at the 2024 Boston Conference on Cyber Security, [calls](#) China “the most prolific threat” in cybersecurity, emphasizing the “hundreds of examples” of intellectual property or personally identifiable information theft conducted by Chinese actors.

June 6, 2024: US Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Financial Markets Nicholas Tabor [delivers](#) public remarks summarizing the progress made by the Financial Working Group co-chaired by the US Treasury and People’s Bank of China over the last year.

June 11, 2024: Department of Homeland Security [adds](#) three China-based companies—a seafood, an aluminum, and a footwear company—to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act Entity List.

June 13, 2024: US Secretary of the Treasury Yellen [calls](#) the US and Chinese economies and their interactions “crucial to global growth,” believes the US has “nothing to fear from healthy economic competition,” denies that “decoupling” would be in any way beneficial for the US economy, and expresses particular concern about China’s “enduring macroeconomic imbalances” and “unfair trade practices.”

June 14, 2024: Group of Seven leaders [release](#) the G7 Apulia Leaders' Communiqué, which extensively acknowledges China's importance to, influence within, and supposed responsibilities in sectors across the globe, including but not limited to: cyberspace, international peace and security, global trade, maritime affairs, human rights, Russia's military industrial base, and its cross-strait relations with Taiwan.

June 14, 2024: US Ambassador to China Burns [gives](#) a commencement speech to Hopkins-Nanjing Center, emphasizing the "hope" he still has for US-China relations in spite of how "the most important relationship between two countries in the world today" was pulled apart over the last few years, also challenging the students to make positive progress in this fundamental bilateral relationship going forward by working with one another with a common purpose.

June 16-17, 2024: US Navy [conducts](#) a Maritime Cooperative Activity with Canadian, Japanese, and Philippine counterparts in the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea to demonstrate their "collective commitment to strengthen regional and international cooperation in the maritime domain."

June 17, 2024: US Department of State [releases](#) a statement condemning the "unjust sentencing" of activists Huang Xueqin (Sophia Huang) and Wang Jianbing, calling the sentences "the PRC's continued efforts to intimidate and silence civil society."

June 17, 2024: US Department of State [releases](#) a statement on "US Support for the Philippines in the South China Sea," condemning China's "escalatory and irresponsible actions" keeping humanitarian supplies from Philippine service members at the BDP Sierra Madre and China's "consistent disregard" for international law in the South China Sea.

June 18, 2024: US Department of Justice [announces](#) a superseding indictment involving a partnership between Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel and a Chinese criminal syndicate to launder drug money underground, thus perpetuating the import of narcotics into the US.

June 18-20, 2024: US Navy [conducts](#) bilateral operations with Royal Canadian Navy in the South China Sea "as a demonstration of our shared commitment to the rules-based international order."

June 19-20, 2024: White House Director of National Drug Control Policy Dr. Rahul Gupta [leads](#) an interagency delegation of senior officials to Beijing to discuss counternarcotics cooperation, meeting separately with State Councilor and Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong, members of the shipping industry, as well as the PRC Minister of Sport to discuss zero tolerance for sports doping.

June 20, 2024: US Department of the Treasury [delivers](#) its semiannual Report to Congress on Macroeconomic and Foreign Exchange Policies of Major Trading Partners of the United States, listing China as one of seven countries on its "Monitoring List" and reiterating Washington's call for increased transparency from China.

June 20, 2024: US Secretary of the Treasury Yellen [describes](#) counternarcotics as a focus in the US-China bilateral relationship, especially as China is "the key source of the precursor chemicals used to manufacture fentanyl."

June 21, 2024: American Institute in Taiwan and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States [host](#) consultations in Taipei, Taiwan, with representatives from the US Department of State and the Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss expanding Taiwan's meaningful participation in international fora like the UN system.

June 21, 2024: US Ambassador to China Burns, speaking in an interview with BBC, [says](#) China has "agreed to increase our military-to-military communications" to prevent misunderstandings, also noting that Washington has "warned the Chinese not to involve themselves in our election in any way, shape or form."

June 26, 2024: US Department of State releases the 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom, produced under the direction of Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain, who [notes](#) the report continues to highlight "ongoing crimes against humanity and genocide the Chinese Government is perpetrating."

June 26, 2024: US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [holds](#) a call with Philippine National Security Advisor Eduardo Año. They shared concerns over China's "dangerous and escalatory actions against the Philippines" lawful maritime operations" in the South China Sea.

June 27, 2024: US Deputy Secretary of State Campbell [holds](#) a call with China Executive Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu to discuss areas of both cooperation and differences as part of “ongoing efforts to maintain open lines of communication.”

June 27, 2024: US Consul General Gregory May [reminisces](#) on the more than two centuries of connected history between the US and Hong Kong, also emphasizing the several points of commonalities and strongly shared interests that remain therein today.

July 1, 2024: US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control [sanctions](#) China-based members of a money laundering organization with criminal links to the Mexico-based Sinaloa Cartel as part of efforts with China on countering money laundering and other illicit finance issues, including those linked to the fentanyl trade.

July 1, 2024: US Space Force publishes an article titled “Combat-Ready—Embracing a new US Space Force Generational Model” in which China [is](#) described as one of two “ambitious” authoritarian regimes “challenging established rules and norms” with “irresponsible behavior” that threatens both US national security and a smooth functioning global economy.

July 2, 2024: US Department of Homeland Security [announces](#) the first large charter flight since 2018 to remove Chinese nationals from the US to China, which was conducted in close coordination with the National Immigration Administration of the PRC, who will continue to work with the US on additional removal flights.

July 8, 2024: US National Security Agency, jointly with the Australian Signals Directorate and other global agencies, [releases](#) a Cybersecurity Advisory titled “PRC MSS Tradecraft in Action,” detailing the tradecraft used by the cyber actor group known as APT40 that is associated with the People’s Republic of China Ministry of State Security.

July 9, 2024: US Department of Homeland Security [releases](#) an updated Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act Strategy, identifying new high priority sectors for enforcement—aluminum, polyvinyl chloride (PVC), and seafood—for the first time and redeclaring the US commitment to countering forced labor.

July 10, 2024: US Secretary of State Blinken [discusses](#) challenges posed by China, including its support for Russia’s military industrial base, in a bilateral meeting with German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock.

July 10, 2024: US Under Secretary for International Affairs Jay Shambaugh [delivers](#) remarks detailing the Biden administration’s “pursuit of a healthy economic relationship between the US and China with a level playing field for American workers and firms.”

July 10, 2024: President Biden [extends](#) the national emergency with respect to Hong Kong, including “recent actions taken by the People’s Republic of China to fundamentally undermine Hong Kong’s autonomy,” for one year.

July 11, 2024: US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner, speaking at the 2024 CSIS South China Sea Conference, [says](#): “Let me be clear that the PRC’s claim to the Shoal has no more credibility today than it did when the Arbitral Tribunal issued its unanimous ruling in 2016. And the kind of revisionism and coercion we’ve seen there from the PRC is both destabilizing and dangerous.”

July 11, 2024: US Department of State [releases](#) a press statement on the eighth anniversary of the Philippines-PRC South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal ruling, reaffirming the US’ call to the PRC to abide by the ruling and to “cease its dangerous and destabilizing conduct” such as those taken over the last year against Philippine vessels in the South China Sea.

July 12, 2024: President Biden [signs](#) into law S.138, the “Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act” that encourages the two parties to resume direct dialogue and “seek a settlement that resolves differences and leads to a negotiated agreement on Tibet.”

July 20, 2024: US Department of State [releases](#) a statement marking the 25 years since China “began a campaign of repression against practitioners of Falun Gong” and calls upon the PRC to “cease its repressive campaign and release all who have been imprisoned for their beliefs.”

July 22, 2024: US Department of Justice [unseals](#) an indictment of a Chinese national and Texas resident for his role in a 2023 conspiracy to import what is believed to be one of the largest amounts of fentanyl precursors in the United States.

July 22, 2024: US Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks [says](#) China “seeks greater influence in the region, greater access to the region and a greater say in its governance...[to] internationalize the Arctic region,” also noting that the US has “seen growing cooperation between the PRC and Russia in the Arctic” both commercially and militarily which is “concerning.”

July 24, 2024: US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control [imposes](#) sanctions on a network of six individuals and five entities based in the PRC for involvement in the procurement of items supporting the DPRK’s unlawful WMD and ballistic missile programs.

July 25, 2024: US Department of Justice [accepts](#) the guilty plea of two Chinese citizens residing in California who acted as unregistered agents of the PRC government directed “to further the PRC’s campaign to repress and harass Falun Gong practitioners” in the United States.

July 27, 2024: US Secretary of State [Antony Blinken](#) and PRC Director of the CCP Central Foreign Affairs Commission and Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#) meet in Vientiane, Laos, on the margins of the ASEAN-related ministerial meetings for “open and productive discussions” and agree to maintain open lines of communication at all levels.

July 30, 2024: US Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of Defense Austin [release](#) a joint statement with Philippine counterparts that expresses serious concerns about the dangerous behavior in the South China Sea over the past year and calls on the PRC to comply with both the international law of the sea and the 2016 *Philippines v. China* arbitration ruling.

July 30, 2024: US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control [targets](#) five individuals and seven entities based in Iran, the People’s Republic of China, and Hong Kong that have facilitated procurements for Iran’s ballistic missile and unmanned aerial vehicle program.

July 31, 2024: US and China [hold](#) a multiagency, senior official meeting as part of the US-PRC Counternarcotics Working Group in Washington, DC in which they reviewed progress and discussed further cooperation.

Aug. 1, 2024: US Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy Vipin Narang [mentions](#) that Washington was “encouraged” by China’s affirmation that a nuclear war must never be

fought, but notes the PRC’s construction of hundreds of new ICBM silos in recent years, fueled by Russia, and shares that the “PRC has likely completed silo construction and has begun loading them with missiles.”

Aug. 6, 2024: US National Security Council [releases](#) a statement on the People’s Republic of China’s announcement of fentanyl scheduling actions, calling it “a valuable step forward” and the “third significant scheduling action by the PRC” since bilateral counternarcotics cooperation resumed in November 2023.

Aug. 7-8, 2024: US Indo-Pacific Command, along with Australia, Canada, and the Philippines, [conduct](#) a Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity within the Philippines’ Exclusive Economic Zone and release a statement that “reaffirm[s] the 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal Award as a final and legally binding decision.”

Aug. 13, 2024: US Department of Justice [accepts](#) guilty plea of a US Army soldier and intelligence analyst indicted in March 2024 over conspiracy to obtain and disclose national defense information, including technical data related to US military weapons systems, to an individual who lived in Hong Kong and is suspected of being associated with the Chinese government in exchange for money.

Aug. 15-16, 2024: Senior officials from the US Department of the Treasury and the People’s Bank of China [lead](#) the Fifth Meeting of the Financial Working Group Between the US and China in Shanghai, [concluding](#) with an exchange of letters in support of coordination in times of financial stress.

Aug. 19, 2024: US Department of State [releases](#) a press statement saying that the US “stands with its ally the Philippines and condemns the dangerous actions by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) against lawful Philippine maritime operations in the South China Sea,” stating that the “PRC ships employed reckless maneuvers, deliberately colliding with two Philippine Coast Guard ships” earlier that day.

Aug. 22, 2024: guided-missile destroyer USS *Ralph Johnson* (DDG 114) [conducts](#) a routine transit through the Taiwan Strait “in accordance with international law...through a corridor in the Strait that is beyond the territorial sea of any coastal state.”

Aug. 23, 2024: US Department of State [announces](#), along with the Department of the Treasury, the designation of nearly 400 entities and individuals, including entities in China, in new measures designed to degrade Russia's international supply chains and wartime economy.

Aug. 28, 2024: US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [meets](#) Gen. Zhang Youxia, vice chairman of the Central Military Commission in Beijing, China, where Sullivan emphasized the two countries' mutual "responsibility to prevent competition from veering into conflict or confrontation."

Aug. 29, 2024: US National Security Advisor Sullivan [meets](#) Chinese President Xi as part of "ongoing efforts to maintain channels of communication and responsibly manage the relationship."

Aug. 30, 2024: US Department of State [releases](#) a statement on the second anniversary of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' Assessment on the Human Rights Situation in Xinjiang, expressing disappointment that, after two years, the PRC "continues to reject the OHCHR assessment's findings" that "serious human rights violations have been committed in Xinjiang" and urges the PRC to "end these ongoing atrocities."

Sept. 4, 2024: FBI Director Christopher Wray [says](#) the FBI will "continue to keep a close eye on China's efforts to denigrate down-ballot candidates it sees as a threat, and on their broader efforts to sow discord."

Sept. 4-6, 2024: US Senior Advisor to the President for International Climate Policy [John Podesta](#) and China Special Envoy for Climate Change [Liu Zhenmin](#) co-lead the second meeting of the US-China Working Group on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s in Beijing, China, during which both sides reaffirm their intention to jointly host, with the COP29 Presidency of Azerbaijan, a Methane and Other Non-CO2 Greenhouse Gases Summit at COP29.

Sept. 6, 2024: US Departments of State, Agriculture, Commerce, Homeland Security, and Treasury jointly [release](#) an Amendment to the July 2021 Business Advisory on Risks and Considerations for Businesses Operating in Hong Kong "to highlight new and heightened risks" for US companies operating in Hong Kong.

Sept. 7, 2024: US Under Secretary of Commerce for International Trade [Marisa Lago](#) and China's Vice Minister of Commerce [Wang Shouwen](#) hold the second Vice-Ministerial meeting of the US-China Commercial Issues Working Group in Tianjin, China, with both sides agreeing to continue their regular engagement.

Sept. 9, 2024: Head of US Indo-Pacific Command Adm. Paparo [holds](#) a video teleconference with the commander of the People's Liberation Army's Southern Theater Command Gen. Wu Yanan, as part of efforts to resume high-level military-to-military communication.

Sept. 13, 2024: Biden-Harris administration [announces](#) new actions to counter the "increased abuse of the *de minimis* exemption," the majority of which is conducted by several China-founded e-commerce platforms.

Sept. 13, 2024: US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, after the US announced the increased use of the *de minimis* exemption, [defends](#) the increase, saying that "for too long, Chinese e-commerce platforms have skirted tariffs by abusing the *de minimis* exemption."

Sept. 13, 2024: Office of the USTR [announces](#) that final modifications concerning the statutory review of the tariff actions in the Section 301 investigation of China's Acts, Policies, and Practices Related to Technology Transfer, Intellectual Property, and Innovation were largely adopted.

Sept. 14-15, 2024: Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China, Taiwan, and Mongolia Michael Chase [meets](#) Chinese counterpart Deputy Director of the Central Military Commission Office for International Military Cooperation Maj. Gen. Ye Jiang in Beijing for the 18th US-PRC Defense Policy Coordination Talks.

Sept. 17, 2024: A US Navy P-8A Poseidon [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait in international airspace "operating within the Taiwan Strait in accordance with international law."

Sept. 18, 2024: US Department of the Navy, led by the Chief of Naval Operations Lisa Franchetti, [releases](#) the Chief of Naval Operations Navigation Plan for America's Warfighting Navy 2024 (NAVPLAN 24), most of which is centered around achieving "readiness for the possibility of war with the People's Republic of China by 2027" because the "PLA Navy, Rocket Force, Aerospace Force, Air Force, and Cyberspace Force are coalescing into an integrated warfighting

ecosystem specifically designed to defeat ours, backed by a massive industrial base...[that] is on a wartime footing.”

Sept. 18, 2024: US National Security Agency, along with national and global partners, [release](#) a joint cybersecurity advisory assessing that PRC-linked cyber actors have “compromised thousands of Internet-connected devices” to create a botnet, which has been controlled and managed by Integrity Technology Group, a PRC-based company “with links to the PRC government,” since mid-2021.

Sept. 18, 2024: FBI Director Wray [announces](#) that the FBI and its partners have successfully disrupted a second Chinese botnet known as Flax Typhoon, like Volt Typhoon “working at the direction of the Chinese government,” that had been targeting critical infrastructure via hundreds of thousands of internet-connected devices.

Sept. 19-20, 2024: US Department of the Treasury’s Under Secretary for International Affairs [Jay Shambaugh](#) and Vice Minister of Finance at China’s Ministry of Finance [Liao Min](#) co-lead fifth meeting of the Economic Working Group (EWG) in Beijing. While in Beijing, the Treasury delegation also meets Vice Premier He Lifeng to whom they pass along US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen’s positive sentiments on the efficacy of the EWG.

Sept. 20, 2024: Head of US Indo-Pacific Command Adm. Paparo [meets](#) the commander of the PLA’s Southern Theater Command Gen. Wu Yanan during the 26th annual Indo-Pacific Chiefs of Defense in Hawaii.

Sept. 23, 2024: White House [releases](#) a fact sheet titled “Protecting America from Connected Vehicle Technology from Countries of Concern,” specifically referring to the People’s Republic of China and Russia and starting with the following statement: “Chinese automakers are seeking to dominate connected vehicle technologies in the United States and globally...”

Sept. 24, 2024: G7 Foreign Ministers [put out](#) release addressing various global issues, including how they “seek constructive and stable relations with China...[and] recognize the importance of China in global trade,” but also remain “seriously concerned” about maritime security in several locations across the Indo-Pacific as well as the “human rights situation in China.”

Sept. 25, 2024: US Department of Defense spokesperson, responding to a question about the PRC’s ICBM test launch, [notes](#) “we believe that that [advanced notice from China about the launch] was a good thing. That was a step in the right direction. And it does lead, you know, to preventing any misperception or miscalculation.”

Sept. 26, 2024: US Embassy in China [highlights](#) information about a historical photo exhibition on US-China cooperation during World War II at the Beijing American Center.

Sept. 27, 2024: US Secretary of State [Antony Blinken](#) meets PRC Director of the CCP Central Foreign Affairs Commission and Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#) on the margins of the 79th UN General Assembly and hold “candid, substantive, and productive discussions on a range of bilateral, regional, and global issues” while emphasizing the need to maintain open lines of communication.

Sept. 28, 2024: US naval forces, alongside counterparts from Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines, [conduct](#) a Maritime Cooperative Activity within the Philippines’ Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea to demonstrate their “shared commitment to the rules-based international order.”

Oct. 2, 2024: US Secretary of State Blinken [releases](#) a congratulatory message to the people of the PRC on the occasion of its 75th National Day, adding that the US is “committed to responsibly managing our bilateral relationship with the PRC and will maintain open lines of communication.”

Oct. 2, 2024: Department of Homeland Security [adds](#) two China-based entities, one steel company and one aspartame company, to the Uygur Forced Labor Prevention Act Entity List.

Oct. 8, 2024: US Secretary of Commerce [Gina Raimondo](#) conducts a call with Minister of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China [Wang Wentao](#) to candidly exchange concerns and maintain an open channel of communication.

Oct. 11, 2024: US Secretary of State Blinken, responding to a press question in Laos on potential Chinese military activities near Taiwan on Taiwan’s National Day, [states](#) “China should not use [the so-called 10/10 speech] in any fashion as a pretext for provocative actions...we want to reinforce...the imperative of preserving the status quo.”

Oct. 11, 2024: US Secretary of State Blinken [participates](#) in the 19th East Asia Summit during which he addresses the “PRC’s provocations” in the South China Sea and East China Sea and reaffirms the “US commitment to maintaining open channels of communication with the PRC.”

Oct. 13, 2024: US Department of State [releases](#) a statement expressing serious concerns over the “unwarranted” PLA joint military drills in the Taiwan Strait and around Taiwan.

Oct. 14, 2024: US Department of Defense [releases](#) a statement on the PLA exercise, JOINT SWORD 2024B, conducted around Taiwan the day after Taiwan’s national day, calling this “military pressure operation...irresponsible, disproportionate, and destabilizing” while concluding that the US remains committed to its longstanding one China policy.

Oct. 17, 2024: US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control [announces](#) sanctions on three PRC-based entities and one individual for their involvement in the development and production of Russia’s *Garpiya* series long-range attack drone that has been used in Russia’s war against Ukraine, marking the first US sanctions imposed on PRC entities directly developing and producing complete weapons systems in partnership with Russian firms.

Oct. 20, 2024: guided-missile destroyer USS *Higgins* (DDG 76) and Royal Canadian Navy frigate HMCS *Vancouver* (FFH 331) [conduct](#) a routine transit through the Taiwan Strait “in accordance with international law...through a high seas corridor in the Strait that is beyond the territorial sea of any coastal state.”

Oct. 21, 2024: US Department of Justice [issues](#) a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking that would help establish a new program to prevent access to US bulk sensitive data by China and other countries of concern.

Oct. 24, 2024: US Department of Justice [announces](#) the indictments placed against eight China-based chemical companies and eight employees who are charged with alleged fentanyl manufacturing and distribution.

Oct. 25, 2024: US Department of the Treasury’s Under Secretary for International Affairs Jay Shambaugh and Vice Minister of Finance at China’s Ministry of Finance Liao Min [co-lead](#) the sixth meeting of the Economic Working Group in

Washington, DC, discussing both concerns and cooperation.

Oct. 28, 2024: US Department of the Treasury’s Assistant Secretary for International Affairs [Brent Neiman](#) and Deputy Governor of the People’s Bank of China [Xuan Changneng](#) co-lead the sixth meeting of the Financial Working Group in Washington, DC, discussing both concerns and cooperation.

Oct. 28, 2024: US Department of the Treasury [issues](#) a final rule to implement Executive Order 14105, “Addressing United States Investments in Certain National Security Technologies and Products in Countries of Concern,” in which the PRC had been identified as a country of concern.

Oct. 30, 2024: US Department of State [announces](#), along with the Departments of the Treasury and Commerce, the sanctioning of nearly 400 entities and individuals, including entities in the People’s Republic of China, for “enabling Russia’s prosecution of its illegal war.”

Oct. 30, 2024: US Department of State [releases](#) a fact sheet reflecting on the Department’s last three years of efforts to strengthen national security, in which the first critical missions listed is the successful establishment of the Office of China Coordination, also known as “China House,” a “whole-of-enterprise approach to strategic competition and diplomatic relations with the PRC.”

Oct. 31, 2024: US Department of Homeland Security [adds](#) three PRC-based textile companies to the Uygur Forced Labor Prevention Act Entity List.

Nov. 6-8, 2024: Representatives from US Indo-Pacific Command, US Pacific Fleet, US Pacific Air Forces, and US Coast Guard [travel](#) to Qingdao, China to meet with PLA Army, Navy, and Air Force for the semi-annual working group and annual plenary session of the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement, meetings which “serve to clarify intent and reduce the risk of misperception, miscalculation, or accidents, and therefore help foster stability within the US-PRC military-to-military relationship.”

Nov. 7, 2024: President Biden [extends](#) the national emergency with respect to the threat from securities investments that finance certain companies of China for one year beyond its expiration date of November 12, 2024 as the “PRC

military-industrial complex...continues to constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat.”

Nov. 12, 2024: US Department of State, along with China and Azerbaijan, jointly [convene](#) “The Sprint to Cut Climate Super Pollutants: COP 29 Summit on Methane and Non-CO2 GHGs” to collaboratively battle and bring attention to super pollutant greenhouse gases.

Nov. 13, 2024: US FBI and Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) [release](#) a joint statement on the continued investigation into the PRC’s “targeting of commercial telecommunications infrastructure has revealed a broad and significant cyber espionage campaign,” noting that actors have been identified.

Nov. 14, 2024: US Department of Homeland Security [announces](#) the indictment of a Chinese chemical company and its senior leaders for allegedly selling fentanyl precursor chemicals and xylazine globally.

Nov. 15, 2024: US Attorney General Merrick Garland [states](#) “[w]e know that the fentanyl supply chain, which ends with the death of Americans, often starts with chemical companies in China.”

Nov. 16, 2024: US Department of Homeland Security [completes](#) a third large-frame charter removal flight to China of Chinese nationals with no lawful basis to remain in the United States in “yet another example of the Department’s ongoing cooperation with the PRC.”

Nov. 16, 2024: Presidents [Joe Biden](#) and [Xi Jinping](#) meet in Lima, Peru and hold a “candid, constructive discussion on a range of bilateral, regional, and global issues, including areas of cooperation and areas of difference,” both stressing the importance of “all countries treating each other with respect and finding a way to live alongside each other peacefully.”

Nov. 19, 2024: US Department of State [releases](#) a statement condemning the “unjust sentencing” of 45 defendants in Hong Kong’s National Security Law trial of pro-democracy advocates known as the NSL 47, stating such “harsh

sentences erode confidence in Hong Kong’s judicial system and harm the city’s international reputation” and calling on the PRC government and Hong Kong authorities to uphold Hong Kong’s judicial independence.

Nov. 22, 2024: US Department of Homeland Security [announces](#) the addition of 29 PRC-based companies to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act Entity List, bringing the total number of entities on the UFLPA Entity List to 107.

Nov. 26, 2024: A US Navy P-8A Poseidon [transits](#) the Taiwan Strait in international airspace “operating within the Taiwan Strait in accordance with international law.”

Nov. 26, 2024: US Department of State [releases](#) the G7 Foreign Ministers Meeting Statement that, among other notes, states their desire for “constructive and stable relations with China” and “readiness to cooperate with China to address global challenges,” recognizes the “importance of China in global trade,” and calls on China to “refrain from adopting export control measures” and “step up efforts to promote international peace and security,” especially in regards to Russia, North Korea, and the East and South China Seas.

Nov. 27, 2024: US Department of State [updates](#) its Travel Advisory for Mainland China and Hong Kong, shifting them from Level 3 (“Reconsider travel”) to Level 2 (“Exercise increased caution”).

Nov. 29, 2024: US Consulate General in Hong Kong & Macau [releases](#) updated summary of their tracking list on “Arrests Under 2020 National Security Law (NSL) and 2024 Safeguarding National Security Ordinance (SNSO) in Hong Kong.”

Nov. 29, 2024: US Department of State [releases](#) a statement condemning the “unjust sentencing” of PRC journalist Dong Yuyu, saying it “highlight[s] the PRC’s failure to live up to its commitments under international law and its own constitutional guarantees to all its citizens” and calling for his immediate release.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

US-KOREA RELATIONS

The Worst Angels of Our Nature

MASON RICHEY AND ROB YORK

The last several reporting periods of *Comparative Connections* have featured little drama in US relations with the two Koreas. A lot of important changes happened—a burgeoning Washington-Seoul-Tokyo trilateral, Pyongyang’s advancing nuclear weapons program, etc.—but these developments were mostly incremental. However, the June-December 2024 reporting period—the final *Comparative Connections*—has featured bombshells, both metaphorically and literally. The most spectacular event was South Korean president Yoon Suk Yeol going full rogue authoritarian and [recklessly declaring martial law](#) at 11pm on December 3 in order to carry out a military “[self-coup d’état](#).” That is, Yoon annulled democratic processes and civil constitutional protections, arrogated all political and executive power to himself and the military, and attempted to suspend the national assembly. This shocking step toward tyranny—considered long-relegated to the distant past of South Korea’s developmental dictatorships of the 1950s-1980s—was as badly conceived as it was executed, farcically [falling apart](#) after less than three hours, when legislators (mostly from the opposition) breached the cordon of deployed soldiers around the national assembly, entered the plenary chamber, and voted 190-0 to revoke the martial law decree.

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Figure 1 South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol speaks at the presidential office in Seoul, South Korea, Saturday, Dec. 7, 2024. Photo: AP.

In addition to a raft of political and security instabilities (see next section) introduced by the self-coup attempt, the “values-based” US-South Korea alliance is now shaken to the core by a wanton power-grab of an allied leader close to the US.

And it is not as though the US-South Korea alliance was steaming toward placid political waters in any event, as the re-election of another noted [destroyer of domestic democratic norms](#)—Republican Donald Trump—[won re-election](#) as US president in November, following the dramatic cognitive and physical decline of Democratic president Joe Biden, who was forced out of his re-election campaign and replaced by hapless vice-president Kamala Harris. Beyond Trump’s own capacity to undermine the democratic values that supposedly support the US-South Korea alliance, his negative proclivities toward alliances, which he views primarily transactionally, and plans for tariffs and other measures potentially unfavorable to South Korea, were already promising friction between Seoul and Washington. The likely impending replacement of Yoon (a pro-US conservative) by a (typically) US-lukewarm progressive South Korean president would make the friction greater.

Finally, North Korea has provided the literal bombshell—many bombshells, in fact—during this *Comparative Connections* reporting period, as the Kim Jong Un regime has supplied Russia with millions of [artillery shells](#) and (likely) [hundreds](#) of short-range ballistic missiles and [multiple launch rockets](#) to support Moscow with materiel for the prosecution of its illegal war of aggression against Ukraine. This has been augmented by North Korea’s dispatch of at least [10,000 troops](#) to the Kursk region of Russia. This not only marks a clear escalation in

Pyongyang’s support for Moscow, but also likely furthers the [arms/technology transfer flowing into North Korea](#), which in turn complicates deterrence and warfighting by the US-South Korea combined forces. All of this is undergirded by a [newly forged Russia-North Korea military alliance](#), another element of the “axis of upheaval” destabilizing East Asia and sharpening the external security challenges faced by the US and South Korea.

US-South Korea Relations: South Korea Goes Rogue, the US Tees Up Trump 2.0



Figure 2 Lawmakers hold placards reading “Yoon Suk Yeol should resign” on 4 December. Photo: BBC News.

Following months of [mounting domestic political turmoil](#), at 10:23pm on December 3 South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol delivered a six-minute televised address in which he cited “legislative dictatorship,” “pro-DPRK, anti-state forces,” and a raft of political subversion measures by the opposition Democratic Party as justification for an “[emergency martial law](#)” decree that went into effect at 11pm. There [seems to be](#) no policy, political, or constitutional foundation or justification for this measure, which was thus illegal, illegitimate, and authoritarian.

The thought process behind Yoon’s decision remains unclear, as does his state of mind at the time and his ostensible endgame for martial law. What is clear, however, is that Yoon—and his co-conspirators, especially the minister of national defense, Kim Yong-hyun—intended to annul democratic processes and civil constitutional protections, arrogate all political and executive power to Yoon and the military, and suspend the national assembly for an indeterminate period of time. More darkly still, Yoon and Kim apparently instructed special operations forces to [arrest senior legislators and party leaders](#)—including the conservative

People Power Party head, Han Dong-hoon—and detain them at a government facility. This is especially noteworthy, given South Korea's authoritarian history of black site torture of political dissidents.

However, the whole martial law circus collapsed within hours, as legislators managed to reach the interior of the national assembly building and convene a plenary session, during which they voted 190-0 to rescind martial law (in accord with the South Korean constitution). Although several hundred soldiers entered the national assembly building in an attempt to stop the proceedings, their efforts were clearly half-hearted, as were their efforts to prevent legislators from entering the national assembly building in the first place. Testimony from the deployed special operations commander revealed that [he ordered soldiers](#) participating in martial law enforcement not to use live rounds in their weapons, enter the plenary chamber of the national assembly, or hurt civilians. That—along with the fact that Yoon, the defense minister, and martial law commander general Park An-su did not control major media outlets—strongly suggests that the coup attempt was badly conceived and organized. It seems that Yoon had little support from and control over the military.

In any event, by 2 am on December 4 the military [withdrew to its normal posts and Yoon conceded](#) to the national assembly vote by announcing the retraction of the martial law decree, a decision that was ratified by cabinet ministers meeting in their State Council formation. Thus, by the morning of December 4 the farcical [state of exception](#) was over, with Yoon, conspiring ministers and military, and elite hard-right conservative supporters suffering a humiliating defeat. The consequences of this attempted self-coup d'état—among the most bizarre and embarrassing in modern political history—are still far from clear, but the most likely outcome is that [Yoon will no longer be president](#). Yoon was impeached by the National Assembly on December 14, with his final removal from office now dependent on a Constitutional Court decision in 2025. The entire cabinet and suite of presidential senior officials have [tendered their resignations](#) (although many remain in post pending acceptance of their resignation), the ruling conservative People Power Party (PPP) is discredited and in shambles, and South Korea is engulfed in political chaos. Kim Yong-hyun (the

now former defense minister) is [under arrest for insurrection](#). Other cabinet ministers, senior officials, and military and police officers [are likely to follow](#). The [police](#) and special prosecutor's offices are now [investigating Yoon himself for insurrection](#), conviction for which in South Korea carries penalties ranging to the death sentence.

As of the time of writing, the political situation in South Korea is [chaotic and fluid](#). Yoon eventually indicated the inevitability of the legislative impeachment process and his will to fight post-impeachment conviction in the Constitutional Court, but at first attempted to remain in office with the support of PPP lawmakers who initially [refused to support impeachment](#) because it would (following potential conviction) lead to a snap presidential election that a candidate from the hated progressive Democratic Party would likely win. Worse still, during the first chaotic week after martial law, the PPP attempted to stay in power through [a byzantine](#) and extra-constitutional plan for Yoon to surrender his administrative power to an opaque governing committee consisting of the prime minister (Han Duk-soo) and party politicians (notably Han Dong-hoon). At best this created a power vacuum; at worst, there was for several days an unelected cabal of conservative PPP members and the prime minister [engaged in a second coup d'état](#). Both situations represented security risk on the peninsula. For instance, it was uncertain who de facto held the top position in the South Korean chain of military command. If North Korea had attacked, it is unknown who would have been able to command the South Korean military.

Even if South Korea's politics are restored quickly to a normal democratic state of the rule of law, Yoon's attempted self-coup (and the apparent follow-on coup attempt by his party) will leave scars, including in terms of relations with the US. To begin with, the military dimension of the alliance was implicated in a way that casts major doubt on South Korea's reliability as a partner. Yoon's presidential office apparently [did not inform the US in advance](#) of the martial law decree. Chief among those uninformed was US Forces Korea and Combined Forces Command general Paul LaCamera, which means that the US unified combatant commander on the Korean Peninsula was unaware in advance of a deeply destabilizing political shift that (a) deployed allied South Korean forces under US-ROK combined wartime

operational control, and (b) could have incentivized North Korea to opportunistically attack South Korea (for instance, by taking disputed islands south of Northern Limit Line) without US and South Korean military units being on heightened alert. Trust issues may also form at the civilian level of armed forces control, which could both call into question current mil-mil arrangements and make future high-level military cooperation a more difficult sell in Washington. Indeed, the US has [suspended](#) the meeting of the Nuclear Consultative Group, designed to give South Korean defense leaders a stake in and insight into US nuclear strategy regarding the Korean Peninsula.

On the diplomatic-political level, the Biden administration is [clearly upset](#), although it took some time for US messaging to indicate as much apoplexy for the desecration of democracy as for the destabilizing of US-South Korea relations. [Initial public statements](#)—from the US ambassador, as well as administration spokespeople—expressed relief at the return to democratic processes post-martial law, eschewing direct criticism of Yoon for the self-coup attempt. Only two days later did deputy secretary of state Kurt Campbell issue a statement criticizing Yoon for a [“badly misjudged,” “illegitimate” act](#). Even after the blunter criticism of Yoon, however, secretary of state Antony Blinken (in the [readout](#) of a meeting with South Korean foreign minister Cho Tae-yul) and Vedant Patel (deputy state department spokesperson) provided boilerplate answers about South Korean democratic resilience and US-South Korea ironclad democratic values, failing to openly criticize Yoon and the conservative PPP. Perhaps more forceful communications occurred in private, but at least in public the US has hardly appeared to meaningfully demand democratic accountability and the rule of law from its ally. What the incoming Trump administration would think about the situation in Seoul is unknown.

The US’s weak public support for democracy during this South Korean crisis will hardly come as a surprise to Cold War political history students, but the Biden administration has spent an extraordinary amount of time extolling its alliances (including with South Korea) as “values-based,” “like-minded” defenders of democracy and the rule of law. In the future, this rhetoric will [ring hollow](#), as will, obviously,

South Korean invocation of democratic values as support for its foreign policy choices.

The political fallout of South Korea’s chaotic situation will likely include a progressive party president succeeding Yoon—and sooner rather than later, although the Constitutional Court’s impeachment review could last for months, leaving a leadership vacuum. This has dramatic consequences for the US-South Korea alliance. There was a reasonable expectation that Yoon and Trump would be able to cooperate in numerous areas, including advancing the Washington Declaration and the Camp David summit agenda of US-South Korea-Japan trilateralism, both of which are among the crown jewels of Yoon’s (and Biden’s) foreign and security policy accomplishments. The hope—from both the Biden and Yoon administrations—was that Yoon and Biden’s successor (either Trump or Harris) would have at least two years (the remainder of Yoon’s term) to institutionalize these accomplishments before the possibility that the South Korean presidency would likely swing in 2027 to a progressive president less prone to be naturally supportive of these directions in the development of the alliance.

With Yoon likely soon out of office, and a progressive possibly taking over the presidency, the window for institutionalization of the Washington Declaration and Camp David trilateralism is likely to be much reduced. Despite the [ongoing establishment](#) of a secretariat, the trilateral relation with Japan is especially vulnerable, as the progressive Democratic Party has a deep-seated distrust of Japan and typically vilifies Tokyo at every opportunity, including opportunistically for domestic political benefit. This would obviously greatly undermine the ability of Japan to cooperate with South Korea, even in a trilateral context and *a fortiori* given new Japanese prime minister Shigeru Ishiba’s weak political position.

For most *Comparative Connections* reporting periods, the election of a US president—especially one as volatile and skeptical of alliances as Donald Trump—would top the agenda. Yoon’s inexplicably mad self-coup attempt momentarily relegates [Trump’s November election](#) victory to second place, but the incoming Trump administration will of course have major short-, medium-, and long-term impacts on the US-South Korea alliance.

Four cardinal rules apply to analysis of Trump's foreign policy. 1) Trump is risk-acceptant, with a wider (compared to most presidents) aperture of conceivable action; 2) Trump is generally hostile to alliances; 3) Trump is highly transactional in his dealings; and 4) the people surrounding Trump play a critical role in all of the above (as Trump is unstudied/unfocused and thus reliant on aides, swayable such that who influences him at the beginning and end of the day is important, and has senior officials who can both catalyze and obstruct his decisions). All of this was on display vis-à-vis South Korea during Trump's first term, during which he met with Kim Jong Un on multiple occasions, denigrated the US-South Korea alliance, attempted to extort massive host nation support payment increases, and was slow-walked by his National Security Council on negotiations with North Korea.

The [Trump 2.0 administration](#) will doubtless display differences to the first administration, but Trump's campaign rhetoric (commenting on ingrate alliance partners, extolling tariffs, etc.) was largely consonant with expectations based on past behavior. His [personnel decisions](#) since election victory also hint at continuity with his first administration.

So far, much of the [expert discourse](#) regarding Seoul-Washington relations under Trump 2.0 has speculated on the incoming administration's potential willingness to:

- force renegotiation of the SMA (Special Measures Agreement) or damage the KORUS Free Trade Agreement (including via tariffs),
- withdraw troops from the Korean Peninsula and/or otherwise undermine the US-South Korea alliance,
- weaken US extended nuclear deterrence for South Korea,
- neglect the blossoming US-South Korea-Japan trilateral relationship,
- allow South Korea to develop nuclear weapons,
- provoke crisis with North Korea, thus creating instability for South Korea,
- or negotiate an unfavorable deal (from South Korea's perspective) with North Korea regarding Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal.

These are all areas deserving attention, although some areas (SMA renegotiation, tariffs) are more likely to occur than others (US troop withdrawal, unfavorable nuclear deal). And of course the aftermath of the self-coup attempt in South Korea will mean that the trilateral with Japan will be undermined, while the already low probability of US support for Seoul's nuclear weapon development should be nearly nil.

There is one dynamic of the US-South Korea alliance that is highly likely to emerge during a second Trump administration: [increasing pressure on the alliance](#) due to sharpening US-China rivalry. The new Trump administration—both in policy statements and presidential nominations for security/defense/foreign policy cabinet positions—has signaled that China will receive extraordinarily high priority from a group of hawks. Trump's new national security advisor, Michael Waltz, as well as his deputy, Alex Wong, are known China hawks. The same holds for Marco Rubio and John Ratcliffe, the respective choices for secretary of state and director of the CIA. Pete Hegseth, the controversial and inexperienced selection for defense secretary, also has a reputation for a tough line on China.

It is very probable that US allies and partners will be expected to join efforts to counter China. This could involve a range of actions, including military aspects of the US-South Korea alliance. Although previous US presidential administrations have taken small, quiet steps to begin this expansion of the focus of the US-South Korea alliance, Trump and his team will probably push farther and faster. To wit, incoming NSA Waltz is on the record in a 2022 House of Representatives hearing demanding to know if South Korea would allow US forces stationed on the Korean Peninsula to be used in a Taiwan contingency. In this vein, the Trump administration may push for US Forces Korea to be postured more for a role in a regional (read: China-focused) conflict, rather than only for defense of South Korea. Trump may also press for US assets to be allowed to use airfields, ports, and sustainment facilities on the Korean Peninsula as a part of US efforts to respond to a China-Taiwan conflict.

China would, of course, respond angrily, and thus all of this would be very difficult even with a conservative, pro-US, anti-China Yoon administration. It will be even more contentious

with a progressive, US-lukewarm, China-moderate Democratic Party president in office. Arguably the situation would be even worse for South Korea if Yoon's impeachment case before the Constitutional Court drags on for the first months of Trump's presidency, leaving a leadership vacuum that the US could exploit.

Although less likely, another way in which US-China rivalry under Trump may affect the US-South Korea alliance is that Trump 2.0 may attempt to weaken China's regional position via Washington's interactions with Pyongyang. If the Trump administration were interested in isolating China, one option might be to drive wedges between Beijing and Pyongyang (China's only de jure ally). It is unclear what it would take for such a deal to emerge—presumably both the US and North Korea would have to make some sacrifices on priority issues in order to create a rapprochement sufficient to significantly weaken North Korea's ties to China—but Trump is noted for his interest in attempting big, strategic alignment-inducing negotiations, including with dictators and other odious leaders. In the case of North Korea, such an attempt by the new Trump administration would likely implicate some form of de facto recognition of the Kim regime's nuclear arsenal, which would greatly complicate South Korea's security in the medium-/long-term, as well as upend decades of inter-Korean policy. It is unclear how a progressive South Korean president would deal with this situation, but in principle Seoul's progressives support US diplomatic outreach to Pyongyang.

Although a bit convoluted, Trump's apparent desire to end the war in Ukraine also has an effect on South Korea. To wit, a primary strategic reason that Trump (along with some senior officials) wants to reduce support for Ukraine (and thus force it to the negotiating table) is so that the US can better focus on China, yet this has major indirect implications for North Korea. Namely, North Korea is currently enjoying a splendid emergence from diplomatic and economic isolation (as well as over-reliance on China) due to Pyongyang's new alliance and strategic partnership with Moscow (see section below), which is providing North Korea with cash, food, energy, and military-technology support in exchange for artillery shells, short-range ballistic missiles, and troops. If the war in Ukraine were to end due to US pressure, this could dramatically reduce (from Moscow's perspective) the need for

Russia-North Korea cooperation, which would be a positive for South Korea.

In the end, Trump 2.0 is likely to be unpredictable. Some of the above may happen, or all of it, or none.

Finally, one notes that during the June-December reporting period all the typical [alliance management](#), [coordinated foreign/security policy](#), [military exercises](#), cultural exchange, and [trade and investment](#) activities (see chronology below) took place between the US and South Korea—right up until all hell broke loose on December 3 and retroactively cast doubt on the underpinnings of the relationship.

US-North Korea Relations: North Korea Goes Supervillain



Figure 3 North Korean leader Kim Jong Un walks with President Trump north of the military demarcation line that divides North and South Korea, in the Joint Security Area of Panmunjom in the Demilitarized Zone, on Sunday. Photo: Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images.

The case for re-electing Donald Trump, originally the consummate political outsider, has largely relied on his willingness to do what other presidential candidates will not. This is true for both domestic and foreign policy, with Trump's outreach to North Korea in the 2018-19 period being especially noteworthy. After all, North Korea went from conducting regular medium-/long-range missile and nuclear tests up through the end of 2017 to their graduated cessation following Trump's denunciations, vows to "[completely destroy](#)" North Korea should it threaten the US, and his willingness to resolve their disputes over dialogue. Whatever one thinks of Trump's direct outreach to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, such testing ostensibly halted by early 2018, before missile testing slowly resumed after the failed 2019 Hanoi summit and then picked up pace under

Joe Biden, a president North Korea has largely regarded as not worth addressing.

Or so the story goes. In reality, North Korea, having demonstrated the increased potency of its nuclear arms and the ability to reach any part of the continental US via its long-range missiles—and seeing potentially pliant administrations in both Washington and Seoul—probably broke its diplomatic isolation in 2018 for reasons all its own. The failure of the 2019 Hanoi summit seemingly indicates that Trump’s vision of himself as a tough negotiator did not proceed him, and that Kim was furious that he did [not receive a favorable deal](#).

This matters in assessing events from the last half of 2024 because—with the Biden interlude giving way to Trump 2.0—hopes of a return to the summitry of Singapore and Hanoi (with a hopefully better outcome) are [already circulating](#), at least among those inclined to support diplomacy with Pyongyang. For others, this provokes worry—the Washington “blob” is [nervous](#) about the prospect, while the international press has already reported on South Korea’s [concerns](#) that Trump may seek to bypass them. Indeed reports have floated that some on the Trump team may indeed [favor something](#) of that nature. It is unclear how this would play out if South Korea were to soon have a left-leaning president rather than Yoon, who is skeptical of engagement with North Korea.

But the North Korea of 2018 is not the North Korea of 2024 or 2025. Its [nuclear](#) and missile programs have [grown considerably](#) (with significant ballistic missile (and [rocket](#)) testing and demonstration taking place during this reporting period), including a new Hwasong-19 ICBM [seemingly successfully launched](#) in November. Pyongyang now [refers](#) to South Korea as a hostile state, rather than a misguided brother state to be led toward unification (an attitude backed up by a [hybrid war campaign](#) of trash-filled balloons floated over South Korea). To be sure, Pyongyang’s [harsh messaging](#) toward Washington and Seoul has been consistent ([even rising](#)), but its diplomatic priorities have shifted. As noted in this issue’s China-Korea chapter, Pyongyang’s direct outreach to Beijing atrophied in the latter half of this year, and the Kim regime thus far has not deigned to respond to Trump’s electoral victory—a statement not long after the election result in which Kim called for [“limitless” nuclear expansion](#) to counter the US is the

closest he has come to acknowledging the return of his old pen pal.

Both elements of this diplomatic shift likely have a common root. North Korea has found a kindred spirit in Vladimir Putin’s Russia, also regarded as an international pariah and revisionist power, and the two have developed a mutually beneficial arrangement that in the short-term goes beyond what they can get from China, much less the US. In the first reporting period of 2024, North Korea was already engaged in large-scale arms sales (notably artillery shells and missiles/rockets) to Russia in exchange for [fuel](#), [funding](#), modern (by North Korean standards) [fighter jets](#), and [missile defense support](#). This list reflects what is more or less publicly known, but informed speculation has broached the possibility of [additional](#) in-kind military assistance, including military satellite and re-entry vehicle technology, help with submarine design, and support in building out North Korea’s defense industrial base.

The June–December reporting period saw this relation deepen further. First, North Korea dispatched at least 10,000 troops to Russia to support Putin’s war against Ukraine. The [current status](#) of those troops—their training level and combat readiness, deployment areas, warfighting role, tactical and strategic value, etc.—is unknown, but the assumption is that they are likely engaged in the Kursk region of Russia in the counter-offensive to push back Ukraine’s incursion. Second, North Korea and Russia have strengthened their partnership diplomatically, signing a bona fide treaty alliance in June ([during a Putin-Kim summit in North Korea](#)), which came into force on December 4. Whether this alliance is sustainable—or rather an artifact of the Russia-Ukraine war, both states’ sanctions challenges, and perceived shared threats—remains to be seen, as dictators are not historically adept at long-term cooperation. For the moment, however, the Moscow-Pyongyang alliance helps both states alleviate their isolation. The US and South Korea have [expressed deep](#) concern about the advancement of North Korea-Russia relations, as it links together the Euro-Atlantic and East Asian theaters in ways that threaten both the US and South Korea individually and as alliance partners.

As mentioned above, Trump’s return to office likely means a different level and time horizon

of US support for Ukraine, with the goal being to force an end to the war sooner rather than later (Ukraine may have to accept a settlement allowing Moscow to retain some of the territory the Russian army has seized). The knock-on effect may be that the Moscow-Pyongyang arms transfer ecosystem could dry up, which would be a positive for the US-South Korea alliance, insofar as that would presumably result in North Korea advancing more slowly on selected military programs. How one views this from Pyongyang would be a matter of perspective. On the one hand, there might be disappointment that the arrangement would become less beneficial; on the other hand, one could say that Kim rolled the dice on support for Putin and won.

Yoon Suk Yeol's botched martial law declaration was not the only "December surprise" relevant to the Korean Peninsula and its diplomatic outlook. North Korea actually took an (unsurprisingly) cautious approach to the South Korean crisis, before eventually [using it](#) for domestic propaganda. But developments in the Middle East surely caught Pyongyang's eye as well. Namely, the North's sometime partner and fellow Russian client state, Bashar al-Assad's Syria, fell to rebel forces on December 7, nearly 14 years after the Syrian Civil War began. Assad had over time regained control of his state, and stamped out resistance with Russian help, and that had persisted... until suddenly it didn't.

A swift new rebel offensive swept through Aleppo and Homs before continuing into the Syrian capital and sending Assad [fleeing to Moscow](#). In addition to Israel's role in decimating Hezbollah and punishing Iran, the speed of the change demonstrated the extent to which Assad had relied on Russian support, which had dried up due to Russian forces being tied down in Ukraine's eastern front. Russia's reputation as a revisionist power able to halt the progress of the international order (and in some cases roll it back) while supporting dictatorial partners, has taken a [major hit](#). Pyongyang was doubtless watching with some concerned interest.

Given that, [rumors of Kim's dissatisfaction](#) as to how his troops have been employed in Ukraine, and [Russia's heavy losses](#) during its recent offensive, one may conclude that the emerging Russia-North Korea axis might not be built for the long term. Pyongyang has [historically profited](#) from Beijing's and Moscow's

willingness to compete for its attention, and, given the failure of its outreach to the US—another potential counterweight to China—in 2019, Kim appears to have reverted to the old habit of asking Russia to provide what China will not. If Moscow does not reverse its current losing streak, Pyongyang may be back on the market for new partners, even if the "new" partner is the same one that left Kim Jong Un at the altar in Hanoi.

In short: *Comparative Connections* has gone the length of the entire Biden administration with no meaningful diplomatic interactions between North Korea and the US to report. The Trump redux offers some possibilities of renewed outreach, but readers are urged to temper their expectations. Should it take place it will largely depend on the wishes of Kim, rather than Trump, and thus on how Kim assesses the options available to him.

Conclusion: Into the Unknown



Figure 4 U.S. President Joe Biden, Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, and South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol on the day of trilateral engagement during the G7 Summit in Hiroshima, Japan, on May 21, 2023. Photo: Jonathan Ernst/Reuters.

This issue closes the book on *Comparative Connections* as an outlet for detailed triannual updates on bilateral relations in the Indo-Pacific. Few bilaterals have been harder to document than that of the US and North Korea, the "rogue state" par excellence that prides itself on its willingness to withstand pressure from the world's strongest military power for decades. There has, on the other hand, been much to document in the relations between the US and South Korea, one of Washington's oldest alliances in Asia, but one beset by fluctuations, such as progressive parties skeptical of long-term reliance on the US and conservative parties

that, while usually reliable US partners, retain disconcerting ties to the country's period of military rule that they have, based on recent events, not put completely behind them. Pacific Forum has treated *Comparative Connections* as an extension of its overall mission, which is to foster dialogue between the US and the major players in Indo-Pacific diplomacy, including both the governments and publics in countries considered friendly, hostile, or ambivalent toward US interests. Doing so has required rigorous attention to detail, as captured in our meticulous attention to bilateral events, but also a commitment to honesty when it comes to US interests and values, some of which have left the US at odds with even long-term partners.

In that spirit: Much of the US foreign policy community welcomed the election of Yoon Suk Yeol in 2022, given his commitment to alignment with the US on regional security issues, openness to engagement with Japan, and well-deserved skepticism toward China. This welcome came despite the very clear flaws in Yoon as a candidate and statesman, manifest in his consistently low approval ratings, pushed down by his swirling scandals and gaffes. Now that Yoon has seemingly reached back to the spirit of [Yushin](#) to overthrow South Korea's constitutional order—and revealed the deep contempt the military and even his own party have for him—it appears the effort spent on him by the Biden and Kishida administrations to deepen trilateral cooperation will not produce the expected benefits. Donald Trump's return to office, along with a likely progressive successor to Yoon, will probably push Seoul toward greater autonomy in diplomatic and military affairs. The responsibility of the US foreign policy community may now shift to making this transition a smooth one—and preventing the outright collapse of Seoul-Tokyo ties. Those distraught by the return of the Democratic Party to power in Seoul can take comfort in that it is only popular relative to Yoon's party, and even that may be short-lived.

North Korea will remain a thorny diplomatic issue regardless of how relations with Russia evolve, and whether Pyongyang reaches out to the Trump administration (much less reaches a deal). Even if Trump and Kim forge an understanding that lowers tensions for a time, North Korea has a decades-long history of hostility toward the US, Japan, and conservative elements in South Korea that will die hard.

Trump, and all others who attempt to work with Pyongyang, should be prepared for tensions over the long term.

Administrations change, as will the format of *Comparative Connections*, but Pacific Forum's mission will not.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

MAY-DECEMBER 2024

May 1, 2024: *TIME* [reports](#) that former President Donald Trump has suggested that the United States could pull out its troops stationed in South Korea if the Asian ally does not make more financial contributions to support them.

May 3, 2024: *NK Pro* [reports](#) that North Korea has conducted a rocket engine test as Pyongyang intensifies preparations for its first satellite launch of the year.

May 7, 2024: Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Kim Myung-soo [meets](#) with the head of the US Space Force to discuss ways to bolster their joint capabilities in space to fend off evolving North Korean threats.

May 7, 2024: South Korean government [submits](#) its comments to the US Department of Commerce as the department has requested public feedback on its rule-making process designed to tackle potential security risks stemming from "connected vehicles" that use technology from China and other countries of concern.

May 15, 2024: Daniel Kritenbrink, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, [says](#) the United States has no choice but to "double down" on security cooperation with South Korea and Japan, and the enforcement of anti-North Korea sanctions due to the recalcitrant regime's rejection of dialogue.

May 15, 2024: US Air Force in South Korea [releases](#) details of a briefing on Chinese missile threats targeting US bases in South Korea and Japan and the artificial islands constructed by China in the South China Sea.

May 15, 2024: UN experts [report](#) that North Korea laundered \$147.5 million through virtual currency platform Tornado Cash in March after stealing it last year from a cryptocurrency exchange.

May 15, 2024: *KCNA* [reports](#) that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has inspected a new tactical missile weapons system and called for an "epochal change" in war preparations by attaining arms production plans.

May 15, 2024: Cerberus Capital Management [rebuilds](#) Subic Bay's shipbuilding capacity as it intends to hire 2,000 workers after firming a long-term lease agreement with Agila Subic Compass, in partnership with leading maritime manufacturer HD Korea Shipbuilding and Offshore Engineering (HD Hyundai KSOE).

May 18, 2024: A committee of the US House of Representatives [adopts](#) a resolution recognizing the importance of trilateral cooperation among South Korea, the United States and Japan, in a sign of congressional support for three-way engagement.

May 18, 2024: United States [condemns](#) North Korea's launch of ballistic missiles equipped with a new 'autonomous' navigation system, citing it as a violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions.

May 19, 2024: CJ Logistics Corporation, South Korea's biggest logistics company, [says](#) it will build a cold chain logistics center in the United States as part of efforts to expand its foothold in the North American market.

May 20, 2024: North Korea [threatens](#) to take powerful deterrent action against what it claims is the US nuclear threat, denouncing Washington for its recent subcritical nuclear test.

May 20, 2024: South Korea's leading carrier Korean Air [says](#) it has partnered with Amazon Web Services to develop an artificial intelligence-based platform to improve customer convenience.

May 20, 2024: Tesla [pushes](#) to slim down its workforce in Korea in line with its massive global layoff announcement as electric car demand slows, putting Supercharger projects on hold.

May 21, 2024: South Korea and the United States [set](#) to begin a second round of negotiations on sharing the costs for stationing American troops.

May 31, 2024: North Korea [denounces](#) a US reconnaissance aircraft's flight over South Korea, warning that its enemies could face an "unpredictable disaster" if they continue reckless military moves.

June 1, 2024: US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell [says](#) South Korea, the United States and Japan are pushing to form a coordinating body for trilateral cooperation amid persistent North Korean threats and other challenges.

June 4, 2024: South Korea [declares](#) its plans to resume all military activities near the Military Demarcation Line and its northwestern border islands for the first time in more than five years, with the full suspension of a 2018 inter-Korean tension reduction pact.

June 4, 2024: China's embassy in South Korea [expresses](#) "strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition" to South Korea's "consecutive erroneous remarks" regarding the Taiwan issue, made in coordination with the United States and Japan, which oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo in Indo-Pacific waters and emphasize the importance of countering unlawful maritime claims in the South China Sea.

June 4, 2024: *TIME* [reports](#) that US President Joe Biden stated that North Korea's security challenge remains "equally as threatening as it was before," seemingly rejecting the idea that Pyongyang's threat has intensified during his presidency.

June 4, 2024: South Korean defense minister Shin Won-sik and Japanese defense minister Kihara Minoru [reach](#) an agreement on the margins of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore

to normalize bilateral defense ties, which have been essentially on ice since 2018.

June 5, 2024: Newt Gingrich, a former US House Speaker, [asserts](#) that if former President Donald Trump is reelected, he has no intention of leaving South Korea "undefended," though he may expect the "wealthy" ally to contribute more to its own security.

June 5, 2024: *NK News* [reports](#) that a US B-1B bomber dropped precision bombs during joint drills with South Korea for the first time in seven years, marking a show of force toward North Korea amid heightened border tensions following DPRK balloon launches.

June 7, 2024: A South Korean fleet of warships and maritime aircraft and around 840 Navy and Marine troops [departs](#) for Hawaii to join a US-led multinational maritime exercise.

June 13, 2024: Samsung Electronics Chairman Lee Jae-yong [meets](#) with the chief executives of Meta Platforms, Amazon, and Qualcomm in the United States to discuss future technologies and potential business collaborations.

June 14, 2024: *Beyond Parallel* [reports](#) movements of North Korean ballistic missile submarines at a shipyard on the country's east coast, suggesting they may indicate the start of submarine trials or preparations for a submarine-launched ballistic missile test.

June 15, 2024: US House of Representatives [approves](#) an annual defense policy bill that calls for maintaining 28,500 American troops in South Korea and reaffirming the United States' deterrence commitment to the Asian ally.

June 18, 2024: NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [calls](#) for close ties with Indo-Pacific partners amid Russia's growing alignment with North Korea, China and its other "authoritarian" regimes.

June 18, 2024: South Korea and China [hold](#) "two plus two" talks of their senior foreign and defense officials amid Russian President Vladimir Putin's imminent visit to North Korea.

June 18, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [meets](#) with Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, seeking his support for Korean electric vehicle and battery companies operating in the state.

June 19, 2024: Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [sign](#) a comprehensive treaty outlining mutual defense obligations, with President Putin stating that the agreement includes provisions for "assistance in the event of aggression," as North Korea reportedly provides arms for use in the conflict in Ukraine.

June 19, 2024: LG Electronics [says](#) it has partnered with ChargePoint Incorporation, the leading supplier of charging solutions for electric vehicles in North America, to expand its EV charging business on a global basis.

June 20, 2024: South Korea [declares](#) that it will reconsider its stance on arms supply to Ukraine after North Korea and Russia signed a treaty that involves a mutual pledge to provide immediate military assistance if one of them is attacked.

June 20, 2024: KCNA [discloses](#) the full text of the comprehensive strategic partnership treaty that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed after their talks in Pyongyang, which includes an agreement to provide military assistance "without delay" if either party is attacked.

June 21, 2024: United States [takes](#) South Korea off its list of countries to monitor for their foreign exchange policies for the second consecutive time while adding Japan to the list.

June 22, 2024: South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul [says](#) South Korea, the United States and Japan have agreed on close security cooperation through "timely" consultation,

after Russia and North Korea signed a new security treaty during a summit in Pyongyang.

June 24, 2024: Institute for National Security Strategy, a state-run think tank based in Seoul, [recommends](#) that South Korea consider diversifying its approach to addressing the North Korean nuclear issue, including the possibility of arming itself with nuclear weapons, in light of the signed comprehensive strategic partnership treaty between Pyongyang and Moscow.

June 24, 2024: USS Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carrier [arrives](#) on the Korean Peninsula in a show of force to deter North Korea, following the DPRK-Russian military pact and ahead of trilateral drills with Japan and South Korea.

June 25, 2024: South Korea and the United States [sign](#) a memorandum of understanding on cooperating in the exchange of diplomatic intelligence analyses.

June 26, 2024: North Koreans [vows](#) to "annihilate" America during anti-US rallies across the country, with state media reporting that 100,000 citizens attended an event in Pyongyang as the DPRK kicks off month of propaganda against the United States and South Korea.

June 27, 2024: United States, South Korea, and Japan [launch](#) the inaugural Freedom Edge drills, featuring multi-domain aerial and naval exercises, including a US aircraft carrier, to counter North Korean threats.

June 27, 2024: South Korea [launches](#) technology research centers at four US universities, including Yale University, Johns Hopkins University, Purdue University, and the Georgia Institute of Technology.

June 27, 2024: A survey conducted by the Korea Institute of National Unification (KINU) [reveals](#) that 44.6 percent of respondents favor the development and possession of an independent nuclear arsenal over maintaining the US military presence in South Korea, while 40.1 percent

prefer the opposite, reflecting a rise in support for an independent nuclear deterrent.

July 5, 2024: NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [invites](#) the leaders of South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand to the NATO summit for the third consecutive year to expand the security alliance's partnership with the countries in the Indo-Pacific region and to discuss with South Korea ways to enhance practical cooperation related to Ukraine.

July 5, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol to [visit](#) US Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii on July 8-9.

July 6, 2024: South Korea and the United States [head](#) for closer cooperation in military logistics and maintenance particularly in the event of a regional crisis.

July 6, 2024: NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners, including South Korea, [plan](#) to discuss resilience, support for Ukraine, disinformation, cybersecurity and emerging technologies during their summit in Washington.

July 8, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [travels](#) to the United States to attend a NATO summit in Washington, where he will address concerns over deepening defense cooperation between North Korea and Russia.

July 8, 2024: Republic of Korea Navy [assumes](#) the role of deputy commander in the US-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) maritime exercise near Hawaii, marking the first time South Korea has held this position in the large-scale multinational drills, a move aimed at demonstrating the strength of the US-ROK alliance to North Korea.

July 8, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [plans](#) to hold more than 10 bilateral meetings with his counterparts on the sidelines of the NATO summit, including discussions with leaders from the Czech Republic, Sweden, Finland, and Norway.

July 10, 2024: Jung Pak [leaves](#) the post as the US senior official for North Korea, adding to uncertainty over Washington's diplomatic efforts to reengage with a recalcitrant Pyongyang.

July 10, 2024: South Korean Navy [holds](#) air defense drills with an SM-2 interceptor during a US-led multinational exercise in waters near Hawaii amid efforts to bolster response capabilities against North Korean missile threats.

July 10, 2024: South Korea and the United States [hold](#) fifth round of negotiations on the sharing of the cost for the upkeep of US Forces Korea.

July 17, 2024: Samsung Electronics [launches](#) an energy management service for electric vehicles of Tesla in the United States as part of their strategic partnership aimed at enhancing connectivity.

July 19, 2024: Former US President Donald Trump [boasts](#) about his personal ties with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, suggesting that the recalcitrant leader might "miss" him and welcome his return to office, in an apparent signal of his desire to resume dialogue with Pyongyang.

July 19, 2024: The opposition party in South Korea [criticizes](#) the presidential office for suggesting that the preceding Moon Jae-in administration bears responsibility for the exposure of South Korean intelligence operations detailed in the indictment of Sue Mi Terry, a renowned foreign policy expert and former US Central Intelligence Agency official, who was charged in New York this week with acting as an unregistered agent for the South Korean government from 2013 to 2023.

July 21, 2024: South Korea's military [blares](#) K-pop songs and news through its loudspeakers across the border with North Korea on Sunday as it steps up its psychological campaign in response to North Korea's repeated launches of trash balloons.

July 22, 2024: Presidential office of the Yoon Suk Yeol administration [says](#) South Korea will continue to closely work with the United States regardless of the outcome of the upcoming presidential election as support for the bilateral alliance is "bipartisan."

July 22, 2024: US President Joe Biden [drops out](#) of the presidential race, officially endorsing Vice President Kamala Harris to become the Democratic Party's nominee to take on former President Donald Trump in the November 5 general election.

July 22, 2024: Korean Air [announces](#) that it has signed a memorandum of understanding with Boeing to buy up to 50 airplanes, including 20 777-9s, in a bid to upgrade its fleet.

July 23, 2024: Ri Il-gyu, a former counselor of political affairs at the North Korean embassy in Cuba, [says](#) scores of North Koreans staying abroad, such as diplomats and overseas workers, have attempted to defect to South Korea since North Korea began undoing its COVID-19 border closure.

July 24, 2024: Camille Dawson, deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, [says](#) that South Korea has been discussed as a potential future partner for cooperation with issue-specific working groups of the Quad forum.

July 31, 2024: Russia [deploys](#) a high-tech North Korean guided missile system in the Ukraine war, signaling a remarkable evolution in arms trade.

Aug. 1, 2024: US Forces Korea commander general Paul LaCamera [says](#) South Korea and the United States will not incorporate a North Korean nuclear attack scenario into their upcoming major military exercise, despite expectations that the exercise would feature the nuclear crisis dimension for the first time.

Aug. 5, 2024: KCNA [reports](#) that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has attended a ceremony to commemorate the transfer of a new-type tactical ballistic missile weapon system, which serves as the "pivot military hardware" in the armed forces.

Aug. 6, 2024: US Department of Commerce [announces](#) that SK Hynix secured \$450 million in grants for its \$3.9 billion chip-packaging facility in Indiana.

Aug. 9, 2024: United States [announces](#) a conditional commitment for a loan guarantee of up to \$1.45 billion to Hanwha Qcells to support the South Korean company's effort to build a solar supply chain facility in Georgia.

Aug. 9, 2024: South Korea and the United States [agree](#) to boost clean energy cooperation by holding regular dialogues and bolstering public-private partnerships, as the two countries aim to strengthen ties in energy security and carbon reduction.

Aug. 20, 2024: South Korea [prepares](#) to purchase \$3.5 billion worth of US Apache attack helicopters following US approval, as both nations navigate defense cost-sharing negotiations to mitigate uncertainties ahead of the US presidential election in November, 2024.

Aug. 24, 2024: North Korea [lashes out](#) at a revised US nuclear strategy plan, approved by President Biden in March to counter China's growing nuclear threats and potential coordination with North Korea and Russia, vowing to further strengthen its nuclear capability.

Aug. 24, 2024: Presidential office of the Yoon Suk Yeol administration [says](#) discussions with the US government taking place to resolve a dispute between the two countries' companies over a nuclear power plant construction project in the Czech Republic.

Aug. 25, 2024: South Korea and the United States [prepare](#) to begin their large-scale amphibious landing exercise in the southeastern city of Pohang and the eastern coast to build up the allies' combat readiness posture and interoperability.

Aug. 26, 2024: South Korea and the United States [begin](#) a joint live-fire aerial exercise to reinforce capabilities to counter North Korean threats.

Aug. 27, 2024: Associated Press [reports](#) that a US federal agency plans to reexamine its environmental permit for an electric vehicle factory of South Korea's Hyundai Motor in Georgia after conservationists claimed regulators failed to properly review the plant's impact on the local water supply.

Aug. 27, 2024: US nuclear energy firm Westinghouse Electric [files](#) an appeal with the Czech Republic to protest the decision to select a South Korean company as the preferred bidder to build two nuclear power units in the Central European country.

Aug. 28, 2024: Pentagon press secretary Major General Pat Ryder [says](#) that the US takes North Korea's "suicide drones" threats seriously, reaffirming its commitment to regional security in cooperation with South Korea and other allies, following reports that Kim Jong Un oversaw drone tests to enhance war preparedness.

Aug. 28, 2024: The deputy nuclear envoys of South Korea and the United States [discuss](#) ways to work together to cut off North Korea's sanctions-evading funding channels, such as illegal cyberactivities and ship-to-ship transfers.

Aug. 28, 2024: KCNA [reports](#) that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has overseen a test-fire of a 240mm multiple rocket launcher with a new guidance system amid speculation that the new artillery system could be provided to Russia for use in its war with Ukraine.

Aug. 28, 2024: Samsung SDI and General Motors [plan](#) to jointly invest \$3.5 billion to build a battery plant in Indiana despite the global slowdown in EV sales.

Sep. 4, 2024: First Vice Foreign Minister Kim Hong-kyun [meets](#) with US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell in Washington to discuss the bilateral alliance, North Korea and other issues.

Sep. 4, 2024: United States [reiterates](#) that it will continue efforts to hold North Korea accountable for its support for Russia's war in Ukraine, as concerns linger that arms transactions between Pyongyang and Moscow could prolong the war in the war-torn Eastern European nation.

Sep. 5, 2024: NK News [reports](#) that major construction at North Korea's Thaesong Machine Factory, a key site for ICBM production, reflects efforts to enhance missile manufacturing as Kim Jong Un intensifies the modernization of arms factories nationwide.

Sep. 7, 2024: Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins [is set to lead](#) the US delegation to the Second Annual Responsible AI in the Military Domain (REAIM) Summit set to take place in Seoul.

Sep. 8, 2024: North Korea [reveals](#) a new, larger ICBM under development, displayed on a twelve-axle missile launch vehicle during Kim Jong Un's visit to a factory.

Sep. 11, 2024: UN Command members [condemn](#) the "illegal and dangerous" North Korea-Russia arms trade in a joint statement by defense chiefs of member states, responding to "unprecedented" global tensions, according to experts.

Sep. 12, 2024: US President Joe Biden [nominates](#) Lt. Gen. Xavier Brunson to lead the United States Armed Forces in South Korea, entrusting him with the critical responsibility of deterring potential attacks from North Korea.

Sep. 13, 2024: KCNA [reports](#) that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un calls for increasing the number of centrifuges for uranium enrichment to expand the country's nuclear weapons for self-defense during a visit to the Nuclear Weapons Institute.

Sep. 24, 2024: Trade Minister Cheong In-kyo [announces](#) that clean economy and anti-corruption deals, two of four pillars under the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, will come into force in October.

Sep. 24, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's dinner meeting with the leadership of the ruling People Power Party [ends](#) without meaningful discussions on sensitive issues such as medical reform and First Lady Kim Keon Hee.

Sep. 24, 2024: Deputy Minister for Defense Policy Cho Chang-rae and Anka Lee, US deputy assistant secretary of defense for East Asia [discuss](#) the need for a coordinated response to North Korea's "gray zone" provocations during their regular defense talks.

Sep. 25, 2024: Republican US presidential nominee Donald Trump [claims](#) that re-electing him in November would trigger a "mass exodus of manufacturing" from South Korea, China, and other countries to America, as he intensified efforts to win over swing voters.

Oct. 4, 2024: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [threatens](#) nuclear strikes on South Korea if its sovereignty is "infringed," while also questioning President Yoon Suk Yeol's sanity following his speech at a military parade showcasing new South Korean missiles.

Oct. 4, 2024: Korea and the United States [finalize](#) the 12th Special Measures Agreement, setting Seoul's cost-sharing for American troop upkeep from 2026 to 2030, with an 8.3 percent increase in the first year and subsequent annual adjustments tied to inflation.

Oct. 16, 2024: Former US President Donald Trump [says](#) that South Korea would be paying \$10 billion a year for the stationing of the 28,500-strong US Forces Korea if he were in the White House, as he described the Asian ally as a "money machine."

Oct. 16, 2024: South Korea [says](#) it is "closely" monitoring for signs of North Korea possibly sending troops to support Russia in its war against Ukraine, following media reports of Russia forming a battalion of North Koreans.

Oct. 16, 2024: State-run Korea Trade Insurance Corporation [says](#) that it has granted trade finance of \$1.35 billion to Hyundai Motor for the ongoing construction of an electric vehicle plant in the US state of Georgia.

Oct. 16, 2024: South Korea's First Vice Foreign Minister Kim Hong-kyun [announces](#) the launch of a new multinational monitoring body to enforce sanctions against North Korea, six months after the UN monitoring body was dissolved following Russia's veto.

Oct. 18, 2024: South Korean Vice Defense Minister Kim Seon-ho [says](#) North Korea might be providing Russia with civilian personnel rather than sending its own troops for the war effort in Ukraine.

Oct. 21, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [pledges](#) to dispatch a delegation to NATO to share intelligence on military cooperation between North Korea and Russia.

Oct. 21, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [holds](#) a phone call with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte to share information on North Korea's preparations to dispatch troops to help Russia in its war with Ukraine.

Oct. 23, 2024: US government [confirms](#) and releases evidence that North Korea is sending troops to Russia, backing South Korean and Ukrainian claims.

Oct. 28, 2024: South Korean intelligence reports [indicate](#) that North Korea has supplied Russia with over 9 million artillery shells.

Nov. 1, 2024: South Korea and the United States [conduct](#) their first-ever live-fire drone drill following North Korea's ICBM test, aiming to enhance reconnaissance and strike capabilities.

Nov. 1, 2024: South Korea [conducts](#) a drill simulating a strike on a North Korean missile launcher just hours after Pyongyang's ICBM test, showcasing its ability to retaliate with "overwhelming force" using a guided bomb.

Nov. 14, 2024: Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [plan](#) to hold talks on the margins of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Peru.

Nov. 16, 2024: *Financial Times* [reports](#) that North Korea has supplied Russia with 50 domestically produced self-propelled howitzers and 20 multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), while 11,000 North Korean troops are reportedly amassing in Russia's Kursk Oblast to train alongside Russian forces in the war against Ukraine.

Nov. 22, 2024: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [showcases](#) new drones and ICBMs at a North Korean arms expo, rejecting talks with the US and emphasizing nuclear expansion as the top priority at the first major weapons event since Trump's election.

Nov. 22, 2024: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [expresses](#) his pessimism toward talks with Washington, claiming that past negotiations only revealed the United States' "unchanging invasive and hostile policy" despite Pyongyang's extensive efforts.

Nov. 22, 2024: South Korea's National Security Adviser Shin Won-sik [states](#) that Russia supplied North Korea with anti-air missiles in exchange for Pyongyang's deployment of troops.

Nov. 23, 2024: US President-elect Donald Trump [appoints](#) Alex Wong, a key figure in working-level nuclear talks with North Korea during his first term, as principal deputy national security adviser, signaling potential reengagement with Pyongyang upon his return to office.

Nov. 26, 2024: Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov [announces](#) that Russia is considering deploying medium- and short-range missiles to Asia in response to potential US missile redeployments, raising concerns that North Korea, amid strengthening ties with Moscow, could become a potential host for Russian weapons.

Nov. 26, 2024: Ukraine's defense intelligence [reports](#) that North Korea has sent over 100 KN-23 and KN-24 ballistic missiles, along with military specialists, to Russia in support of its war with Ukraine, following South Korea's confirmation of North Korea's additional artillery exports to Russia.

Nov. 27, 2024: South Korea's presidential office [plans](#) to hold an emergency meeting to address US President-elect Donald Trump's proposal to impose tariffs on Canada, China, and Mexico, following his announcement on social media to implement the measures via executive order on his first day in office.

Nov. 27, 2024: Top diplomats of South Korea, Canada, France and Italy [voice](#) concerns over the threat posed by North Korea's troop deployment to fight for Russia in its war with Ukraine, pledging to work together for a concerted response.

Dec. 1, 2024: US Forces Korea [seeks](#) the permanent deployment of its advanced F-35A stealth fighters to the Korean Peninsula, marking the first official stationing of the aircraft in Korea after previously operating from Japan and other locations during heightened North Korean threats or training exercises.

Dec. 3, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [declares](#) emergency martial law, accusing the opposition of "anti-state activities plotting rebellion."

Dec. 3, 2024: Caught off guard by South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration of martial law, the Biden administration [refrains](#) from condemning the move while grappling to address the rare and dramatic political turmoil in a close US ally.

Dec. 3, 2024: United States [announces](#) a new semiconductor export control package targeting China, including restrictions on high-end chips for artificial intelligence, a move expected to impact South Korea's semiconductor industry.

Dec. 4, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [lifts](#) a surprise martial law declaration, backing down in a standoff with parliament, which roundly rejected his attempt to ban political activity and censor the media.

Dec. 4, 2024: Nearly all South Korean Cabinet members, including Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok, Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, and Education Minister Lee Ju-ho, [express](#) their intent to resign, taking responsibility for the president's declaration and subsequent lifting of martial law.

Dec. 5, 2024: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [states](#) that the United States was unaware of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's intention to declare martial law.

Dec. 5, 2024: KCNA [reports](#) that the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty," agreed upon by the leaders of North Korea and Russia in June, officially came into force following the exchange of ratification instruments in Moscow.

Dec. 5, 2024: US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell [says](#) that South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol "badly misjudged" his decision to declare martial law.

Dec. 5, 2024: Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [speaks](#) with South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul, expressing deep concerns over the declaration of martial law in South Korea and welcoming its lifting after a unanimous National Assembly vote.

Dec. 6, 2024: South Korea's ruling party leader Han Dong-hoon [maintains](#) his stance that President Yoon Suk Yeol should be "suspended from his position."

Dec. 6, 2024: United States [pauses](#) high-level communication with Seoul, adding to diplomatic uncertainties, as Korean experts warn that President Yoon's martial law move could strain the "iron-clad" alliance with the US.

Dec. 7, 2024: Adm. Samuel Paparo [discusses](#) negotiations between Moscow and Pyongyang over the transfer of Russian MiG-29 and Su-27 fighter jets, without providing details on the number of aircraft involved.

Dec. 7, 2024: The commander of troops deployed to the National Assembly under martial law [recounts](#) the chaos, stating, "I was shocked" by orders to remove lawmakers by force, including breaking doors or cutting electricity.

Dec. 8, 2024: Han Dong-hoon, leader of the ruling People Power Party, [renews](#) his call for President Yoon Suk Yeol's orderly resignation after the impeachment motion against the president was abandoned due to the ruling party's boycott of the National Assembly vote.

Dec. 8, 2024: Prosecutor Park Se-hyun, head of the special investigation headquarters probing President Yoon Suk Yeol's brief declaration of martial law, [announces](#) that the president has been booked as a suspect on charges of treason.

Dec. 8, 2024: President Yoon Suk Yeol's ill-fated bid to impose martial law [creates](#) a power vacuum in his governing camp, pushing the country deeper into what analysts call a constitutional crisis.

Dec. 8, 2024: National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik [calls](#) the joint exercise of presidential power by the prime minister and the ruling party as "unconstitutional."

Dec. 15, 2024: South Korea's National Assembly [votes](#) to impeach Yoon Suk Yeol, removing him from power and sending the matter to the Constitutional Court.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

US-INDIA RELATIONS

Preparing for Realignment

AKHIL RAMESH, PACIFIC FORUM

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In 2021, when President Biden took office, the US-India relationship was riding on the positive momentum created by successive US presidents since President George W Bush. Over the four years of the Biden administration, with few positive developments and several other tensions, the partnership was stress-tested across domains. For watchers of the US-India bilateral partnership, the Biden administration's denouement vis-a-vis the partnership with India was disappointing and underwhelming. While several key supply chain diversification initiatives materialized, issues surrounding India's position toward Russia—in the aftermath of the latter's invasion of Ukraine—its alleged involvement in the killing of a Khalistan separatist and lastly Washington's position on the interim government in Bangladesh highlighted the divergences between the two democracies. For the US-India partnership, President Biden's term in office could be described as one that alienated an already allyship/treaty-averse India, pushing it further into groupings such as BRICS and other emerging non-Western multilateral institutions. The last eight months were no different. Nonetheless, domestic political developments in both India and the US could potentially set the stage for a recourse in the spiraling US-India bilateral partnership.

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Election Polls ≠ Election Results

Around the world, pollsters are increasingly having a hard time deciphering the exact outcome of elections in boisterous democracies. In both India and the US, elections polls predicting results were off by significant margins, particularly in India. In India, elections last a few months, with different parts of the country going to the polls one after the other. The election contest that began in April 2024 ended in June 2024. Most pollsters had predicted a sweep for the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party and return of Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a third term in office.



Figure 1 US President Joe Biden hailed US-India ties, while rolling out the pomp and pageantry for visiting Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Jun. 22, 2023. Photo: Getty Images

The pollsters were partly correct. Modi returned for a third term in office. However, unlike the first or second terms, it would not be with an absolute majority in the parliament. For the first time the Modi government turned to its coalition partners in the north and southeast to form a government. Some strategic analysts deemed it a weakening of Modi's position. Opinions are mixed as to whether the opposition truly made inroads or not, since the leading opposition party, Indian National Congress, secured only 99 seats out of the available 543, versus the BJP's 240. With 272 seats required to form a government, BJP's path to 7 Lok Kalyan Marg (the PM's office) was easier with its partners in the northern state of Bihar and southeastern state of Andhra Pradesh sweeping the polls, bringing its seat tally to 293. The unexpected election results caused an initial panic in the Indian stock markets. However, things settled soon after when speculation and rumors were put to rest, signaling policy continuity in Modi 3.0.

For Washington, Modi 3.0 signals macroeconomic stability and policy continuity to continue cooperation in critical and emerging technologies, supply chain diversification and defense and security cooperation. Unlike coalition partners from past Congress governments, the BJP's coalition does not include members of the Indian far left, such as Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist), also known as CPI-M. These two parties have opposed several initiatives aimed at strengthening US-India relations. In complete contrast, BJP's coalition partner in the south, the Telugu Desam Party led by Chandrababu Naidu, has consistently advocated for stronger US-India ties. In fact, the chief minister in his terms in office has brought in significant American investment to Hyderabad. The election results in the US were no different. Opinion polls predicted a close and tight race between Vice President Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, incumbent Joe Biden's predecessor. On Nov. 5, the 45th president won a decisive victory, claiming all swing states from Pennsylvania in the east to Arizona in the southwest, also bringing down what was known as a blue wall for the Democrats in Midwest. While reactions to Trump's victory were largely mixed in the Indo-Pacific, New Delhi was among the [few](#) that was [ecstatic](#) with the news that the former president will return to the Oval Office in January 2025.

There are multiple reasons for the Indian strategic community's celebration. In the first Trump administration, there were multiple policy convergences. From defense officials overtly supporting India in its clash with China at the border, to a revitalized and strengthened Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad"), increased security cooperation between the two nations, supplemented by Modi-Trump bromance, the partnership between the world's largest and oldest democracies was strengthened.

In complete contrast to these developments, the Biden administration postponed and [canceled](#) Quad meetings, pressured India on its non-aligned position on Russia's [invasion](#) of Ukraine, handled allegations surrounding India's involvement in the plot to kill a Sikh separatist (labeled a terrorist in India) in a haphazard way by [leaking](#) intelligence to the press and validated an interim government in Bangladesh that ousted the former prime

minister Sheikh Hasina through violent protests.

Strategic analysts believe Trump's transactional foreign policy coupled with his nomination of several champions of the US-India partnership will lead to a smooth or at least smoother ride in his second administration. From the leader of the India caucus, Michael Waltz, as national security advisor, to Marco Rubio—the Florida senator who advocated for elevating the US-India partnership to a [defense](#) treaty level, on par with Japan, Korea, Israel, and NATO—as secretary of state to the former Rep. Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii as director of national intelligence, several key nominations indicate a strong support for US-India partnership and increased synergies between Trump 2.0 and Modi 3.0.

Granted, trade and commercial ties between the two could experience turbulence given the president-elect's penchant for using tariffs and trade barriers as leverage against both allies and partners. India was not [spared](#) his first administration and with the [ballooning](#) trade deficit between the two, it likely won't be spared in his second administration.

Nonetheless, a major headache for Delhi may be solved—Washington's pressure to abandon Russia, severing its ties with its Cold-War era- and time-tested partner. A key bone of contention for the Biden administration since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 may not be one for the Trump administration.

Cold-War Era Differences are Here to Stay

In the months leading up to the election in the US, [Hindu priests](#) in New Delhi were organizing prayers for Trump's victory. This phenomenon reflected overlapping priorities between many in India and the Trump administration. It is not news that strengthening the bilateral partnership between the US and India is a bipartisan effort in Washington DC. However, in the months between May and December, there was increased skepticism in the direction of the partnership, both in Washington and New Delhi. Despite making significant progress in expanding the scope of the partnership across traditional and non-traditional security domains, allegations surrounding the Indian government's involvement in a plot to kill a separatist, particularly by the judiciary in the US, did not bode well for the partnership. The US

District Court for Southern District of New York [named](#) the government of India, National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, and former Secretary of the Research and Analysis Wing Samant Goel in a summons right before Modi's visit to the US. While the summons came in response to a [civil lawsuit](#) filed by a Khalistan separatist, the optics of a court in New York summoning their nations NSA and former intelligence chief reinforced Indians' concerns of the West's overreaching arm. The India government [dismissed](#) the summons as “unwarranted and unsubstantiated imputations.”



Figure 2 Secretary of State Antony Blinken speaks with Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Thursday, Sept. 28, 2023, at the State Department in Washington. Photo: AP Photo/Stephanie Scarbrough

In an ironic turn of events, Modi and Indian External Affairs Minister Subramanyam Jaishankar were in Washington [celebrating](#) the progress of iCET, a brainchild of the Indian NSA. These ironies reflect a broader theme in the US-India partnership. While challenges in the Indo-Pacific, such as China's aggression, have served as a catalyst for increased cooperation between the two democracies across various domains, Cold-War era allegiances and ideological fealties continue to hamper the relationship.

Not to mention that the divergences have raised doubts about Washington's seriousness toward supporting India in the Indo-Pacific region. [Delays](#) in shipment of the Apache helicopters ordered by India and slow progress on other fronts have not helped the US-India partnership. While the Biden administration positioned India as a key “friendly shore” in the diversification of key supply chains, initiated sector specific programs such as iCET, including with partners such as South Korea, political concerns and these distractions have held back the partnership from realizing its full potential.

One of the major contentions of the Cold War were the United States and India's partnerships with their adversaries. India had a defense partnership with the Soviet Union while the US supported Pakistan. Plus, in former secretary of state, Henry Kissinger's attempts at establishing a rapprochement between the US and China, he further [isolated](#) India. US involvement in South Asia has not supported India but often challenged its hegemony or supposed sphere of influence. In the months between May and December 2024, New Delhi found its sphere of influence threatened with the friendly Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina ousted by violent protests. While she has sought refuge in India, among the first governments to [recognize](#) the new unelected leader of Bangladesh—with an official title of advisor—Muhammad Yunus, was the United States.

Signaling a different approach, at the end of October, shortly before the election, Trump tweeted: "I strongly condemn the barbaric violence against Hindus, Christians, and other minorities who are getting attacked and looted by mobs in Bangladesh, which remains in a total state of chaos. It would have never happened on my watch."



Figure 3 President Donald Trump with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2017. Photo: Mark Wilson/Getty Images

From the Cold War era to present day, sections within the Washington establishment continue to undermine New Delhi's influence in the region. The unfolding crisis in Bangladesh add to an already unstable South Asia. For New Delhi, the civil strife in its northeastern state of Manipur and the unfolding situation in Bangladesh increase volatility in its neighborhood. With China actively trying to consolidate footholds in Pakistan, Maldives, Sri

Lanka, Nepal, and elsewhere, and Bangladesh turning increasingly hostile to Indian interests and religious minorities, especially Hindus, India's neighborhood has turned challenging over the last few years. These developments highlight stress points in New Delhi and Washington's divergent approaches to the Indian Ocean and the broader Indo-Pacific. In mid-November, US and India held the [inaugural](#) Indian Ocean dialogue to discuss security issues affecting the region. While there were several high-level exchanges between Modi and Biden, and across various levels of the government, including in track 1 dialogues such as the recently inaugurated Indian Ocean dialogue, talks and walks have been diametrically different on several instances.

The chaos in India's neighborhood, postponed and canceled Quad meetings in 2023 and in early 2024, and friction over the alleged plot to kill a separatist may have prompted an expedited [rapprochement](#) with the PRC. In the last six months, New Delhi and Beijing's diplomatic efforts at resetting ties to pre-Galwan levels took shape. Both sides have agreed to disengage and continue border patrols. On the sidelines of the BRICS summit, both sides agreed to border patrol arrangements and disengage from their earlier offensive stand. The last four years witnessed tense relations between the two, affecting trade and commercial ties and even people-to-people ties with both countries, making travel difficult between the two.

The perceived threat of China was a catalyst for expanded cooperation between the US and India. In the absence of an active threat, and multiple divergences over regional and global issues, the impetus for increased cooperation could wane over time without proper intervention.

Blow Hot, Blow Cold

There were multiple developments signaling expanded cooperation and convergence on interests and even values. For example, the Indian consulates in the US engaged in several sub-national diplomatic efforts highlighting shared values of democracy and equality. In Lansing, Michigan, the Indian Consul General in Chicago, participated in the Annual Indian American Legislative Day at the State Capitol, highlighting the shared democratic values of both countries. Similarly, senior officials from both the US and India signed a Statement of Intent to establish the Gandhi-King

Development Foundation named after Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.



Figure 4 Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, US President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi pose prior to a Quad meeting last year on May 24, 2023 in Tokyo, Japan. Photo: The Asahi Shimbun/Getty Images

From Indian diplomats organizing a celebration of International Yoga Day in Mississippi State Capitol to American diplomats supporting LGBTQ rights in Pune, India, subnational diplomacy was alive and well—even when diplomacy at the top was strained. For example, in early May, President Biden accused India, China and Japan of being “xenophobic” at a fundraising event for his presidential campaign. In early December, the BJP, Modi’s party at the center, accused the State Department of colluding with billionaires such as George Soros to destabilize the Modi government. Deputy Secretary Kurt Campbell along with senior Indian officials was convening the inaugural US-India Indian Ocean dialogue in November all while India was upset with Washington’s approach to the government in the Indian Ocean neighbor Bangladesh. At the G20 meeting in Rio De Janeiro, Biden expressed support for India’s climate actions. Not long after, the Indian billionaire Gautam [Adani, behind](#) India’s Make in India movement to reduce reliance on Chinese solar panels, was accused by the SEC and the district courts in New York of securities fraud and bribery among other charges. These push and pull frictions have not helped the US-India bilateral partnership.

Over the last two decades, the US-India partnership was fostered by all branches of the US government across different administrations. The US-India partnership was among the few partnerships that enjoyed bipartisan support. However, recent accusations by the BJP and frictions in ties since Biden took office, would indicate a shift in the

bipartisanship. Members of the Democrat party such as representatives Ilhan Omar ([D-Minnesota](#)), Rashida Tlaib ([D-Michigan](#)) and Jamaal Bowman ([D-New York](#)) have consistently voiced concerns about the US partnership with India. While initially these were considered fringe, and not shared by the larger Democrat party, alleged actions by the Indian government or the Democrat party itself moving farther left from core ideology, has strained the relationship, raising concerns of the relationship turning a partisan endeavor.

This pull and push dynamic in the relationship has certainly proved to be an impediment to unfettered growth.

Strategic analysts are of the view that the BJP is counting on Trump 2.0 to reset ties. The Indian government if not publicly exuberant, is not anxious as many in Europe and the broader Indo-Pacific seem to be. India’s External Affairs Minister Jaishankar, speaking at a public event, [said](#), “Prime Minister Narendra Modi was among the first three calls, I think, that President (elect) Trump took”...while a lot of countries are nervous about a Trump presidency, India is not among them”

The expectation is understandable. The bromance between the leaders, witnessed at events such as Howdy Modi and Trump’s welcome in India helped stabilize the relationship in Trump’s first term even as the two administrations diverged on trade issues. Minus the jabs at India for its tariffs, Trump has consistently spoken highly of Modi and the Indian government. Multilateral initiatives such as Quad were on much stronger footing in Trump 1.0 and Modi 1.0 than they were under Biden. Nonetheless, the incoming Trump administration may not necessarily have the same priorities as the Biden administration, not just in democracy promotion but in global common interests such as addressing climate change.

One of the key convergences between the Biden and Modi administration was on increasing engagement with G20 countries on global issues such as climate change and environmental protection. In multilateral platforms such as G20 and Quad, the two countries emphasized the need to address climate change and work collectively to promote environmental protection and climate resilience. In such areas where the US under Trump may not have an

appetite for increased engagement, such as public good delivery and infrastructure development, New Delhi may have to go alone.

New Delhi Steps in Where Washington Retreats

Trump's transactional foreign policy that prioritizes zero-sum trade interests over goodwill and greater public good, could leave voids in places that offer little commercial incentive for increased engagement. The Pacific Islands are one such place that hold immense strategic value to the United States but little commercial value, at least relative to the large economies in the Indo-Pacific. While Washington steps up its focus on commercial ties and defense posturing in the Indo-Pacific, New Delhi can stick to its playbook in the Pacific by continuing public goods delivery and supporting the inclusive development of small-island states.

Over the last eight months, India has extended its official outreach to the Pacific Islands at the highest levels. President of India Droupadi Murmu [visited](#) Fiji and Timor Leste to meet with government officials and address the parliament in Fiji. In 2023, Modi visited Papua New Guinea to attend the India-Pacific Islands meet. Albeit slow and limited to public goods support, India has consistently delivered to these nations, even during times of crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the risk of a Trump administration abandoning commitments to multilateral initiatives, including on climate change, New Delhi could be along in its global projects. However, increasing convergence on the need for coordinated approach to infrastructure development in the Indo-Pacific region by New Delhi and Washington's other partners in the region may have to fill the void in the event of Washington's retreat to zero-sum economic partnerships.

Light at the End of the Tunnel

Washington and New Delhi have witnessed challenging times. From the brink of war to sanctions, the two democracies have managed relations through thick and thin. The last six months would be one such difficult period in the US-India bilateral partnership. As previous chapters of *Comparative Connections* have highlighted, for Washington and New Delhi to truly maximize the potential of their partnership, both nations must get past the muscle memory of the Cold War era.

Washington's penchant for democracy promotion, particularly by the Democratic Party, does not instill confidence in New Delhi on Washington's support for its autonomy. Instead, it validates its concerns of undermining its influence in the Indo-Pacific. As the political winds have shifted, there will be a renewed opportunity for the Trump administration to reset ties based on shared strategic interests over arbitrary values. The first 100 days of the Trump administration may set the stage for that policy realignment.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-INDIA RELATIONS

MAY-DECEMBER 2024

May 2, 2024: US President Joe Biden [accuses](#) India, China, and Japan of being ‘xenophobic’ at a fundraising event for his Presidential campaign because of the countries’ restrictions towards immigration, which Biden believes is a limiting factor of their respective economies. Biden attests that immigration has bolstered the US economy and that immigrants would strengthen the respective countries.

May 4, 2024: Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar [rejects](#) President Biden’s claim that India’s xenophobia was stunting economic growth in South Asia, in which Jaishankar stated at a roundtable hosted by The Economic Times that India had always been a society that was historically ‘very open’ and that the economy was “not faltering.”

May 9, 2024: Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman [speaks](#) to US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen over the telephone on international taxation.

May 9, 2024: US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti [expresses](#) his trust in India amidst the United States’ complex dynamics with both China and Russia, defending India’s role as a check against China and cited New Delhi’s unwavering support for the ideology of non-alignment. Garcetti addressed concerns of India’s ties with Russia and China, stating that US-India ties were a ‘romance of convenience,’ and that ‘we are all suspicious of each other.’

May 20, 2024: US Ambassador to India Garcetti [visits](#) Pune, India and stopped in Lohegaon to see the office of the MIST LGBTQ Foundation, an organization that has been closely working with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

May 28, 2024: US Ambassador to India Garcetti [participates](#) in the US Industry Roundtable discussion on bolstering ties between the US and India.

June 4, 2024: India's Modi-led [alliance](#) clinches win in elections.

June 5, 2024: President Biden [called](#) Prime Minister Modi to congratulate him on his victory in the 2024 Indian general election and the 650

million Indian citizens who casted their vote—the largest democratic exercise in history—that ultimately emphasized their commitment to deepening the US-India Comprehensive and Global Strategic Partnership.

June 7, 2024: India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi is [elected](#) as leader of the coalition and set to form new government.

June 9, 2024: US [co-hosted](#) a T20 World Cup match cricket tournament with the West Indies in Eisenhower Park in New York between India and Pakistan. India defeated Pakistan by six runs.

June 12, 2024: Indian Consulate General in Chicago [participates](#) in the Annual Indian American Legislative Day at the State Capitol in Lansing, Michigan that highlighted the shared democratic values of both India and the US

June 17, 2024: Senior officials from both the US Government and the Government of India [sign](#) a Statement of Intent to establish the Gandhi-King Development Foundation by October 2024.

June 18, 2024: United States National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [visits](#) India’s capital on shared US-India priorities, discussing how to boost defense and technology cooperation between the two countries and remove long-standing barriers to bilateral strategic trade.

June 22, 2024: International Yoga Day is [celebrated](#) for the first time at Mississippi State Capitol and was organized by CGI and Indian community organizers.

June 24-26, 2024: US Trade and Development Agency (USTDA) [hosted](#) the US-India Aviation Summit in Washington DC to foster tremendous growth in the civil aviation sector.

June 25, 2024: The US Federal Government [hosted](#) the annual SelectUSA Summit that attracted the largest-ever Indian delegation led by US Ambassador to India Garcetti and Jonathan Heimer, Minister Counselor of Commercial Affairs and the Commercial Service India Team.

June 25, 2024: The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) CEO's delegation to the US [met](#) with Ambassador Sripriya Ranganathan, Charge d'Affaires of the Embassy of India in Washington DC and had comprehensive discussions about US-India relations.

June 27, 2024: USTDA Director Enoch T. Ebong [announces](#) the approval of grant funding for technical assistance to help create an integrated aviation hub at the Hisar Airport in the Indian state of Haryana, with the goal of strengthening India's supply chain network.

June 29–July 7, 2024: Indian Navy's indigenous stealth warship, the INS Shivalik, [arrives](#) at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii to participate in the 29th edition of Exercise Rim of the Pacific.

June 30, 2024: Indian Embassy in the US [organizes](#) a full-day Consular Camp in West Virginia at the BAPS Temple in Morgantown, where applicants availed Visa, OCI Passport, and other Consular services at the camp.

July 1, 2024: US Ambassador to India Garcetti [launches](#) the #USIndiaFWDforTech initiative to celebrate the partnership between the US and India on advancing innovation and scientific discoveries.

July 2, 2024: US Commercial Service [participates](#) in a Quad Roundtable on "Critical Minerals and Emerging Renewable Technologies" hosted by the National Solar Energy Federation of India and the US-India Business Council.

July 11, 2024: US Ambassador to India Garcetti [speaks](#) about US-India relations at the US-India Defense News Conclave in New Delhi.

July 16, 2024: Federation of Indian Export Organizations [hosts](#) a discussion with US Ambassador to India Garcetti on the US-India bilateral relationship, focusing on how—in the last two decades — trade between the two countries has multiplied exponentially and has expanded to critical areas such as space, clean energy, and artificial intelligence.

July 18, 2024: US and Indian governments and development agencies [release](#) a statement indicating a partnership between the two countries in a triangular energy infrastructure development partnership.

Aug. 15, 2024: Blinken [congratulates](#) India on its Independence Day, saying "US-India cooperation is expanding at a rapid pace as we

continue to work together to advance our shared vision of a free, open, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. From climate and clean energy to defense and space technologies, US-Indian bilateral cooperation is more wide-ranging and stronger than ever before."

Aug. 23, 2024: Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh [underscores](#) India-US collaboration as a force for global peace and stability, describing the nations as "natural allies." Addressing the diaspora, he highlighted India's transformation under PM Modi from a "Fragile Five" economy to a "Fabulous Five," projected to become the third-largest economy by 2027.

Sept. 21, 2024: Biden and Modi meet during Modi's three-day visit to the US, as Biden [emphasizes](#) the growing partnership between the two nations, describing it as the "defining partnership of the 21st century." Modi highlights the comprehensive India-US strategic partnership, founded on shared democratic values and on strengthening bilateral cooperation across key areas and discussing global and regional issues, including the Indo-Pacific.

Sept. 24, 2024: In a move likely not welcomed by Delhi, Biden [offers](#) support to the new government of Bangladesh, led by "advisor" Muhammad Yunus.

Sept. 24, 2024: US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti [mentions](#) that the United States views India as a "friend and partner," not a counterbalance to any nation. He highlighted shared principles on borders, sovereignty, and the rule of law, affirming US support for India during border conflicts, especially with China. He praised the close friendship between Prime Minister Modi and President Biden, calling Biden the "most pro-Indian president."

Oct. 4, 2024: Union Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal [reaffirms](#) India's stance against allowing multi-brand retail, citing its potential to harm the country's vast network of small mom-and-pop stores. He contrasted this with the US, where similar policies have impacted small businesses, noting that India's larger population relies heavily on these local shops for livelihoods. Goyal emphasized integrating such stores with technology and e-commerce without altering existing e-commerce rules. He highlighted India's openness to foreign investments, including

100% FDI in defense and space, with safeguards against money laundering.

Oct. 8, 2024: US [approves](#) sale of lightweight torpedoes worth \$175 million to India, as part of a broader package that also includes sales to Italy and Romania.

Oct 15, 2024: State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller [describes](#) the allegations of Indian involvement in the 2022 killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Vancouver as "extremely serious" and stressed the importance of collaboration between the two nations. He calls on India to cooperate with Canada's investigation into claims.

Oct. 17-18, 2024: US [charges](#) former Indian intelligence officer Vikas Yadav with orchestrating a failed plot to assassinate Khalistani separatist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun in New York. The US Justice Department has charges him with murder-for-hire and money laundering after it was revealed that the hired assassin turned out to be an FBI informant.

Oct. 31, 2024: Donald Trump [condemns](#) violence in Bangladesh, saying it would "never have happened on my watch."

Nov. 3, 2024: Hindu priest in Delhi pray publicly for Donald Trump's victory, saying Trump is "the only leader who can bring world peace" and that he has "vowed to protect Indians living in the US and Hindus all over the world."

Nov. 6, 2024: Modi [sends](#) the "Heartiest congratulations to my friend" Donald Trump upon his victory in the US presidential election.

Nov. 14, 2024: Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal [highlights](#) the two decades in economic integration between the US and India, stating that the change in US administrations will not affect halt this trend. According to data compiled by the commerce department, the compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of the US' imports from India stood at 10.48% during 2001-2023. The US' overall import growth rate from the world grew at a CAGR of only 4.76% during the same period.

Nov. 19, 2024: Prime Minister Narendra Modi [meets](#) US President Joe Biden at the 19th G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, describing the interaction as "always a delight." Their meeting highlighted the strong partnership between

India and the United States, building on shared commitments to address global challenges.

Nov. 22, 2024: White House [addresses](#) a US indictment accusing Gautam Adani, his nephew Sagar Adani, and six others of bribing Indian officials for power contracts. The indictment claims they offered bribes to secure solar energy supply deals. When asked about the impact on US-India relations, White House press secretary Jean Pierre [emphasizes](#) that the relationship is built on a strong foundation, focusing on people-to-people ties and cooperation on a broad range of global issues.

Nov. 22, 2024: US Consulate General Mike Hankey [emphasizes](#) the potential for diverse partnerships between the US and India, particularly in electric vehicle manufacturing and green energy sectors. During his visit to Goa, he highlights the supply chain dependence on China for lithium-ion batteries, stressing the need for more resilient alternatives. Hankey expressed optimism about collaboration between US and Indian businesses in electronics and clean energy. He noted ongoing talks between US national labs and Indian counterparts to address technological and supply chain challenges for future advancements.

Nov 27, 2024: During the G7 gathering in Fiumicino, Italy, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [emphasizes](#) the strength of US-India collaboration after meeting Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar. Blinken highlights their shared commitment to promoting global security and prosperity, referencing coordinated efforts in the Indo-Pacific, Taiwan Strait, and South China Sea. Jaishankar discusses evolving Indo-Pacific dynamics, noting both challenges and opportunities, and highlighted collaborations in technology, clean energy, and innovation. The leaders reinforce bilateral ties, including future engagements guided by a Joint Strategic Action Plan.

Dec. 6, 2024: External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar [highlights](#) the pivotal role of Donald Trump's administration in revitalizing the Quad during his remarks at the India-Japan Forum. He credited the Trump administration for upgrading the grouping from vice-ministerial to ministerial levels, fostering its growth since 2017.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

Political Changes May Roil Security Dynamics

CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

In the second half of 2024, Southeast Asia faced growing headwinds that challenged its longstanding principles of neutrality in external conflict and, above all, “ASEAN Centrality” in regional affairs. Maritime competition between the Philippines and China around the Second Thomas and Sabina Shoals intensified, causing Philippine President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr., to warn Beijing that there would be serious repercussions if Chinese naval vessels crossed a “red line” in the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Overtures from Moscow to several Southeast Asian nations for increased security cooperation presented two worrisome complications: a more pro-active Russian military role and the implications of the strengthening China-Russia alliance on the region’s security. A threat internal to the region, the civil war in Myanmar, developed new complications when China stepped up its diplomatic and security presence in the country to protect its economic interests. In Indonesia, however, an internal threat may be abating as the Jemmah Islamiyah publicly agreed to dissolve.

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During these challenges, political shifts could color Southeast Asian responses to security threats. Political transition in Vietnam and Indonesia ushered in new leaders whose geopolitical alignments are not yet clear. Thailand underwent a peaceful shift of prime ministers, but the process demonstrated that the country could remain internally focused for the near-term. The political transition in Japan raised questions of whether Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru would continue Tokyo's growing security relations with its Southeast Asia partners. Throughout the summer and into the fall, US presidential politics loomed over the region. The election in November of Donald Trump raised concerns in Southeast Asia over Washington's future relations with its security partners; the impact on Southeast Asia of a stiffer US posture toward China; and blanket tariffs, which could erode bilateral relations and impede cooperation in security and other key policy areas.

The Increasing Centrality of the Philippines



Figure 1 The Philippines reaffirmed its position on Sabina Shoal in the South China Sea even as it agreed with China to explore ways to lower tension in the area, its foreign ministry said on September 12, 2024. Photo: Reuters

By mid-year the Philippines was rapidly gaining salience in US policy paradigms for maritime security in the Asia-Pacific. China's accelerating attacks on Philippine vessels, especially those around on Second Thomas Shoal; the proximity of the Philippines (and its bases) to the Taiwan Strait; and the warming US-Philippines alliance all contribute to this focus. Beyond that, President Marcos had styled himself as a negotiator of the conflict in the South China Sea, a vision that neither China nor the other Southeast Asian claimants appeared to share. Lastly, in the heated political environment in

the United States, the Philippines had become the poster child for a US ally threatened by China, although Taiwan remained the greater focus. However, many statements from both the executive branch and Congress paired Taiwan and the Philippines together.

Maritime conflict between China and the Philippines this year has larger been around Philippine attempts to resupply the *Sierra Madre*, to provide the naval personnel aboard with water, food, and other essentials. China has claimed that Manila is attempting to restore the ship and use it as the foundation for a military base in Second Thomas Shoal. This is not without some foundation--in the past Philippine officials have occasionally said just that. A small number of US politicians have also surfaced the idea, although some suggest that the wrecked ship would not be useable, and that a new dock and pier would have to be built on Second Thomas Shoal.

In May a clash between Chinese and Philippine vessels resulted in injuries to Filipino sailors, prompting Marcos to issue his "red line" warning to Beijing when he delivered the keynote address at the Shangri-la Security Dialogue on May 31. This was presumed to mean that Manila would invoke the self-defense clause of the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), although it is not clear that China's "grey zone" tactics in the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) rise to that level in Washington's view.

Nevertheless, the May incident was the catalyst for opaque discussions between Manila and Beijing in June to avoid accelerating the conflict around Second Thomas Shoal. Earlier in the summer China claimed that it had forged a "gentleman's agreement" with former President Rodrigo Duterte, in which they agreed that Manila would only resupply the *Sierra Madre* with essential supplies, and that Marcos was abrogating that agreement. There is no such agreement on record, and Duterte has not confirmed the existence of any. The outcome of these negotiations closely paralleled the hypothetical Duterte agreement: Manila agreed to resupply the *Sierra Madre* only with essential goods for the naval personnel on it, and Beijing agreed not to interfere with that process. On July 27 the Philippine Navy conducted a resupply mission, and for the first time in several months China did not interfere.

However, the agreement covered only the Second Thomas Shoal. While China conspicuously did not interfere with the resupply mission on July 27th, it anchored its largest coast guard vessel at Sabina Shoal east of Second Thomas Shoal. Some Filipino officials have said they believe that China is attempting to build on Sabina Shoal which, although smaller than Second Thomas Shoal, is still strategically important.

Defense Cooperation Intensifies

As “grey zone” activity accelerated so did US-Philippines defense diplomacy. On July 30 the Philippines and the United States completed its fourth “2+2” Ministerial Dialogue, bringing together cabinet secretaries for foreign affairs and defense from both countries. The dialogue was held in Manila for the first time, a signal of the maturing alliance. The most notable deliverables from the meetings were in the flow of funds to come from the United States to the Philippines. Washington to provide \$500 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and \$128 million for infrastructure related to the expansion of EDCA sites. The generous FMF pledge—which US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken described as a “once in a generation” sum—was intended to support the modernization of the Philippine armed forces and Coast Guard as, in Blinken’s words, “they transition to focus on external defense.”



Figure 2 Secretary of State Blinken, Secretary of Defense Austin, Secretary of Foreign Affairs Manalo, and Senior Undersecretary and Officer in Charge (OIC) of National Defense Galvez convened the third U.S. Philippines 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in Washington, D.C., on April 11, 2023. Photo: The America Times

This uptick in defense diplomacy was matched by the eighth iteration of the US-Philippines Sama Sama Exercises, which were a statement of solidarity between Manila and Washington, as well as like-minded security partners. The two-week maritime exercises on Oct. 7-18, also included Australia, Canada, France, the United

Kingdom, and Japan. The exercises were particularly notable for the equipment deployed. Participating assets from the United States included the Navy’s Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS *Howard* (DDG 83), the presence of which drew sharp protests from Beijing and claims that the United States was attempting to escalate conflict in the South China Sea.

Intra-ASEAN Efforts

Attempts among the Southeast Asian states to calm tensions in the South China sea have been largely ineffectual. In keeping with his higher profile on the South China Sea, President Marcos proposed that the Southeast Asian claimant countries run the South China Sea might resolve their disputes among themselves first. Vietnam and Malaysia rejected this idea out of hand. Marcos’ response was to petition the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) Arbitration Tribunal to declare that the Philippines’ EEZ extends across the continental shelf to the shores of Sabah, a Malaysian province. This keeps alive the Philippines’ claim that Sabah was leased but not given to Malaysia during the British colonial period and that Manila had a right to reclaim it.

In the meantime, ASEAN delayed finalization of the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct on the South China Sea until 2026, when the Philippines will chair the group, following Malaysia’s chairmanship in 2025. Laos, this year’s chair, appeared to be more focused on the Myanmar civil war and, as a landlocked country, would not be inclined to tackle a complicated maritime conflict. In any case, expectations for a COC remain low in ASEAN, even if the agreement is finalized. Southeast Asian leaders have tended to view the Code of Conduct (and its predecessor, the ASEAN-China Declaration on a Code of Conduct on the South China Sea) not a treaty but as a dialogue mechanism.

Russian-Indonesian Naval Ties

Forging new security ties or expanding existing ones with external powers is a common theme in the Southeast Asian states, particularly the maritime ones. On November 4-8, on the heels of the inauguration of President Prabowo Subianto, Indonesia initiated a new phrase in relations with Russia with Orruda Joint Training, a five-day joint exercise in the Java Sea near Surabaya. The Russian Navy brought

three corvette-class warships and a medium tanker to the exercises, which were divided into harbor and sea phases.

The exercises were a strong signal from Prabowo that he intended to follow Jakarta's traditional posture of non-alignment in Indonesian foreign and defense policy. Jakarta has declined to take a position on the war in Ukraine. The Orudda exercises were one in an expanding defense portfolio that recently has also included joint exercises with Germany. In scope, they are dwarfed by the Super Garuda Shield Exercises that Indonesia has conducted with the United States since 2006. That said, they follow recent developments in the Indonesia-Russia relationship that could complicate Jakarta's relations with the United States and Europe in the near-term. In 2023 Prabowo, in his capacity as Defense Minister in the administration of former president Joko Widodo, quietly revived a \$1.1 billion agreement with Russia to purchase eleven Su-35S fighter jets that had been dormant since 2019, defying international sanctions on Moscow over Ukraine.



Local dancers welcome Rear Admiral Alexei Sysuev (right), Commander of the Primorsky Flotilla of the Pacific Fleet, and Andrei Kazazev (center), Commander of the Russian corvette Gromkiy, upon their arrival at Tanjung Perak port on Nov. 3, 2024, for a five-day joint military exercise between Indonesia and Russia, in Surabaya. Photo: VCG

Has Indonesia Rolled Back Terrorism?

On June 30, 16 leaders of the Jemah Islamiyah (JI), Southeast Asia's regional terrorism network, announced that they were dissolving the group. JI's origins were in the *mujahideen*, the global Muslim resistance to the Soviet presence in Afghanistan in the 1980s; the group, led by Indonesian and Malaysian fighters, was allegedly tutored by Osama bin Laden. JI has been the most important terrorist group in

Southeast Asia for three decades; has been active in the conflicts in Syria and Yemen; and even has a presence in Australia.

JI's long-term goal has been to develop cells across Southeast Asia and eventually establish an official Islamic state—a caliphate—in the region. Although the joint Indonesian-Malaysian leadership has endured, the group is more Indonesian than Malaysian and its most famous attacks—such as the 2002 Bali bombing and the 2004 bombing the Marriott hotel in Jakarta. JI is on most international terrorist sanctions lists and was officially outlawed by the Indonesian government in 2007. Several JI leaders are in prison in Indonesia but most will be released in the next few years.

Most Southeast Asian leaders and analysts doubt that JI will disappear altogether, and many think the announcement is a ruse. That said, it is probably no accident that the announcement comes after the election of Prabowo Subianto in February, since Indonesia's extremists may fear a particularly strong response from him to terrorist attacks. Prabowo has a complicated relationship with Indonesia's Muslim community: he has considerable political support from Muslim groups, but he has a history of repressive tactics. Moreover, as Minister of Defense he has been the link between the Indonesian military and international partners on counter-terrorism cooperation.

A major break-up of Jemah Islamiyah could significantly lower the terrorist threat to Indonesia. It would be the most benign outcome to the announcement, and it is within the realm of possibility. However, many Indonesians believe that the dissolution could be a tactic that would enable the leadership to regroup while it continues to pursue its long-term goals. In addition, appearing to dissolve the group and reorganizing with different leadership under a new name could make JI less a target for arrest. In the past decade, over 30 Indonesian civil servants, military officers and police officers were arrested for suspected ties to JI.

Many also argue that it is immaterial if JI does dissolve, because it will likely have splinter groups, of younger and more radical extremists who disagree with the dissolution. This is often the case with terrorist networks—JI was itself a splinter from the Darul Islam network in the

1990s. In that case, terrorism could rise with JI's dissolution.

The Indonesian security sector has improved its counter-terrorism response considerably since the early 2000s, and even if JI recoups under other auspices, the government will likely take it in stride. Countering new splinter groups will be more difficult but still within Jakarta's bandwidth. Because it has been the lynchpin for Southeast Asia terrorism for three decades, however, the impact of JI's dissolution could be greater on some Southeast Asian countries, because they will be tempted to become more extremist and more violent:

- The greatest impact would likely be on Philippine *jihadist* groups in Mindanao. These groups are often prey to larger terrorist networks, and would likely ally themselves with more radical groups if JI dissolves. This could be complicated by the growing rivalry between the Marcos and Duterte clans, and Duterte's determination to keep Mindanao on his side.
- Singaporeans were shocked in 2002 to uncover a homegrown JI cell in their territory—prior to that, they tended to view Islamic extremism as an external threat. A rise in Islamic extremism on the island would challenge Lawrence Wong's new administration to crack down on the terrorism threat without alienating the country's Muslim population.

China Moves More Deeply into Myanmar

As Myanmar moves toward the fifth anniversary of the military coup in February 2021 there are no signs that the internal conflict is moving toward a peaceful resolution. In recent months the opposition forces and the ethnic armed organizations (EAO's) allied have made significant gains on the battlefield, particularly in eastern Myanmar. On Aug. 3 the resistance captured the northern city of Lashio in northern Shan State after a month's battle. It represented the first time that had a Tatmadaw command had been seized by resistance forces; moreover, it underscored the reality that the Tatmadaw had become one of several armed groups contesting for power rather than the major block to an opposition assault. Their defeat in Lashio raised alarm not only within the military but also in Beijing.

China has much to worry about in the current political and security environment in Myanmar. The China-Myanmar border has become increasingly less secure over the past four years, with upticks in trafficking in illegal drugs and other forms of international crime. The Chinese pipelines that extend through Rakhine State to deliver oil and gas to Kunming have been targeted by opposition forces, occasionally prompting China to rely on their own security forces to guard them. Armed ethnic groups opposed to the junta are attacking Chinese mining operations that extract critical minerals vital to electronics manufacturing in China. Although they have been curtailed, Chinese criminal gangs continue to operate "scam campuses" on Myanmar territory near the border with Thailand. Beijing has conducted police and military actions to break up the camps, as has Interpol.

China still intends to build an economic corridor with Myanmar, which includes road and rail projects and a deep sea port that will give the PLA-Navy a strategic outpost on the Indian Ocean. Although the two countries agree in principle to go forward with this cluster of projects, full implementation is deferred until a peaceful resolution of the conflict is in sight. Lastly, both China and Russia have increased their economic stake in Myanmar, particularly in arms sales; however, the war in Ukraine has reduced Russian supplies, which China is now obliged to replace.

With this deterioration of the security environment--and the military's control of territory--after the Lashio battle Beijing adopted a more pro-active role in attempting to revoke the conflict that unabashedly tilts toward the junta. Accordingly, China has increased its presence in Myanmar in several states and for multiple. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited the country in August, and a special Chinese envoy for the ethnic armed groups was dispatched to urge that those fighting with (or parallel to) the People's Defense Force (PDF) refrain from attacking the junta forces. Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing was invited to visit China, a clear sign of Beijing's partisan support for him, and did so in November.



Myanmar's military chief Min Aung Hlaing (R) meeting with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Naypyidaw on Aug. 14, 2024. VOA File

Beijing appears to have little confidence in Min Aung Hlaing, but Chinese officials continue to back him. Beijing is pressing the junta to organize elections, presumably an attempt to legitimate Min Aung Hlaing and the junta in the eyes of the international community. However, organizing elections would be extremely difficult, particularly given the fact that the military controls only a corridor of territory, from Yangon to Mandalay and could not ensure adequate conditions for polls in other territories.

In any case, there is little likelihood that neither the international community nor the significant portion of the Myanmar public that supports the opposition would accept the legitimacy of elections conducted under these circumstances. At present the junta appears reluctant to schedule new polls, but Beijing will likely step up pressure on Min Aung Hlaing to move forward with them.

In and among this flurry of diplomatic activity, Beijing secured an agreement from Myanmar to deploy Chinese private military corporations (PMCs) to operate in the country. A minimum of four Chinese PMC are believed to be operating in Myanmar. These mercenary groups provide static security, each stationed at a specific point to protect the interests of Chinese companies. Despite their narrow commercial mandate, the presence of foreign forces in Myanmar of any kind has the potential to destabilize the conflict further.

In the second half of 2024 Washington cautiously expanded support for the Myanmar opposition. The current budget authorization, the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) provides for funds “to support the people of Burma in their struggle for democracy,

freedom, human rights and justice”; authorizes additional sanctions; and permits the provision of “non-lethal, technical assistance” to resistance groups. Although humanitarian assistance to Myanmar, totaling more than \$140 million since the beginning of the conflict, make up the bulk of American aid, US officials began to make cautious contact with opposition groups in late 2024.

On August 17, three days after Min Aung Hlaing's visit to Myanmar, two US officials -- Tom Sullivan, Senior Advisor to Secretary of State Blinken, and Michael Schiffer, Assistant Administration for Asia of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), met with officials of the National Unity Government and with key ethnic groups, including the Karen National Union. They promised to “expand direct support and assistance to pro-democracy actors” in Myanmar, although the administration has not made public precise plans. That said, the United States has little interest in entering a proxy war with China in Myanmar, although Washington will watch carefully for developments that affect the strategic balance between the US and China in this area of the Indo-Pacific.

Key Political Transitions

In late 2024 Southeast Asia underwent three political transitions: a change of party secretary-general in Vietnam, from Nguyen Nhu Trong to Tô Lâm; an internal reshuffle in the Pheu Thai Party in Thailand, leader of the parliamentary coalition, that brought Thaksin Shinawatra's 38-year-old daughter Paetongtarn to power; and the inauguration in October of Prabowo Subianto as President in Indonesia.

Of these three, the transition most likely to have an impact on US security interests in Southeast Asia is the move from Joko Widodo to Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia. Although closely allied politically—Joko's son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, is Prabowo's vice president—the new president will take a more pro-active approach to foreign relations and national defense.

Prabowo will be influenced by his most recent position as minister of defense but as well by his and his family's deep involvement with the New Order of former president Suharto. In his inaugural address, he promised to strengthen Indonesia's neutrality in foreign affairs. In the near term, this has translated into deepening

Jakarta's relations with both Moscow and Beijing, although he promises to balance deeper ties to China and Russia with stronger relations with the West and Japan,

Prabowo has made two moves in the direction of China and Russia. Joint naval exercises with the Russian Navy were the most obvious step. Additionally, on Nov. 13, Jakarta also signed an agreement with China to jointly develop maritime resources near the Natuna Islands. Indonesian security experts have warned that it will undermine Indonesia's territorial rights and reinforce Beijing's claims to a "nine-dash-line." They point out that Jakarta might learn from the experience of the Philippines, which has periodically attempted to conduct joint oil exploration projects with China in the South China Sea, all of which were abandoned when Beijing proposed terms that were overwhelmingly in their favor.

Prabowo's other foreign policy goals are less defined, but he has floated several possibilities. Although Jakarta maintains formal neutrality on the war in Ukraine, in June Prabowo renewed his interest in helping to settle that conflict in his address at the Shangri-la Security Dialogue. He is unlikely to play a prominent role, but Moscow will seek Jakarta's support in any solution they pursue. As well, Prabowo appears to be more inclined to bring Indonesian into BRICS than was Joko, although he also will also seek entry for Jakarta in the OECD.

Vietnamese Communist Party Secretary-General Tô Lâm began his climb to the top in July, when he made the transition from minister of public security to president in July, largely the result of his successful management of the "Burning Furnace" anti-corruption purge that has consumed Vietnam in recent years. When Party Secretary-General Nguyen Phu Trong died shortly thereafter, on July 19, Lam became acting secretary-general and was subsequently confirmed as the permanent leader by the Party Central Committee on Aug. 4. In 2026 he will face re-election as party secretary-general at the National Party Congress.

Lam's longtime experience as public security minister has raised expectations that he will keep tight control over political dissent, and that he is likely to continue the anti-corruption purge in some form. However, his goals in foreign policy are less clear. In contrast to Trong, who was a strict doctrinaire, Lam is more

pragmatic and is likely to seek a middle lane between China and the West. In the near-term, he will tread delicately on relations with Washington, not least because Vietnam will be in the crossfire for potential tariffs in the Trump administration because of its \$102 billion trade surplus with the United States.

Former Prime Minister Srettha Thavasin's removal as prime minister was a function of the increasing politicization of Thailand's judiciary, but the Constitutional Court stopped short of dissolving the Pheu Thai Party. His replacement by Paetongtarn Shinawatra, daughter of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, was not surprising but raised inevitable questions of whether Thaksin himself would be the *de facto* leader of the Pheu Thai Party and thus the parliamentary coalition. This issue was settled legally when the Constitutional Court ruled in Thaksin's favor on a petition charging that he had improperly influenced the party. However, for the time being, the Thai military appears to accept Pheu Thai's continued role in leading the government, if only because it is a hedge against more pro-democracy parties. However, the military will watch closely for signs that Thaksin is accruing greater political power and could take measures to depose Pheu Thai, in the courts if not on the streets, if he crosses a red line.

Looking Ahead to Trump 2.0

Southeast Asian leaders watched the US presidential election campaign with marked nervousness. In contrast to Europe, fewer leaders believed that the United States would abandon or seriously downgrade its security alliances in the Indo-Pacific if Trump won, although they do anticipate greater pressure on burden-sharing. Moreover, the Pentagon's efforts to reconfigure the US alliance system in the Indo-Pacific from a hub-and-spokes to a "lattice" configuration had encouraged the expansion of security cooperation to include Japan and Australia in US-Southeast Asian security relations. This new dynamic offers some scaffolding even if bilateral defense relations with Washington deteriorate.

However, Southeast Asians worry about a hardening of the US position toward China, and the greater likelihood that they would be drawn into US-China conflict in the region, however much they insist that they should not be made to choose. The specific concern is that greater

conflict in the Taiwan Strait would inevitably draw in the Philippines; however, the silver lining to such a scenario is that the Pentagon would likely seek to maintain, or even strengthen, the US-Philippines alliance as a result.

Although trade does not usually have a direct connection to security, many Southeast Asian leaders fear that a rigid tariff regime, of the kind that Trump has promised, could upend the region economically and, at the least, damage some bilateral relations and security cooperation within those relations. Vietnam and Thailand have the largest trade surpluses with the United States and expect to be the prime targets of tariff increases. In that case, both countries are likely to bring their security relations into negotiations on trade, reminding Washington that damage on the trade side would inevitably be felt in security.

If there is a Southeast Asian country that is least impacted by these policy changes, it is likely to be Singapore. The country continues to run a trade deficit with the United States and its relative wealth makes it a more equitable security partner. Moreover, US “flexible basing” in Singapore is a powerful card that Prime Minister Lawrence Wong will likely play if relations with the new administration become rocky.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

MAY - NOVEMBER 2024

May 7, 2024: Reports say Undersecretary of the Treasury Brian Johnson will express concern that Iran using Malaysian companies to sidestep sanctions and transship oil to Singapore, and that Hamas is raising funds through Malaysian channels. Home Minister Saifuddin Nasution Ismail meets with Johnson and says that Malaysia will not recognize international sanctions in this issue area.

May 31-June 2, 2024: IISS Shangri-la Dialogue is convened in Singapore, with Philippine President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr., presenting the keynote speech. Marcos slams China for its actions around Second Thomas Shoal.

June 4, 2024: US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited Cambodia, on the heels of the Shangri-la Security Dialogue in Singapore. He met with Prime Minister Hun Manet, Senate President Hun Sen, and Defense Minister Tea Seiha.

June 30, 2024: Indonesian leaders of the Jemah Islamiyah, Southeast Asia’s regional terrorism network, announces they are dissolving the group. Although the JI itself may disappear, the possibility for splinter groups could increase.

July 19, 2024: Vietnamese President Tô Lâm becomes Acting Vietnamese Communist Party secretary-general upon the death of his predecessor, Nguyen Phu Trong. On Aug. 4 is confirmed as the Permanent Secretary-General by the Party’s Central Committee.

July 27, 2024: Following talks between Beijing and Manila to forge an informal agreement on conduct around Second Thomas Shoal, the Philippine Navy launches a resupply mission to resupply the *Sierra Madre*, without interference.

July 30, 2024: United States and the Philippines conducts the fourth 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue on foreign affairs and defense in Manila.

Aug. 3, 2024: Forces of the resistance in Myanmar—the People’s Defense Force and allied armed ethnic groups—take the city of Lashio in northern Shan State, marking the first time that the opposition has captured a regional military command.

Aug. 7, 2024: Thailand’s Constitutional Court’s dissolves the Move Forward Party and bans 11 of its senior party leaders, including Pita Limjaroenrat, from politics for 10 years. The banishments effectively decapitated Move Forward, although 143 Members of Parliament remain in the legislature.

Aug. 13, 2024: Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavasin is dismissed from his position as prime minister by the Thai Constitutional Court for having appointed an official with a criminal conviction to his cabinet.

Aug. 14, 2024: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visits Myanmar and meets with junta leader Ming Aung Hlaing and Foreign Minister U Than Swe.

Aug. 16, 2024: Former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s daughter Paetongtarn Shinawatra is elected prime minister by a two-thirds majority of parliament.

Aug. 17, 2024: Tom Sullivan, Senior Advisor to US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Michael Schiffer, Assistant Administrator of USAID, meet with Myanmar’s shadow National Unity Government and allied ethnic groups to discuss US non-lethal assistance.

Aug. 27, 2024: Chinese vessels block Philippine patrol boats attempting a resupply mission on Sabina Shoal in the Philippines EEZ.

Oct. 6-11, 2024: ASEAN conducts a series of major meetings with Laos as the 2024 chair. These included the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting; the 44th and 45th ASEAN Summits; and at the East Asia Summit. At the ASEAN Summits for the first time since the 2021 coup Myanmar is invited to send a representative from the career ranks of the Foreign Ministry. Permanent Secretary Aung Kyaw Moe attends but does not speak at the Summits. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken represents the United States at the East Asia Summit.

Oct. 7-18, 2024: United States and the Philippines hold the 8th iteration of the Sama Sama Exercise, which also include Australia, Canada, France, the United Kingdom and Japan. The United States deploys the Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer *USS Howard*.

Oct. 20, 2024: Prabowo Subianto is sworn in as Indonesia's eighth president. Gibran Rakabuming Raka, son of outgoing president Joko Widodo, is sworn in as vice president.

Nov. 4-8, 2024: Indonesia and Russia hold their first-ever joint naval exercises in the Java Sea off Surabaya.

Nov. 13, 2024: Indonesia signs an agreement with China to jointly develop maritime resources near the Natuna Islands.

Nov. 22, 2024: Former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is acquitted by the Constitutional Court of charges of having improperly influenced the Pheu Thai Party.

PACIFIC FORUM

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA
RELATIONS

BEIJING SEEKS ADVANTAGE IN US COMPETITION, LEADERSHIP CHANGE

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

China marked the end of 2024 and four years of often intense competition for regional influence with the Biden administration and its allies and partners by continuing strong opposition to outside interference and working to advance China's leading position among most Southeast Asian governments. The Biden government made significant gains at China's expense, notably in the Philippines, a contrast with the decline in US regional influence and China's ascendance that occurred during the first Trump administration. Looking forward, Beijing will seek to advance Chinese influence as a reliable partner and stabilizing presence amid widespread regional and global uncertainties caused by growing economic protectionism, wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and perceived negative implications of a second Trump administration.

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Assessing China, US Regional Influence

Amid surveys showing China's position as Southeast Asia's [leading power](#), President Biden in the 2024 presidential campaign repeatedly highlighted his administration's achievements in [checking](#) Beijing's challenges to the US and ambitions in Asia and elsewhere. US efforts involved domestic strengthening through massive spending bills and working with allies and partners in Asia and elsewhere to counter China's regional advances at others' expense. Supporting evidence was provided by Xi Jinping over the past year—reacting to perceived US encirclement and serious domestic problems by [compromising with the Biden administration](#) in agreeing to the US government's longstanding calls for talks with China to set guardrails to manage rising tensions and beginning a modest charm offensive seeking to reduce tensions and stabilize relations with the United States and many US partners and allies, though not Taiwan or the Philippines.

The authoritative annual Lowy Institute [Asia Power Index](#) in late 2024 compared US and Chinese regional influence by highlighting China's inability to close a large gap between its influence and that of the United States on account of slower Chinese economic growth and domestic challenge. Meanwhile, the United States advanced via growing activism and networking with regional partners and strong US economic fundamentals. It noted that China notably narrowed the gap and advanced in influence relative to the United States during the first Trump administration, predicting a similar rise in China's relative influence was likely under a second Trump presidency.

[A report](#) in late 2024 synthesizing the views of 25 Southeast Asian specialists of China's influence in the region relative to that of the United States showed continued shortcomings in China's quest for regional leadership. It balanced China's economic, diplomatic and other advantages with under-appreciated US investments far surpassing China's and the US emerging as the largest market for ASEAN exports. This reflects anticipated strong US economic growth that contrasts with continued decline in China's growth rate. It noted regional countries remain ambivalent about China's long-term ambitions. A summary assessed Beijing as far from dominant with a spectrum of regional countries' relations ranging from close alignment by Cambodia and Laos to strident opposition by the

Philippines, with most others showing differing degrees of attraction and wariness in relations with Beijing.

Meanwhile a [CSIS assessment](#) by two Southeast Asian specialists added insight in evaluating China's influence relative to the United States. Notably, regional governments pragmatically seek closer economic ties with China because economic security is indispensable to regime survival and legitimacy and China is an essential partner in sustaining economic growth.

Leadership Meetings Reflect Continued Strong China-US Rivalry in Southeast Asia

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Chinese counterpart Defense Minister Dong Jun and his delegation members offered starkly [different views](#) of the regional order in their remarks at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in late May. Austin highlighted US growing military ties with several Southeast Asian and other Indo-Pacific countries while the Chinese speakers denounced the United States as the source of regional tension. They claimed that the US allegedly sought advantage in creating division, provoking confrontation and undermining stability. In a [separate meeting](#) with Austin, Dong objected to US support for the Philippines in disputes with China over the South China Sea and US deployment of advanced mid-range *Typhon* missiles in northern Philippines with a range covering much of southeastern China.

Chinese media in mid-June sharply attacked the G7 [Summit statement's](#) criticism of Chinese actions in the South China Sea disputes. The summit statement took a strong position in support of "lawful" Philippine actions in the disputed South China Sea in the face of "dangerous" Chinese actions based on expansive claims "with no legal basis" and deemed irrelevant by a legally binding award by an UNCLOS arbitral tribunal in July 2016. There followed Chinese media [criticism](#) in early July of the 2024 RIMPAC exercises showing US intentions to confront China in the South China Sea and elsewhere with a broad alignment of NATO and Indo-Pacific allies.

Attending the ASEAN Regional Forum and related meetings in Laos on July 27, Chinese Politburo Member and Foreign Minister Wang Yi [warned](#) Secretary of State Antony Blinken against

US interference in the South China Sea disputes between China and the Philippines.

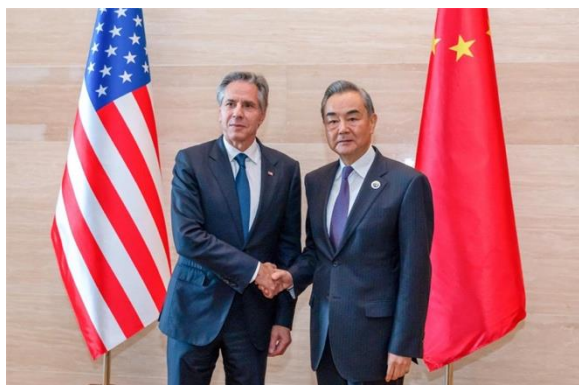


Figure 1 Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, meets with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Vientiane, Laos, July 27, 2024. [Photo/Xinhua]

Chinese media [condemned](#) Secretary Blinken's and Secretary Austin's meetings with Japanese counterparts and then the two countries' delegates meeting with South Korean counterparts in Japan on July 28 as seeking to contain China in the South China Sea and elsewhere along its periphery. And they focused special [criticism](#) on statements of Blinken and other Quad foreign ministers critical of China as the greatest strategic challenge and source of troubles in the South China Sea and the East China Sea.

Chinese Prime Minister [Li Qiang](#) represented China at the East Asian Summit and related ASEAN meetings in Laos on Oct. 10-11. Secretary Blinken substituted for President Biden, who was preoccupied with the war in the Middle East in the lead-up to the US elections. Chinese media [criticized](#) Blinken's alleged intention to drive a wedge between China and ASEAN. They attacked Blinken's [statement](#) at the US-ASEAN meeting on Oct. 11 referring to "dangerous and unlawful"

Chinese coercive actions in the South China Sea. Chinese and Russian officials [blocked](#) a US-supported leaders' statement on the East Asian Summit seen as challenging China's broad claim to the South China Sea. Chinese Premier Li and related [commentary](#) emphasized the positive in China-ASEAN relations as the two sides announced "the substantial conclusion" of negotiations creating Version 3.0 of the China ASEAN Free Trade Agreement.

Xi Jinping's [prominent role](#) at the APEC summit in Peru and the G20 summit in Brazil put Biden, now a "lame duck," into the background. At Xi's meeting with Biden at the G20 summit, both sides made [their points](#) on the South China Sea and other disagreements. During the publicized summit meetings, Xi and supporting Chinese commentary emphasized the positive, highlighting China's commitment to economic globalization as a source of regional and global stability in times of pervasive uncertainty caused by the implications of the second Trump administration and other factors. Chinese [experts](#) maintained that Beijing is prepared for adverse moves by the Trump government as Chinese commentary endeavors to exploit [angst](#) about a Trump presidency. The commentary argues that export-oriented Southeast Asian economies will face serious negative consequence from Trump's widely predicted increases in US tariffs.

China-Philippines Tensions over South China Sea Disputes

China-Philippines relations continued to deteriorate with the government of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. defying Chinese expansionism and intimidation over disputed South China Sea claims. Marcos has sought and received wide ranging US military, economic, and diplomatic support and is backed by US Indo-Pacific allies and partners and supporters in the G7, NATO, and other Western organizations. US and allied backing showed in joint [exercises](#) with Philippine forces involving the US, Japan, Australia, Canada, Great Britain, France, and South Korea; a \$500 million US military [aid](#) package announced in July; and repeated [statements](#) of support against Chinese bullying in the South China Sea by these and other governments and organizations. Against this background, tensions rose dramatically over the disputed Philippines-occupied outpost at Second Thomas Shoal, reaching a highpoint on June 17 when [armed conflict](#) broke out among Chinese and Philippines security forces who skirmished with knives and axes near the disputed outpost. The Chinese forces successfully blocked Philippine forces attempting to supply the outpost. Both sides pulled back and sought dialogue. Secret negotiations helped to reduce tensions for a time. *Global Times* on Sept. 2 that the China-Philippines Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on the South China Sea had met nine times, with the ninth meeting in early July. The eighth occurred

in January. Following the July talks, both sides avoided confrontations over Philippine supply missions to the outpost.



Figure 2 Chinese President Xi Jinping and other leaders and representatives from APEC member economies pose for a group photo in Lima, Peru, Nov. 16, 2024. Xi on Saturday delivered an important speech at the 31st APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting under the title "Shouldering Responsibility to Our Times And Jointly Promoting Asia-Pacific Development." [Photo/Xinhua]

A major Chinese objective in blocking supply to the outpost was to prevent the provision of construction material that would shore up the rusting naval vessel the Philippines deliberately grounded on the shoal 25 years ago to support Manila's claim to the territory. Beijing anticipated the old ship would soon fall apart, forcing evacuation and allowing the superior Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia fleets to control the area. But concurrent with the fight at Second Thomas Shoal in June came [reports](#), including a lengthy report in China's [Global Times](#) on June 22, that the Philippines had used fishermen to smuggle construction equipment to the outpost for repair and reinforcement to make the outpost permanent. Philippine military personnel on the ship were reportedly seen welding and doing reinforcement during daylight hours, suggesting China's efforts to restrict Philippine supply missions had failed.

New confrontations between Philippine supply ships attempting to reach a Philippines Coast Guard vessel anchored at Sabina Shoal since April and Chinese Coast Guard ships pushing them back led to [collisions](#) on Aug. 19. The collisions came amid a large show of force of Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia vessels intending to intimidate Manila and force it to withdraw the anchored ship at the Shoal. After the Philippines government on Sept. 14 withdrew the ship, which had stayed at Sabina Shoal since April 17, Chinese

[commentary](#) approved the move but Philippine spokespersons affirmed that another Philippine ship would be sent to the shoal. *Global Times* reported on Sept. 18 that the withdrawal of the Philippines Coast Guard vessel from Sabina Shoal was preceded by a meeting of the China-Philippines Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on Sept. 11.

Meanwhile, Scarborough Shoal, occupied by China but claimed by the Philippines, remained a periodic hot spot.

Tensions again rose when President Marcos on Nov. 8 [signed](#) into law the Maritime Zones Act and the Philippines Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act that defied Chinese claims to Philippines claimed territories in the South China Sea with legislation consistent with UNCLOS and with the interpretation articulated by the arbitral tribunal on July 2016 ruling against Chinese claims. The US State Department promptly [supported](#) the Philippines action while Beijing was very critical. On Nov. 10 the Chinese Foreign Ministry released [baselines](#) for territorial sea adjacent to Chinese occupied Scarborough Shoal, a move taken to counter "infringement actions" by the Philippines.

Also raising tensions was the Philippine plan [reported](#) in November to purchase the US *Typhon* advanced intermediate range missile system that has been deployed in the country since April. A Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman on May 30 [complained](#) that this "strategic and offensive weapon" will "break strategic balance" in the region and "cause great risk of war" as it endangered targets throughout southeastern China.

Related developments

The spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in Manila on May 2 [rebutted](#) Philippines complaints of April 30 concerning Chinese Coast Guard ships harassing, blocking, and using water cannons against Philippine official vessels entering the 12 mile waters surrounding disputed Scarborough Shoal. Beijing claimed there had been "a temporary special arrangement" that allowed Philippines fishing in areas outside the lagoon but no official Philippines vessels were to enter the 12-mile limit. It said the Marcos government had violated this agreement and past commitments regarding Second Thomas Shoal.

Regarding what it said were secret Philippines-Chinese agreements regulating Philippine supply

missions to the outpost at Second Thomas Shoal, the Chinese embassy in Manila [released](#) to the media on May 7 the transcript of a two-minute section of a 12 minute phone conversation with a Philippines general on Jan. 3. In it, the general agreed to notify China at least two days ahead of a supply mission to the outpost at Second Thomas Shoal and limit the number of Coast Guard and supply ships to one each for each supply mission. The Chinese Foreign Ministry [spokesperson](#) that day also reiterated earlier Chinese claims that “a gentleman’s agreement” on Second Thomas Shoal was reached with former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, and claimed that an understanding with the Marcos government was reached at the start of that government. The spokesperson criticized Marcos government for denying such agreements. The Philippines National Security Advisor called for the [expulsion](#) of Chinese diplomats over the reported Chinese embassy leak to the media of the Philippine general’s Jan. 3 remarks.

On May 11, the Philippines [confirmed](#) it sent a Coast Guard ship to stay at Sabina Shoal amid reports Beijing planned to occupy and develop the Philippine-claimed territory as another South China Sea outpost. Beijing deployed dozens of Coast Guard and Maritime Militia ships to [fend off](#) a large flotilla of Filipino fishing boats seeking to challenge Chinese fishing restrictions regarding Scarborough Shoal but the flotilla ended its trip on May 16, well before reaching the shoal. On May 19, the Philippines Navy air dropped supplies to the outpost at Second Thomas Shoal and Philippine officials [criticized](#) nearby Chinese Coast Guard forces for retrieving some supplies from the sea and destroying them.

Beijing strongly [criticized](#) President Marcos for using his keynote speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue and answers to questions on May 31 to warn China against “acts of war” in the South China Sea. During those remarks, he asserted that if a Philippine service person or a citizen were killed in a willful act, “that is very close to what we define as an act of war.”

The Philippines government on Aug. 13 filed a diplomatic [protest](#) charging Chinese jet fighters fired a volley of flares at a Philippine patrol plane over disputed Scarborough Shoal. At that time, Manila had reportedly filed over [150 complaints](#) against the practices of Chinese security forces in the disputed South China Sea since the start of the Marcos government in 2022.



Figure 3 Philippine RHIBs are surrounded and boarded by the China Coast Guard at Second Thomas Shoal. AFP Photo

The Aug. 19 collisions of Chinese Coast Guard ships blocking Philippine Coast Guard ships attempting to enter waters at Sabina Shoal was one of seven [scuffles](#) between Chinese and Philippines security forces over the shoal during that month as Chinese rhetoric demanded removal of the anchored Philippine Coast Guard ship at the shoal.

The Philippine Navy [reported](#) that in the week Sept. 17-23 that 251 Chinese Maritime Militia, Coast Guard and Navy vessels were active around disputed areas in the South China Sea, the highest levels this year, with 83 deployed to Sabina Shoal and 72 to Second Thomas Shoal.

China-Myanmar Relations

Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing [arrived](#) in China in November for the first time since he launched a coup in February 2021. The junta leader was invited to attend the Greater Mekong Subregion Summit of Leaders in Kunming. While not a state visit, the official reception and meetings with Chinese Premier Li Qiang sent an important signal. China is concerned with the continued instability and civil unrest in Myanmar, especially along the two countries’ borders, and it would like the junta leader to take action to help stabilize Myanmar’s domestic affairs. Beijing also would like to see cross-border trade restored, Chinese investments in Myanmar protected, a timetable for elections to be laid out, and for the insurgents to enter negotiations with the junta.

China has attempted to intervene in various ways. In August, the PLA [organized](#) its army units and joint air-ground police patrols near its border with Myanmar in Ruili and Zhenkang to maintain security as fighting between the junta

and rebel forces has been escalating. China has also been more [involved](#) in conflict mediation. In late November, one of the ethnic minority army groups, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, announced that it would hold talks with the junta after a year-long battle along the China-Myanmar border. The TNLA acknowledged China's mediation effort and agreed to halt air strikes in the northern Shan state of Myanmar as it prepares for talks with the junta.

China-Vietnam Summitry

China's relations with Vietnam were closer in recent months in spite of competing claims and ongoing disputes in the South China Sea. In August, Chinese President Xi held talks with Vietnam's President To Lam in Beijing. It was Lam's first state visit since becoming Vietnam's top leader. The two discussed the importance of maintaining a positive neighborhood diplomacy. Xi pointed to their good working relations and personal friendship as the basis for strengthening party-to-party ties as well as bilateral cooperation. Similarly, Lam described relations with China as a "top priority in Vietnam's external policy." In their joint statement, China and Vietnam [announced](#) the signing of 14 documents spanning cooperation in cross-border railways to defence and security ties.

In October, Chinese Premier Li Qiang [visited](#) Hanoi for meetings with his Vietnamese counterpart and other senior Vietnamese officials. Both countries agreed to carry out feasibility studies for standardizing railway routes and survey activities between Kunming and Haiphong, Guangxi to Hanoi, and a potential new route linking Shenzhen to Haiphong, all of which would increase connectivity, cross-border trade, and people-to-people exchanges.

Even as trade, economic, and business ties deepen between China and Vietnam, the two countries remain at odds over competing claims in the South China Sea. Vietnam maintains actively [engaged](#) in dredging and landfill activities in the Spratly Islands, although at a scale that is still smaller than that of China in recent years in the contested waters. Hanoi is also employing gray-zone tactics to counter China's presence in the South China Sea, having established maritime militias in coastal provinces to support its navy and provided funding to help strengthen and fortify Vietnamese fishing vessels in case they are

rammed by Chinese counterparts. For the time being, the maritime dispute is being managed in ways that avoid escalation, which can be attributed in part to Hanoi's adroit diplomacy of maintaining an arm's-length relationship with Washington while engaging in pragmatic ways with Beijing.

Indonesia Engages in High-Profile Diplomacy with China and the United States

Relations between China and Indonesia warmed in this reporting period. Within weeks after taking office, Indonesia's President Prabowo Subianto [embarked](#) on his first official state visit to China, meeting with President Xi in Beijing in early November. In their discussion, the two leaders affirmed the state of China-Indonesia relations, with Prabowo stressing how China is an "important friend and partner," a key reason behind choosing China as his first foreign trip as president. This was followed by the joint [announcement](#) of the signing of deals worth \$10 billion at the Indonesia-China Business Forum in Beijing, spanning sectors including food, new energy, technology, and biotechnology. The two leaders also agreed to increase more two-way exchanges through the introduction of new visa measures, including multi-entry long-term visas, and more direct flights and destinations.

During the visit, Beijing and Jakarta also inked a maritime development agreement which mentioned that both countries had "reached important common understanding on joint development in areas of overlapping claims." This signing of the agreement [prompted](#) some backlash and controversy in Jakarta, with the Indonesian foreign ministry clarifying that Jakarta is not a claimant state to the South China Sea, and has no overlapping claims or jurisdiction with China. The ministry further reassured that the maritime development agreement would have no impact on Indonesia's sovereignty.

The high-profile visit to China was immediately followed by Prabowo's visit to Washington, DC, meeting with President Joe Biden, as well as making a highly publicized [call](#) to President-elect Donald Trump. Prabowo said, "I would like to call personally on you wherever you are. I'm willing to fly to congratulate you in person, sir." In the clip's backdrop and on Prabowo's desk was a copy of the *China Daily* newspaper. Analysts in Southeast Asia discerned a subtle yet important message behind the flurry of state visits and the

phone call with Trump: amidst the intensifying geopolitical competition between the United States and China, Indonesia is willing to rally and lead the region, taking on a more visible and active foreign policy while underscoring Indonesia and the region's centrality and neutrality. Some are even comparing him to Sukarno, Indonesia's first president and chief architect of the Non-Aligned Movement. As Prabowo's presidency unfolds, and as US-China competition intensifies in the region, it remains to be seen whether Indonesia can elevate its regional and global stature and further its foreign policy and diplomatic objectives.

Anwar Advances Malaysia's Relations with China

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's two years in power have featured remarkable personal efforts to solidify close relations with China, which has been [well received](#) in Beijing. When combined with the Malaysian leader's consistently strong criticism of US support for Israel in the armed conflicts in the Middle East, Anwar's activism is [viewed](#) by critics in Malaysia and abroad as favoring China in the US-China competition for influence in Southeast Asia, which he [denies](#).

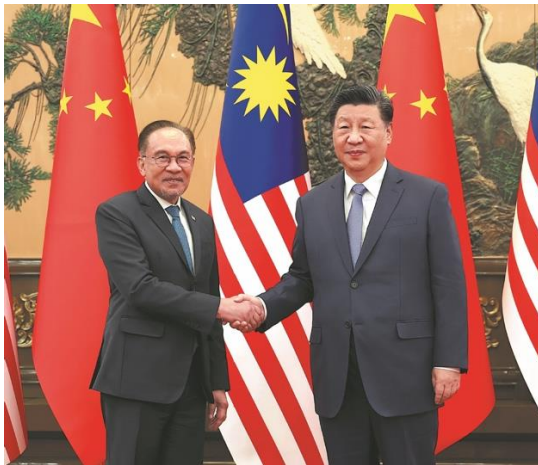


Figure 4 President Xi Jinping meets with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in Beijing on Thursday. FENG YONGBIN/CHINA DAILY

2024 marked the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Malaysia-China relations in July 1974. Chinese Premier Li Qiang [visited](#) Malaysia in June to celebrate the anniversary. In November, Anwar made his third trip to China since taking power in late 2022. The four-day working [visit](#) included a meeting with Xi Jinping and attending the opening ceremony of the

seventh annual China International Import Expo in Shanghai.

Both governments have emphasized many positives in the relationship, acknowledging the importance of Malaysia as the incoming chair of ASEAN for the next year and the incoming ASEAN-China dialogue partner coordinator for the next three years. Bilateral [trade](#) reached \$190 billion in 2023, 17% of Malaysia total foreign trade, with Malaysia ranked as China's second largest trade partner in ASEAN. China has ranked as Malaysia's top trading partner for 15 years. By 2023, Malaysia's cumulative [investment](#) in China was \$9.2 billion and China's cumulative investment in Malaysia was \$17 billion. Malaysia was one of the top 10 participating countries in China's Belt and Road Initiative. More than 3 million Chinese tourists visited Malaysia annually prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and 5 million were expected in 2024. In 2023, 40,000 Chinese students were studying in Malaysia and more than 10,000 Malaysian students were studying in China.

Chinese commentary strongly supported Anwar's decision to [apply](#) to join the BRICS during the Russian foreign minister's visit to Malaysia in July. It [noted](#) an adjustment in Malaysia's nonaligned foreign policy, with "stronger leanings toward China" seen as "a shift from the previous governments that maintained closer ties with western powers." References to Sino-Malaysian differences over the South China Sea were rare. An [exception](#) was the leak in September of a Chinese message to the Malaysian embassy in Beijing in late August demanding a halt of Malaysian survey and drilling efforts in the South China Sea infringing on Chinese sovereignty. Those efforts have [persisted](#) despite Chinese opposition and Chinese Coast Guard ships harassing and endeavoring to force the withdrawal of the Malaysians. Anwar said the Malaysian efforts would continue.

China-Cambodia Relations

With strong backing of his father, long-serving former Prime Minister Hun Sen, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet on Aug. 5 presided over a 10,000-person groundbreaking ceremony marking the start of construction of the \$1.7 billion, 180-km, China-backed Funan Techo Canal, which will provide Cambodia direct access from the Mekong River to the South China Sea rather than routing through Vietnam's Mekong Delta. China [welcomed](#) the occasion and followed

in September with the announced [gift](#) of two Chinese naval corvettes to the Cambodian Navy to be delivered by 2025. China has become Cambodia's primary supplier of modern military equipment outpacing the United States which set an arms embargo targeting Cambodian military officials in 2021. The developments underscored Cambodia's strong alignment with China even as it endeavored to diversify foreign contacts, including [visits](#) by the US Defense Secretary and the Director US Agency for International Development in June and October respectively. In November, however, *Reuters* [reported](#) that Chinese funding for the canal project may be in doubt after Beijing expressed misgivings about the project's feasibility.

China, Timor-Leste Relations

Xi Jinping on July 1 warmly [welcomed](#) Jose Ramos-Horta, president of Timor-Leste, for a four-day visit. This was first visit to China by the president of the country, an applicant to join ASEAN, since China established relations in 2022. China was the first country to establish relations with the country and has more recently signed over 20 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. The joint communiqué marking Ramos-Horta's visit emphasized the need for closer ties in various areas, including a section on security relations with [China](#).

Up to now, China has [offered](#) low amounts of investment and aid compared with ASEAN countries, Australia, Japan, the EU, and the United States. This stands in contrast with more generous Chinese aid to the Solomon Islands and other small Pacific Island countries. [Commenting](#) on the visit, China's Defense Ministry spokesperson noted that the two militaries have maintained active exchanges and would deepen cooperation including joint exercises and training.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

MAY-NOVEMBER 2024

May 11, 2024: Philippine officials confirm Manila sent a Coast Guard ship to stay at Sabina Shoal in the disputed South China Sea amid reports Beijing planned to occupy and develop the Philippine claimed territory as another South China Sea outpost.

May 19, 2024: Two Chinese PLA Navy warships dock in Sihanoukville as part of a two-week land and sea drill with Cambodia. The docking of the Chinese warships renews US concerns about China's renovation of Ream, a Cambodian naval base that was originally built partly with US funds.

May 31, 2024: Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun and US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin discuss differences over the South China Sea and other matters on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.

May 31, 2024: Beijing strongly criticizes Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. for using his keynote speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore to condemn China's actions in the South China Sea.

June 17, 2024: Tensions over the disputed Philippines-occupied South China Sea outpost at Second Thomas Shoal reach a highpoint in a melee of Chinese and Philippines security forces with knives and axes near the disputed outpost.

June 18, 2024: Visiting Chinese Premier Li Qiang celebrates the 50th anniversary of China-Malaysia diplomatic relations with Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and other Malaysian leaders.

June 22, 2024: *Global Times* reports that the Philippines used fishermen to smuggle construction equipment to the disputed outpost at Second Thomas Shoal for repair and reinforcement to make the outpost permanent.

July 27, 2024: During the ASEAN Regional Forum and related meetings in Laos, Chinese Politburo

Member and Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets Secretary of State Antony Blinken and among other matters warns against US interference in the South China Sea disputes between China and the Philippines.

August 5, 2024: China welcomes Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet's groundbreaking ceremony marking the start of construction of the \$1.7 billion 180-km China-backed Funan Techo Canal which will provide Cambodia direct access from the Mekong River to the South China Sea.

August 18-20, 2024: Chinese President Xi Jinping holds talks with Vietnamese counterpart, To Lam, in Beijing. This is the new Vietnamese party leader's first official and foreign visit, and both sides agree to increase the comprehensive bilateral relationship.

August 19, 2024: Confrontations between Philippine supply ships attempting to reach a Philippines Coast Guard vessel anchored at Sabina Shoal in the disputed South China Sea and Chinese Coast Guard ships result in [collisions](#) damaging the Philippine vessels.

Aug. 26, 2024: The PLA organizes its army units and joint air-ground police patrols near China's border with Myanmar in Ruili and Zhenkang to maintain security as fighting between the Myanmar's junta forces and rebel groups has been escalating.

Oct. 11, 2024: Chinese Premier Li Qiang represents China at the East Asian Summit and related ASEAN meetings in Laos. A key outcome is the decision to expedite final negotiations to upgrade the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement that would deepen regional trade and cooperation in digital and green economies.

Oct. 12-14, 2024: Chinese Premier Li Qiang visits Vietnam and signs deals that enhance customs and border procedures, highspeed rail links, and agricultural trade, among others.

Oct. 16, 2024: China and Thailand conduct “Strike-2024,” a joint counterterrorism exercise in Kunming, Yunnan province. In addition to troops, unmanned drones are also involved in this year’s joint exercise. The drills are conducted near the China-Myanmar border, serving as a platform for Thai and Chinese troops to address such nontraditional security threats as transborder crime, human trafficking, and arms smuggling.

Oct. 30, 2024: A report with new images released by the Center for Strategic and International Studies’ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative shows that Vietnam is laying a runway about 2.4 km long in the South China Sea with capacity to build two more airstrips.

Nov. 5, 2024: Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing visits China for the first time since he staged a coup in 2021, attending the Greater Mekong Subregion Summit of Leaders in Kunming.

Nov. 7, 2024: President Xi meets visiting Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Nov. 8, 2024: Philippines President Marcos Jr. signs into law the Maritime Zones Act and the Philippines Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act that defy Chinese claims to Philippines claimed territories in the South China Sea.

Nov. 10, 2024: In response to Marcos’ action, China’s Foreign Ministry releases baselines for territorial sea adjacent to Chinese occupied and Philippine claimed Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea.

Nov. 10, 2024: China and Indonesia sign deals worth \$10 billion at a bilateral business forum following a summit meeting in Beijing between President Xi and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto.

Nov. 16, 2024: President Xi and President Biden meet at the G20 summit in Brazil and discuss issues involving the South China Sea among other matters.

Nov. 21, 2024: Reuters reports that Chinese funding for the \$1.7 billion Funan Techo Canal project in Cambodia that would connect the Mekong River to the Gulf of Thailand and reduce Cambodia’s shipping reliance on neighboring Vietnam is in doubt after Beijing expresses

concerns and misgivings about the project’s feasibility.

Nov. 25, 2024: A China Coast Guard fleet heads to the Gulf of Tonkin to carry out a joint patrol with its Vietnamese counterpart. This marks the 28th joint patrol since 2006 between the two countries. The drills focus on maritime cooperation, including combating smuggling of illicit goods at sea and regulation of fishery operations.

Nov. 26, 2024: The Ta’ang National Liberation Army, an ethnic minority army that is part of formidable rebel alliance fighting Myanmar’s junta, announces that it is ready to engage in a ceasefire and dialogue, acknowledging China’s help and mediation efforts.

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

INCREASING PERILS AHEAD

DAVID KEEGAN, JOHN HOPKINS SCHOOL OF ADVANCED INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
KYLE CHURCHMAN, DIRECTOR OF GLOBAL STRATEGY & ANALYSIS AT ADVAMED

Lai Ching-te insisted at his May inauguration that Taiwan is sovereign and not subordinate to China. Beijing reacted by increasing cross-Strait tensions. China's latest rounds of military exercises make clear that it is preparing to use force or at least gray-zone intimidation to effect reunification. Taiwan's opposition Kuomintang continued unofficial contacts with the Chinese Communist Party, seeking reconciliation but risking aiding China's efforts to fragment Taiwan. Taiwan's TSMC continues to expand in Taiwan and overseas in ways that keep it at the center of the global high-tech economy. Taiwan has increased its purchases of military equipment from the US and opened negotiations on a bilateral tax agreement. Beijing views US support for Taiwan as collaboration in Lai's separatism. US President-elect Donald Trump has said that Taiwan stole the production of semiconductors from the US and should pay for US military support. However, this animus may be balanced by the outspoken Taiwan supporters he has chosen for his national security team. Can Taiwan overcome its internal divisions and Trump's Taiwan skepticism? Can China, Taiwan, and the US step back from a confrontational spiral? None of this will be easy, but failure may put Taiwan's future at risk.

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Lai Ching-te's Inaugural Address and Cross-Strait Relations

The most important development in relations between Taiwan and China over the past six months has been the inauguration of Taiwan's new president, Lai Ching-te, and China's reaction. Lai was elected on Jan. 13 to succeed Tsai Ing-wen and continue the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) leadership of Taiwan's government. In his inaugural address on May 20, Lai echoed themes familiar from Tsai's presidency. [Lai began by proclaiming](#) that the people of Taiwan had elected him as "president of the Republic of China in accordance with the Republic of China Constitution system" and that "the Republic of China Taiwan is a sovereign, independent nation in which sovereignty lies in the hands of the people." He praised the people of Taiwan "for refusing to be swayed by external forces." He promised to "continue working with other democratic nations to form a democratic community."

Recalling "Russia's invasion of Ukraine and conflict between Israel and Hamas," Lai warned that "China's military actions and gray-zone coercion are considered the greatest strategic challenges to global peace and stability." And "no one wants [Taiwan's] achievements to be destroyed by war." Lai promised that his new government would uphold [Tsai's Four Commitments](#), which include that "the ROC (Taiwan) and the [the People's Republic of China] PRC [should not be subordinate](#) to each other." Continuing to echo Tsai's words, Lai said that Taiwan would "neither yield nor provoke, and maintain the status quo." What Lai did not say May 20 was that his administration would continue conducting cross-Strait relations on the basis of the ROC Constitution and Cross-Strait statute.

Lai then issued a challenge to Beijing: "I hope that China will face the reality of the Republic of China's existence, respect the choices of the people of Taiwan, and in good faith, choose dialogue over confrontation, exchange over containment, and under the principles of parity and dignity, engage in cooperation with the legal government chosen by Taiwan's people."

Using language apparently designed to appeal to Washington, Lai concluded that "Taiwan is strategically positioned in the first island chain, and what affects us here affects global

geopolitical development," and Taiwan remains "a frontline guardian of world peace."



Figure 1 In his inauguration speech, Taiwan's new President Lai emphasized China must stop military intimidation. Photo: PBS News.

To Beijing, Lai Looks Just Like Tsai

Beijing undoubtedly read Lai's words as a continuation of the policies in [Tsai's first inaugural address](#) in 2016. Lai's call for dialogue almost certainly reminded Beijing of Tsai's offer to open a dialogue based on her reading of cross-Strait talks starting in 1992.

Tsai had promised "to maintain the existing mechanisms for dialogue and communication across the Taiwan Strait," including the "various joint acknowledgments and understandings" reached by the two sides in 1992 as well as the "over twenty years of interactions and negotiations" since 1992. She called on China to "set aside the baggage of history and engage in positive dialogue, for the benefit of the people on both sides."

Because Tsai did not identify the outcome of the 1992 talks as "the 1992 Consensus," a term coined by a KMT commentator almost a decade afterward and then adopted by Beijing, China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) [rejected Tsai's offer](#) out of hand. It insisted that Taiwan acknowledge itself part of "one China," which Tsai refused to do. Beijing sees Lai's offer of dialogue as more of the same.

Lai's Inaugural Speech and Reactions Were Predictable

In the wake of Lai's inaugural speech, [the TAO responded in the same vein](#) as they had to Tsai eight years earlier: "The Democratic Progressive Party stubbornly adheres to the separatist

position of ‘Taiwan independence,’ refuses to recognize the ‘1992 Consensus’ that embodies the one-China principle . . . spreads separatist fallacies, incites confrontation between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait, and attempts to ‘rely on foreign countries to seek independence’ and ‘seek independence by force.’” Chinese Foreign Minister [Wang Yi was even more outspoken](#): “The treacherous acts of Lai Ching-te and his ilk, who betray the nation and their ancestors, are despicable” (translation from 5-21-2024 Sinocism.)

Lai’s critics in Taiwan worried that his speech might have weakened any chance for cross-Strait dialogue. Lai’s speech was “[tougher than expected](#)” and might be “moving towards a sovereign nation without formally declaring independence under the name of Taiwan,” according to James Yifan Chen at Tamkang University.

The US State Department [congratulated](#) Lai and Taiwan: “The United States congratulates Dr. Lai Ching-te on his inauguration as Taiwan’s fifth democratically elected president. We also congratulate the Taiwan people for once again demonstrating the strength of their robust and resilient democratic system.” *The Wall Street Journal* [captured the US reaction](#) in its headline: “Taiwan’s New President Serves Up Predictability in Era of Turmoil.”

Perhaps the single most striking feature of Lai’s inaugural address and the reactions to it was the sense that there is no longer any hope for dialogue. Taiwan’s offer to open a dialogue were offered not for Beijing but to appear responsible in the eyes of Taiwanese independents and foreign audiences, most importantly the US. Lai and the TAO both seemed well aware that Beijing’s prerequisites for dialogue—acknowledging the 1992 Consensus by name and describing Taiwan as part of “one China”—were simply not feasible politically for a DPP president of Taiwan in 2024.

Lai’s National Day Speech Offered Half an Olive branch

On Oct. 10, Lai gave his second major speech of the year on the National Day of the Republic of China. Lai said that the ROC [began in 1911](#), when a group of democratic dreamers in China overthrew the Qing Dynasty; it was defended in 1949, when ROC soldiers defended the island of Kinmen; and it claimed its democracy in 1979

when Taiwan dissidents demonstrated in Kaohsiung to celebrate International Human Rights Day. For Lai, the message was clear: Taiwan’s democracy is the fulfillment of the aspirations of the founders of the ROC in 1911, a dream that began before the Chinese Communist Party was founded. In doing so, Lai linked Taiwan with China in a way no DPP leader before him had done. When President Tsai celebrated the National Day of the Republic of China in 2023, she praised “[the unwavering spirit](#) that has underpinned the Republic of China since establishing itself in Taiwan 74 years ago,” words which seemed to suggest that for her the ROC was only the ROC after it came to Taiwan and was distinct from the ROC in China.



Figure 2 Taiwanese soldiers salute during National Day celebrations in front of the Presidential Building in Taipei, Taiwan, October 10, 2021. Photo: AP, Chiang Ying-ying.

Although the dream began in China, Lai made it clear that today it was not the dream of China’s current rulers but instead “the dream that Taiwan’s 23 million people all share.” To drive home that point, Lai said again that “the Republic of China and the People’s Republic of China are not subordinate to each other. On this land, democracy and freedom are growing and thriving. The People’s Republic of China has no right to represent Taiwan.” In short, Beijing’s one-China principle does not apply in Taiwan.

The rhetorical and military responses from China were predictable and unmistakable. According to the TAO, Lai “continued to advocate the ‘[new two-state theory](#)’ of “mutual non-subordination” in his speech [and] fabricated the fallacy of “Taiwan independence.” The US [rebuke to the TAO](#) was equally predictable: “The PRC response with military provocations to a routine annual speech is unwarranted and risks escalation.” The spokesperson for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) responded in kind: The US should “[stop arming Taiwan](#) and stop sending any wrong signal to the ‘Taiwan independence’ separatist forces.”

Two Double-edged Sword Exercises

Both Lai's inaugural speech and his Oct. 10 National Day speech were followed by large-scale military exercises launched by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), dubbed Joint Sword 2024a and 2024b. China's designating these exercises Joint Sword 2024a and 2024b linked them to the [Joint Sword 2023 exercise](#) that the PLA conducted in the wake of President Tsai's meeting with US Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy in April 2023 and less directly to the extended PLA exercise in the aftermath of Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022.



Figure 3 The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) launched 'Joint Sword-2024B' military drills near Taiwan on Monday, the country's Defense Ministry said in a statement. Photo: MEHR News Agency.

The exercises had two purposes. The first was propaganda. [China's foreign ministry described Joint Sword 2024a](#), launched three days after Lai's inauguration as "a necessary and legitimate move to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity, crack down on 'Taiwan independence' separatist forces and their separatist moves, and send a warning to external interference and provocation." The second purpose of Joint Sword 2024a was to strengthen PLA capabilities to interdict commercial traffic in the Taiwan Strait and between Taiwan and the islands it controls near the Chinese coast. For the first time, the exercise incorporated Chinese Coast Guard vessels, which practiced inspections of foreign vessels.

Joint Sword 2024b was the briefest in the Joint Sword series to date, occurring over a 13-hour period on Oct. 14, but it was nonetheless intense. [The exercise included 125 PLA aircraft](#) flying close to Taiwan, a new single-day high, as well as 14 PLA navy vessels and an additional 12 Chinese government vessels operating near the island. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the exercise

was that [Chinese Coast Guard vessels completely surrounded](#) Taiwan in an apparent effort to practice the deployment that would be required to blockade the island. The progressive expansion of the Chinese Coast Guard role also may signal that China is treating the Taiwan Strait and the area around Taiwan as internal waters and therefore within the purview of its law-enforcement activities. More ominously, the PLA and the Chinese Coast Guard appear to be systematically intensifying military activity in ways that will make them better able to shift quickly from gray-zone intimidation to directly coercive military actions against Taiwan and against foreign merchant and military approaching near Taiwan.

Fishing is Risky Near Offshore Islands

The increasing presence of the PLA Navy and the Chinese Coast Guard in waters around Taiwan's Kinmen (also known as Jinmen or Quemoy) and Matsu islands near the Chinese coast and the Penghu islands in the middle of the Taiwan Strait have made these waters and the Taiwanese who fish there an ever more prominent flashpoint. On May 29, [Taiwan's Coast Guard warned two PLA vessels](#) to retreat from restricted waters they had entered near Kinmen. A month later, [four Chinese Coast guard vessels](#) sailed to within five miles of Kinmen despite Taiwanese Coast Guard attempts to warn them off. On July 2, the Chinese Coast Guard [seized a Taiwanese fishing vessel](#) in what it said were Chinese waters near Kinmen. In a rare US comment on such incidents, the White House spokesperson told reporters it was monitoring the situation. The Taiwanese ship, which had sailed from the Penghu islands, and its crew were seized and held for over a month; [the captain was detained until mid-November](#). In one sense, these sorts of fisheries incidents have been business as usual for some time, but the increasing prominence of the PLA Navy and Chinese Coast Guard as agents of gray-zone coercion means that each incident risks becoming a cross-Strait crisis. Even the release of detained fishermen, once a matter of several hours, is now delayed by days or months. China is increasingly choosing to negotiate such releases with KMT local officials as part of United Front efforts to treat Taiwan's KMT opposition as the only intermediary they will deal with.



Figure 4 Chinese coast guard ships entered prohibited or restricted waters around Taiwan's frontline islands of Kinmen on Monday, a Taiwan minister told reporters on Tuesday amid a rise in tension with Beijing. Photo: Ted Aljibe | Afp | Getty Images.

Opposition KMT Challenges Lai and the DPP—Wise Counsel or Risk?

The Jan. 13 elections gave the opposition KMT effective control of the Legislative Yuan (LY), the national legislature. The KMT immediately used its control of the LY to challenge the DPP government. KMT attempted to legislate laws making the executive branch under President Lai more accountable to the LY. These efforts were opposed by the Lai administration as a power grab, and his administration appealed the proposed rules to Taiwan's Constitutional Court, which for the most part [found the rules unconstitutional](#). The KMT has also initiated a series of challenges to the government budget submitted by Lai's Premier Cho Jung-tai. [The two sides reached a compromise](#) on Nov. 8, enabling the LY review of the budget to proceed. However, this skirmish portends a deadlock that could threaten Taiwan's ability to increase defense spending as both the DPP and KMT say they are committed to do.

The opposition KMT also criticized Lai's approach to China as it had criticized Tsai's. In response to Lai's inaugural address, former President Ma Ying-jeou [challenged Lai's cross-strait approach](#): "He should have dialogue with the government across the Strait by returning to historical and cultural common ground with the Chinese. Only in this manner can there be a chance for peace in the Taiwan Strait." In November, Ma invited China to send a delegation of students to visit Taiwan, [reciprocating the visit](#) of Ma and Taiwan students this April during which Chinese President Xi Jinping had a high-profile meeting with Ma. After a flurry of

concerns that the Chinese Communist Party had handpicked the students, which they obviously had, Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) approved the visit. The MAC then [invited China](#) to allow Chinese students to study in Taiwan on a regular basis, but China has thus far not responded. Former KMT leader of the LY Wang Jinping also visited China, and [a delegation from Shanghai is scheduled to visit Taipei](#) in December in another signal that China welcomes contacts with KMT politicians such as Taipei Mayor Chiang Wan-an.

Although China welcomed KMT visitors, it issued a stark warning that others might not be welcome. A month after Lai's inauguration, China [issued regulations](#) to enforce the Anti-Secession Law it promulgated in 2005. These guidelines "detailed the steps it might take to punish supporters of Taiwanese self-rule. The new rules adopted by China authorize execution for what it describes as exceptionally severe cases of Taiwanese separatism, though they do not say exactly what actions might constitute a severe offense." After a member of a tour group from Taiwan was detained in China in early June without explanation, [Taiwan's MAC issued a warning](#) to anyone considering travel to China. On Aug. 3, [a Chinese court sentenced a Taiwanese](#), Yang Chih-yuan, to nine years in prison for what it identified as pro-independence activities, specifically because Yang had helped organize the Taiwan National Party. Yang had been in China to teach Go. On Sept. 1 [China detained an executive](#) from Formosa Plastics without explanation.

Can Taiwan Acquire the Military Equipment It Needs?

As the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East have continued to challenge the ability of the US to supply needed weapons systems to its allies and partners, the US State Department acknowledged that ["insufficient production capacity"](#) had slowed weapons deliveries to Taiwan. That backlog was reported to have [reached \\$20.5 billion](#) by August. Speaking virtually to an AI forum in Washington two months earlier, Taiwan's Vice President-elect Bihxim Hsiao [bemoaned](#) "deficiencies in the traditional US defense industry production base," saying that they meant that "the current US defense industry base is producing neither enough nor on time the hardware to meet global demand." She called for the US manufacturers to enter into coproduction arrangements with Taiwan companies.

[The US Department of Defense \(DOD\) Inspector General found](#) that not only the speed but also the quality of deliveries was deficient, stating “the DOD’s delivery of non-mission-capable items [as part of Presidential Drawdown authority] to Taiwan inhibits the DoD’s ability to achieve its security cooperation goals and risks degrading Taiwan’s confidence in the United States.” At least one US defense industry analyst said that [the delivery deficit had been cut](#) to approximately \$9 billion since then, due less to any corrective actions and more due to the normal process of transferring equipment and munitions ordered earlier.

Despite these acknowledged difficulties, on Sept. 27 [the US committed to provide Taiwan up to \\$567 million](#) in defense articles and services under Presidential Drawdown Authority in 2024, its largest assistance package ever for Taiwan, following its commitment of \$345 million in 2023. On June 18, the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) offered to sell Taiwan anti-personnel Switchblade drones and anti-armor Altius drones, together worth \$360 million. [These contracts were then signed](#) by Taiwan on Oct. 15 and would expand Taiwan’s acquisition of asymmetric defense capabilities.

Biden Administration Lends Support to Lai Government

Relations between Lai’s new government from the Biden administration have started on a positive note. In August, Taiwan Foreign Minister Lin Jia-lung and National Security Advisor Joseph Wu held security talks with senior Biden officials outside Washington, according to the *Financial Times*. The most recent gathering under this “Special Channel” convened in February 2023. In early December, the Biden administration afforded Lai courteous treatment during his transits through Hawaii and Guam en route to Taiwan’s South Pacific allies. Biden officials have viewed Lai as basically maintaining Tsai Ing-wen’s pragmatic and responsible approach toward cross-Strait relations.

On the other hand, Washington has uniformly viewed Beijing’s behavior toward Lai as belligerent, prompting demonstrations of support. Notably, US Navy vessels continue to sail through the Taiwan Strait individually and with partner nations. The week following the PLA’s brief yet expansive Joint Sword 2024B exercises in mid-October, a US Navy destroyer

and a Canadian frigate transited the Taiwan Strait on Oct. 20. The PLA reacted with live-fire drills nearby Pingtan island off Fujian province two days later.

Trump’s Support Less Certain

Donald Trump’s election has added further uncertainties. On June 25, Trump told *Bloomberg Businessweek* that “[I think Taiwan should pay us for defense](#). You know, we’re no different than an insurance company.” As Trump has assembled his national security team, his choices overwhelmingly reflect a far stronger commitment to defending Taiwan and a far greater emphasis on reinforcing Taiwan’s military capabilities as part of the first island chain. Secretary of State Designate Marco Rubio and National Security Advisor Designate Michael Waltz are both generally identified as China hawks and advocates for increased US military sales to Taiwan. On the sidelines of the Republican Convention, [Rubio told Fox News](#), “I don’t have any worries about the US being supportive of Taiwan and doing everything we can to discourage the Chinese from invading.” In addition to the impact of his own nominations, Trump will walk into a US defense establishment already intently focused on defending Taiwan. Adm. Samuel Paparo, head of the US Indo-Pacific Command, [told The Washington Post](#) that “I want to turn the Taiwan Strait into an unmanned hellscape using a number of classified capabilities, so that I can make their lives utterly miserable for a month, which buys me the time for the rest of everything.”

Trump’s former National Security Advisor, Robert O’Brien, put a positive spin on Trump’s remarks to *Bloomberg*, saying that [Trump was simply calling for burden sharing](#), adding that Taiwan should increase its defense spending to 5% of gross domestic product. The Taiwan government counters that it is already at 2.5% of GDP and that President Lai proposed an increase of 6% on that. Nonetheless, David Sacks of The Council on Foreign Relations [captured the attitude of American analysts](#): “The consensus is that Taiwan is still not taking the existential threat that it faces seriously enough and should raise defense spending far more rapidly.”

Can Taiwan Build the Military Capability It Needs?

Over the past six months, Taiwan has taken a number of steps that suggest it is beginning to

reform its approach to its defense. President [Lai chose a civilian Minister of National Defense](#), Wellington Koo, who had served Tsai as National Security Advisor since 2016. Earlier efforts to reform the military by imposing a civilian minister of National Defense by President Lee Teng-hui (KMT) in the early 1990s and by President Chen Shui-bian (DPP) in 2008 both faltered, but there is hope that Koo's extended service under Tsai may enable him to break the resistance of the uniformed military to civilian oversight and modernize the force. Koo's announcement that the ROC military would [end goose-step marching](#) and bayonet training was considered a symbolic watershed.

In domestic procurement, [Taiwan commissioned two naval corvettes](#) equipped with *Hsiung-feng* anti-ship missiles, designed to counter the PLA's growing fleet of aircraft carriers. These two will join four already in service, and Taiwan's MND has said it expects to add five more of these corvettes by the end of 2026.

Beyond Defense Spending and Acquisitions

On Sept. 26, President Lai convened the first meeting of a special [committee to strengthen civil defense and resilience](#) on the island. Its task is to integrate civilian forces into responses to potential attacks from Beijing, manage emergencies, and maintain social order and stability. The plan would train 400,000 civilians to respond to a civil or military emergency. Taiwan civil society began a series of initiatives that would complement the government's efforts. On Facebook, one group, [the Kuma Academy, explained](#) that it was "awakening the spirit of resistance in Taiwanese society." [China's Taiwan Affairs Office \(TAO\) responded by sanctioning](#) Taiwanese businessman Robert Tsao Hsing-cheng, who founded United Microelectronics Corporation (UMC), and Taiwanese lawmaker Puma Shen for funding and organizing the group.

The darker side of Taiwan's response to China's increasing campaign of gray-zone intimidation may be glimpsed in the trailer for [a TV miniseries, Zero Day, planned for 2025](#). It will offer a dystopian view of how China might concoct an excuse to blockade and then invade Taiwan, all the while barraging Taiwan with defeatist disinformation through broadcast and social media.

Strong US-Taiwan Economic Ties Make Further Progress

Following an intensive in-person [negotiating round](#) in Taipei in early May, US and Taiwan trade negotiators continued discussions on the labor, environment, and agriculture provisions of The 21st Century Trade Initiative. A follow-on negotiating round did not convene as anticipated, indicating gaps remain. In November, US Trade Representative (USTR) Katherine Tai met her new Taiwanese counterpart, Minister without Portfolio Jen-ni Yang, in Peru at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) trade ministerial. The USTR [readout](#) notes the "important progress" achieved under the trade initiative to date but gives no indication of future talks. Separately, the trade initiative's [first agreement](#), signed in June 2023, is poised to go into effect by the end of 2024 following certification by USTR and a final nod from the US Congress.

The US Treasury Department in late October [announced](#) the launch of negotiations with Taiwan on a comprehensive double taxation agreement. Long sought by Taipei, a double tax agreement had struggled to gain traction inside the US government. Views have shifted with the expanding footprint of TSMC and its suppliers in the United States since 2021. In addition, Congress this year inched closer to legislating adjustments to the US tax code that would benefit Taiwan investors in the United States. Such Congressional action could not address the double taxation concerns of US investors in Taiwan without action by Taiwan's government, presumably after reaching agreement with the US. The Treasury Department's announcement specifically touts the prospective agreement's tax benefits for small and medium-sized Taiwan firms within the US semiconductor supply chain. A first round of negotiations is expected before the end of the year, and the final agreement will require the blessing of Congress.

The booming US-Taiwan commercial relationship, supported by a handful of active governmental dialogues, could face headwinds if President Trump follows through on a campaign promise to impose a 10-20% tariff on all US imports. Taiwan's export-driven economy has grown increasingly reliant on the United States in the last half dozen years, with exports to the US poised to exceed \$100 billion in 2024. At the same time, Trump has pledged even higher tariffs on China, which could cause Taiwan firms

supplying the US market from China to shift manufacturing back to the island. The Lai government has [expressed](#) interest in a second trade agreement with the United States, but trade negotiations with the second Trump administration could invite scrutiny of the growing US-Taiwan trade imbalance and pressure on Taiwan to purchase more US goods.

TSMC Deepens Its Alignment with the United States

Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company brought online its first fab (semiconductor production plant) in Arizona during the fall, after having overcome a myriad of labor disputes and construction delays since 2021. Initial output batches have shown chips with slightly higher yields, meaning fewer defects per wafer, than the leading TSMC fabs in Taiwan. In a vote of confidence for TSMC's Arizona site, the US Commerce Department on Nov. 15 [finalized](#) a \$6.6 billion cash subsidy it had provisionally offered to the Taiwanese chipmaker earlier in the year.

TSMC's reputation took a hit, however, when Canadian news platform TechInsights discovered a TSMC-manufactured chip inside Huawei's latest AI processor in October. TSMC launched an internal investigation and identified Sophgo Technologies, a Chinese customer, as the culprit. TSMC promptly stopped shipments to Sophgo and notified the US Commerce Department, which has imposed extensive export controls on Huawei since 2019. On Nov. 10, TSMC reportedly received a letter from the Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security requiring it to suspend advanced semiconductor sales to all Chinese customers manufacturing AI processors. This so-called "is informed" letter has underscored the US government's expectation that TSMC and other chip suppliers will conduct thorough "know your customer" checks and remain vigilant. TSMC appears unlikely to face penalties over this incident.

The incoming Trump administration will likely prioritize the continued onshoring of chip manufacturing. Trump, without evidence, accused Taiwan of "stealing the US chip industry" while on the 2024 campaign trail. He also described CHIPS funding incentives as "so bad" and instead called for tariffs on imported semiconductors to spur domestic manufacturing. Taiwan's commanding lead in

advanced semiconductors and TSMC's now finalized contract with the US Commerce Department on its \$6.6 billion subsidy provide some safeguards. A more acute risk could be pressure on TSMC to begin in Arizona production of its most cutting-edge chips, at the 2-nanometer level, ahead of the scheduled 2030 target date.

Perils Ahead

As we conclude this series of periodic updates on Taiwan and its relationship with China, cross-Strait conditions are more perilous than they have been since 1950 when the US inserted the Seventh Fleet into the Strait at the beginning of the Korean War.

Under President Lai, and almost any successor imaginable, Taiwan will continue to develop its political identity as a responsible and de-facto independent member of the global order. China will continue to insist it has the unilateral right to control Taiwan. It will expand its efforts to move Taiwan toward what it calls peaceful reunification without any prospect of success. Anticipating failure, China will continue expanding its military capability to compel reunification. Taiwan's survival will rely on its ability to build and arm a military sufficient to deter and, if necessary, resist PLA military action. Taiwan's efforts to ensure a peaceful status quo will depend well on its growing economic and high-technology importance as well as the support and US partner and allies. The US will find that its high technology economy is increasingly dependent on Taiwan and that supporting Taiwan is a useful component of its economic and strategic pressure against China.

This triangular clash portends a growing risk that cross-Strait political confrontation might become a military confrontation, devastating China, Taiwan, and their neighbors in East Asia and undermining US regional leadership. Is Taiwan willing to spend enough and strengthen its social cohesion and resilience to deter a Chinese assault or blockade or, if necessary, to delay one long enough for the US to choose to intervene? The challenge for Taiwan and China will remain what it has been since 2000, at least. Can they argue over their incompatible visions for Taiwan's future without undermining their stability and prosperity? Will the US under a second Trump administration continue the US policy of "strategic ambiguity" or "dual deterrence" without dragging Taiwan into its

own intensifying confrontation with China? Will China and the US find that their broader geostrategic and economic interests sufficiently outweigh their dissatisfaction with the cross-Strait status quo and trends to enable them to kick the can down the road? Finally, can wisdom and compromise overcome intransigence on all three sides?

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

MAY-NOVEMBER 2024

May 1, 2024: Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) reminds Taiwanese of the risks of traveling to China after the PRC's enactment of an amended States Secrets Law.

May 10, 2024: Taiwanese TV and movie actor Wu Mu-hsuen was recently forced to sign a pledge to support China's territorial claim on democratic Taiwan or see her Chinese hit show "Hey! Come a Bit Closer" be banned.

May 14, 2024: US sources reveal that the US and Taiwan navies quietly held joint Pacific drills.

May 20, 2024: Dr. Lai Ching-te is inaugurated as the fifth democratically elected president of the Republic of China. In his inaugural address, Lai calls on China to "face the reality of the Republic of China's existence." China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) says that Lai's speech "incites confrontation."

May 22, 2024: China sanctions 12 US companies for arms sales to Taiwan, saying they come after US sanctions on Chinese companies for sales to Russia.

May 23, 2024: China's People Liberation Army (PLA) launches Joint Sword 2024a to "punish" Taiwan after Lai's inauguration.

May 31, 2024: China terminates preferential tariffs on 134 items granted as part of the Economic Cross-Strait Framework Agreement (ECFA) saying that Lai had failed to acknowledge the "1992 Consensus."

June 13, 2024: In an interview with *The New York Times*, Republican Vice-Presidential candidate JD Vance says, "Our policy effectively is one of strategic ambiguity."

June 17, 2024: Taiwan Defense Minister Wellington Koo tells the Legislative Yuan that

Taiwan expects to receive all 1,700 TOW 2B missiles and 100 launchers by year end following a two-year delay.

June 20, 2024: Taiwan's MAC says that at least eight Taiwanese retired military and police personnel have been detained in China in the past year and urged caution for all travelers with similar backgrounds.

June 21, 2024: China issues regulations implementing its 2005 Anti-Secession Law and imposing criminal punishments on "diehard Taiwan independence separatists."

July 1, 2024: Taiwan media report that a total of 120,000 reservists are expected to be called up for alternative reserve drills this year, compared with the 6,505 who drilled last year.

July 18, 2024: The Wall Street Journal warns: "The fall of Taiwan to the Communist Party would mark the end of America's Pacific alliance system, which has produced 80 years of mostly peace."

July 18, 2024: Taiwan and Japanese coast guards have conducted their first joint training.

Aug. 14, 2024: Premier Cho Jung-tai says that Taiwan is open to Chinese tourists, students, and religious practitioners.

Aug. 22, 2024: Taiwan Foreign Minister Lin Chia-lung and National Security Council Secretary-General Joseph Wu travel to the Washington area for "special channel" talks.

Aug. 26, 2024: Wang Yitai, a Chinese rapper, was denied entry into Taiwan for a concert after he used the term "Taipei, China" in his promotional materials.

Aug. 26, 2024: [Chinese sentences Taiwanese political activist Yang Chih-yuan](#) to a nine-year prison term on charges of secession.

Aug. 31, 2024: A mention of "[Taiwan/Republic of China](#)" is [removed](#) from the final communique of the annual Pacific Island Forum (PIF) meeting because of Chinese objections.

Sept. 1, 2024: Taiwan President [Lai urges China to reclaim land given to Russia](#) by the Qing dynasty through an unequal treaty if it wants to claim Taiwan to secure territorial integrity.

Sept. 2, 2024: China resumes Taiwanese pomelo imports ahead of Mid-Autumn Festival in response to requests by Taiwan's Nationalist (KMT) party officials.

Sept. 13, 2024: Germany confirms that two of its naval vessels sailed through the Taiwan Strait, the first German ships to transit the Strait in 22 years.

Sept. 26, 2024: Taiwan's Whole of Society Defense Resilience Committee meets for the first time.

Oct. 12, 2024: Former Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen travels to the Czech Republic.

Oct. 10, 2024: In his first 10/10 National Day speech as president, [Lai recalls](#) that the ROC was built by idealists in China and Taiwan.

Oct. 11, 2024: Lai thanks veterans during a visit to the Taoyuan Veterans Home.

Oct. 12, 2024: Britain [asks](#) that a visit by Tsai be "deferred" to avoid angering China.

Oct. 14, 2024: China [sanctions](#) businessman Robert Tsao and DPP lawmaker Puma Shen for organizing the Kuma Academy, which helps Taiwanese learn how to respond to a natural disaster or a Chinese attack.

Oct. 15, 2024: China's Joint Sword 2024b exercise is [brief](#), half a day, but intense with the largest

number of PLA aircraft flying near Taiwan ever in a single day. It was equal parts propaganda and training.

Oct. 20, 2024: US and Canadian warships [transit](#) the Taiwan Strait.

Oct. 25, 2024: Lai [commemorates](#) the 1949 battle of Guningtou on Kinmen Island in which a PLA amphibious assault was repelled. He vows that the ROC "will not cede an inch of ground."

Oct. 29, 2024: French frigate [Prairial transits](#) the Taiwan Strait.

Oct. 31, 2024: [TAO Director Song Tao tells media](#) from China and Taiwan that they should advance Taiwan's unification with China and "build a shared consensus that both sides are Chinese."

Nov. 7, 2024: US Department of Agriculture, Department of Commerce, and Department of State issue a joint letter to US state and local government officials, mayors, and Fortune 500 CEOs to invite them to strengthen trade and investment ties with Taiwan.

Nov. 11, 2024: Taiwan's [investigative Control Yuan concludes](#) that Taiwan's Coast Guard was guilty of "severe lapses" that resulted in the death of two Chinese fishermen near Kinmen Island on February 14.

Nov. 11, 2024: [TAO Director Song Tao meets Wang Jin-pyng](#), KMT politician and former head of Taiwan's Legislative Yuan.

Nov. 23, 2024: Former President Tsai says the US should prioritize assisting Ukraine during a speech in Halifax during her visit to Canada.

Nov. 27, 2024: Forty Chinese students arrive in Taiwan at the invitation of Former President Ma Ying-jeou.

Nov. 28, 2024: TSMC has informed both the Taiwan and US governments that it intends to begin [producing 2-nanometer semiconductors in the US](#) in 2028.

Nov. 30, 2024: President Lai stops in Honolulu
during his first foreign trip as president.

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

Rubbish Balloons, Mutual Repudiation: Is This How It Ends?

AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UNITED KINGDOM

Inter-Korean relations, already bad, got worse in 2024. North Korea launched a bizarre new campaign, sending balloons bearing trash. South Korea reacted by fully suspending the already defunct North-South military pact and resuming propaganda broadcasts at the DMZ. In August, ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol announced a new policy of unification under liberal democracy, which despite offering dialogue left no place for the DPRK or Kim Jong Un. The latter took umbrage at Seoul for exaggerating flood casualties in the North, but offered no figure of his own. It is unclear whether North Korea has revised its constitution to declare South Korea irredeemably hostile, as no text has been published. In October the North blew up inter-Korean road and rail links. In December, Yoon blew up his own presidency by briefly declaring martial law, plunging South Korea into political chaos. As of now the North has not taken advantage of this.

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New Northern Dirty Tricks: What A Load Of Rubbish!



Figure 1 Balloons full of trash and filth from North Korea are seen in south Chungcheong province, South Korea. Photo: CNN

The main inter-Korean news during the period under review was a new dirty tricks campaign—literally—by Pyongyang. Since late May, North Korea has [launched](#) between 6,000 and 9,000 missiles of a new kind across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Fortunately none bore explosive warheads or flew at supersonic speeds to rain death and destruction on the South. Instead they floated slowly through Southern skies, before depositing unpleasant but at worst mildly harmful payloads of a most peculiar kind: assorted rubbish.

Some background first. As regular readers know, North Korea has long bridled at Southern activists, some defectors, who launch helium balloons into the North laden with anti-DPRK propaganda; cargoes can also include medicines, dollar bills, memory sticks, and more. This became a political issue in South Korea when the previous liberal administration of Moon Jae-in in 2020 controversially banned such launches, though in practice they continued. Under Moon's conservative successor Yoon Suk Yeol, the Constitutional Court [struck down](#) that ban in September, 2023 as infringing freedom of speech. Activist NGOs like Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK) duly redoubled their efforts, infuriating the North, which vowed to retaliate.

Now it is doing so. The context is important. Weird as North Korea's action seems, this is not random in at least two ways. Sending rubbish echoes and mirrors the North's characterization of Southern balloon cargoes as rubbish sent by "human scum." Indeed, Pyongyang gave notice in advance, unusually. After yet another balloon launch by FFNK on May 10, DPRK Vice Defense

Minister Kim Kang II warned: "Mounds of wastepaper and filth will soon be scattered over the border areas and the interior of the ROK, and it will directly experience how much effort is required to remove them." Two days later he was as good as his word.

Official DPRK statements consistently framed this as giving the South a taste of its own medicine. Kim Kang II followed up on June 2: "We made the ROK clans (sic) get enough experience of how much unpleasant they feel and how much effort is needed to remove the scattered wastepaper." (For full quotation and more detail, see the Chronology.) Subsequent waves of Northern balloons have also been portrayed by Pyongyang as ripostes for Southern actions, since needless to say FFNK and their ilk have continued their own launches.

What to make of this odd turn? Some figures first. According to [Beyond Parallel](#), a DPRK-focused website which has been keeping score, as of Nov. 29—after almost exactly six months of this—North Korea had [sent](#) between 6,430 and 8,950 trash-filled balloons into South Korea, on 32 occasions (they are launched in batches, not continuously). Of these, 3,147—between a third and half—landed successfully, in 3,359 locations nationwide (so the latter figure, being higher, must include unsuccessful landings, whatever that means). The great majority came down in Seoul and the surrounding Gyeonggi province, but some have reached every ROK province except South Jeolla and Jeju island.

Rubbish comes in many forms, and payloads have varied. In *Beyond Parallel's* summary, "These balloons have been found to contain trash such as animal and human feces, batteries, cigarette butts, clothes, dark soil, plastic bottles, toilet paper, wastepaper, and vinyl." The nastier stuff was mainly earlier on. Fears at one point of disease-bearing vectors proved groundless. Some soil was [found](#) to contain parasites like roundworms, whipworms, and threadworms, reflecting the fact that North Korea largely uses human feces as fertilizer.

Seoul reacted with understandable anger. On June 2 National Security Adviser Chang Ho-jin threatened Pyongyang with "unendurable" consequences for its "despicable provocations that could not have been imagined by a normal country." This was after a second wave, whose cargo included cigarette butts, paper, and plastic

bags—but no more poop. In addition to the filthy balloons, for four days (May 29—June 1) the North tried to jam GPS signals near ROK islands in the West/Yellow sea, causing glitches to some vessels' navigation systems. Another brief bout of GPS jamming followed in November.

On June 4 South Korea responded in deed as well as word, by fully suspending 2018's inter-Korean tension reduction agreement. Pyongyang had already repudiated the whole accord, after Seoul partially suspended it in November. For the ROK, full suspension meant it could resume previously banned military exercises and other activities near the DMZ, which it duly did. On June 26 the ROK Marine Corps staged its first live-fire drills for seven years on Yeonpyeong and Baengnyeong islands in the West/Yellow Sea, which lie close to the DPRK. Live-fire artillery drills on the mainland near the DMZ resumed on July 2.

After another wave of Northern balloons, Seoul took further action. On June 9 it reinstalled loudspeakers at the DMZ and resumed propaganda broadcasts, for the first time since 2016. The speakers blared for just one day in the first instance. But in July, as the balloons kept coming the speakers were turned on again, for longer and more often.

In due course the North riposted with loudspeakers of its own; only once again—as per the balloons—in a weird way. Rather than propaganda, Southern residents in some areas near the DMZ were disturbed and kept awake by very loud eerie howling and other strange sounds. At this writing (early December.) both sides were continuing their respective aural bombardments.

Floods Rattle Kim: He Takes It Out on Seoul

In late July northern North Korea was hit by severe floods. In itself that would be a domestic event, all too familiar in the monsoon season given the impoverished DPRK's failure to invest in the necessary infrastructure—although Kim Jong Un's response was to scapegoat and sack officials rather than admit this system failure. But there is also an inter-Korean dimension, indeed two. Seoul naturally offered aid, and was ignored. (When Putin did the same, Kim thanked him politely but said they will manage on their own.)



Figure 2 North Korean leader Kim Jong Un inspects a flood-affected area in North Pyongan Province, North Korea, on July 28. South Korean media has estimated the number of dead or missing to be over 1,000. Photo: Korean Central News Agency

The other, more intriguing connection is that Kim used part of a long speech to flood victims to vent his spleen against South Korea (see Appendix I). His whole response to this disaster is revealing of the dilemmas he faces and the strategies he adopts. On the positive side, as also seen in other areas such as failed satellite launches—there was another of those, promptly admitted, on May 27, just before the balloon launches began—this Kim does permit a bit more *glasnost* than his father or grandfather. The floods were reported, and some material damage was detailed. State media portrayed a concerned leader on the spot: risking his shiny new Maybach SUV in wheel-high floodwaters, or looking grim and getting soaked as he toured the area in an open rubber dinghy. One remarkably candid shot showed him ducking to avoid being thwacked by an overhanging branch on a watercourse that used to be a road.

But there are limits. DPRK media gave no casualty figures, although satellite photos showed considerable devastation—including at least one entire village swept away. Naturally, South Korean media and the ROK government sought to assess this aspect as well. On Aug. 1 TV Chosun quoted an ROK official as estimating that up to 1,500 people perished, “including rescue workers who died from over-exertion.” MOU concurred that there must have been “considerable casualties,” while noting that material damage appeared less than in previous floods in 2010, 2016, and 2020.

Such claims clearly got Kim's goat. I suggest you read Appendix I now. As you do, ponder thousands of sodden flood victims, herded to

listen to a typically long speech. Must they not have wondered, as you may too, why he was banging on about South Korea so much? And how did they react when he revealed that Southern claim of over 1,000 casualties? They would never have known that, had the Leader not said it, though rumors doubtless swirled. He did not say what the true figure was. Yet we know there were casualties, for elsewhere Kim admitted this. Sacking two party secretaries and the minister of Public Security on July 29, he said their neglect of flood prevention “caused even the casualty that can not be allowed.”

When you’ve just lost everything, being told over and over to hate South Korea is hardly the message you expect or want or need to hear. But that is evidently what was on Kim’s mind. Having to ram it home suggests that this message is encountering some skepticism, as well it might. (No mention, needless to say, that the evil ROK had actually offered to help.)

Yoonification Under ‘Liberal Democracy’: Bye Bye DPRK!



Figure 3 President Yoon Suk Yeol delivers the 47th Singapore Lecture on “A Vision for Korean Unification Towards a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region” at a hotel in Singapore, Wednesday. Photo: Yonhap

In Seoul, meanwhile, President Yoon was preparing to announce what was trumpeted as a wholly new vision of Korean unification. He duly did so on Liberation Day (from Japanese rule in 1945), Aug. 15, a public holiday in both Koreas. What was dubbed ‘Yoonification’ was indeed new. Hitherto, the varied stances adopted by ROK governments in the post-1987 democratic era all shared some version of a process by degrees. The end-point was reunification, but the starting point here and now had to be the two existing states. So the first step must be

dialogue between Seoul and Pyongyang, leading over time to reconciliation.

Yoon wanted no truck with any of that. Despite a pro forma offer of talks, which many media misleadingly headlined—[Reuters](#), [Bloomberg](#), [Nikkei](#), [DW](#)—did you not read the full speech?—his core message was uncompromising: unification under liberal democracy. His words left no room for doubt or indeed dialogue. “The freedom we enjoy must be extended to the frozen kingdom of the North, where people are deprived of freedom and suffer from poverty and starvation.” True enough—but what exactly does that leave for Kim Jong Un to discuss?

NK News, by contrast, got the true message exactly right in its [headline](#) “ROK president makes no room for Kim Jong Un in a unified Korea. Yoon’s call for unification under democracy makes North Korean regime change unspoken goal, aiming to divide its society.”

In its own way, this stance is no less hostile toward North Korea as a state than Kim Jong Un’s new doctrine of South Korea as an implacable foe. One big difference is that Yoon recognizes North Koreans as fellow-Koreans: a truer and more logical stance, which also gives Seoul the moral high ground. Kim rages against the ROK as a state, says the DPRK is entitled to destroy it, but is silent on how 52 million South Koreans fit into this malevolent vision. They are no longer kin or compatriots, so perhaps they don’t count. As discussed in our last article, this is one of several ways that Kim’s doctrine makes no sense.

SPA Damp Squib

Clarification had been anticipated in October, when the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) — North Korea’s rubber-stamp Parliament, as it is often correctly tagged—was due to [meet](#) in order (inter alia) to revise the DPRK Constitution to reflect the new line on the South, as Kim had announced earlier in the year. Much attention was focused on this, to see how the changes would be worded. Kim had also spoken of clarifying territorial borders, threatening fire and brimstone should any foe cross them. This naturally raised fears of renewed tensions in the West/Yellow Sea around the Northern Limit Line (NLL), the de facto maritime boundary.

In the event this proved a damp squib, or perhaps a pig in a poke. The SPA duly met on

Oct. 7-8, but went unreported until afterward. Kim did not attend, instead giving a speech at what—in a further sign of his growing personality cult in his own right—is now renamed Kim Jong Un University of National Defense. Subsequent brief reports suggest that the SPA did indeed revise the Constitution, but as of December the new text has yet to be published.

This silence looks like a retreat. It is a stretch to imagine how one would draft such an absurd and incoherent notion into a Constitution. Chad O’Carroll of *NK News* [suggests](#) two different possible motives: domestic opposition to Kim’s new anti-unification policy and Pyongyang’s preference for strategic ambiguity, to keep its enemies guessing. Both may well be true.

North Delinks From South, Explosively

But maybe for Pyongyang actions speak louder than words. Never mind redrafting, let’s just stage an explosion! A week after the SPA met, on Oct. 15 North Korea ceremoniously blew up the roads and railway tracks—two of each, in the east and west of the peninsula—which in happier times earlier this century had physically reconnected the two Koreas (all paid for by Seoul, needless to add). True, this had been a very limited relinking. No regular train services ever ran, and the eastern road was only briefly used to ferry Southern tourists to the Mount Kumgang resort before tours were suspended in 2008 after a middle-aged female visitor was shot dead. The western road saw more use, as Southern businesses trucked supplies in and finished goods out from the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), which lasted until 2016. But no further. Except for rare high-level meetings, no one drove between Seoul and Pyongyang

Those seeking consolation may note that the destruction is symbolic too. In some future thaw, unimaginable currently, these now severed arteries could easily be reconnected. Interestingly, the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff noted that the visually impressive large mounds of earth which the North has piled up to fortify the blockage are not militarily effective ramparts, much less the tank traps they claim. But they look good on camera. Here, as often, North Korea seems content with merely symbolic histrionics. We should be thankful Kim settles for that.

Yoon Loses The Plot—And His Job?



Figure 4 Demonstrators from a labour group take part in a protest calling for the ouster of South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol outside City Hall in Seoul on Dec. 12, 2024. Photo: ANTHONY WALLACE/AFP via Getty Images

North Korea is often described as unpredictable: led by an isolated and unloved ruler, whose paranoia might tempt him to misjudge situations and lash out. Wrong Korea, it would seem.

As I write, the political chaos unleashed by Yoon Suk Yeol’s mad declaration of martial law (swiftly rescinded) on Dec. 3 is ongoing. While primarily about South Korean domestic politics, this has clear implications for inter-Korean relations. This dismal affair is obviously negative for the ROK’s security: exposing weaknesses that Kim Jong Un might see as vulnerabilities. While we do not share the view that Kim is bent on all-out aggression—pin-pricks and gestures are more his bag—in principle he may seize such a golden opportunity to exploit Yoon’s and South Korea’s discomfiture. But as of this writing, he has not done so.

More specific issues also arise. Glad as we may be in this instance that some senior military commanders apparently refused or ignored orders they deemed unwarranted or even illegal, thereby ensuring a peaceful denouement, chains of command need to function properly and reliably. The subsequent formal power vacuum is also troubling. On Dec. 11, with Yoon sidelined but not yet impeached, who is South Korea’s commander-in-chief?

Also, crucially, the North was Yoon’s avowed excuse, however specious, for what he did. In his own [words](#): “I declare martial law to protect the Republic of Korea from the threats of North

Korean communist forces, to immediately eradicate the unscrupulous pro-Pyongyang antistate forces that pillage the freedom and happiness of our people and to protect free constitutional order.”

It is a familiar rightwing McCarthyite ploy to [smear](#) democratic liberals as crypto-commies. There was in fact no specific DPRK threat. The same pretext may have been cited to soldiers involved, perhaps to pre-empt any doubts they might have. An opposition lawmaker claims that 2.5 hours before Yoon declared martial law, the ROK Army’s 707th Special Mission Group—the same unit sent to the National Assembly shortly after—received orders saying “the situation regarding North Korea is serious, and immediate deployment may be required.”

Moreover, as B R Myers notes in a typically contrarian [commentary](#), rumors of a possible declaration of martial law had swirled since September—but were dismissed as leftist paranoia. While the full truth must await the multiple investigations now under way in Seoul, this casts a new light on a drone which dropped leaflets on Pyongyang in early October. The possibility cannot now be ruled out that Yoon—or his (now ex-) defence minister and schoolmate Kim Yong-hyun, the seeming brains (if that is the word) behind what increasingly looks like an attempted [coup](#)—deliberately sought to antagonize the North, in hope of provoking a reaction which they could then use to justify abolishing democracy (in order to save it, of course).

As for North Korea, they waited a week to comment, perhaps as bemused as the rest of us. On Dec. 11 the party daily *Rodong Sinmun* finally carried quite a detailed factual account, albeit peppered predicatably with phrases like “puppet.” We reproduce this in full as Appendix II.

One can only wonder what North Korean readers are making of all this. Their government has just told them that in enemy South Korea there is a political opposition; you can come out on the streets in protest and denounce the leader, and he may yet fall. Those are heady thoughts to ponder in Pyongyang, even if none can be safely uttered aloud.

Sunrise, Sunset: A Roller-Coaster Quarter Century

As this is the final issue of *Comparative Connections* in its current form, it seems apt to stand back from immediate events and try to frame the bigger picture. What is the overall story of inter-Korean relations in the first quarter of the 21st century? And what are the lessons?

Let us remind ourselves of the main events. The century, and these articles, began with the radically new “Sunshine” policy pursued by Kim Dae-jung (ROK president 1998–2003), who sought to end decades of North-South hostility. The name derives from an Aesop fable, where sun and wind compete to make a man take off his coat. Warm sun triumphs over chilly wind.

For a decade under Kim and his fellow-liberal successor Roh Moo-hyun (2003–08), each of whom went to Pyongyang for summits with the North’s then leader Kim Jong Il—who never repaid the compliment by visiting Seoul—the two Koreas took baby steps, if giant-seeming compared to the past, to interact and reduce tensions. Two joint ventures, financed by the South, were built on Northern soil. From 1998 to 2008 1 million South Korean tourists visited scenic Mount Kumgang on the east coast: first by boat, but later by bus or car through the hitherto impassable Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), staying in Southern-built facilities. Near the west coast, the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC, 2004–16) at its peak saw some 120 mostly small ROK companies employ over 50,000 DPRK workers to make various goods for South Korean and overseas markets.

In 2008 South Korean voters turned right. Two conservative Presidents—Lee Myung-bak (2008–13) and Park Geun-hye (2013–2017)—were skeptical of Sunshine. Lee decided not to implement any of the numerous new joint ventures agreed by Roh at the second North-South summit in 2007, near the end of his presidency (South Korean presidents serve a single five-year term). Presumably in reprisal, in 2010 the North sank the Southern corvette *Cheonan* with 46 deaths—Pyongyang denies responsibility—and shelled a Southern island, killing four. Lee retaliated by banning inter-Korean trade, with the large exception of the KIC. That JV continued till 2016, when Park abruptly shut it down after Pyongyang launched a satellite.

Park Geun-hye's impeachment gave Sunshine a second chance, as Seoul's pendulum swung left again (for reasons unconnected to North Korea). Her liberal successor Moon Jae-in (2017-22) had visited Pyongyang as Roh's chief of staff. 2018 appeared an *annus mirabilis*, starting with Northern participation (in hastily formed pan-Korean teams) in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. The North's leader Kim Jong Un, who for his first six years after inheriting power in late 2011 on the death of his father Kim Jong Il had met no other foreign leader, emerged on the global stage in a whirlwind of summitry: meeting Moon three times, the same with Xi Jinping of China, and a first ever US-DPRK summit with Donald Trump, held in Singapore.

But after the second Trump-Kim summit (held in Hanoi in early 2019) collapsed, Moon's reward for being an assiduous go-between was to be shunned by Kim and dissed by Trump. Though Moon insisted until the end of his term that a North-South peace process continued, the fact is that there have been almost no direct inter-Korean contacts for almost six years. (And yet these updates have never lacked issues to discuss.)

The latest ROK presidential election, in March 2022, narrowly voted in a conservative of a different kidney from Lee or Park, each of whom intermittently pursued dialogue with the North (not always [publicly](#)). Yoon Suk Yeol, a prosecutor new to politics, made an initial perfunctory "audacious offer" of aid, but soon showed he had no more interest in dealing with Kim than vice versa. As discussed above, his vision of unification has no room for the DPRK. Meanwhile the North sends trash balloons. We have come a long way since 2000: backward.

Was Sunshine Moonshine?

With chilly winds blowing colder than ever, it is tempting to conclude that sunshine failed. Certainly that era is over for the foreseeable future, partly due to wider geopolitical changes beyond our bilateral remit here: China's hardening under Xi Jinping, and Kim's enthusiastic new military support for Russia in Ukraine. Yet the value of *Comparative Connections* is to have provided a granular, blow by blow account of events as they unfolded. I hope scholars and policy-makers will mine this archive carefully, before rushing to a priori or superficial conclusions. Here are my own tentative thoughts, looking back.

Indeed, Sunshine had grave flaws and issues, which must be acknowledged. Let us list some:

- It was exceedingly one-sided. Seoul did all the running and paid all the bills.
- Initially it included large secret payments, which not only broke ROK law but could be seen as enabling Pyongyang's nuclear program.
- Very little was actually accomplished in any sphere. This encounter was marginal at best.
- Fundamental security issues, notably DPRK WMD, went unaddressed. North Korea's first nuclear test, and subsequent ones, occurred during and despite Sunshine.
- Also unaddressed were North Korea's appalling human rights abuses, as a corollary of respecting each others' systems.

These are major negatives. Looking back, no one could claim that Kim Dae-jung's Aesopian gamble worked out as he hoped. Hawkish skeptics, who from the start dismissed Sunshine as moonshine, may well feel vindicated. Undeniably, at no point did either Kim Jong Il or Kim Jong Un take major tangible—much less irreversible—steps to signal true reciprocity or an unmistakable willingness to change.

Many such would have been possible. Imagine, for instance, if reunions of separated family reunions had been genuine—in home towns, unchaperoned, for longer, more often and on a larger scale—rather than the ghastly brief media-driven blub-fest mockery that they became. Or if that be deemed too risky, as the Kims evidently judged: Imagine if trains and trucks had actually run on the reconnected cross-border roads and railways, rather than these remaining unused and merely symbolic. A little more courage from the North could have seen the sinews of a reunified Korea begin to be built, in cumulative ways not easily reversible.

That was the road not taken. Above all, the fact that Sunshine coincided with growing global concern about the DPRK's nuclear ambitions was fateful, and ultimately fatal. Pyongyang's refusal to abandon its nuclear quest inevitably set limits to how far South Korea, a US ally hosting US bases and troops, could go on the inter-Korean front. One such moment came in

Feb. 2016, when Park Geun-hye closed the KIC—not for any inter-Korean reason, but to punish Pyongyang for a satellite launch. Some might deem that an over-reaction: shutting down the last area of concrete North-South cooperation, for extraneous reasons.

Should we therefore conclude that Sunshine was misguided from the start? Was its net effect merely to enable or even strengthen a malign, cynical regime: happy to pocket ROK money, but which never had any intention of giving anything back, much less abandoning its WMD?

Historical counterfactuals (“what if ...?”) have their limits, but perhaps lessons may be learnt. What if more substantial inter-Korean economic relations had been built, like for instance those between China and Taiwan? As that case shows, such ties do not eliminate military risk but they certainly mitigate it. Bluntly, Xi Jinping will think twice before damaging TSMC.

The detail afforded by *Comparative Connections* enables us to zero in on key moments and episodes. 2008 still seems to me a [turning-point](#). What if South Korea’s incoming President, Lee Myung-bak, had gone ahead with the economic joint ventures inked by his predecessor Roh Moo-hyun? The structural links thus created would have made the North increasingly dependent on the South economically, a valuable card on many levels, not least in building constituencies in Pyongyang with a solid material interest in inter-Korean betterment. As it was, and as I [wrote](#) elsewhere some time ago, South Korea lost the North to China.

This relates to another clear lesson. Regardless of Pyongyang’s intentions, a big problem was South Korea’s failure—unlike West Germany, back in the day—to craft and implement a [bipartisan Nordpolitik](#): one which could endure despite the frequent changes of government in Seoul. Policy continuity is admittedly easier for dictatorships. But if DPRK archives are ever unsealed so we can read the discussions, I bet we’ll find their hawks raising a perfectly fair point: How can you make a deal with the South, when their next government might tear it up?

For all these reasons, bilateral inter-Korean relations, fitful and incipient as they were, never became more than a dependent variable in the broader regional and global geopolitical picture,

at the mercy of extraneous events and developments. I still reckon that North-South ties, if better handled, could in principle have become a driver—but it didn’t happen. **Looking Ahead: Never Say Never!**

So much for the past. What of the future, which sadly I shall no longer be chronicling and analyzing here? Murky though current prospects look, let me venture a few thoughts.

First, the point just made applies in spades. In the short term, more than ever inter-Korean ties will be subject to wider geopolitical developments. Three in particular loom large. Kim Jong Un’s ever deepening commitment to support Putin’s aggression in Ukraine, now with boots on the ground, has profound ramifications which are beyond our scope here. Second, the imminent return of Donald Trump to the White House is a wild card. In his first term Trump successively pursued two opposite North Korea policies: from sneering at ‘little rocket man’ to bromance. Which will he plump for this time? And third, South Korea’s sudden political crisis means that at this writing it is unclear—if increasingly unlikely—that Yoon Suk Yeol will serve out his presidential term. Progressives already looked likely to regain power in Seoul after Yoon, but that could now happen in 2025 rather than 2027—in which case the ROK’s Nordpolitik will change drastically, yet again.

Another lesson: Never say never in Korea. As of now, both Korean governments have taken mutual hostility to the point of formal repudiation—but that can turn on a dime. Should the opposition Democrats (DPK) form the next ROK government, they will certainly reject Yoon’s hard-line stance and revert to some form of outreach (hopefully having learnt lessons from Moon Jae-in’s misguided one-sided bending over backward toward Pyongyang.)

If that happens, how will Kim Jong Un respond? Having gone so far as to define the ROK as an enemy state in the DPRK Constitution, any U-turn could be difficult and embarrassing. Nonetheless, should Ukraine become an unpopular quagmire and Putin’s friendship prove limited and transactional, then given North Korea’s poverty and permanent economic crisis (self-inflicted by Kim’s refusal of market reforms), the lure of a rich and generous neighbor ready once again to wave checks—not blank, but substantial—may prove hard to

resist, not least as counterweight to an increasingly irritated Beijing. Moreover, should Trump pick a fight with Seoul over payments for USFK, as he has threatened, any resulting spats may afford the ROK more flexibility than in the past to go its own way in dealing with Pyongyang.

Extending our gaze to the medium- and longer term, further issues loom. Kim Jong Un's health remains a concern. If he drops dead tomorrow, that could unleash a power struggle in Pyongyang with alarming ramifications. Old hypothetical questions, never answered, would arise anew, starkly and for real. If there were chaos in North Korea, would South Korea and/or China intervene: to secure the North's loose nukes or perhaps restore order more broadly? If so, would Seoul and Beijing consult first—or might they, and the US, once again confront each other on the peninsula? One hopes there are agreed contingency plans, but I fear not.

Absent such collapse, more likely North Korea will limp on—but with an ever more restive populace, well aware that South Koreans live better and increasingly discontented with their own poverty and unfreedom. As Kim Jong Un's early pledge that they will no longer have to tighten their belts rings ever hollower, and youths are shot for watching South Korean movies, the control and stability the DPRK has always achieved hitherto cannot be taken for granted. Future South Korean governments, and their citizens, may need to brace for contingencies and decide whether these constitute threats or opportunities.

There I shall leave it—and leave you, dear readers. It has been a privilege to spend the first quarter of this century chronicling the vicissitudes of inter-Korean relations for *Comparative Connections*. Whatever the future holds, I hope the archive thus created will prove useful to future scholars, policy makers and others. Let me conclude with Gramsci: Pessimism of the intelligence; optimism of the will. History is not foreordained. Korean reunification may be beyond reach, but inter-Korean reconciliation is still possible—and well worth striving for.

Appendix I

Excerpt from [speech](#) by Kim Jong Un, headlined: “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Clarifies in His Speech Stand of Party and Government on

Repairing Flood Damage and Consoles Flood Victims”, KCNA 10 Aug. 2024

Comrades,

It is necessary for us to impress on our mind once again that the current rehabilitation project is not simply an undertaking for our own but also a serious struggle against the enemy.

At present, the enemy, misusing the occasion when we have suffered damage, is continuing to make foolish attempts to tarnish the image of our state.

It is important to inform Party organizations and working people's organizations at all levels, various networks of education and the people of these facts and thus make them have a correct understanding of the ROK scum bordering on us.

The rubbish ROK's media are desperately slandering all the socialist benefits and measures taken by our Party and government for the flood victims and also the communist traits displayed throughout the society, abusing them as a means of achieving some sort of internal unity and a type of demonstration. They are also fabricating such false information, in their frantic manoeuvres to slander our government and system, that the missing persons in the afflicted areas exceed 1,000 in number and that its intelligence authorities found out that several helicopters had fallen on rescue mission.

Worse still, they are spreading a baseless rumour that the V-day celebrations took place in Pyongyang on the 27th of last month when loss of life occurred in the flood-hit areas.

Because the rumor is in wide circulation in the ROK society that its government is always late in coping with all sorts of accidents that happened there and such is an everyday occurrence in the country, they seem to weave absurd sophistry that slanders and slights us in an attempt to coax their citizens and stir up world public sentiments.

When I visited the helicopter unit that rescued you, I gave full account of the rescue operation, including the crash-landing by one helicopter during the operation, and expressed my gratitude that there had been no casualties in the turmoil.

The enemy even went so far as to say that I reacted personally to the report fabricated by their media because there were heavy casualties and I intended to cover it up.

What is their dogged insistence on making you, safe and sound like this, missing or dead? It is an open and shut case.

This is a smear campaign and a grave provocation against our state as well as an insult to you.

I have reason and feel it necessary to say this about the media of the dirty, rubbish country.

There is no need for us to make separate materials for education. It is because these clear facts are actual and educational materials good enough to clearly bring home to the people how filthy the enemy clan is, what ancient and old-fashioned way they resort to for fabrication and political smear campaign to tarnish the image of our state, what their ulterior motives are and why we call the enemy the enemy and scum.

No country in the world has such media which does nothing but to invent groundless and exaggerated lies.

What we must clearly realize is that the enemy is what we see them now.

Referring to these actual facts, the whole country should have a correct understanding of the enemy and cultivate a correct feeling against them.

Our enemy is an unchangeable enemy.

We should make the current opportunity, which helps us to have a correct understanding of what our enemy is, an opportunity of having a correct stand towards the enemy.

Appendix II

The DPRK's first comment on the martial law crisis in South Korea

Headline: In the puppet Korea, social unrest expands due to martial law, more than 1 million people across the country take part in protests demanding the impeachment of Yoon Seok-yeol, the international community is keeping a close eye on it

Rodong Sinmun, 11 Dec. 2024, page 6 (unofficial translation)

The puppet Yoon Seok-yeol, who is facing a serious crisis of governance and impeachment, declared martial law without any hesitation and unleashed the guns of the fascist dictatorship on the people. This shocking incident has turned the entire puppet Korea into a mess.

On the night of December 3, the puppet Yoon Seok-yeol declared martial law in order to escape the worst crisis of his rule, and sent in fully armed martial law troops, including several direct-controlled planes and a group of thugs from the Army Special Warfare Command, to blockade the National Assembly. However, as the resolution demanding the lifting of martial law was passed in the plenary session of the National Assembly, which was urgently convened, the puppet Yoon had no choice but to lift it just six hours after declaring martial law.

The puppet Yoon Seok-yeol, who was in a tight spot both inside and outside of his term in office and was immediately forced out of his position of power, committed a crazy act reminiscent of the coup d'état during the military dictatorship decades ago, which drew strong condemnation from all walks of life, including the opposition party, and further exploded the public's impeachment fever.

The Democratic Party of Korea and other opposition parties immediately declared that they would file a complaint of sedition against the puppet Yoon Seok-yeol, who caused the martial law situation, and those involved, the Minister of National Defense and the Minister of Public Administration and Security, and push for their impeachment.

On the 5th, six opposition parties, including the Democratic Party of Korea, and independents totalling 191 lawmakers proposed an impeachment motion. However, as the People Power Party members who had decided to oppose impeachment left the conference room en masse, the Yoon Seok-yeol impeachment motion was invalidated without even being able to open the ballot box due to a lack of voters.

When this news was delivered, not only the area surrounding the puppet National Assembly but also Korea itself became a national protest ground.

A crowd of 1 million people rallied around the National Assembly building and staged a “siege march.”

They held up propaganda materials such as “Impeach Yoon Seok-yeol,” “Arrest Yoon Seok-yeol,” and “Oppose impeachment = Participate in rebellion,” and chanted, “Yoon Seok-yeol is no longer the president of the people. Impeach Yoon Seok-yeol!”, “Impeach the ringleader of rebellion, Yoon Seok-yeol!”, “Disband the People Power Party, a collaborator in rebellion!”, and “The National Assembly must immediately process the Yoon Seok-yeol impeachment motion!” They released a statement emphasizing that they would not stop fighting until Yoon Seok-yeol was suspended from his duties, resigned, and punished, and that the people would not tolerate the existence of the People Power Party.

On the 7th, the 118th candlelight vigil and demonstration was widely held in Seoul under the theme of “Impeach the insurgent Yoon Seok-yeol immediately! Arrest him immediately!” The rally and demonstration that day, which was carried out as a nationwide emergency protest action, was attended by 200,000 people from all over the place, including workers, farmers, and young students.

Speakers at the rally claimed that Yoon Seok-yeol’s existence itself was a war and a disaster, that Yoon Seok-yeol should be impeached immediately, and that he should be held accountable and punished without fail.

The rally participants chanted slogans such as “Yoon Seok-yeol, step down!” and “Disband the People Power Party!” and marched toward the National Assembly.

They then held a rally in front of the National Assembly, calling for “Yoon Seok-yeol, step down for insurrection!” We joined the “National Sovereignty Realization! Social Reform! National People’s March for the Resignation of the People”.

On this day, cries of anger against the puppet Yoon Seok-yeol and his party erupted in other regions as well.

At a rally hosted by the Incheon Movement Headquarters for the Resignation of the Yoon Seok-yeol Regime in Incheon, participants

expressed their outrage at the National Assembly’s failure to declare martial law and impeach Yoon Seok-yeol for committing a crime of sedition, and declared that they would launch a nationwide protest to force Yoon Seok-yeol out and disband the People Power Party.

In Daegu, the Daegu City National Assembly for the Resignation of Yoon Seok-yeol, comprised of 85 social groups in the Daegu and Gyeongbuk regions, held a rally for the resignation of Yoon Seok-yeol and declared that they would definitely fulfill the people’s wishes.

Protests also took place in front of the headquarters of the People Power Party in various places where the accomplices of the puppet Yoon Seok-yeol, the People Power Party, are nesting. On the 8th, 9th, and 10th, protest candles continued to burn in Seoul and all over the country.

With boiling anger toward Yoon Seok-yeol, who committed an indelible sin against the people through dictatorship, tyranny, and martial law, crowds of people from all walks of life declared a long-term impeachment struggle with the “Immediate Impeachment! Immediate Arrest! Candlelight Cultural Event” in front of the puppet National Assembly in Seoul.

Shouts such as “Immediately impeach and arrest the special criminal Yoon Seok-yeol!”, “Yoon Seok-yeol, who committed an atrocious crime by pointing guns at the people, is no longer the president!”, and “We will wage a nationwide struggle!” erupted everywhere. The puppet media reported that the whole country was shaking with protests, with headlines such as “Chants for Yoon Seok-yeol’s resignation from all walks of life”, “1 million candles surrounding the National Assembly”, “Cheerful candle struggle prepared for a long-term war”, and “Yoon Seok-yeol has difficulty avoiding impeachment trial”, and reported that the whole country was shaking with protests, that each region was forming a huge sea of candles demanding Yoon Seok-yeol’s impeachment once again, and that Yoon Seok-yeol could not avoid destruction as the candles were burning like an active volcano.

The international community is closely watching the emergency martial law and impeachment commotion in the puppet Korea, saying that the vulnerability of Korean society has been revealed, that Yoon Seok-yeol’s

sudden declaration of martial law is an expression of despair, and that Yoon Seok-yeol's political life could end early. [Korean Central News Agency]

Appendix III

Full [text](#) of “All DPRK citizens vent rage at ROK's provocation upon receipt of FM's crucial statement”, *Pyongyang Times* 14 October 2024.

“It made my blood boil when I received the news about the crimes puppet ROK scum committed at dead of night in October. Even the dirty dead bodies of the puppets should not be left, but be squashed in the crusher of our workshop.” Chae Song Il, worker of ore-dressing workshop No. 2 of the Musan Mining Complex

“The noxious insects irritating humans should completely be exterminated for the healthy development of humankind.” Ri Jong Hui, researcher at Pyongyang University of Medical Sciences

“If those brutes don't want to live any longer, our coal miners will finish them off by beating them to pulp and throw their bodies into disused mines.” Ri Jong Ho, manager of a pit at the Kogonwon Coal Mine under the Kyongwon Area Coal-mining Complex

“It is sickening and disgusting even to talk about the loathsome pack of dogs. I want to turn their stronghold into a sea of flames.” Ju Jae Song, department director of the Ministry of Machine-building Industry

“I eagerly wait for the day of condemning the ROK puppets to the most gruesome and horrible death.” Ri Song Mi, staffer at the Pyongyang Jonghyang Building-materials Factory

“The unparalleled human rejects playing with fire should be given, not ultimatum, but the most terrible shower of shells at once.” Workers of the Kim Jong Thae Electric Locomotive Complex

“The harshest punishment should be meted out to the enemies actually, not by word of mouth.” Kye Yong Gil, workteam leader of the Samyang Farm in Sonchon County

“At present, the whole university is burning with resentment. The enemies we are confronting are the wicked foes we should

surely exterminate.” Ju Kyong Sang, student of the forestry science faculty of Kim Il Sung University

Even elderly persons and Children's Union members say they want to take up arms to destroy the enemies by reducing their stronghold to ruins at once.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA–SOUTH KOREA

MAY–NOVEMBER 2024

May 2, 2024: South Korea [raises](#) the alert status at its embassies in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, and 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: ROK Ministry of Unification (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](#) South Korea’s quasi-official news agency *Yonhap* that in March (date unspecified) the ROK Marine Corps destroyed an unidentified 2-meter balloon which crossed the Northern Limit Line (NLL, the de facto inter-Korean maritime border) 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 were unsuccessful. It is assumed to have been North Korean, though China is also possible.

May 3, 2024: Two NGOs [tell](#) *NK News* (leading English-language resource on the DPRK) 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 61 more 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: ROK Unification Minister Kim Yung-ho [meets](#) Carsten Schneider, Germany’s minister of state for East Germany and equivalent living conditions (sic), after the annual session of the Korea-Germany Unification Advisory Committee. 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.” Schneider tells his hosts to be ready for the unexpected: “We did not know in the spring of 1989 that the Berlin Wall would collapse in November that year. If South Korea wants to catch such a chance, it should not lose the goal of unification while keeping close tabs on North Korean people’s situations.”

May 8, 2024: Gimm-Young Publishers in Seoul [announce](#) that they will publish former President Moon Jae-in’s memoir on May 20. Titled *From the Periphery to the Center*, and written in question and answer format, this will include “behind-the-scenes stories about key diplomatic events”. The book “candidly document[s] not only diplomatic and security achievements, but also regrets, limitations, successes and failures of [Moon’s] policies.”

May 8–10, 2024: ROK [stages](#) “defensive” annual combined maneuvers on border islands in the Yellow Sea, close to the DPRK. The Marine Corps is joined by army, navy, and air force units. Among other assets, this mobilizes UH-60 and CH-47 helicopters, F-15K and KF-16 fighter jets, destroyers, frigates, landing ships and amphibious assault ships. Drills include artillery

firing, counterterrorism operations and maritime live exercises.

May 10, 2024: MOU [says](#) the DPRK has demolished a fire station, built and paid for by the ROK government, at the former Mount Kumgang tourist resort on the east coast.

May 10, 2024: “Sources” [tell](#) *Yonhap* the ROK military may deploy special forces inside the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ, the de facto inter-Korean border), to strengthen security while it rebuilds guardposts demolished under the now repudiated 2018 inter-Korean military accord.

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 DPRK hacking group known as Lazarus stole 1,014 gigabytes (GB) of data and documents from an (unnamed) ROK court computer network. The report did not say how the breach was effected.

May 11-12, 2024: Kim Jong Un [inspects](#) what the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) describes as “major defense industrial enterprises under the Second Economic Commission.” (The 2EC runs North Korea’s military economy.) With rare detail, KCNA itemizes these as “a complex producing ultramodern precision munitions,” “an enterprise producing major small arms”—where Kim “show[s]his deep care for a newly-developed sniper's rifle”—and a facility producing “updated 240mm multiple rockets launchers to be equipped by KPA [Korean People’s Army] artillery units newly formed this year.” Kim gives one of the latter a test run. His rather lengthy comments focus on production issues, quality control, and the like; there is no mention of South Korea or other enemies.

May 13, 2024: Park Sang-hak, who heads the activist NGO Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK), [says](#) that on May 10 his group sent 20 balloons into North Korea. Launched from Ganghwa island in the northwestern ROK, the balloons are said to carry 300,000 anti-DPRK

flyers and 2,000 USB sticks loaded with K-pop content. They trail banners which read: “Kim Jong Un, he is nothing but an irreversible traitor and an enemy of our people.”

May 16, 2024: Pyongyang [criticizes](#) a visit to Beijing by Seoul’s Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul, who asked China to play a “constructive” role on the peninsula. Pak Myong Ho, vice minister for Chinese affairs at the North’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), said “No matter how earnestly the diplomats of the ROK order someone a constructive role through soliciting and begging diplomacy...we will never give up our sovereign rights crucial to our lives.”

May 17, 2024: “A military source” [tells](#) *Yonhap* that North Korea has been installing mines and reinforcing barbed-wire fences in four or five different locations within the DMZ.

May 21, 2024: ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) [says](#) a joint military-police probe is under way into the hacking of defense officials’ emails. DPRK involvement is suspected. No details are given, save to clarify that the breach involved their personal email accounts rather than military servers.

May 24, 2024: Seoul [sanctions](#) seven named North Koreans and two Russian vessels, said to be involved in illicit trading of arms and fuel between Pyongyang and Moscow.

May 24 and 27, 2024: Monuments hoping for the return of five South Koreans, abducted as teenagers by North Korean agents in 1977-78, are [unveiled](#) on Seonyu and Hong islands, off the west coast, whence they were kidnapped. Relatives attend, as do MOU Kim Yung-ho and Julie Turner, US special envoy for North Korean human rights. *[Rob: it’s hardly hot news, but there are touching photos at the link.]*

May 26, 2024: Complaining of Southern provocations, including balloon launches and alleged incursions, DPRK vice-defense minister Kim Kang Il [warns](#) that “Mounds of wastepaper and filth will soon be scattered over the border

areas and the interior of the ROK, and it will directly experience how much effort is required to remove them.” *He means it.*

May 27, 2024: Another North Korean satellite launch [fails](#): its third in two years, as against a single success in November. Promptly admitting the mishap, the DPRK’s National Aerospace Technology Administration (NATA) [says](#): “The launch failed due to the air blast of the new-type satellite carrier rocket during the first-stage flight.” A day later, Kim Jong Un [adds](#) that “a destruct system [was] activated due to malfunctioning of the first-stage engine”

May 29, 2024: South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [say](#) that since late on May 28 North Korea has sent some 260 balloons carrying assorted rubbish, including fecal matter, into the South. A few reach over 200km south of the DMZ, the largest balloon incursion from the North. The JCS tells Pyongyang to cease such “inhumane and vulgar” actions. In a mocking statement, Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong [calls](#) the balloons “‘sincere presents’ to the goblins of liberal democracy.” She warns there will be more—as indeed there are: North’s campaign remains ongoing. (NB this Chronology does not record every single launch. For a timeline and analysis as of late August, see [here](#); and as of Nov. 29, see [here](#).)

May 29–31, 2024: On three consecutive days South Korean military officials [detect](#) Northern attempts to jam GPS signals around northerly ROK-controlled islands in the West/Yellow sea. Some ferries and fishing boats experience glitches in their navigational systems, but military communications are unaffected. Additionally, on May 30 North Korea fires 18 rounds from multiple rocket launchers toward the East Sea near the inter-Korean border.

May 30, 2024: MOU [says](#) that North Koreans are no longer permitted to name their children Hana, Tongil, or Hankook (respectively meaning one, unification, and South Korea), in line with Kim Jong Un’s new diktat to erase any idea of, or reference to, Korea being a single country.

Similarly, the geography section of the DPRK foreign ministry website, which had characterized Korea as a maritime nation with seas on three sides, has been removed.

May 31, 2024: MOU [says](#) that North-South trade fell to zero last year, for the first time since inter-Korean commerce began in 1989. There were also no personnel exchanges for a third straight year. Southern NGOs’ humanitarian aid totaled 900 million won (\$653,000) last year: down from 2.6 billion won in 2022, and the lowest figure since records began in 1995.

June 1, 2024: North Korea’s GPS jamming continues for a fourth day.

June 2, 2024: ROK National Security Adviser Chang Ho-jin [threatens](#) the DPRK with “unendurable” consequences, saying its “flying of trash balloons and GPS jamming are such despicable provocations that could not have been imagined by a normal country.” He adds that Seoul’s riposte may include resuming loudspeaker broadcasts across the DMZ.

June 2, 2024: ROK National Police Agency [reports](#) that as of 1600 local time it has received 581 reports of North Korean balloon sightings, mostly in western Seoul but also further afield. The JCS say they have detected 720 incoming balloons since 2000 the previous evening. This latest wave carries trash such as cigarette butts, paper and plastic bags, but not feces as in the first batch. Incheon International Airport has been briefly disrupted several times, and a car windscreen was broken.

June 2, 2024: DPRK vice-defense minister Kim Kang Il [says](#): “From the night of May 28 to the dawn of June 2, we scattered 15 tons of wastepaper, favorite toy of the human scum, over the border areas of the ROK and its capital region with more than 3,500 balloons of various sorts. We made the ROK clans (sic) get enough experience of how much unpleasant they feel and how much effort is needed to remove the scattered wastepaper. We are going to halt wastepaper scattering over the border

temporarily as our action was a countermeasure from A to Z. But, if the ROK clans resume anti-DPRK leaflet scattering, we will correspond (sic) to it by intensively scattering wastepaper and rubbish hundred times the amount of scattered leaflets and the number of cases, as we have already warned.” This suspension lasts less than a week.

June 3, 2024: In response to North Korea’s trash balloon campaign, South Korea’s National Security Council [decides](#) to fully suspend 2018’s inter-Korean tension reduction pact—which Pyongyang already repudiated, after Seoul partially suspended it in November. The Cabinet and President Yoon Suk Yeol [endorse](#) this on June 4, whereupon the Ministry of National Defense [says](#) it will resume military activities near the DMZ which the accord had banned.

June 5, 2024: South Korea’s NIS [says](#) it has detected signs that North Korea is demolishing part of the Donghae inter-Korean railway line. In 2006 Seoul built and paid for 27 km of new track linking the two Korea’s railway systems along the east coast, but after a test run in 2007 this was never used again.

June 9, 2024: After North Korea sends more trash balloons on June 8, the presidential office [says](#) South Korea will re-install loudspeakers at the DMZ and resume propaganda broadcasts today, for the first time since 2016. This duly [happens](#), but just for one day.

June 20, 2024: South Korea [expresses](#) “grave concern” at the Russia-DPRK comprehensive strategic partnership signed in Pyongyang on June 19 by Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin. This includes a mutual pledge to provide immediate military assistance if one is attacked. In the light of this, National Security Advisor Chang Ho-jin says: “We plan to reconsider the issue of arms support to Ukraine.” Seoul has not hitherto supplied weapons directly to Kyiv.

June 20, 2024: FFNK’s Park Sang-hak [says](#) his group has sent 20 balloons carrying 300,000 leaflets, US dollars, and USB sticks containing a

hit K-drama and songs across the DMZ from the border city of Paju. Next day Kim Yo Jong warns that the North will retaliate in kind.

June 20, 2024: “Sources” [tell](#) *Yonhap* that the ROK seized a cargo ship in the Korea Strait, which it suspects of breaching UN sanctions against the DPRK. The 2,900-ton vessel—its name and flag are not revealed—is carrying coal and iron ore. It is now at anchorage in Busan. Seoul effected a similar seizure of another small cargo vessel in March.

June 21, 2024: ROK JCS [say](#) that KPA troops working in the DMZ briefly crossed the Military Demarcation Line (MDL, the actual border within the DMZ) around 1100 local time. They returned after the South broadcast warnings and fired warning shots. This is the third such incident by work parties of 20-30 Northern soldiers in the central area of the front, following incursions on June 9 and [18](#). Seoul judges all to be accidental. Since April the North has deployed thousands of troops in 10 different locations in the DMZ for a range of [activities](#): reinforcing roads, planting mines (with “multiple casualties,” according to the [JCS](#)) and erecting presumed anti-tank barriers.

June 23, 2024: In a threat to directly arm Ukraine, speaking on KBS TV, ROK NSA Chang Ho-jin [says](#): “It all depends on what Russia will do. Will there be any line remaining for us if Russia gives precision weapons to North Korea?”

June 26, 2024: ROK Marine Corps [holds](#) its first live-fire drills for seven years on Yeonpyeong and Baengnyeong islands in the West/Yellow Sea, which are close to the DPRK.

June 27, 2024: South Korea [sanctions](#) eight named North Koreans, four Russian vessels, and five entities of various types for illicit trade in weapons and fuel in violation of UN sanctions. The entities sanctioned include the DPRK Missile Administration. As ever these measures are largely notional, as none of those sanctioned would have dealings with South Korea anyway.

June 27, 2024: MOU [releases](#) its second annual [report](#) on North Korean human rights. Based on testimony from 141 defectors who reached Seoul in 2023, this includes [claims](#) of public executions for watching ROK media. A law against reactionary ideology also criminalizes white wedding dresses, a groom carrying the bride on his back, and wearing sunglasses.

June 28, 2024: A day after North Korea claimed it had successfully test-launched a multiple-warhead missile, South Korea's JCS [release](#) a video showing that in fact the rocket exploded in mid-air after travelling only 250 km.

June 30, 2024: In a longish statement, robust but not histrionic, the DPRK foreign ministry [condemns](#) "Freedom Edge, the first tripartite multi-domain joint military exercises in the waters near the DPRK from June 27 to 29...Lurking behind this is the US strategic scenario to use the US-Japan-ROK tripartite military bloc as a three-horse carriage for carrying out its strategy for hegemony in not only Northeast Asia but also the rest of the world."

July 2, 2024: JCS disses another KPA missile launch (see June 28). Hours after Pyongyang boasts that it successfully tested a new tactical ballistic missile on July 1, Seoul [suggests](#) that that is a "lie." North Korea [claims](#) its Hwasong-11Da-4.5, with a 4.5 ton 'super-heavy' warhead, "hit accuracy (sic) at the maximum range of 500 kilometers and the minimum range of 90 km". South Korea's military say they detected two BM launches, which travelled 600 km and 120 km. They reckon the latter was a failure: it flew abnormally, and came down on land rather than at sea. State media [published](#) no photographs of this test.

July 2, 2024: South Korea [holds](#) its first live-fire on-land artillery drills near the DMZ in six years. These were banned under the now-suspended 2018 inter-Korean military pact.

July 2, 2024: MOU [publishes](#) a 1,693-page dossier of newly declassified documents on inter-

Korean contacts during 1981-87, when military dictator Chun Doo-hwan was ROK president. These run the gamut: from the North's bid to kill Chun in Rangoon in 1983 (17 other South Koreans died), to its sending flood aid to the South just two years later in 1985, among much else. This is the fifth such cache of documents to be published since May 2022.

July 2, 2024: MOU [says](#) that since June 20 North Korea's Korean Central Television has, for reasons unknown, switched the carrier of its TV broadcasts from China's ChinaSat 12 to Russia's Express 103 satellite. This makes them harder to access in South Korea: *verboden* for ordinary citizens, but government, researchers, and media are permitted to do so.

July 5, 2024: MOU [says](#) that during Aug.-Oct it will spend 815 million won (\$592,000) on a survey of separated families. Hitherto quinquennial, future surveys will be done every three years. This cohort's number has fallen to 38,295 as of end-May: two-thirds are over 80.

July 8, 2024: Kim Yo Jong [denounces](#) South Korea's resumption of live-fire drills near the inter-Korean border, as well as the recent tripartite Freedom Edge military exercises as "suicidal hysteria" and an "inexcusable and explicit provocation." (She seems to forget a rash of DPRK artillery drills near the border in late 2022, violating the inter-Korean military agreement which has since been suspended.)

July 9, 2024: South Korea's Ministry of Environment [says](#) the North seems to have released water from its Hwanggang dam on the Imjin river without notice, but the volume is small enough to pose no downstream threat. It is over a decade (2013) since Pyongyang last deigned to give Seoul the advanced warning it agreed to, after an earlier huge unannounced discharge killed six South Korean campers in 2009. Another small discharge is [detected](#) on July 18.

July 11, 2024: South Korea's defense ministry (MND) [says](#) it will rename and reorganize its

North Korea policy division. Henceforth to be dubbed the North Korea strategy division, this will concentrate on sanctions and their enforcement, while scaling down its focus on inter-Korean military talks and agreements (those now being a dead letter).

July 14, 2024: Kim Yo Jong, noting that “dirty leaflets and things of the ROK scum have been found again in the border area,” [warns](#) that “the ROK clans...must be ready for paying a very high price for their dirty play.” Pyongyang duly sends further waves of trash balloons, while defector activists in the South continue to launch further leaflet-bearing balloons.

July 16, 2024: Kim Yo Jong [weighs in](#) again, in surprising detail. 29 large balloons “sent by the scum of the Republic of Korea” landed in six different counties. “In case the scum of the ROK continues to conduct crude and dirty acts, the change in our countermeasure will be inevitable...I warn seriously again. They should be ready for gruesome and horrible cost.”

July 17, 2024: After Kim Yo Jong’s threats, ROK Defense Minister Shin Won-sik [calls](#) for firm readiness against DPRK provocations. The JCS urge vigilance lest recent heavy rains wash Northern mines into the South. A spokesman says: “North Korea tends to randomly place them without relevant safety measures...Whether it occurs intentionally or naturally due to heavy rains, there is a higher possibility of the land mines flowing down.”

July 19, 2024: After a further wave of North Korean trash balloons, South Korea [resumes](#) propaganda broadcasts into the North from areas where the balloons landed. The loudspeakers blare for 10 hours starting at 1800 local time (i.e., throughout most of the night).

July 21, 2024: With DPRK balloon launches continuing, after four days of limited broadcasts South Korea [turns on](#) all its border loudspeakers. *Yonhap* notes that programs “typically comprise news, a message urging North Korean soldiers near the border to escape to South Korea, as well

as K-pop songs including...BTS’ megahit singles ‘Dynamite’ and ‘Butter.’

July 22, 2024: Tae Yong-ho, appointed a week earlier by President Yoon as head of the Peaceful Unification Advisory Council, [says](#) his appointment sends a message to Pyongyang that Seoul seeks peaceful reunifications. A former DPRK deputy ambassador in London who escaped to Seoul in 2016, Tae is the first defector to head the PUAC.

July 23, 2024: MOU Kim Yung-ho [tells](#) an ROK-sponsored forum in Washington on DPRK human rights that over half the 196 Northern defectors last year were young, or high-ranking officials. This “attest[s] to the influence of South Korean culture, which is causing cracks in the rigid wall of *juche*...“many North Koreans are consuming *juche* culture by day and South Korean culture by night.” Hence “the importance of cultural approaches is increasing alongside political and military approaches to strongly deter North Korea’s military threats.”

July 23, 2024: MOU [says](#) 105 defectors reached South Korea in the first half of 2024, more than the 99 who arrived in Jan.-June last year: 43 came in the first quarter, 62 in the second.

July 24, 2024: ROK Presidential Security Service (PSS) [says](#) a North Korean trash balloon landed in the presidential compound today. Nothing dangerous is found.

July 30, 2024: ROK defense ministry [reveals](#) that a military court has issued an arrest warrant for an unnamed civilian employee of the Korea Defense Intelligence Command, who allegedly devastated South Korea’s spy network by passing the names of “black” (covert) agents to a Chinese ethnic Korean national suspected of working for Pyongyang.

July 30, 2024: *NK News* [reports](#) that South Korea will spend \$530,000 this year on overseas conferences spotlighting North Korean human rights: more than MOU spends on

counseling centers and trauma recovery programs for escapees from the North.

July 31, 2024: KCNA [confirms](#) that “Many public buildings, facilities, roads and railways, including more than 4,100...houses and nearly 3 000 hectares of farmlands, were flooded in Sinuiju City and Uiju County.” It is silent on casualties. Kim Jong Un visits affected areas. An emergency enlarged Politburo meeting, held in Sinuiju on July 29–30 on Kim’s personal train, [sacks](#) the Minister of Public Security and the Party secretaries in the two provinces worst hit, Jagang and North Pyongan. Kim proposes “to strictly punish those who severely neglected their responsible duties assigned by the Party and the state and thus caused even the casualty that can not be allowed.”

Aug. 1, 2024: MOU [concurs](#) that the North must have suffered “considerable casualties” from flooding, although material damage appears less than in 2010, 2016 and 2020. Soon after, the ministry [says](#) “it is willing to urgently support North Korean flood victims with the necessary supplies from a humanitarian and fraternal perspective through the Korean Red Cross.”

Aug. 5, 2024: Under the snappy headline “Commissioning Ceremony of Absolute Weaponry Demonstrating Sure Victory of Cause of Building Powerful Army Ceremony for Celebrating Transfer of New-Type Tactical Ballistic Missile Weapon System Takes Place with Splendor,” KCNA [reports](#) that on Aug. 4 Kim Jong Un, with daughter Ju Ae, presides at the handover—held at night, with fireworks, at the Mirim military parade training complex in Pyongyang—of 250 nuclear-capable “new-type tactical ballistic missile launchers,” said to be “personally designed by Kim Jong Un and impeccably completed under his energetic guidance,” to front-line units. (Days earlier, monsoon rains severely [flooded](#) the northwestern DPRK where major arms factories are [located](#)). A female-led band, clad in tee-shirts bearing the DPRK flag, [plays](#) the national anthem in heavy-rock style; some attendees are

visibly baffled. [Rob, the NK News [report](#) on this has some striking pics]

Aug. 5, 2024: South Korea’s Korea Cybersecurity Intelligence Community—an inter-agency body comprising the NIS, prosecution, police, and military—[warns](#) of a sharp increase in North Korean hackers trying to steal data on construction and machinery. It attributes this to Kim Jong Un’s plans to boost economic projects in the provinces.

Aug. 8, 2024: In a policy report to the National Assembly, the ROK MND [says](#) that despite recent downpours the DPRK continues to lay landmines and build walls within the DMZ. It also tallies the North’s launches so far this year: 37 ballistic missiles on eight occasions, plus 11 cruise missiles in six instances. Seoul has responded with 10 large-scale combined drills with the US in the first half of this year: twice as many as during the same period last year.

Aug. 9, 2024: ROK JCS [say](#) no signs have yet been detected of the new tactical missile launchers ceremoniously transferred on Aug. 4 arriving at front-line units, adding that it will take “considerable” time for the North to manufacture enough missiles for them (they carry four each). Also Pyongyang lacks fissile material for so many warheads.

Aug. 10, 2024: In a speech to flood victims, Kim Jong Un attacks South Korea—the “dirty, rubbish country”—at some length. “The rubbish ROK’s media are desperately slandering all the socialist benefits and measures taken by our Party and government for the flood victims.” He is especially riled by the claim of 1,000+ casualties, but offers no alternative figure.

Aug. 12, 2024: MOU [suggests](#) that Kim Jong Un’s lashing out at South Korean media reports of massive casualties from flood damage in the North is a diversionary tactic “to minimize the deterioration of public sentiment by shifting the subject of criticism to the outside.”

Aug. 15, 2024: President Yoon proclaims what is touted as a new vision of reunification. On Liberation Day (from Japan in 1945: a holiday in both Koreas), he [says](#): “Complete liberation remains an unfinished task...The freedom we enjoy must be extended to the frozen kingdom of the North, where people are deprived of freedom and suffer from poverty and starvation. Only when a unified free and democratic nation rightfully owned by the people is established across the entire Korean Peninsula will we finally have complete liberation.” Somewhat contradictorily, he also proposes an official dialogue channel with Pyongyang which can “take up any issue.” (The full text is [here](#), among other places.)

Aug. 16, 2024: MOU Kim Yung-ho [calls](#) on Pyongyang to accept Yoon’s offer. Opining that the North “will carefully review” Seoul’s proposal and not reject it out of hand, he denies that it is tantamount to unification by absorption: “We seek a gradual and peaceful unification.”

Aug. 16, 2024: Kim Yong-hyun, the ROK Presidential Security Service chief (and old school friend of President Yoon) nominated to be Minister of National Defense, [says](#) “all means and methods are open” for South Korea to counter the North’s nuclear threat. Kim has in the past called for Seoul to acquire its own nuclear deterrent. On Sept. 2, at his parliamentary confirmation hearing, Kim is [explicit](#): going nuclear “is included among all possible options.”

Aug. 18, 2024: Pyongyang [criticizes](#) imminent *Ulchi Freedom Shield*, the major ROK-US annual summer combined military exercise. The DPRK Foreign Ministry’s Institute for American Studies says this “fully betrays its dangerous colors as the biggest military training in the Asia-Pacific region and offensive multinational muscle-flexing involving even NATO member states.”

Aug. 19, 2024: *Ulchi Freedom Shield* (UFS) [begins](#). This 11-day exercise includes 48 field training

events such as amphibious landings and live-fire drills, 10 more than last year; and 17 brigade-level exercises, up from four in 2023. As UFS kicks off, Yoon [warns](#): “We must strengthen our readiness to respond to North Korea’s gray-zone provocations, such as the spread of false information, fake news and cyberattacks.” He adds, ominously: “Anti-state forces that threaten the free democracy are operating covertly in various places.”

Aug. 20, 2024: MOU [suggests](#) that Kim Jong Un is seeking to shift the blame for destruction caused by recent floods to lower-level officials: “This could mean that North Korea’s flood damage is very significant and people’s discontent remains high.”

Aug. 26, 2024: As UFS continues, separate joint coastal maneuvers [begin](#). During the 13-day *Ssangyong* (meaning Double Dragon) exercise, over 40 US and ROK aircraft, 40 ships and 40 amphibious assault vehicles practice landings on South Korean east coast beachheads.

Aug. 26 2024: NIS [doubts](#) if North Korea has sufficient missiles to equip the hundreds of new launchers that Kim Jong Un ceremonially sent to the front line on Aug. 5, given that it is also supplying Russia. It also suggests that Kim visited flooded areas in North Pyongan rather than harder-hit Jagang province, to avoid exposing the latter’s military installations to scrutiny. Major arms factories are located in Jagang.

Aug. 27, 2024: MOU [says](#) it is seeking to verify a report from an NGO that 15 North Korean would-be defectors (13 women and two children) were ambushed and arrested on Aug. 21 in Kunming in southern China. They were about to board a boat to southeast Asia, but have now been sent to Jilin for likely repatriation to the tender mercies of the DPRK.

Aug. 29, 2024: *Ulchi Freedom Shield* [concludes](#).

Aug. 30, 2024: MOU [issues](#) English translation of 280-page report on North Korea’s economic and

social situation, based on interviews with 6,351 defectors. The Korean edition was published in Feb. The English version is [here](#).

Aug. 30, 2024: For the first time since last November, MOU [permits](#) nine South Korean NGOs to try to contact North Korea and offer aid for flood damage relief. It is unclear whether anything comes of this.

Sept. 3, 2024: A report from the Institute for National Security Strategy (INSS), the NIS's think-tank, [reckons](#) that during 2017-23 North Korea earned \$6.29 billion from illicit or banned activities, despite sanctions. The biggest item was coal exports (\$2.15 billion), followed by income from workers in China and Russia (\$1.75bn) and cybercrime (\$1.35bn). Arms sales to Russia are a new revenue stream, earning \$540 million last year.

Sept. 4, 2024: PUAC head and former DPRK diplomat Tae Yong-ho [suggests](#) that one reason Pyongyang has not reacted to Yoon's new unification vision is that it has not yet institutionalized Kim Jong Un's new line of two hostile states: "I believe North Korea has not yet fully established the theoretical framework to justify the policy internally."

Sept. 4, 2024: NIS [says](#) it has detected signs that North Korea might have executed some officials after the recent flood damage. Victims may include Kang Pong Hun, the dismissed party secretary of Jagang province.

Sept. 6, 2024: In a third successive night of DPRK rubbish balloons, the ROK JCS [say](#) 260 were launched, 140 trash bundles landed in Seoul and surrounding Gyeonggi province. These mainly comprise paper and plastic bottles; no hazardous substances are found. In response, South Korea continues to blast the North daily with propaganda from loudspeakers.

Sept. 11, 2024: Opening Cyber Summit Korea, a global event hosted by the NIS, Yoon [says](#) that South Korea's continuously developing its cyber defense capabilities to deal with hostile forces

like North Korea has made it "a cyber drill hub in the Indo-Pacific region." On Sept. 1 the National Security Council (NSC) [unveils](#) a National Cybersecurity Basic Plan, involving 14 different government agencies.

Sept. 12, 2024: Seoul media [report](#) that North Korea too has activated border loudspeakers. These emit not propaganda but weird deafening high-pitched noises, making life a misery for South Koreans living within range. Opinions differ on whether this is anti-ROK psy-war, or rather a crude form of jamming to prevent North Koreans hearing the South's broadcasts.

Sept. 19, 2024: In a speech in Gwangju marking the sixth anniversary of his joint Pyongyang [Declaration](#) with Kim Jong Un after their third summit, former President Moon [urges](#) Seoul to "completely review the existing discourse about peace and unification...now that North Korea has defined inter-Korean ties as ones between two hostile nations...We are at a very dangerous moment where just one small wrong step could turn into a military clash." His ex-chief of staff Im Jong-seok—long a [controversial](#) figure—goes further, blasphemously suggesting that reunification as a goal be abandoned altogether: "I think it would be good for South and North Korea to live just as they are while respecting each other."

Sept. 20, 2024: Rejecting Moon's call for a *Nordpolitik* rethink, President Yoon's office [brands](#) his predecessor's approach unrealistic: "Didn't they lobby the US and the world that 'the war is over, and peace has arrived?' It is a matter of how to build peace."

Sept. 20, 2024: Exactly 4,000 days after North Korea sentenced Kim Jung-wook, a Southern missionary, to hard labor for life on espionage charges, unification minister Kim Yung-ho [calls](#) on Pyongyang to "immediately and unconditionally" return him and five other South Koreans detained in the North. *Yonhap* calls this "a rare statement." In fact the Yoon administration has strongly prioritized these cases, as discussed in previous [issues](#).

Sept. 20, 2024: For the second time, a DPRK trash balloon [lands](#) inside the government complex in Seoul. The first one, in May, landed on the roof. Another was found inside the presidential office compound in July. This latest reportedly carries mostly household garbage, including a green piece of plastic with an address in Pyongyang.

Sept. 20, 2024: Visiting Prague to support South Korea's bid to build a new nuclear power plant in Czechia, President Yoon [denies](#) that Seoul seeks its own nuclear weapons, and says it is focused on strengthening joint deterrence with the US.

Sept. 23, 2024: JCS [state](#): "While there may be inconveniences and difficulties caused by North Korea's trash balloons, our fundamental measure to eradicate them is to show that 'there is nothing to gain for the enemy.'" But they promise "stern military measures" should citizens' safety be endangered, "or if the North is assessed to have crossed the line." They add that shooting the balloons down would increase risk. This follows the North sending some balloons with timers for releasing their load, which could be a fire hazard.

Sept. 24, 2024: Yoon [slams](#) the idea of jettisoning Korean reunification as "unconstitutional" and "[incomprehensible](#)," adding: "Is the two nations theory really possible?"

Oct. 1, 2024: In a speech on Armed Forces Day, which (unusually for this Korea) features a military parade, President Yoon [warns](#): "If North Korea attempts to use nuclear weapons...that day will be the end of the North Korean regime."

Oct. 3, 2024: In the first of a plethora of anti-ROK press statements in Oct.—too numerous and repetitious to itemize here—Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong [mocks](#) South Korea's military parade. She derides Seoul's newly revealed Hyonmoo-5 ballistic missile as "a weapon of worthless large bulk." In a rhetorical flourish which KCNA uses in its headline, she concludes: "Is the event marking the ROK 'army day' a

'boast of strength' by the group of curs or a funeral procession of colonial mercenary army?"

Oct. 4, 2024: Visiting a "training base of KPA special operation units in the western area," Kim Jong Un [launches](#) his strongest attack for two years on "the puppet Yoon Suk Yeol, who had never been rid of his anti-DPRK intent" a propos Yoon's Oct. 1 speech. Chiding him for "bragg[ing] about overwhelming counteraction of military muscle at the doorstep of the state possessed of nuclear weapons," which he called "a great irony that caused the suspicion of being an abnormal man," Kim warns that "to pray for a good luck of survival in a military conflict with the nuclear weapons state would be a foolish thing...if such situation comes, the permanent existence of Seoul and the Republic of Korea would be impossible."

Oct. 7, 2024: Skipping the SPA, Kim Jong Un instead [visits](#) what is now his eponym: Kim Jong Un University of National Defense. Almost half his [speech](#) rants against South Korea, including this: "To be honest, we have no intention of attacking the Republic of Korea. Thinking of it is abominable, and we hate dealing with those in it. Formerly, we often spoke about liberating the south and reunification by force of arms, but now we are not interested in it. And since our statement about two separate states, we have been all the more unwilling to be conscious of the state in the south. However, the point is that the latter provokes us now and then." His second sentence was [actually](#): "Even thinking about them gives me the creeps and I don't even want to get near those people." KCNA's translators evidently deemed that undignified. (In [Korean](#): 의식하는것조차도 소름이 끼치고 그 인간들과는 마주서고싶지도 않습니다.)

Oct. 9, 2024: KCNA et al [report](#) that the 11th Session of the 14th SPA was held as scheduled on Oct. 7-8. The stated agenda includes amending the Constitution; but with no detail given, it is unclear whether this refers to Kim Jong Un's new line on South Korea. The SPA appoints a new Minister of National Defence, No Kwang Chol. Or rather an old one, since No—a four-star

general— held the same post in 2018–19, when it was called Minister of the People’s Armed Forces (MPAF). In that role he [saluted](#) Donald Trump in Singapore, who saluted back.

Oct. 9, 2024: KPA General Staff [announces](#) that, starting today, it will “completely cut off roads and railways connected to the ROK and fortify the relevant areas of our side with strong defence structures,” so as to “permanently shut off and block the southern border with the ROK, the primary hostile state and invariable principal enemy.” It adds that “the US forces side” (presumably the UN Command) was notified by telephone, “to prevent any misjudgment and accidental conflict.” This follows months of KPA clearing and other activities in the DMZ, including accidental crossings of the MDL, which were not so notified.

Oct. 11, 2024: Seoul [reveals](#) that on Sept. 17 a North Korean defected by boat to the South’s Baengnyeong island, near the DPRK west coast, the third direct cross-border defection in two months.

Oct. 11, 2024: In what *KCNA* [headlines](#) as “Crucial Statement of DPRK Foreign Ministry,” North Korea claims that the ROK infiltrated drones on Oct. 3, 9, and 10, the last of which committed “such a hideous crime as scattering a huge number of anti-DPRK smear leaflets over the central part of Pyongyang.” State media publish [photos](#) of said leaflets: partly blurred, but leaving readers able to work out that they are criticizing Kim Jong Un for his luxury watch and his daughter’s expensive Dior coat while the people are starving.

Oct. 13, 2024: Pyongyang’s drone accusation sparks [debate](#) in Seoul and beyond. Having first denied any responsibility, the official ROK response shifts (tellingly) to neither confirm nor deny—along with counter-charges that this could be DPRK black propaganda.

Oct. 15, 2024: As per its earlier notice, North Korea blows up roads that led to South Korea on

its side of the DMZ. The explosive moment can be watched [here](#).

Oct. 17, 2024: Under the headline “Roads and Railways to ROK Completely Blocked,” *KCNA* [reports](#) that by order no. 00122 of the WPK Central Military Commission (CMC), inter-Korean western and eastern road and rail links “have been completely blocked through blasting.” It calls this “an inevitable and legitimate measure...in keeping with the...DPRK Constitution which clearly defines the ROK as a hostile state.” The amended text of the said Constitution remains undisclosed. *MOU* [comments](#): “This action is anti-unification and anti-national by betraying the hopes of the South Korean people and North Korean residents for unification, which the government strongly condemns.”

Oct. 17, 2024: On an inspection visit to the headquarters of the KPA Second Corps, Kim Jong Un [summarizes](#) his new line on the South. As quoted by *KCNA*, he “stressed that our army should keep in mind once again the stark fact that the ROK is a foreign country and an apparent hostile country. Recalling that we completely blocked the roads and railways to the territory of the ROK two days ago through blasting, he said that it means not only the physical closure but also the end of the evil relationship with Seoul which persistently lasted century after century and the complete removal of the useless awareness about fellow countrymen and unreasonable idea of reunification. And he added that it also means the last declaration that when the DPRK’s sovereignty is violated by the ROK, a hostile country, its physical forces will be used unhesitatingly, without sticking to conditions any longer. As we have already declared, if our offensive forces are used in the precondition of ‘if’, it constitutes legitimate retaliatory action against the hostile country, not the fellow countrymen.”

Oct. 18, 2024: In another [press statement](#), this one weirdly petty, Kim Yo Jong chides ROK “idiots” for raising provenance and copyright issues about photos *KCNA* published of North

Korea's road-blocking explosions: "Their behavior makes even a cat laugh."

Oct. 19, 2024: DPRK media [publish](#) photographs of a claimed ROK drone which crashed in the North. *NK News* [cites](#) experts who note that Pyongyang could have faked these images.

Oct. 24, 2024: North Korean propaganda leaflets, presumably carried by balloon, are found on the streets of Seoul. They attack Yoon and his wife, who is mired in scandal. In Reuters' [summary](#): "They included graphic messages accusing the Yoon government of failures that had left his people living in despair, and describing the first couple as immoral and mentally unstable." This is the first of [several](#) leaflet drops. Meanwhile trash balloons keep coming too.

Oct. 29, 2024: NIS [claims](#) that Kim Jong Un's personal security has been beefed up for fear of assassination attempts, and now includes equipment to jam communications and detect drones. Separately, the agency confirms [reports](#) that after 27 years North Korea has ditched the Juche calendar, based on the year of Kim Il Sung's birth, which it introduced in 1997. This is seen as a move by Kim to boost his own status relative to his father and grandfather.

Oct. 30, 2024: South Korea's Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) [tells](#) lawmakers that North Korea has completed preparations to launch a long-range missile. Hedging its bets, the agency says this may be an ICBM to test reentry capabilities, or it could be "a space launch vehicle."

Oct. 30, 2024: ROK military Cyber Operations Command [tells](#) the National Assembly's Intelligence Committee that North Korea's 8,400-strong hacking team—not further specified or named, so perhaps lumping together all the various [different](#) teams of DPRK threat actors—mounted some 15,000 cyber-attacks on the South's defense sector during Jan.-Sept. this year: up from 9,000 in 2022 and 13,000 in 2023. No major breaches occurred.

Oct. 31, 2024: ROK and Japanese monitors [report](#) successful test of the DPRK's biggest ICBM yet. Lofted vertically as usual, the [Hwasong-19](#) flew almost 5,000 miles into space, landing in the East/Sea of Japan just over 1,000km east of where it launched. Flight time was a record 86 minutes.

Nov. 1, 2024: In another snappy headline—like the missiles, they are getting bigger—KCNA [confirms](#): "Crucial Test Showing DPRK's Definite Response Will and Overwhelming Edge of Its Strategic Attack Force. Test-fire of DPRK's Latest ICBM Hwasongpho-19 Successfully Conducted under Guidance of Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un." Somewhat contradictorily, after thundering that "The entity of absolute power loaded with the DPRK people's soaring enmity and strong will to punish all evils and injustice on earth was launched toward the sky," they go on: "The test-fire had no negative effect on the security of neighboring countries."

Nov. 4, 2024: ROK JCS [say](#) the North has built earth mounds 11 meters high, with anti-tank trenches, to completely block the inter-Korean road and rail links it severed in October. But they add that this is "just for show": se are not militarily effective defenses.

Nov. 4, 2024: In his speech to the belated official opening of the National Assembly—read by Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, since (unprecedentedly in the democratic era) the president chose not to attend—Yoon [avers](#): "The recent international security situation and the illegal military cooperation between North Korea and Russia pose a significant threat to our national security. We will thoroughly review all possible scenarios to prepare countermeasures." He pledges to "work to expand the international community's understanding and support for the vision of a free and unified Korea."

Nov. 4, 2024: MOU [says](#) it presumes the new DPRK Institute of Enemy State Studies is a rebranding of the former National Reunification Institute under the WPK, which has long been Pyongyang's main think-tank covering South Korea.

Nov. 4, 2024: Korea Internet & Security Agency (KISA), the ROK's cybersecurity watchdog, [warns](#) that "amid the Russia-Ukraine war [and] North Korea's dispatch of troops, cyber threats against South Korean organizations through distributed denial-of-service attacks have increased."

Nov. 5, 2024: South Korea's defense ministry [says](#): "More than 10,000 North Korean troops have currently gone to Russia, and we understand that a considerable number of them have moved to front-line areas, including Kursk."

Nov. 13-15, 2024: ROK, Japan and US [hold](#) the second iteration of the trilateral multi-domain exercise *Freedom Edge*. PACOM reports: "Approximately 7,000 trilateral military and defense force personnel, seven ships and more than 20 fighter, maritime patrol and tanker aircraft executed Ballistic Missile Defense, Air Defense, Anti-Submarine Warfare, Maritime Interdiction, and Defensive Cyber training."

Nov. 13, 2024: South Korea's NIS [says](#) North Korean troops sent to Russia have moved to the frontline Kursk regions and are "already engaging in combat" against Ukrainian forces.

Nov. 14, 2024: MOU [says](#) that in response to Pyongyang's deployment of troops to fight for Russia, Seoul "will proceed to implement effective, phased measures grounded in principles of composure and discipline." It does not elaborate.

Nov. 15, 2024: MOU [publishes](#) DPRK diplomatic cables from 2016-23 brought out by Ri Il-kyu, former political counsellor at North Korea's embassy in Havana who defected last year. They show Kim Jong Un personally guiding responses to human rights criticisms. Pyongyang is sensitive to such critique from UN bodies, but cares less what NGOs say. Ri promises further revelations, in what he calls a "North Korean version of WikiLeaks."

Nov. 16, 2024: After eight straight days of DPRK jamming of GPS signals, an unnamed ROK military official [says](#) the North has extended this to a range of regions along the DMZ. But the signals are weaker than in the May-June episode, and this time the purpose seems to be for anti-drone training rather than attacking the South.

Nov. 21, 2024: *Beyond Parallel*, a DPRK-focused [website](#) run by the Korea Chair of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington DC, [updates](#) its tally and map of North Korea's trash balloons. On 31 occasions starting May 28, the North "sent between 6,390 to 8,910 trash-filled balloons into South Korea, with over 3,117 balloons landing successfully."

Nov. 21, 2024: As KCNA [puts](#) it: "Weaponry Exhibition 'National Defence Development-2024' Splendidly Opens. Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Commemorative Speech at Opening Ceremony." Kim's speech is [here](#). *NK News* analyzes the armaments on show [here](#).

Nov. 22, 2024: In something of a scoop, an *NK News* investigation near the DMZ [identifies](#) three hitherto unknown TV stations broadcasting South Korean content into the North. All ROK government agencies contacted offer a curt "no comment," or fail to reply.

Nov. 22, 2024: ROK National Security Adviser Shin Won-sik [says](#) that in exchange for North Korea sending troops to fight Ukraine, "Russia is believed to have provided equipment and anti-air missiles to strengthen Pyongyang's vulnerable air defense system." Analysts [say](#) Kim Jong Un's focus on offensive weapons systems has not been matched by attention to defense, which could risk incapacitation of critical command and control infrastructure in a conflict.

Nov. 26, 2024: South Korea's military [says](#) North Korea has cut Southern-built power lines which supplied electricity to the shuttered former joint venture Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC). It expects the North will also demolish 15 pylons (of 48) which are on its territory. Although ROK then

President Park Geun-hye abruptly closed the KIC in Feb. 2016, the South continued to supply power until June 2020 when the North blew up the inter-Korean liaison office in the zone.

Dec. 3, 2024: In a late night unscheduled TV broadcast Yoon Suk Yeol shocks South Koreans and the world by [declaring](#) martial law. “I declare martial law to protect the Republic of Korea from the threats of North Korean communist forces, to immediately eradicate the unscrupulous pro-Pyongyang antistate forces that pillage the freedom and happiness of our people and to protect free constitutional order.” Lawmakers rush to the National Assembly, despite police blocking entry, and the 190 present unanimously nullify martial law, which Yoon formally rescinds around 0430 on Dec. 4 (he later mendaciously [claims](#) to have done so much earlier, around 0100). Political crisis continues in Seoul at this writing, but social order is maintained. (See [here](#) for a detailed timeline of the initial events.)

Dec. 6, 2024: KCNA [announces](#) that the 14th SPA will hold its 12th session on Jan. 22 (just after Donald Trump’s inauguration). The stated agenda includes “the issue of revising some provisions of the Socialist Constitution.” Nothing is said about fresh ‘elections,’ which are [overdue](#): they should have been held in March.

Dec. 10, 2024: NK News [reports](#) that DPRK media have suspended normal coverage of protests in Seoul against Yoon, even though the latest demonstrations are the largest yet. *Rodong Sinmun*, the Party daily, had covered these regularly since May 2023, including every week for the past five months—until now.

Dec. 10, 2024: Opposition lawmakers [accuse](#) ex-MND Kim Yong-hyun, now under arrest, of ordering the drone incursion that dropped leaflets on Pyongyang in Oct., and of pressing for military strikes against Northern trash balloon launch sites days before the martial law crisis. They claim that JCS chairman Adm. Kim Myung-

soo refused the latter order as escalatory, whereupon Kim called him a “clueless fool...Get rid of him.” The JCS denies the latter story; re the drone, it repeats its position that it “has nothing to confirm.” (Adm. Kim was passed over to head the short-lived martial law command.)

Dec. 11, 2024: Pyongyang finally comments on ructions in Seoul. *Rodong Sinmun* offers a surprisingly full and detailed [account](#) of “the puppet Yoon Suk Yeol’s actions and travails. (See Appendix II. As of Dec. 13 no official English translation has yet been published.)

Dec. 11, 2024: An [article](#) in the Seoul-based *Daily NK*, which has sources inside North Korea, details the DPRK reaction to Yoon’s declaration of martial law. The KPA General Staff immediately called a meeting around 11pm on Dec. 3 and put all forces on high alert until 5pm on Dec. 4. Some WPK officials senior enough to have access to outside media, who thus knew right away, allegedly feared the KPA had attacked the South without telling the Party. Others wondered if Northern agents in the South had been nabbed. Amid uncertainty on how to frame events, they went unreported for a week in DPRK media. Even the “reference newspaper,” circulated to high officials to tell them what is really going on in the world, had no mention for several days. (None of this can be confirmed.)

Dec. 13, 2024: Nicely illustrating the Kim regime’s reportage dilemmas, *Daily NK* claims that college students in Haeju in the southwestern DPRK had to undergo self-criticism for raising questions after a lecture on anti-Yoon protests (which were widely reported in DPRK media prior to Dec. 3). The idea of approval ratings for leaders piqued their curiosity, as well it might. As one complained: “The lecturer brought up concepts we don’t understand, like the puppet state president’s approval rating. Why is it wrong to discuss what we learned?”

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CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

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SEE-WON BYUN, SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY

A rebound in China-ROK diplomacy raised optimism after a slow start to 2024, paving the way for the summit between Xi Jinping and Yoon Suk Yeol on Nov. 15. They met on the sidelines of APEC Peru before attending the G20 summit in Brazil. Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Cho Tae-yul met in Beijing on May 13, facilitating the China-ROK-Japan trilateral summit and Yoon's meeting with Premier Li Qiang in Seoul. As China-DPRK exchanges dwindled compared to the first third of this year, Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un's summits with Putin in May and June raised questions about the direction of China's Korea policy. Donald Trump's reelection in November intensified debate on the regional security and economic implications of US-China competition.

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New Momentum in China-South Korea Partnership?

ROK Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul's May 13-14 visit to Beijing set a positive tone for this year's high-level exchanges. It marked his first face-to-face talks with Foreign Minister Wang Yi since taking office in January, and the first visit to China by a ROK foreign minister since 2017. Cho [raised](#) hopes for a "new phase" of sustainable cooperation, "fostering mutual trust rather than solely focusing on the speed and volume of the development of the bilateral relationship." They recognized space for further expanding economic cooperation, and agreed to boost local government and societal exchanges to improve mutual public perceptions. Setting up Yoon's summits with Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio in Seoul later that month, South Korea's foreign ministry [concluded](#) the ministers' meeting "created a new momentum for the development of the Korea-China relationship."

President Yoon met Premier Li on May 26 in Seoul, a day before trilateral talks with Prime Minister Kishida. While focused largely on economic priorities, a key outcome of Yoon-Li talks was the reactivation and expansion of strategic communication channels. They agreed to create the Foreign Policy and Security Dialogue between foreign and defense ministries, after the halting of similar mechanisms a decade ago. [Initiated](#) on June 18 in Seoul, the "2+2" meeting was led by China's Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong, Deputy Director of the Central Military Commission's Office for International Military Cooperation Zhang Baoqun, South Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Kim Hong Kyun, and Director General of the PRC Defense Ministry's International Policy Bureau Lee Seung-buhm. It facilitated separate talks between Sun and Foreign Minister Cho. Cho met China's vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu on July 24 in Seoul, where Ma and Korean counterpart Kim Hong-kyun [led](#) the 10th China-ROK high-level strategic dialogue, last held virtually in December 2021. ASEAN forums in Laos allowed foreign ministers Wang Yi and Cho Tae-yul to meet again on July 26 to reaffirm active progress in enhancing bilateral dialogue.

China and South Korea's 9th [trilateral summit](#) with Japan on May 27 was highly anticipated after a four-year suspension. This year's summit marked the 25th anniversary year of China-ROK-Japan cooperation stemming from

the ASEAN+3 mechanism. Making "our bilateral relations and trilateral cooperation mutually reinforcing" topped Li's five-point [proposal](#), extending to trade, innovation, cultural exchange, and sustainable development. China's foreign ministry [stressed](#) the summit's "highly meaningful" value symbolizing a "new start" for trilateral cooperation. Supporting the Yoon administration's optimistic reviews, Korean public opinion praised the summit's significance for [Northeast Asian](#) security, the "[central theme](#)" of China-ROK ties, and overall "[progress](#)" despite China's "different tone" on North Korea. The 8th trilateral [business summit](#) was held alongside the leaders' meeting, hosted by the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and Japan Business Federation.

The Xi-Yoon November [summit](#) renewed high-level support for developing the China-ROK "strategic cooperative partnership" in security, economic, and cultural fields. Xi and Yoon last met in November 2022 on the sidelines of the G20. China's foreign ministry [emphasized](#) joint commitments to "the original intention of establishing diplomatic relations" despite "many changes" in the international environment since 2022. Yoon reiterated his vision for building a partnership based on "mutual respect, reciprocity, and common interests."

Friction Points: Third Parties and Internal Affairs

The resurgence of China-ROK diplomacy from May failed to mask enduring strategic challenges. This year's earlier lull in contacts magnified US-China competition and Yoon's US-ROK alliance focus constrained the China-ROK partnership. For South Korean [skeptics](#), besides agreeing to hold a good trilateral summit and intensify bilateral meetings, Foreign Ministers Wang and Cho in May "merely said what they wanted to say in diplomatic ways." According to Yun Sun at the Stimson Center, Beijing's [primary](#) motive for the trilateral summit was to "counterbalance US influence." Featuring interviews with China's Korea experts Zhang Huizhi at Jilin University and Da Zhigang at Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences, Chinese state media [warned](#) Japan and South Korea "should not lose their own interests following US' suppression of China." South Korea's trilateral vice foreign

ministerial meeting with US and Japanese allies right after the China-ROK-Japan summit was disappointing news indicating “Seoul’s diplomatic immaturity” and “[hasty](#) declaration of loyalty,” according to state think tank scholars like Dong Xiangrong.

Competing views of third-party actors, and interference in each other’s internal affairs, resurfaced in China-ROK diplomatic interactions. In Peru, Yoon held trilateral talks with Biden and Kishida the same day he met Xi. Launching a new Trilateral Secretariat, they [renewed](#) their 2023 Camp David pledges on Indo-Pacific and South China Sea maritime security, and Taiwan. South Korean media attention on November’s multilateral summits [focused](#) on Seoul’s quest to build global support on Korean security, and “free and fair trade” as host of APEC 2025. As Yoon’s key advisor Kim Tae-hyo reported after the Xi-Yoon summit, Yoon [expressed](#) hopes for cooperation with China “in response to North Korea’s repeated provocations, the war in Ukraine and military cooperation between Russia and North Korea.” While jointly applauding the “vitalization of bilateral exchange and cooperation in various areas,” Foreign Minister Cho [told](#) Vice Minister Ma in July, “North Korea’s continued provocations and its close ties with Russia are seriously threatening peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the international community.” Although Cho communicated similar concerns to Wang in May, Foreign Minister Wang [reaffirmed](#) China’s “unchanged” Korea policy and “constructive role” on the peninsula.



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, holds talks with Cho Tae-yul, foreign minister of the Republic of Korea (ROK), in Beijing, capital of China, May 13, 2024. [Photo/Xinhua]

Friction over Taiwan prompted Seoul to repeat its “unchanged” position on the One China Policy. Ruling People Power Party lawmaker Cho Kyoung-tae’s participation in Taiwan President Lai Ching-te’s inauguration reignited angry responses from Beijing, and an [exchange](#) of accusations of internal interference. China’s Foreign Ministry raised the Taiwan issue during [meetings](#) with ROK and Japanese Embassy representatives in Beijing on May 22 on trilateral cooperation. On June 3, ministry spokesperson Mao Ning [described](#) US-ROK-Japan defense and diplomatic talks as a means “to advance the so-called “Indo-Pacific Strategy,” point fingers on the Taiwan question, grossly interfere in China’s internal affairs, once again deliberately attack and vilify China on maritime issues and sow discord between China and neighboring countries.” Such disagreements [surfaced](#) more broadly in China-ROK 2+2 talks two weeks later. On peninsula security, Chinese officials indicated China “will continue to play a constructive role in its own way.” They claimed Russia and North Korea “have the legitimate need” for engagement as “friendly and close neighbors” and “two sovereign countries.”

The Implications of Xi and Kim’s Summits with Putin

Beijing-Pyongyang high-level communication was limited to Xi and Kim’s exchange of anniversary messages on the DPRK’s founding in September and on PRC-DPRK diplomatic ties in October. Their bilateral summits with Putin in May and June raised more important implications for China-Korea relations. To commemorate the China-DPRK Friendship Treaty in July, the DPRK Embassy in Beijing [hosted](#) the foreign affairs chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, He Ping. The lower level of DPRK representation at the Chinese Embassy reception compared to last year’s anniversary sparked speculation about the impact of Pyongyang’s cooperation with Russia. South Korean media in July interpreted various signs of widening division, including Beijing’s push to [return](#) DPRK workers in China in line with UN resolutions, its tightened monitoring of bilateral trade, and Kim Jong Un’s reported directive to China-based diplomats to “[ignore China](#).” Pyongyang’s immediate denunciation of the May 27 China-ROK-Japan statement, coinciding with a failed satellite launch that night, raised similar speculation, reinforced by Beijing’s less

explicit triangular alignment with Russian and DPRK allies.

Putin's June 18-19 visit to Pyongyang for his historic [summit](#) with Kim raised China's [dilemma](#) of managing historically-strained ties with North Korea and Russia, as 2024 marked the 75th anniversaries of China's ties with both allies. In a July 23 *Yonhap* [interview](#), DPRK defector and former diplomat Ri Il-gyu explained Pyongyang's "estranged" ties with China since late 2022: "For North Korea, it is not a top priority to recover its ties with China. The North's primary goal is to elicit the maximum benefit from Russia and map out its strategies to brace for Trump's possible return...North Korea believes China does not make it live well, but it also thinks Beijing would not let it die of hunger." The Putin-Kim summit's timing with China-ROK 2+2 strategic talks on June 18 prompted China's foreign ministry to [assure](#) that dialogue plans with Seoul have "no particular link to other countries." Some observers saw the Putin-Kim summit as an opening for "[Seoul-Beijing détente](#)," concluding "South Korea's cooperation with China may prove to be more significant than Russia's support for North Korea." A *JoongAng Daily* editorial argued, such a scenario for Seoul [first](#) requires "exploiting Beijing's concerns about its weakening leverage on Pyongyang and repercussions of a strengthened unity of the West," before responding with the United States and other allies. At a June 17 Wilson Center forum, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who [met](#) President Yoon in Washington a month later, [noted](#) the growing importance of transatlantic cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners.

Xi's [summit](#) with Putin on May 16 in Beijing, and Pyongyang's ballistic missile test a day later, heightened skepticism about deterring North Korean aggression through UN sanctions. The meeting was even more [disappointing](#) for South Koreans in light of Foreign Minister Cho's May 13-14 visit to Beijing, raising calls for South Korea's own nuclear development or "NATO-style" cooperation. DPRK missile tests from May included a new record-setting Hwasong-19 intercontinental ballistic missile test on Oct. 31, Pyongyang's 11th ICBM launch since 2021. While pointing to "large loopholes" in the global sanctions regime, ROK Ambassador to the UN Hwang Joon-kook [called](#) the test a move "to distract the world's attention from its troops in Russia, demonstrate themselves as larger than

life, or gain diplomatic leverage amid the US presidential election." PRC Ambassador Fu Cong traced the peninsula security problem to a lack of US-DPRK "mutual trust," and blamed US military expansion for threatening Chinese and regional security.

Talks between PRC and ROK nuclear envoys Liu Xiaoming and Lee Jun-il on the sidelines of the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue in Tokyo on May 9 released no results. As Troy Stangarone at the Korea Economic Institute indicated, the April expiration of the mandate for the UN Panel of Experts on North Korea called into [question](#) the future of nuclear diplomacy. At a post-US election [forum](#) in Seoul, Trump's former envoy Joseph Yun anticipated that Kim Jong Un is unlikely to resume denuclearization talks with Washington given stronger DPRK capabilities and Russian support.

China-ROK Economic Diplomacy and Trade Reset

China regained its position as South Korea's biggest export market in January-July after ROK exports to the United States surpassed China's share in April-June 2023. A 38% decline in memory chip exports to China last year contributed to South Korea's first trade deficit with China since 1992. By December 2024, a recovery in semiconductor exports injected more optimism into South Korea's trade [performance](#). But the declining rate of ROK export growth from August implied longer-term concerns.



Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok speaks during the 18th Korea-China Meeting on Economic Cooperation held virtually with Zheng Shanjie, chairman of China's National Development and Reform Commission, on May 16, 2024, in this photo provided by the Ministry of Economy and Finance. (PHOTO /Yonhap)

Agreements between President Yoon and Premier Li in May included the launching of a senior-level trade dialogue, resumption of the 2nd phase of FTA talks to promote the services sector, and revival of a bilateral investment cooperation committee after a 13-year pause.



President Yoon Suk Yeol (R) and Chinese Premier Li Qiang pose for a photo during their meeting at the presidential office in Seoul on May 26, 2024. (PHOTO /Yonhap)

The latest meeting of trade officials on Nov. 28 in Yancheng supported such priorities and facilitated a China-ROK business forum on the sidelines to explore new opportunities. Supply chain stability remained a top focus of bilateral economic diplomacy from May. China's National Development and Reform Commission chairman Zheng Shangjie and ROK Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok led the 18th China-ROK Meeting on Economic Cooperation online on May 16. Choi pointed to a critical [time](#) for managing supply chains to "jointly lead the global industry," citing raw materials and critical minerals, and new industries like clean energy. South Korea's trade ministry announced new bilateral talks on July 11 "[aimed](#) at exchanging opinions on export controls." The initiative complemented director general-level economic talks in Beijing on July 29, an exchange led by China's Commerce Ministry and South Korea's Foreign Ministry since 1993.

Regional Economic Security and Unfair Play

US-China technology competition and China's e-commerce practices continued to drive China-ROK economic frictions. As US-China "[protectionist moves](#)" loomed over South Korea's export recovery path, the latest exchange of the [tightest](#)-yet export [controls](#) under Xi and Biden drew mixed responses from South Korea. The trade ministry quickly projected limited repercussions for Korean

semiconductors, [reassuring](#) the public on Seoul's close coordination with Washington. Korean analysts [suggested](#) the barriers to China's technology advancement could boost South Korea's competitiveness, but also lower future Chinese demand and raise dependence on the US market. Ahead of US elections, a *Korea Herald* editorial summarized worsening [fears](#) in the shifting chip market: "Previously, roles were clearly assigned: the US led chip design; Europe excelled in related equipment; Korea and Taiwan spearheaded chip production for the global market; and China consumed the final chip products. This old chip production structure is now expected to undergo a wave of drastic changes now that the US is pivoting to "friendshoring" to keep China's technology advance at bay."

Such structural shifts framed Beijing and Seoul's clashes over economic security and coercive diplomacy since the 2016-2017 THAAD dispute. During June 2+2 talks, Chinese officials opposed "turning economic issues into political or security ones," and "all forms of trade protectionism." ROK Industry Minister Ahn Duk-geun joined US and Japanese partners a week later in Washington to [launch](#) trilateral cooperation addressing "a wide range of non-market policies and practices" and "the weaponization of economic dependencies on certain supply sources for strategic goods." South Korean [opinion](#) in May focused on the heightened need to manage mineral import reliance given "China's strategic use of its core material resources as a geopolitical tool."

Frictions over "unfair" practices also heated up in e-commerce. South Korea's Fair Trade Commission (FTC) announced on May 13 the signing of voluntary agreements with AliExpress and Temu to address hazardous Chinese products and protect Korean consumers. By late November, the FTC ordered the online retailers to revise terms and conditions violating Korean legal standards on personal data protection and consumer compensation. Online purchases from China drove an annual 28% growth in direct overseas purchases by Korean consumers to 6.8 trillion won (\$4.9 billion) in 2023, when China represented half of South Korea's total overseas purchases. But the volume of user complaints about product quality and services has soared with China's rapid expansion into the Korean market.

Against such consumer frustrations, the Xi-Yoon summit highlighted China's granting of

visa-free entry to South Koreans in early November, its first such move since 1992, as an immediate indicator favoring friendship through cultural exchanges. Xi “especially” [welcomed](#) more youth exchanges, and expressed hopes for more steps to boost China-ROK travel from the Korean side. Foreign Minister Cho also told Wang in May that freer access to cultural content would “help [bridge](#) the emotional gap between the youths of the two countries.” But China’s recent visa exemption drew cautious reactions in South Korea amid geopolitical uncertainties. While some [supported](#) the effort to mitigate recent strain, skeptics called China’s “[sudden](#) visa waiver” a strategic act to counter US influence, called for Seoul’s “prudent diplomacy,” and cautioned that reciprocal benefits to China require balancing economic gains and “less than favorable” public attitudes.



President Yoon Suk Yeol (L) shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping during their meeting at a hotel in Lima, Peru, on Nov. 16, 2024, on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit. (PHOTO /Yonhap)

Resumption of China-DPRK Trade and Repatriation

Post-pandemic reopening and increased trade with China and Russia drove North Korea’s economic recovery, as South Korean data [showed](#) in July. After negative economic growth from 2020, North Korea marked 3% growth in 2023, a doubling of exports to \$0.33 billion, and 71% growth in imports to \$2.44 billion. Trade with China constituted 83% of total DPRK trade last year. As the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy [indicated](#) in March, although remaining below 2018-2019 pre-pandemic levels, trade with China grew by more than 120% in 2023 to \$2.29 billion, including \$2 billion in imports and \$0.29 billion in exports. Friendship Year initiatives also supported the resumption of China-DPRK people exchange. Student

exchange programs resumed with the [arrival](#) of more than 80 PRC government scholarship and self-funded students in North Korea by May. The Chinese students represented the first foreign students to enter the country since North Korea’s August 2023 border reopening.

Global attention sharpened most importantly on China’s resumption of the forced repatriation of DPRK defectors, identified as illegal “economic immigrants.” Seoul repeated its requests for Chinese support though this year’s high-level meetings. In May, Foreign Minister Cho [shared](#) “domestic and international concerns” with Wang Yi, calling for “China’s special attention and cooperation to ensure that North Korean defectors are not repatriated against their will.” Seoul continued to push the human rights issue on the UN Security Council agenda by linking Pyongyang’s weapons development and human rights violations. ROK Ambassador Hwang Joon-kook [said](#) at a June 12 meeting: “If human rights violations stop, nuclear weapons development will also stop...This is why we need to look at the DPRK human rights situation from the perspective of international peace and security.” As Security Council president that month, he also delivered a joint statement by 57 UN member-states and the EU delegation calling for stronger collaborative action. China’s deputy representative Geng Shuang maintained that the UN Security Council “should not intervene in country-specific human rights issues...We’ve always opposed the politicization of human rights issues or using human rights as a pretext to exert pressure on other countries.”

Amid Seoul’s China-ROK-Japan summit preparations in May, various reports on China’s repatriations raised public calls for stronger diplomacy. A May 7 *Korea Times* editorial [argued](#) China “should pay more attention to improving its global reputation” as a UN Security Council permanent member and “major trading nation,” and called on the Yoon government to “adopt a more assertive approach and urge China to cease such improper actions.” Recent trends extend pessimism on Chinese cooperation. North Korea’s growing isolation poses a key challenge to South Korea’s rising activism, as Seoul’s UN Human Rights Office representative James Heenan [indicated](#) in May. Reports in June of North Korea’s construction of walls within the Demilitarized Zone affirmed [views](#) of tightening regime control against external influences. At a July CSIS [event](#), ROK Unification Minister Yung Ho-kim pointed to

the rising forces of South Korean popular culture against the DPRK regime's *juche* culture of self-reliance, to promote cultural tools of influence. Such engagement strategies raised Chinese unease over threats to DPRK sovereignty. Citing President Yoon's Oct. 9 [Singapore Lecture](#) on unification, Wang Junsheng at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences [criticized](#) Yoon's intensified "ideological offensive" "to influence DPRK citizens" as a leading driver of escalating peninsula tensions.

The 75th anniversary year of China-DPRK relations heightened Beijing's challenge of promoting its global image while also consolidating its traditional friendship with Pyongyang. Mounting global criticism last year, in response to China's October 2023 repatriation of more than 500 DPRK defectors, raised hope for constraining China's actions. In August, the UN Human Rights Council Working Group on Arbitrary Detention [urged](#) China and North Korea to take steps to address the issue, after finding the case to be an "arbitrary deprivation of liberty" violating human rights norms. As Human Rights Watch [reported](#) in May, Beijing has detained more than 90 North Koreans since January, and forcibly repatriated more than 670 since Pyongyang's 2020 border closure. China's repatriation of about 60 North Koreans from Jilin and Liaoning on April 26, two weeks after China's top legislator Zhao Leji met Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang, affirmed fears of increased repatriations.

Post-2025 Prospects for China-Korea Relations

Beijing-Seoul dialogue efforts this year recharged their "[strategic cooperative partnership](#)" forged in 2008 under Hu Jintao and South Korea's conservative Lee Myung-bak administration, intended to expand ties to regional and global levels. China's Korea watchers [saw](#) "multiple positive signals" this year of Yoon's shifting China policy "beyond bilateral significance." South Korea's hosting of APEC 2025 raises much anticipation over a possible visit by Xi Jinping next year. But even Korean advocates of [practical diplomacy](#) cautioned, "President Yoon needs to moderate the speed of getting along with China" given the "mishaps" of previous administrations since Park Geun-hye, whose engagement with Xi from 2013 yielded a short-lived peak in partnership. Advancing the China-ROK partnership will require maintaining state and

public diplomacy initiatives, delinking regional economic and security strategies, and avoiding discursive clashes on ideological differences.

The November election of Trump marked a critical juncture in China-Korea relations. On the security front, supporters of [thawing](#) China-ROK relations after the Xi-Yoon summit suggested "strengthening ties with Beijing could serve as a hedge against potential disruptions in the US-South Korea alliance." Yoon's media remarks on the G20 sidelines, indicating that relations with China and the United States is not "a case of choosing one country or the other," [signaled](#) a major shift in his US alliance-centered foreign policy. While [cautioning](#) against "third party" influences, PRC Ambassador Xing Haiming in May agreed that "South Korea's efforts to develop ties with the US, and also with China, do not go against one another." Sharpened by the Xi-Putin summit, Yoon's domestic criticism in May already projected an "inevitable" policy turn raised by [voices](#) favoring a "balanced" security approach. The June Kim-Putin summit raised Beijing and Seoul's shared unease about Pyongyang's tightening military ties with Russia. But the impending return of Trump's "America First" revealed deeper South Korean anxieties about "choosing sides" on key priorities like [Taiwan](#), and the security risks posed by Trump's hardliners on China for resolving the [North Korean](#) nuclear issue.

The downward adjustments in South Korean growth projections after Trump's November election reflected even stronger pessimism about the risks from US economic policy. As the presidential [office](#) reported after assessing the potential impact of Trump's tariff plans, "A decline in China's exports to the U.S. could affect Korea's intermediate goods exports to China and may also intensify competition in third-country markets." Korean public opinion captured the worsening economic outlook featuring ripple effects from [US protectionism](#), the direct trade impact of [technology](#) restrictions on China, and wider repercussions from Chinese economic [slowdown](#). From such perspectives, US-China competition dampens South Korea's export drive if it is "[forced](#) to join a messy trade battle." The Korea International Trade Association identified Trump's tariff threats as the biggest risk facing ROK export recovery. A South Korean survey [found](#) that more than 80% of Korean companies expect Trump's protectionist policy to hurt the Korean

economy, while less than 8% think his China policy would benefit it. Such pessimism is amplified by an increasingly challenging foreign investment environment in China, where ROK direct investment dropped by 78% in 2022-2023 to \$1.87 billion. One scholar [affirmed](#) in November, “China is country where political logic is strong...one cannot merely trust China as a business partner based purely on economic logic.”

Regaining trust at both state and societal levels remains a top priority for Beijing and Seoul. During his June meeting with former ROK Prime Minister Lee Hae-chan in Beijing, Wang expressed [hopes](#) for Korean efforts “to promote a correct understanding of China in the ROK society.” As South Korea’s Ambassador to China Chung Jae-ho [argued](#) in 2012 during the transition to China’s Xi era, “the wealthier and stronger China becomes, the larger the perceptual disparity may grow between China and its regional neighbors, including South Korea.” South Korea’s internal political turmoil compounds the geopolitical and economic risks from US-China competition under Trump. While Beijing [declined](#) commenting on Korean “domestic affairs,” the Chinese state media [saw](#) Yoon’s Dec. 3 imposition of martial law as a sign of “serious divisions in ROK politics.”

In conclusion, I want to thank Rob York, Brad Glosserman, Ralph Cossa, Carl Baker, and especially Scott Snyder for the valuable opportunity to contribute to *Comparative Connections* since 2008.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

MAY-NOVEMBER 2024

May 3, 2024: PRC Vice Finance Minister Liao Min, ROK Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok, and Japanese Finance Minister Shunichi Suzuki meet on the sidelines of the 27th ASEAN+3 Finance Ministers' and Central Bank Governor's Meeting in Tbilisi, Georgia.

May 9, 2024: PRC and ROK nuclear envoys meet on the sidelines of the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue in Tokyo.

May 13-14, 2024: ROK Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul [visits](#) Beijing for talks with PRC counterpart Wang Yi.

May 13, 2024: South Korea's Fair-Trade Commission, AliExpress, and Temu chiefs sign consumer safety agreements in Seoul.

May 16, 2024: China's NDRC chairman Zheng Shangjie and ROK Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok [virtually hold](#) the 18th China-ROK Meeting on Economic Cooperation.

May 16, 2024: PRC and ROK police chiefs hold talks in Beijing.

May 22, 2024: PRC Embassy in Seoul condemns a lawmaker of South Korea's ruling People Power Party for attending Taiwan President Lai Ching-te's inauguration.

May 22, 2024: Director General of the PRC Foreign Ministry Department of Asian Affairs Liu Jinsong meets Minister of the ROK Embassy in China Kim Hankyu.

May 26, 2024: ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol and PRC Premier Li Qiang [meet](#) in Seoul.

May 27, 2024: Ninth China-ROK-Japan trilateral summit is held in Seoul.

Jun. 15, 2024: PRC, ROK, and Japanese education ministers hold trilateral talks in Seoul.

Jun. 18, 2024: China and South Korea [hold](#) 2+2 diplomatic security talks.

Jun. 19-20, 2024: Jiangsu party secretary Xin Changxing visits South Korea.

Jun. 29, 2024: PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi and former ROK Prime Minister Lee Hae-chan meet in Beijing.

Jul. 11, 2024: The first China-ROK talks on export controls are held in Beijing.

Jul. 11, 2024: Beijing and Pyongyang commemorate the 63rd anniversary of the signing of the China-DPRK Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance.

Jul. 24, 2024: Tenth China-ROK Vice Foreign Ministerial Strategic Dialogue is held in Seoul.

Jul. 26, 2024: Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Cho Tae-yul meet in Laos on the sidelines of ASEAN forums.

Jul. 29, 2024: PRC and ROK foreign ministries hold director general-level economic talks in Beijing.

Aug. 7, 2024: ROK Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Chung Byung-won meets Gansu Province's Deputy Party Secretary Shi Moujun in Seoul.

Aug. 20, 2024: PRC Vice Foreign Minister Chen Xiaodong meets a South Korean youth delegation visiting China led by Korea Foundation Executive Vice President Lee Jong-kook.

Sep. 9, 2024: Xi Jinping sends a message to Kim Jong Un for the 76th anniversary of the DPRK's founding.

Sep. 23, 2024: A Chinese foreign ministry delegation for the 2024 China-ROK Future-Oriented Exchange Program meets Deputy Minister for Political Affairs Chung Byung-won at the ROK Foreign Ministry.

Oct. 6, 2024: Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un exchange messages marking the 75th anniversary of China-DPRK diplomatic ties.

Oct. 26, 2024: China, Japan, and South Korea open the Seminar Commemorating the 25th Anniversary of Trilateral Cooperation in Changchun.

Oct. 28, 2024: PRC Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong, Deputy Minister for Political Affairs of the ROK Foreign Ministry Chung Byung-won, Senior Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan Funakoshi Takehiro, and Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat Secretary-General Lee Hee-sup hold the China-ROK-Japan senior officials' meeting in Tokyo. The three foreign ministry representatives collectively meet Japanese Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi.

Nov. 15, 2024: Presidents Xi and Yoon [meet](#) in Lima on the sidelines of the 31st APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting.

Nov. 21, 2024: China and South Korea participate in the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus in Vientiane .

Nov. 22, 2024: China's foreign ministry announces extension of visa-free travel for South Koreans from 15 to 30 days.

Nov. 24, 2024: PRC and ROK culture ministers meet in Shanghai.

Nov. 28, 2024: PRC and ROK trade officials meet in Seoul.

Nov. 29, 2024: Chinese and Russian military aircraft enters South Korea's air defense identification zone.

Nov. 29, 2024: The ROK Embassy in China announces a Dec. 10 farewell ceremony for Ambassador Chung Jae-ho.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

Movement but Minimal Progress

JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Signs of a possible improvement in Sino-Japanese relations followed a [meeting](#) between newly elected Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru and Xi Jinping on the sidelines of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) gathering in Peru on November, with the two exchanging vague promises of cooperation. Separately, China softened its position on various issues, [saying](#) that an unexpected obstruction had accidentally pushed its spy plane into Japanese airspace, allowing the [resumption](#) of imports of Nishikigoi tropical fish that had been suspended since November 2023 and [reinstating](#) visa-free entry that had been suspended in the wake of COVID. The government also indicated that it will gradually [resume](#) imports of Japanese seafood and [remove](#) a buoy in what Japan considers its exclusive economic zone, though neither has happened yet. Japanese [skeptics](#) pointed out that with no resolution on these and a number of other issues such as the detention of Japanese nationals on vaguely worded charges and sporadic violent attacks against Japanese children, it is premature to speak of Xi's long-postponed state visit to Tokyo.

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Political

While the hopeful signs mentioned above led optimistic sources in both countries to conclude that the time for improved Sino-Japanese relations had [arrived](#), contraindications abounded. Chinese ships and planes continued to fly and sail in contested areas, and in May it was announced that a US State Department officer would be [deployed](#) to the embassy in Tokyo to work under the State's Office of China Coordination, informally known as China House, to monitor Chinese "problematic" behavior and consider countermeasures. The position's duties include cooperation with the Japanese government to collect more information about China's coercive activities.



Figure 1 Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa, on the left, shakes hands with Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi. Photo: Japanese Foreign Ministry

On China's part, and also in May it was announced that the Hong Kong Museum of Coastal Defense was to be [converted](#) into the Hong Kong Museum of the War of Resistance & Coastal Defense with the inauguration taking place on Sept. 3, the date marking victory in the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1931-45). The four existing exhibition galleries about the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression in the HKMCD cover different parts of war history such as the Japanese invasion of China, the fall of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong and Kowloon Independent Brigade of the East River Column behind enemy lines and the fighters' contributions, and the surrender of Japan. Such efforts, plus the attention given to Japanese behavior during World War II in school curricula are believed to be instrumental in attacks on Japanese in China. The killing of a 10-year-old Japanese boy on his way to school occurred on

Sept. 18, the anniversary of the 1931 Mukden/Shenyang incident and an earlier [attack](#) on a Japanese mother and child in front of a bus taking Japanese children to school are attributed to such actions, with the Chinese government responding to criticism by saying it as simply recounting what had happened. However, the government also vitriolically condemned anti-Japanese social media with an editorial in the official Renmin Ribao [stating](#) "We will .. not accept the hype of 'xenophobia' and hate speech by individuals...this is unacceptable to mainstream Chinese society and to us Chinese." Still, verbal attacks are ongoing and those netizens who [attributed](#) blame to their own government's teachings had their posts [removed](#) from social media.

In May Chinese milk tea brand Xiang Piao Piao [saw](#) a 400% surge on its live-streaming sales in China after a netizen discovered that MECO fruit tea, a Xiang Piao Piao brand, sold products in a store in Japan with slogans on their cup sleeves showing "the ocean is not Japan's sewer" and "0.1% of the land pollutes 70% of the ocean." The picture was then exposed on Chinese media social platforms. In October, China's ultra-nationalist "little pinks" called for a [boycott](#) of major milk powder company Feihe following reports that it signed a letter of intent to develop a lactoferrin-based infant formula product with Japan's Kyowa Hakko Biochemical Co. Yet Chinese state media lined up to support Feihe, which is listed as a key research and development company in China's 14th Five Year Plan, with a Xinhua op-ed claiming that Feihe had been "unreasonably slandered." The conclusion was that although China has long used nationalism as a tool to build "unity" in the face of a foreign opponent, there appear to be limits on how far Beijing will allow it to go.

In a gesture of goodwill applauded by Beijing's nationalistic *Global Times*, in August a Japanese foundation [began](#) Project Dongwang Xigui ("looking east, returning west") announcing an initiative to promote the return of Chinese cultural artifacts scattered in Japan to China. Japanese musicians are increasingly popular on Chinese stages, though the driving force behind this trend is not so much popularity but a disparity in appearance fees, since Japanese artists typically command lower fees than their Chinese counterparts. Nonetheless, [according](#) to Nikkei, this suits Japan's ambitions to tap into the lucrative Chinese market. A delegation from Fujian [led](#) by the province's party head in July,

said to be acting on the consensus reached between their respective state leaders, was described as continuing traditional friendships, further deepening the exchanges of sister-city relationships, and making new contributions to the comprehensive bilateral relationship. Japan is Fujian's sixth-largest trading partner, fifth-largest export market and an important source of foreign investment.

In October, China and Japan [held](#) their 17th round of high-level consultations on maritime affairs in Tokyo, agreeing to make the East China Sea a sea of peace, cooperation, and friendship.

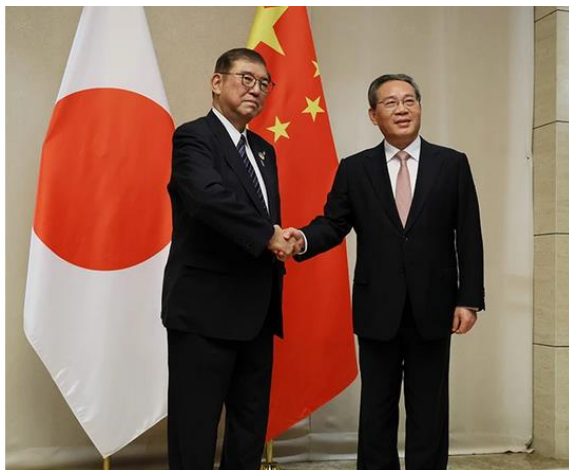


Figure 2 Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, left, and Chinese Premier Li Qiang shake hands before their meeting in Vientiane, Laos, on Oct. 10. Photo The Asahi Shimbun

Each side argued its case during foreign trips with, for example, separate visits to Paris by then-Prime Minister Kishida Fumio and Xi Jinping. French expert Celine Pajon [characterized](#) Xi Jinping's visit to Paris as lacking substance, contrasting it with Kishida's success in securing agreements on supply chains for critical minerals and beginning negotiations for a reciprocal access agreement to facilitate joint military training and exercises. She opined that although French officials tend to perceive Japan as overly aligned with the US and too assertive toward China, Japanese counterparts regard France as sometimes too yielding toward Beijing, with Pajon believing that it would make sense for France and Japan to embrace each other more closely, given the alignment of their positions. Pajon noted that Japan's multifaceted approach toward China, which includes deterrence, counterbalancing, and conditional cooperation against a backdrop

of guarding its economic security shares many similarities with the French and European de-risking stance that views China as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival.

In August, as part of a plan to diversify Central Asian states' dependence on China and Russia, Kishida [visited](#) Central Asia in mid-August, meeting with the leaders of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. At a summit in Kazakhstan, he signaled Japan's support for regional efforts to achieve carbon neutrality, offering technology from Japanese companies such as fossil-fuel power plants with low carbon emissions and helping the countries manufacture value-added exports, such as hydrogen and fertilizer produced with natural gas. Kishida's agenda included discussions on a Caspian Sea shipping route linking Central Asia and Europe that bypasses Russia, which Central Asian nations have favored since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Japan will also provide intangible assistance such as implementing digital technology in customs procedures and encouraging countries to make use of Japan's skilled worker program to train talent and promote person-to-person exchanges. As the report period closed, the government [announced](#) that such items as radars for vigilance and surveillance would be provided free of charge to the Philippines, Indonesia, Mongolia, and Djibouti.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, many wealthy Chinese who are attracted by the low prices occasioned by Japan's weak yen, declining economic growth in the PRC, and frustrated with Beijing's autocratic political system, are [moving](#) to Japan. At the end of 2023, Japan had 822,000 Chinese residents, up 60,000 from 2022 this being the biggest jump in recent years. People who invest the equivalent of at least \$32,000 in a Japanese business that has a permanent office and two or more employees can get a business-management visa. Beijing restricts how much its residents can take out of the country, but many Chinese buyers own companies with international operations or have overseas investments. Many have bank accounts in Hong Kong or Singapore from which they can wire money or can mobilize friends and relatives to carry cash little by little over a few months. While most are not political, Chinese officials are aware that in the early 20th century an exile group led by Sun Yat-sen attempted to mobilize support to overthrow the Qing dynasty,

and worry that the current community might do the same. In November, Human Rights Watch [reported](#) that Chinese authorities are targeting and intimidating expatriates in Japan. Most of those interviewed said they had been contacted by Chinese police, who pressured them to end their activities in Japan. Some reported receiving calls from authorities through their relatives back home, while others were approached at the Chinese embassy in Tokyo. The report states that several Tibetans said they faced pressure from the Chinese government after engaging in activities to promote Tibetan culture in Japan. One Tibetan individual told HRW that when they went to the Chinese embassy in Tokyo to renew their passport, embassy officials told them they needed to return to Tibet to do so. The person said they rejected the embassy's recommendation, fearing they would be detained or face punishment.

In November Japanese national security adviser Akiba Takeo [visited](#) China seeking to lay the groundwork for a meeting between the leaders of the two countries' leaders though critics argued that given the outstanding issues between their countries, such a meeting was premature.

Economic

Both countries' economies are described as [fragile](#). The Japanese economy [expanded](#) by an annualized 0.9% in Q3 highlighting Japan's tepid economic recovery, as domestic demand has not fully picked up while a growing risk of a slowdown in the US and further weakness in China's economy could weigh on exports ahead. China's economy expanded 4.6% year on year in the third quarter, slower than in the previous three months—significantly below the government's target for full-year growth of 5%—and underlining faltering growth as Beijing stepped up efforts to boost the economy as sluggish consumption and a property slump weighed on household sentiment. In September Beijing [announced](#) its biggest monetary stimulus since the pandemic and followed up with promises of heavy fiscal spending, with economists doubting that it would have the desired effect.

Japanese investment into China [declined](#). A survey by Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry reported that Japanese companies were pulling away from China, with capital investments by local subsidiaries declining for

the seventh consecutive quarter in April–June and falling below the amount invested in Europe. Reasons for the decline included the slowdown in the Chinese economy, increased competition from indigenous Chinese brands, concerns for safety after the detention of Japanese businesspeople on vaguely defined charges, and related uncertainty about the application of China's espionage law. Employees at four Japanese companies [told](#) Asahi that some big firms had given Japanese employees and their families the option to be relocated home at the company's expense, or are considering doing so. The executive and the employees declined to give any further details, and it is not known how many plan to take advantage of the offer.



Figure 3 Gen Nakatani and EU Foreign Policy Chief, Josep Borrell. Photo: Japan Times

In September, Mitsubishi chief executive officer Nakanishi Katsuya called for a more [active](#) strategy from the government to help Japanese companies counter increasing Chinese competition in their traditional stronghold of Southeast Asia. His comments echoed the alarm privately expressed by other executives and government officials, who fear Japanese market share in Southeast Asia is being eroded as Chinese companies increase exports and investment. Still, Mitsubishi, with \$6.4 billion in annual profits, remains one of the biggest of the sogo shosha, or general trading houses, with a long history of navigating complicated geopolitical situations.

Distressed Japanese businesses provide opportunities for Chinese interests. Sovereign wealth fund China Investment Corporation was reported [targeting](#) undervalued small and midsize Japanese businesses, many of them unlisted, with the potential to thrive in China's massive market. CIC has created an

international advisory council that includes former and current executives from American and European financial institutions to show transparency but the fund provides very limited information about the companies in which it invests and there are concerns that Chinese money might eventually pose an economic security risk to Japan.

Despite continuing to lose market share to China, Japanese auto manufacturers plan to stay. Aiming to [secure](#) a 30% share of the global software-defined vehicle (SDV) sales market, against leading US and Chinese manufacturers in automotive technologies, Toyota, Honda, and Nissan agreed to promote collaboration on developing in-car software and are considering standardizing specifications for functions of car computers such as window opening and wiper movement. SDVs are next-generation cars that can add new functions and enhance abilities by updating software via the internet. Hence, they enable the company to earn money even after selling the cars, with China already boosting the development of leading-edge technologies by the standardizing application programming interface (API) that serves as the link between the software and other systems.

Large Japanese corporations with outlets in several countries were able to weather losses and regroup. Major clothing retailer Uniqlo whose parent Fast Retailing reported a large profit fall in China and Hong Kong during the three months through May by July, [described](#) itself as at a turning point with its store-opening strategy in China. Uniqlo plans a “scrap and build” policy in the PRC, closing stores with low monthly sales and opening larger ones in better locations. Meanwhile Fast Retailing nonetheless recorded a 13.5% increase in sales from a year earlier, helped by a 19.4% rise in overseas sales driven by Europe and North America.

Frosty government-to-government relations notwithstanding, both sides are aware of the interlinked nature of their economic prosperity. In May, Jiji [reported](#) that while state-level exchanges between the two remained almost halted local government were actively interacting with each other to enhance trade. There were winners and losers in the competition. In July, Nippon Steel announced that it would [withdraw](#) from a joint venture with Baoshan Iron & Steel, marking a turning point in a 21-year relationship that was a symbol of

China's progress in modernizing its steel industry. This will result in a 70% reduction in Nippon Steel's steel production capacity in China. Chinese steelmakers, who continue to produce at high levels despite falling demand for their products as the domestic economy slows, present stiff price and quality competition, as the shift to EVs reduces Chinese demand for Japanese cars. On the other hand, factory automation supplier Fanuc [raised](#) its annual net profit outlook by \$117 million on a recovery in orders from China, where government subsidies drove demand despite a sluggish economy. Demand also grew for Fanuc's metalworking Robodrills which are used for making smartphone bodies. This occurred as Fanuc's sales fell worldwide due to lackluster demand in Europe and Japan.

Competition did not preclude cooperation where it was mutually beneficial. On October, the People's Bank of China (PBOC) and the Bank of Japan [agreed](#) to renew their bilateral currency swap deal amounting to 200 billion yuan (about \$28.13 billion), or 3.4 trillion Japanese yen. The agreement, which aims to stabilize the financial markets of both countries and support bilateral economic and financial activities, will be valid for a three-year period and can be extended by mutual consent. In early Nov. in its first visit to China in eight years, a [delegation](#) of the Japan Association of Corporate Executives (Keizai Doyukai) asked China to exempt short-term visitors from visa requirements (later granted) and called for China's active participation in the 2025 Osaka-Kansai Expo. Regional organizations also visited. As the report period closed, a delegation from Kansai Economic Federation (Kankeiren) [visited](#). While affirming its desire to trade also advised China to learn from the deflation that Japan experienced over the past 30 years and asked that China expand domestic demand to improve its business environment.

Defense



Figure 4 Defense Minister Gen Nakatani attends the NATO defense ministers' meeting held in Brussels on Oct. 17. Photo: The Asahi Shimbun, Nen Satomi

Both sides advanced their military capabilities with China facing resistance over its claims in the East China and South China seas and Taiwan and Japan principally worried about its control over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and the effect that a PRC invasion of Taiwan would have for it.

Chinese media touted the [debut](#) of its J-35A stealth jet at the Zhuhai airshow. A variant, the J-35, is designed for use on aircraft carriers. With the J-35A joining the J-20 in service, China [became](#) only the second nation in the world to operate two different fifth-generation stealthy fighters: the US flies the F-22A Raptor and F-35 Lightning II. A variety of other weapons including a 10-ton drone [mothership](#) said to be capable of launching drones in mid-air and then managing them to carry out operations was also exhibited. Further raising anxieties was the expansion of the PRC's nuclear arsenal, now believed to total 500 warheads with over a thousand [expected](#) by 2030.

In May the Japanese government announced the creation of a new Japanese research center to [develop](#) both transformational breakthrough technologies and civilian applications for defense technologies during peacetime. Modeled on institutions such as the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and the Defense Innovation Unit based in Silicon Valley, the center will research new, more sensitive methods to detect submarines from a distance using subatomic particles and electromagnetic waves, since conventional sonar has become less effective following technological improvements that have made subs quieter.

Japan's 2024 Defense White Paper [stated](#) *inter alia*, that Japan is facing the most severe and complex security environment since the end of World War II, and that it could not be ruled out that a serious situation similar to Russia's aggression against Ukraine may occur in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in East Asia, adding that China was intensifying its activities across the entire region surrounding Japan, including in the East China Sea, particularly in the area around the Senkaku Islands, the Sea of Japan, and the western Pacific Ocean and extending beyond the so-called first island chain to the second island chain.

In terms of weapons upgrades, in Sept. the Japanese defense ministry [signed](#) contracts for two Aegis-equipped vessels, to play a central role in ballistic missile defense. They are also expected to carry an improved version of the Type 12 surface-to-ship guided missiles to provide powerful counterattack capabilities, as well as missiles that can intercept hypersonic glide vehicle weapons. The ministry also plans to [build](#) a satellite constellation network for guided missiles to replace the current satellites which cannot be used to lock onto moving targets. The intent is to strengthen the nation's information-gathering capabilities. Japan also aims to enhance production capabilities of hypersonic guided missiles and to acquire an improved version of the Type 12 surface-to-ship guided missiles. Deployment of US-made Tomahawk cruise missiles and other new weapons will begin in fiscal 2025. Other budget requests will enhance production capabilities for hypersonic guided missiles and acquire an improved version of the Type 12 surface-to-ship guided missiles. And, to [improve](#) its ability to deal with Chinese encroachments in the East China Sea including the area around the Senkaku Islands, the coast guard is to construct its largest-ever multipurpose patrol vessel, to function as an offshore base capable of carrying a number of small boats and to deter incursions onto the islands. However, Japan's military capabilities continue to be bedeviled by personnel problems. Despite generous enhancements to enlist, the SDFs [recruitment](#) in 2023 was barely over half the desired number.

With far fewer financial resources to commit to defense than China and hindered by vocal, though diminishing, voices of opposition on military budgets, Japan reached out to like-minded countries for partnerships. Principal among these was the United States. At the end of

July, warning that China's aggressive posture [posed](#) the "greatest strategic challenge" in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, the US and Japan outlined the most significant upgrade to their joint military alliance since 1960. Coordination between the allies had long been hampered because, although roughly 50,000 US military personnel are based in Japan, US Forces Japan lacked command and control authority, with its authority limited to supervising Japan-US joint training exercises and managing troops. Tokyo had to deal with the US Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii, which is 19 hours behind Tokyo and 6,500 km away. The upgrade involves placing a three-star commander with accompanying staff in Japan, and the USFJ will be reconstituted as a joint force headquarters to allow the two militaries to co-operate and plan more seamlessly, particularly in a crisis such as a Taiwan conflict. Japan had [requested](#) a four-star commander but since US military units based in Hawaii and Guam would be the main force in the event of a crisis such as a Taiwan contingency, the ultimate command authority for US forces in Japan will remain with the Indo-Pacific Command, whose commander will likely be the counterpart of the head of the Japan's SDF Joint Operations Command. The Kishida administration, wanting to [demonstrate](#) the strength of the Japan-US alliance in response to developments in China and North Korea, expressed satisfaction that the operative commander who is responsible for Japan's defense will actually be stationed in Japan.

Strengthening ties with multinational organizations was also on Japan's agenda. To China's displeasure, Kishida [attended](#) the annual NATO meeting, with Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian [saying](#) that Japan must not interfere in China's domestic affairs and act as a "vanguard" of NATO's Asia-Pacific expansion. Japan has also [hinted](#) that it would like to join the Five Eyes intelligence sharing agreement of Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and the US. However, apart from Japan becoming the only non-Anglophone member, there are concerns about its ability to safeguard secrets. As Kishida's successor, Ishiba has come out in favor of the formation of an Asian NATO. though Biden administration officials [reacted](#) coolly with Daniel Kritenbrink, assistant secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific affairs, saying "it's too early to talk about collective security" in the region... "We're continuing to build this network of formal and informal relationships and then we'll see where

that goes to." Ishiba has also [suggested](#) that Japan could be added to ANZUS as JANZUS.

Support from other countries continues to be sought. In May, a meeting of the defense chiefs of Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the US issued a joint [statement](#) expressing serious concern over China's "repeated obstruction of...freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. Japan and the Philippines are discussing a reciprocal access agreement (RAA) that will facilitate exchanges between their militaries similar to an agreement concluded last year between Japan and Australia. At the same time, Kishida met French President Emmanuel Macron and [agreed](#) to start formal talks on a reciprocal troop access deal and strengthening military cooperation amid rising maritime tensions in the Indo-Pacific region and the war in Ukraine. Reciprocal access agreements (RAAs) make the entry of foreign personnel and equipment easier for the visiting force. France has territories in the Indo-Pacific and stations armed forces in the region, where it has sought to develop its presence, and wants to can play a bigger role in Japan's defense industry as Kishida adopts a more muscular military policy in the region. The Italian Navy's aircraft carrier Cavour and frigate Alpino [arrived](#) at the MSDF base in Yokosuka to conduct joint training exercises with the MSDF in response to China's increasing maritime presence. In August, ships from Canada, New Zealand, Singapore, Italy, called at the Yokosuka base. Germany also expressed concerns, with Rear Adm. Axel Schulz, commander of the German navy's 2nd Flotilla, [telling](#) Nikkei that although Germany has no overseas territories, a conflict in the Asia-Pacific would have massive adverse consequences since it is a major export nation, and that it intended to strengthen ties with Japan.

Japan also reached out to support smaller nations to resist Chinese encroachment. It has [sent](#) the Maritime Self-Defense Force and coast guard to the Marshall Islands to help improve the Marshallese coast guard's capabilities through joint drills and other activities. This marked the first time that the MSDF and the JCG jointly landed on a Pacific island nation to offer such assistance. The China-leaning South China Morning Post [described](#) then-Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko's 10-day tour to Madagascar, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and Nepal as aimed at selling itself as the Global South's China counterweight against China's aggressive

maritime expansion. Among other results was an announcement that the Japanese government will [provide](#) Sri Lanka with a vessel and sonar system worth about ¥1 billion (\$6.6 million) in total as Kamikawa emphasized Japan's position on realizing a free and open Indo-Pacific and demonstrated support for Sri Lanka, which sits in a strategic position along sea lanes. China has been making advances into the Indian Ocean in recent years.

The Future



Figure 5 LDP Diet member Nikai Toshiro shakes hands with Zhao Leji, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, in Beijing on Aug. 28. Credit: Kyodo, accessed at Nikkei, Aug. 28, 2024.

Whether these hopeful signs will result in warmer Sino-Japanese relations remains to be seen. Even if Xi Jinping pays the state visit that Tokyo has long desired, Ishiba, due to his party and its coalition partner losing their majority in the Diet, will be in a weak negotiating position. He is known as a defense hawk which will give Xi little incentive to remove the offensive buoy, resume seafood imports, or reduce even temporarily the tempo of Chinese encroachments in the East China Sea. Conversely, Ishiba has little leeway to concede to China on territorial issues and Taiwan. The most likely outcome is a continuation of efforts to manage tensions rather than resolve underlying issues.

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

MAY - NOVEMBER 2024

May 3, 2024: Defense chiefs from the US, Australia, Japan, and the Philippines [meet](#) in Hawaii for their second-ever joint meeting and vowed to deepen cooperation amid concerns about China's operations in the South China Sea. The meeting comes after the four countries last month held their first joint naval exercises in the South China Sea.

May 3, 2024: Prime Minister Kishida [sends](#) a video message to a meeting of people in favor of revising the constitution on the Constitution Day holiday, saying that "amending the constitution is increasingly becoming an imminent and important issue." *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) in favor of the revision, saying that in light of the "extremely deteriorated security environment, in-depth discussions of Article 9 are also essential" and citing the paper's survey indicating that 63% of respondents were positive about constitutional revision. *Asahi* [opposes](#) revision, saying that although preparing for security emergencies is obviously important protecting values such as the freedom and human rights advocated by the constitution, and preventing war should be the foremost priority.

May 4, 2024: A joint [statement](#) by the defense chiefs of Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the US in Honolulu expresses serious concern over China's "repeated obstruction of ... freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea.

May 4, 2024: Aimed at reining in China's aggressive maritime expansion, the Japanese government announces it will [provide](#) Sri Lanka with a vessel and sonar system worth about ¥1 billion (\$6.6 million).

May 4, 2024: *South China Morning Post* [describes](#) Foreign Minister Kamikawa's 10-day tour to Madagascar, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and Nepal as Japan selling itself as Global South's China counterweight.

May 6, 2024: Chinese milk tea brand Xiang Piao Piao [sees](#) a 400% surge on its live streaming sales in China after a netizen discovered that MECO fruit tea, a Xiang Piao Piao brand, sells

products in a store in Japan with slogans on their cup sleeves showing "the ocean is not Japan's sewer" and "0.1% of the land pollutes 70% of the ocean."

May 7, 2024: Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi Yoshimasa [announces](#) with no further details the government's intention to set up an expert panel to begin full-fledged deliberations on the introduction of "active cyber defense" to prevent serious cyber-attacks by infiltrating the attacking party's servers.

May 10, 2024: With bipartisan support, the Diet [approves](#) legislation restricting access to economic security information will require government officials, company employees and others to undergo background checks to obtain government clearance to handle sensitive information with leaks punishable by up to five years in prison or a maximum fine of 5 million yen.

May 13, 2024: Reports state that Japanese government will [send](#) the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) and coast guard to the Marshall Islands to help improve its coast guard's capabilities through joint drills and other activities.

May 13, 2024: Japanese intelligence agency [obtains](#) a document from a Shanghai-based tech company with ties to the Chinese government that it suspects of developing a system to manipulate public opinion via accounts on the X social media platform, believing that it is connected with China's activities to manipulate public opinion overseas.

May 14, 2024: *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) against the SDFs' inadequate security, which allowed a drone to intrude into a military base and take aerial footage close to the deck of a destroyer.

May 16, 2024: Yuan Keqin, a Chinese national who taught at Hokkaido University of Education until detained by China in 2019, is [sentenced](#) to six years in prison for violating the PRC's anti-espionage law.

May 16, 2024: Cabinet office [discloses](#) that Japan's economy shrank at an annualized rate of 2%, or 0.5% on a nonannualized basis, in January–March in inflation-adjusted real terms, the first drop in two quarters.

May 17, 2024: To [encourage](#) enlistment, the MSDF will be providing global internet access to its personnel while deployed at sea. Previously, limited satellite connection times restricted crew members to sending or receiving emails, with pre-approved contacts only, twice a day for brief periods.

May 17, 2024: Although Yonaguni Island's 1,500 residents [voted](#) in favor of hosting an SDF base in 2015 Ambassador Rahm Emanuel's visit to the island—the first US ambassador to do so—arouses concerns on plans to expand the base and deploy surface-to-air missiles as a deterrent to any Chinese designs on Japan's vulnerable outlying islands.

May 19, 2024: Hoping to [increase](#) Japan's cyber defense capabilities to a level on par with North American and European countries by authorizing the government to access an attacker's server to neutralize their attack as well as other actions, the LDP begins discussions on enabling the government to conduct active cyber defense.

May 19, 2024: US State Department officer is reported to be [deployed](#) to the embassy in Tokyo to monitor problematic behavior of China and consider countermeasures.

May 19, 2024: Hong Kong Museum of Coastal Defence (HKMCD) will be [converted](#) into the Hong Kong Museum of the War of Resistance & Coastal Defence on Sept. 3, the date marking victory in the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1931–45).

May 20, 2024: Ambassador to China Kanasugi Kenji holds [talks](#) with Anhui Gov. Wang Qingxian during his visit to the province, expressing hopes of enhancing the two countries' ties in culture and youth exchange as well as improving the business environment for Japanese-affiliated companies and increasing flows of people.

May 20, 2024: According to a Japanese source based in China, about 60 governors and mayors in Japan [visited](#) China in the Japanese fiscal year that ended in March. China visits by prefectural and municipal heads became active around last July and are expected to remain robust.

May 20, 2024: *Jiji* [reports](#) that while state-level exchanges remain almost halted local government leaders of Japan and China are actively interacting with each other.

May 21, 2024: *Yomiuri* reports that Taiwan's newly inaugurated President Lai Ching-te showed the importance he places on Japan on Monday by lunching with a Japanese nonpartisan group and meeting with various other guests from Japan immediately after taking office.

May 21, 2024: *Asahi* [editorializes](#) that Xi Jinping rethink his aggressive, unyielding policy toward Taiwan, which lacks tolerance and flexibility, in light of the mutual benefits.

May 22, 2024: Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi Yoshimasa's strong [protest](#) against Chinese ambassador's (see above May 21) remark that "the Japanese people will be dragged into the flames if Japan gets involved in any attempt to divide China" is widely reported in both Japanese and international media.

May 24, 2024: Unnamed diplomats [interviewed](#) by *Reuters* have low expectations that the first trilateral summit among China, Japan, and South Korea and hosted by Seoul can go beyond surface-level cordiality, though two anonymous Japanese foreign ministry officials said that the resumption of the summit after a long gap—since 2019—was important for optics.

May 24, 2024: [Meeting](#) with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in Tokyo, Kishida expresses willingness to strengthen bilateral cooperation on maritime security in view of China's hegemonic moves in the South China Sea.

May 25, 2024: An editorial in *Asahi*, normally sympathetic to China, [states](#) "Beijing's saber-rattling in a belligerent reaction to the newly inaugurated Taiwanese president's speech is completely off the rails."

May 26, 2024: During a meeting of a consultative expert group set up by the two governments China [demands](#) that Japan expand the scope of its environmental assessment around the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

May 26, 2024: [Speaking](#) with Premier Li Qiang on the sidelines of a trilateral summit in Seoul, Kishida asks for an immediate lifting of its ban on Japanese seafood products and conveys Japan's "serious concern" over China's recent military expansion, emphasizing that Tokyo believes stability in the Taiwan Strait is "crucial" not only for the region but also for the international community.

May 27, 2024: Trilateral summit [pledged](#) that China, Japan, and Korea would cooperate on: people-to-people exchanges; sustainable development including through climate change response; economic cooperation and trade; public health and aging societies; science, technology and digital transformation; and disaster relief and safety.

May 27, 2024: GSDF [holds](#) the Fuji Firepower Exercise 2024, its largest-scale annual live ammunition drill, in which 2,100 personnel practice responses against unnamed enemy forces landing on a remote Japanese island.

May 28, 2024: Slowdown in China's economy is affecting Japanese retail giant Uniqlo, with its parent company Fast Retailing announcing that it was [cutting](#) back its plans to open 80 new stores to 55. It may shut some locations and do more with ecommerce and livestream commerce, the latter becoming an increasingly popular form of shopping on Chinese social media apps.

May 28, 2024: ASDF fighters are [scrambled](#) when a Chinese military reconnaissance and strike unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), the W-10 flies into Japan's Air Defense Identification Zone over the East China Sea. The drone did not intrude into Japanese territorial airspace. Four types of Chinese UAVs have been making flights but this is the first time a WL-10 has been confirmed.

May 28, 2024: Marking the 158th consecutive day since Dec. 22, 2023 that Chinese coast guard vessels have entered Japan's contiguous waters,

the longest period on record, four vessels sail inside Japan's contiguous zone approximately 22 km outside its territorial waters.

May 29, 2024: Citing unnamed diplomatic sources, *Yomiuri* [reports](#) that Japan refused to agree to China's demand that the trilateral summit's joint declaration include the term "industrial chains" as an area in which to strengthen cooperation, believing that the expression reflects China's attempt to dominate the global market in key industrial sectors.

May 29, 2024: [Meeting](#) with Kishida in Tokyo, Liu Jianchao, head of the CCP's international department, admonishes Japan to abide by the "one China principle" and "earnestly" maintain a political foundation for its bilateral relations with China.

May 30, 2024: LDP Secretary General Motegi Toshimitsu and Liu Jianchao, head of the CCP's International Liaison Department, [agree](#) to restart a forum for exchange between the Japanese and Chinese ruling parties suspended after 2018.

June 1, 2024: Public [reporting](#) on the first meeting between Defense Minister Kihara Minoru and Chinese counterpart Dong Jun on the sidelines of the Shangri-La forum in Singapore indicated little.

June 4, 2024: Foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning [expresses](#) strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition against remarks made by military officials from Japan, the US, and South Korea to criticize China on issues regarding South China Sea and Taiwan.

June 4, 2024: Security cameras at the Yasukuni Shrine [show](#) a Chinese man spray painting "toilet" in English on the stone pillar bearing the name of the shrine and urinating against it.

June 4, 2024: Japanese government [names](#) prefectures mainly in the Kyushu region as planned shelters for residents of five municipalities of the Sakishima Islands in the event of a Taiwan contingency.

June 4, 2024: *Global Times* [accuses](#) Japan of cognitive warfare techniques to whitewash its irresponsible discharge of nuclear contaminated wastewater into the sea.

June 8, 2024: To [improve](#) its ability to deal with China's increasingly hegemonic behavior in the East China Sea including the area around the Senkaku Islands, the Japan Coast Guard will construct its largest-ever multipurpose patrol vessel, to function as an offshore base capable of carrying a number of small boats and to deter incursions onto the islands.

June 10, 2024: Cabinet office [revises](#) earlier 2.0% decline in GDP to 1.8% in the first quarter of 2014. Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi expects a moderate improvement in economic output in Q2.

June 11, 2024: China Coast Guard [harassment](#) of a Japanese surveillance vessel near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands earlier this year included jamming the frequencies of some surveillance drones.

June 12, 2024: Japan's Panasonic [plans](#) to adopt China's minimalist approach to designing consumer electronics as it struggles to fend off challenges from Chinese rivals such as Haier Group and the Midea Group, particularly in Southeast Asia.

June 12, 2024: At least 50% of Japan's exports of semiconductor manufacturing equipment [went](#) to China for a third straight quarter in the three months through March, amid an apparent surge in demand for less advanced gear spurred by US-led trade restrictions.

June 16, 2024: A task force member for a comprehensive review of renewable energy regulations [resigns](#) after she carelessly submitted a document containing digital data from China's state-run power company, State Grid Corporation of China, to the Cabinet Office's discussion forum on Japanese energy policy. This raised suspicions that Japan's energy policy might be distorted by China's intentions.

June 17, 2024: Referencing a report published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute saying that Beijing is increasing its nuclear arsenal faster than any other country, Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi [expresses](#) worry about the "rapid and unclear" expansion.

June 18, 2024: Immigration consultants and analysts [observe](#) a sharp increase in inquiries

from Chinese people, both rich and middle class, looking to move to Japan.

June 19, 2024: As the regional security environment becomes more severe amid China's growing military assertiveness, Kishida and New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon effectively [agree](#) on a pact to enhance classified information sharing, express concern over the situation in the South China Sea, and affirm the significance of working together to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific, a vision advocated by Japan in a veiled bid to counter China.

June 20, 2024: Speaking at a press conference for a Japan Hong Kong Democracy Summit, exiled Hong Kong activists [call](#) for Japanese support against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s transnational repression. Activist Finn Lau described having a bounty of a million Hong Kong dollars placed on him. Among the Diet members attending was former defense minister Nakatani Gen, who pledged to urge his government to send firm messages to Hong Kong, demanding human rights be protected.

June 20, 2024: In a [survey](#) conducted by *Reuters* from June 5-14, 61% of Japanese companies see no need for their government to follow the US in raising tariffs on Chinese imports, saying excessive production capacity in China's industrial sector does not affect them; about 53% replied that China's excessive production capacity had little to no impact on their business.

June 20, 2024: [Noting](#) the surprise victory of the LDP in Okinawan elections despite strong opposition to the presence of US bases on the island, Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* suggests that Okinawans have been rethinking their views in response to China ramping up its pressure on Taiwan.

June 21, 2024: Japan [imposes](#) trade restrictions on China-based companies as part of a fresh round of sanctions against individuals and groups supporting Russia's war on Ukraine. The restrictions also apply to firms in India, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

June 21, 2024: [Responding](#) to the Japanese foreign ministry's statement of serious concern over repeated actions that obstruct freedom of navigation and increase regional tensions, a

spokesperson for China's embassy in Japan says that Japan is not a party to the South China Sea issue and has no right to intervene in China-Philippines maritime matters.

June 21, 2024: Due to a significant [drop](#) in sales due to the rise of low-priced electric vehicles in China, Nissan is shutting down its car plant in the city of Changzhou, Jiangsu province, one of eight plants that it operates under its joint venture with China's Dongfeng Motor.

June 22, 2024: Interviewed by *Nikkei* in Washington, commandant of the US marine corps Gen. Eric Smith [says](#) that the new Marine Littoral Regiment founded in November is meant to come to the defense of Japan's remote islands quickly in the event of an attack and also to protect the Philippines and South Korea.

June 24, 2024: According to the Japan Coast Guard's regional headquarters in Naha, two Haijing Chinese Coast Guard vessels [enter](#) what Japan considers its territorial waters off the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands for the fourth consecutive day. As they approach, a Japanese fishing JCG warn the vessels to leave.

June 26, 2024: DM Kihara [announces](#) that the ASDF will hold joint drills with the German, French, and Spanish air forces from July 19-25 for the purpose of deepening cooperative ties to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific.

June 26, 2024: Chinese national security officials [visit](#) the 87-year-old mother of Osaka-based Japanese citizen Liu Yanzhi at the family home in Hunan to demand that Liu not write unpatriotic books. Liu's book *Fushi no Bomeisha* (Immortal Emigré), published at the end of May, discusses 10 intellectuals in and outside of China.

June 27, 2024: A joint [statement](#) following the inaugural meeting of the commerce and industry ministers of Japan, South Korea, and the US voices "concerns over the weaponization of economic dependencies on certain supply sources for strategic goods," apparently with China in mind.

June 27, 2024: Citing media reports that the Japanese Cabinet has issued decrees to expand the continental shelf of the Ogasawara Plateau, which is located on the east side of the Father

Island in the Ogasawara Islands, by 120,000 sq. km., a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson [protests](#) the move as contravening the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and international practice.

June 27, 2024: After a hiatus of over four years, [negotiations](#) for the China-Japan-South Korea Free Trade Agreement resume, with the focus on a higher level of liberalization that goes beyond the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement, particularly in areas such as automobiles and key components.

June 28, 2024: A Chinese assistant on a Japanese school bus who intervened to protect a Japanese mother and her child from a knife attack [dies](#) of wounds she received.

July 1, 2024: A Japanese delegation to China led by former speaker of the House of Representatives Kono Yohei to promote economic relations with Japan expresses [concerns](#) about the safety of Japanese nationals engaged in bilateral economic interactions.

July 2, 2024: [Surveys](#) of Chinese factory managers show a mixed outlook in June, with growth steady. The Purchasers Managers Index (PMI) for new export orders slipped to 49.4 from 49.6, perhaps reflecting announcements by the EU and US of plans to increase their tariffs on imports of electric vehicles from China.

July 2, 2024: Chinese conglomerate Fosun International will [sell](#) Japanese ski destination Hoshino Resorts Tomamu for 40.8 billion yen (\$252 million), as Fosun sheds nonstrategic assets in the face of a slumping Chinese property market.

July 4, 2024: In [response](#) to news that the second 2+2 Japan-Philippines meeting since April 2022 will be held in July and that the two will sign a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), that will allow their respective militaries to visit each other's soil.

July 5, 2024: China Coast Guard (CCG) is more vigorously [attempting](#) to claim sovereignty over the waters around the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, warning off Japanese fishing vessels in the area and identifying some by name. Since October 2023 the CCG has also adopted stronger

wording, using “illegal trespassing” in its posts rather than “intruding into territorial waters

July 6, 2024: With China in mind, Japan’s Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency will [begin](#) manufacturing a prototype device for practical use on Okinawa Prefecture’s Yonaguni Island by the end of this fiscal year. Research continues on the development of an over-the-horizon (OTH) radar that can detect targets at ranges beyond the capabilities of standard radar, since the radio waves emitted by radar currently used by the SDF cannot reach beyond the horizon.

July 6, 2024: Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa [tells](#) a news conference that a Chinese marine research vessel has installed a buoy in the waters north of Okinotorishima, adding that Chinese buoys have been observed near the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, but it is unusual for a Chinese buoy to be set up on the Pacific side of Japan.

July 8, 2024: Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko, DM Minoru and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. hold [talks](#) in Manila affirming their intention to strengthen security cooperation in light of China’s increasingly aggressive maritime expansion.

July 9, 2024: Japan and NATO set up a [dedicated line](#) for sharing highly confidential security information.

July 9, 2024: As NATO leaders [convene](#) in Washington to discuss the war in Ukraine and express concerns over China, a Pew poll reveals that 15 out of the 18 high-income countries surveyed expressed unfavorable views toward China, with Japan and Australia leading the pack with more than 8 in 10 in those countries viewing China negatively.

July 10, 2024: Toyota, Honda, and Nissan [report](#) a combined year-on-year 12.9% decline from January-June in China. This is the third consecutive year of decline.

July 11, 2024: Japanese clothing retailer Uniqlo [describes](#) itself as at a turning point with its store-opening strategy in China, after the chain's parent, Fast Retailing, announced a "large profit fall" in China and Hong Kong during the three months through May. Uniqlo plans a

“scrap and build” policy in the PRC, closing stores with low monthly sales and opening larger ones in better locations.

July 11, 2024: Gan Yu, a spokesperson for the Chinese Coast Guard, [says](#) that the CCG “took necessary control measures and drove away a Japanese fishing boat and several cruise ships that illegally entered the territorial waters of China's Diaoyu Islands on July 10,” urging the Japanese side to immediately stop all illegal activities in these waters and warning that China reserves the right to counter otherwise.

July 11, 2024: China protests as MSDF destroyer Suzutsuki [sails](#) within 12 nautical miles of the Zhejiang coast without notifying China. Japan's defense ministry has launched an investigation questioning the captain of the Suzutsuki, and the crew's intention remains unclear.

July 11, 2024: Citing unnamed diplomatic sources, Kyodo [reports](#) that China and Japan did not use their defense hotline to communicate when an MSDF destroyer temporarily sailed into Chinese territorial waters, diplomatic sources said Thursday, calling into question the direct line's effectiveness in crisis management.

July 12, 2024: Japan’s defense ministry [releases](#) its annual White Paper saying, inter alia, that “Japan is facing the most severe and complex security environment since the end of World War II, and that it cannot be ruled out that a serious situation similar to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine may occur in the Indo-Pacific region in future, particularly in East Asia.”

July 12, 2024: Following the publication of Japan's new defense white paper, which delivers its strongest words yet on Taiwan, and Prime Minister Kishida’s attendance at the recent NATO meeting, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian [says](#) that Japan must not interfere in China’s domestic affairs and not act as a "vanguard" of NATO's Asia-Pacific expansion.

July 13, 2024: With China in mind, Kishida and Olaf Scholz [agree](#) to establish a new bilateral framework for consultations on economic security. Measures to strengthen supply chains for semiconductors and other key products are expected to be on the agenda for consultations.

July 14, 2024: *Global Times* [responds](#) that if Japan-Germany cooperation solely focuses on the idea of "countering China" and distorts economic policy by overstressing the security concept, it will only hinder these countries' progress and limit their own potential for growth.

July 15, 2024: *Nikkei* China Bureau Chief Momoi Yuri [argues](#) that the paucity of recent personal exchanges represents a significant missed opportunity, risking weakening bilateral relations while depriving Japan of firsthand knowledge about developments in China, leaving it at a disadvantage compared to other nations.

July 16, 2024: Japan's 11th Regional Coast Guard Headquarters [reports](#) that two China Coast Guard vessels entered Japanese territorial waters off the Senkaku Islands carrying what appeared to be guns. A Japan Coast Guard patrol vessel warned the CCG vessels to leave the waters.

July 17, 2024: Reacting to the publication of the 2024 Defense White Paper, *Asahi* [editorializes](#) that Japan seems impatient to boost its deterrence power while communications with China remain inadequate on multiple levels.

July 19, 2024: Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting hosted by Tokyo [expresses](#) unity, but with noticeable differences among some nations' positions regarding China and some dissension on Japan's discharge of treated water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant.

July 20, 2024: A foreign ministry spokesperson [expresses](#) "China's strong dissatisfaction with and firm opposition to" the recent joint maritime drill between Japan and the Taiwan region. Taiwan's Patrol No. 9 inspection ship and Japan's aircraft-carrying Sagami conducted a joint exercise off the southern tip of the Boso Peninsula and the waters near Izu Island.

July 22, 2024: Given China's continuing aggression in the area, the Japanese defense ministry has moved [forward](#) the timeline for deployment of improved missiles to defend the Nansei Islands.

July 23, 2024: Moriyama Hiroshi, chairperson of the LDP's General Council, [meets](#) Chinese Foreign Minister and Politburo member Wang Yi in Beijing saying that "Today's Japan-China relationship is not necessarily ideal...and that to make it truly constructive and stable, the embodiment of the mutually beneficial strategic relationship is important."

July 23, 2024: Onizuka Mitsunori, mayor of remote Kita-Daitojima island, [agrees](#) to allow the Air Self-Defense Force to deploy mobile warning and control radar to track China's growing military presence in local waters, adding that he will "carefully explain their concerns in a manner that does not cause anxiety."

July 23, 2024: Japan's Nippon Steel will [withdraw](#) from a joint venture with Baoshan Iron & Steel, marking a turning point in a 21-year relationship that was a symbol of China's progress in modernizing its steel industry.

July 24, 2024: Japanese coast guard [confirms](#) that a China coast guard ship that had been sailing off Kubashima Island of the Senkakus left the contiguous zone on July 23, meaning that there are currently no current CCG vessels in the area.

July 26, 2024: Taiwan authorities announce [plans](#) to completely abolish import restrictions on Japanese food products, removing a major irritant to bilateral relations. China still restricts products from Fukushima and four other prefectures.

July 26, 2024: In what Beijing will [see](#) as the further militarization of Japan as well as the deepening of US-Japanese military cooperation, the Japanese and US governments aim to establish a production system in Japan for the AMRAAM medium-range air-to-air missile.

July 27, 2024: Wang Yi, meeting Kamikawa Yoko in Vientiane July 27 on the sidelines of a meeting of foreign ministers hosted by ASEAN ahead of the security-focused ASEAN Regional Forum. says [relations](#) are at a critical stage and must advance or be left behind.

July 28–31, 2024: Zhou Zuyi, Secretary of Fujian Provincial Committee and Chairman of the Standing Committee of Fujian Provincial People's Congress [leads](#) a delegation to Japan.

July 28, 2024: Warning that China's aggressive posture [poses](#) the “greatest strategic challenge” in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, the US and Japan outline the most significant upgrade to their joint military alliance since 1960.

July 29, 2024: [Meeting](#) in Tokyo with China in mind, the Quad foreign ministers issue a joint statement opposing unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East and South China Seas by force or coercion. They also affirm cooperation on maritime security and measures related to critical and emerging technologies and cybersecurity.

July 29, 2024: [Responding](#) to the Quad statement, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian says that the Quad keeps chanting the slogan of a free and open Indo-Pacific while all the while scaremongering, inciting antagonism and confrontation, and holding back other countries' development

July 30, 2024: Japanese factory automation supplier Fanuc [raises](#) its annual net profit outlook by \$117 million on a recovery in orders from China, where government subsidies are driving demand despite a sluggish economy.

July 30, 2024: A “Tainan Declaration” emanating from the 10th Japan-Taiwan Exchange Summit [calls](#) for both governments to establish a Taiwan-Japan basic relations law (台日關係基本法), initiate higher-level cooperation and urges the Japanese government to support Taiwan's application to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, WHO and other international organizations.

July 30, 2024: A thriving [community](#) of Chinese intellectuals has grown up in Tokyo. Describing themselves as the successors of China's 40 years of reform and opening up, they express gratitude for the ability to escape the PRC's constant surveillance and censorship.

July 31, 2024: A new [project](#), Dongwang Xigui (“looking east, returning west”) is launched in Tokyo to promote the return of Chinese cultural artifacts scattered in Japan to China, provide important resources for research into the history, culture and art of China, and promote in-depth exchanges and cooperation between China and Japan in the fields of historical research, cultural heritage protection and inheritance.

Aug. 1, 2024: Liu Jinsong, director general of the Chinese Foreign Ministry's department of Asian affairs, meets Yokochi Akira, chief minister of Japan's embassy in Beijing, on Tuesday to express strong [disapproval](#) of Japan's negative words and deeds about China during the meeting of the Japan-US Security Consultative Committee, at the two-plus-two security talks, by Japanese and US foreign and defense ministers, and at the meeting of foreign ministers of the Quad countries.

Aug. 2, 2024: In the latest collaboration between countries that have pushed back against China's regional assertiveness the Philippines and Japan [hold](#) their first joint military exercises in the South China Sea, within the Philippines exclusive economic zone.

Aug. 2, 2024: With Tesla and China's BYD leading the growing global EV market, Honda and Nissan will [partner](#) to jointly develop software-related technologies for EVs.

Aug. 2, 2024: *China Military Online* [complains](#) that the more aggressive US-Japan alliance implicit in the “2+2” US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (SCC) threatens Asia Pacific security and stability.

Aug. 4, 2024: Japan, aiming to ensure its presence is felt in Central Asia against Russian and Chinese involvement, [agrees](#) with the five Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan on priority areas for collaboration including green technologies and resilience, connectivity and development of human resources.

Aug. 5, 2024: Aiming to [encourage](#) Mongolia to lower its level of reliance on China and Russia, with which the country has national borders, the Japanese and Mongolian governments enter the final phase of coordination toward a basic agreement on the transfer of defense equipment and technologies, under which the two countries will be able to export defense equipment to each other.

Aug. 7, 2024: [Responding](#) to US ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel's statement to Bloomberg that America is looking to Japan to be a significant partner in Asia in terms of both hard power and soft power and that their relationship is "no longer an alliance of protection but projection," *China Daily* editorializes that the statement plays into the hands of some alt-right politicians in Japan.

Aug. 7, 2024: Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning [reiterates](#) China's opposition to Japan's unilateral discharge of water from the Fukushima site, the eighth batch of which was dumped on Aug. 7.

Aug. 8, 2024: [Interpreting](#) Kishida's instructions to the LDP to accelerate discussion on revising Japan's pacifist constitution as a bid to win support from conservative forces ahead of an upcoming party leadership election, the *Global Times* quotes Lü Chao, director of the Institute of the US and East Asian Studies at Liaoning University, as saying that doing so will allow the former aggressor and defeated country [Japan] to potentially engage in wars against other countries or use the threat of war."

Aug. 8, 2024: Beijing University economist Michael Pettis [refutes](#) previous comparisons between Chinese and Japanese economic imbalances, saying that what is striking is not that Beijing is attempting a radically different solution to its economic imbalances from Tokyo's solution in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but rather how similar its response has so far been to Tokyo's.

Aug. 10, 2024: Website of the Shishi municipal government of Fujian [prohibits](#) fishers from "operating in sensitive sea areas" just prior to the Aug. 16 expiration of the Chinese central government's fishing ban in the seas around the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

Aug. 13, 2024: *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) in favor of the Honda-Nissan agreement to collaborate on EV production to counter Chinese gains in that sector.

Aug. 15, 2024: DM Minoru [visits](#) Yasukuni Shrine on the 79th anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II, making a cash offering of his own money and explaining that he offered his heartfelt condolences and paid respect and reverence to those who sacrificed their lives. The Chinese foreign ministry [lodges](#) "serious protests" over the visit.

Aug. 15, 2024: Ahead of the anniversary, Hideo Shimizu, former member of Unit 731, the notorious Japanese germ-warfare detachment during World War II, [identifies](#) the crimes of the Japanese army at the site where he served 79 years ago in Northeast China's Harbin.

Aug. 16, 2024: Chinese fishing vessels have been [active](#) in waters near Japan despite a Chinese embargo on Japanese seafood products following the release of treated water from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant that began a year ago. Japanese fishermen complain that Chinese fishermen have been pressuring them to leave their fishing grounds.

Aug. 17, 2024: At the two-plus-two meeting, taking China's increasing maritime expansion into account, India and Japan prepare to [accelerate](#) space and cyber security cooperation and boost joint drills to deepen security ties. Prime Minister Modi is to visit Japan before the end of the year.

Aug. 17, 2024: After a [visit](#) to Taiwan by a bipartisan group of Japanese lawmakers, including former Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba, China's embassy in Tokyo warns Japan that it should be prepared "to pay a heavy price" if it interferes with Beijing's plans for Taiwan.

Aug. 19, 2024: Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department [issues](#) arrest warrants for three Chinese men after graffiti are discovered on a stone pillar at the Yasukuni Shrine, the second such act of this year. Two of the men have already returned to China.

Aug. 21, 2024: Reports note that Chinese prosecutors have [indicted](#) a Japanese employee of Astellas Pharma who was detained in March 2023 on suspicion of espionage. The Japanese government is calling for his early release, but his detention is expected to be prolonged further.

Aug. 22, 2024: Italian Navy's aircraft carrier *Cavour* and frigate *Alpino* [arrive](#) at the MSDF base in Yokosuka to conduct joint training exercises with the MSDF to cooperate in response to China's increasing maritime presence.

Aug. 23, 2024: Japanese machine tool producers' orders from China [increase](#) 66% to 29.5 billion yen year-on-year from the end of July, offsetting a drop in domestic order which shrank for the 23rd month in a row.

Aug. 24, 2024: Chinese fishing boats continue to [operate](#) in waters near Japan a year to the day after the release of treated water from the disabled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant and despite a Chinese embargo on Japanese seafood products over the release of the water.

Aug. 26, 2024: Japan's Defense Ministry [reveals](#) that a Chinese Y-9 military intelligence-gathering aircraft violated Japan's airspace off the Danjo Islands in Nagasaki Prefecture for about two minutes. This is the first time for a violation of Japan's airspace by a Chinese military aircraft to be confirmed and announced.

Aug. 27, 2024: According to an anonymous [source](#) said to be linked to the CCP and cited by *Yomiuri* the reason for the violation of Japan's airspace on Aug. 26 was Japan's actively conducting joint training exercises with the naval and air forces of NATO member countries since July and to "gauge Japan's reaction."

Aug. 27, 2024: Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi [calls](#) China's incursion "not just a severe violation of Japan's sovereignty but a threat to our security," adding that Japan would take all possible measures to monitor and act against any future violations of airspace.

Aug. 27, 2024: Chinese Foreign Ministry [says](#) China has "no intention" to violate any country's airspace, adding that "the competent Chinese authorities are learning and verifying the situation."

Aug. 27, 2024: Japan Coast Guard will make a budget [request](#) for funds to construct what would be its largest multipurpose patrol vessel to respond to disasters and evacuate remote island residents in the event of emergencies.

Aug. 28, 2024: A *Global Times* commentary [applauds](#) the visit of Nikai's delegation while noting that problems between the two countries have piled up. Japan's provocative actions in the East China Sea and South China Sea challenge China's core interests, as well as its alignment with the US that destabilizes the region, have become a source of concern for China.

Aug. 29, 2024: Diet member and former LDP secretary-general Nikai Toshiro [leads](#) the first nonpartisan legislative group to visit China in five years. Nikai, 85, has close ties in China, has announced that he will not run again.

Aug. 30, 2024: Japan's defense ministry is to invest in AI, automation and improving troop conditions to address a worsening recruitment [shortfall](#) that has left its forces understaffed amid a buildup aimed at countering China's growing military power.

Aug. 30, 2024: Japanese steelmakers [urge](#) Tokyo to consider curbing cheap steel imports coming from China. China's steel exports rose 24% to 53.4 million tons in the first half of 2024, on track for 100 million tons for the year.

Aug. 31, 2024: A Chinese naval survey ship [enters](#) territorial waters southwest of Kuchinoerabu Island at around 6 a.m. and exited southwest of Yakushima Island at around 7:53 a.m. as MSDF vessels and aircraft were conducting surveillance and intelligence gathering.

Aug. 31, 2024: *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) that China's statement that it has "no intention" of violating the sovereignty of other countries is unacceptable, and that if airspace violations, which are serious violations of sovereignty, are not fully addressed, China may further escalate its provocations.

Sept. 1, 2024: Defense ministry [requests](#) ¥323.2 billion to build a satellite constellation network for guiding missiles in its initial budget request for fiscal 2025.

Sept. 1, 2024: A Chinese man [contracted to](#) an affiliate of Japanese state broadcaster NHK goes off-script while reporting on graffiti at the Yasukuni Shrine saying in Chinese that the Senkaku Islands are “Chinese territory” and protesting “NHK’s historical revisionist propaganda” and “unprofessional practices.”

Sept. 3, 2024: Mitsubishi CEO Nakanishi Katsuya calls for a more [active](#) strategy from the government to help Japanese companies counter increasing Chinese competition in their traditional stronghold of Southeast Asia.

Sept. 3, 2024: Hong Kong’s government [revamps](#) a colonial-era coastal defense museum with a sharper focus on wartime anti-Japanese resistance, coinciding with the annual commemoration of Imperial Japan’s defeat 79 years ago.

Sept. 5, 2024: A joint statement [issued](#) after the 2+2 meeting of Japanese and Australian foreign and defense ministers expresses serious concern over China’s escalating dangerous and coercive activities against the Philippines and condemns attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion in the East China Sea and elsewhere.

Sept. 12, 2024: [Commenting](#) on China’s decision, reported in Hong Kong’s Sing Tao daily on Sept. 3, to establish a Ryukyu Research Center *Nikkei* correspondent Nakazawa Katsuji believes that China may have set its sights on Okinawa, perhaps in retaliation for Japan’s deepening ties with Taiwan.

Sept. 14, 2024: Digital Minister Kono Taro asserts on a Fuji Television program that Japan needs to deploy its own nuclear submarines which, he said, would “make it difficult for the Chinese navy to move out into the Pacific at will.”

Sept. 15, 2024: Former Environment Minister Koizumi Shinjiro [says](#) Japan-China relations would be “unlocked for the future through top-level diplomacy” while former LDP secretary general Ishiba Shigeru favors the creation of an Asian version of NATO as well as emphasizing to the US that it “is able to enjoy its interests in Asia because of Japan’s cooperation.”

Sept. 15, 2024: To [counter](#) illegal fishing in waters where China’s influence is growing, the coast guards of the Quad nations will launch joint patrols to monitor vessels in the Indo-Pacific.

Sept. 17, 2024: Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs [requests](#) 350 million yen for the next fiscal year to pay for the security measures for each of the eleven Japanese schools in China, which will include posting one guard for each bus. A total of 3,305 students attend.

Sept. 18, 2024: A 10-year-old boy is [stabbed](#) near a Japanese school in Shenzhen and dies while under treatment in a hospital. A 44-year-old man, surnamed Zhong, is taken into custody. Lin Jian, a spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, says the government will continue to take “effective measures” to protect “the safety of all foreigners in China.” Sept. 18, the anniversary of the 1931 Mukden incident that led to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, is typically a time of [heightened](#) anti-Japanese sentiment.

Sept. 18, 2024: Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning [accompanied](#) by two destroyers [enters](#) Japan’s contiguous zone for the first time.

Sept. 20, 2024: Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko expresses [condolences](#) and says that the attack on the student on Sept. 18 occurred despite Tokyo’s requests for caution and enhanced safety as China marks a key anniversary of its war with Japan.

Sept. 20, 2024: China and Japan reach a four-point [agreement](#) on the discharge of Fukushima nuclear-contaminated water that includes Japan establishing a long-term international monitoring arrangement and allowing stakeholders including China to conduct independent sampling and monitoring.

Sept. 20, 2024: Reports state that, beginning in 2025, the coast guards of the Quad states will [begin](#) carrying one another's personnel on their vessels that patrol the Indo-Pacific.

Sept. 21, 2024: Employees at four Japanese companies [say](#) that some big firms in China have given Japanese employees and their families the option to be relocated home at the company's expense, or are considering doing so.

Sept. 21, 2024: Kyodo [reports](#) that, aiming to further strengthen collaboration amid China's growing military assertiveness, Japan and the European Union plan to establish director general-level dialogue on security and defense issues.

Sept. 23, 2024: Quad leaders [issue](#) the Wilmington Declaration expressing "serious concern about the situation in the East and South China seas."

Sept. 24, 2024: Foreign Minister Kamikawa [meets](#) opposite number Wang Yi at the opening of the UN General Assembly demanding that China crack down on "unsubstantiated and malicious anti-Japanese social media posts [that are] directly related to children's safety and absolutely unacceptable."

Sept. 25, 2024: *Asahi* [editorializes](#) on the need for Japan's next prime minister to aim at improving ties with China.

Sept. 26, 2024: MSDF destroyer Sazanami [sails](#) through the Taiwan Strait on the 25th for the first time since the SDFs were formed. Kishida made the decision after consultation with his government and in response to the Chinese sending a reconnaissance plane into Japanese airspace in August.

Sept. 26, 2024: Miyamoto Yuji, newly [appointed](#) president of the Japan-China Friendship Center and former Japanese ambassador to China, having recently visited China, comments that exchanges between the two countries have never truly ceased and that most Japanese people are eager to understand and also value their relationship with the real China.

Sept. 27, 2024: Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian [says](#) at a routine daily press conference in response to Ishiba

Shigeru's election as LDP president that China has noted the election results but that it is Japan's internal matter, and that China does not comment on it.

Sept. 28, 2024: After Ishiba's election as president of the LDP, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian [expresses](#) the PRC's strong opposition toward Japanese politicians visiting Taiwan.

Sept. 29, 2024: In an article [posted](#) on the Hudson Institute's website, Ishiba [says](#) that "the creation of an Asian version of NATO is essential to deter China by its Western allies" and that the creation of the Asian NATO he envisions "must also specifically consider America's sharing of nuclear weapons or the introduction of nuclear weapons into the region."

Oct. 3, 2024: Japan's new government [says](#) it hopes to improve ties with China after receiving a "forward-looking" congratulatory message from Beijing on the election of Prime Minister Ishiba.

Oct. 11, 2024: [Meeting](#) on the sidelines of the ASEAN summit in Laos, Ishiba and Premier Li Qiang confirm their commitment to promoting mutually beneficial ties as Ishiba expresses "serious concerns" over Chinese military movements in areas surrounding Japan.

Oct. 11, 2024: *China Military Online* [interprets](#) reports that Japan's defense ministry is in talks with several commercial ferry companies about using civil transport capacities to undertake military tasks as a move to cover up Japan's strengthened war preparedness with a civil cloak and to establish an amphibious transport and logistics supply model similar to that of the US, which will facilitate their defense cooperation.

Oct. 13, 2024: *Yomiuri* [observes](#) that Chinese mainstream media have remained silent on the news that Nihon Hidankyo, or Japan Confederation of A- and H-Bomb Sufferers Organizations, won the Nobel Peace Prize, interpreting the silence as reflecting the differences between Xi Jinping's administration, which is focused on strengthening its nuclear capabilities, and Hidankyo's efforts toward a world free of nuclear weapons.

Oct. 17, 2024: Responding to the latest round of large-scale Chinese military exercises encircling Taiwan, *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) that if China thinks continued military threats and psychological intimidation can force Taiwan into submission, it would be a serious mistake.

Oct. 17, 2024: *Asahi* [editorializes](#) against China's military exercise around Taiwan following a similar intimidating show of force in May.

Oct. 17, 2024: Writing in *China Daily*, research fellow in the China Institute of International Studies Xiang Haoyu [advises](#) that Japanese leaders need to strike a balance between catering to the domestic public, which means they should manage to maintain cooperation with China rather than simply taking a populist tough stance against China.

Oct. 17, 2024: In a first, Defense Minister Nakatani Gen [attends](#) the NATO defense ministers' meeting in Brussels, expressing deep concern over the closer military cooperation between not only Russia and China, but also between Russia and North Korea.

Oct. 18, 2024: Concerns [remain](#) among Japanese due to the Chinese government's still not having provided a clear motive for the fatal stabbing of a Japanese boy on Sept. 18.

Oct. 19, 2024: *Yomiuri* [reports](#) that on Sept. 25 the MSDF destroyer Sazanami transited the Taiwan Strait to counter China's influence in East Asia.

Oct. 19, 2024: A 17-member expert panel of Japan's defense ministry [confirms](#) the necessity of strengthening domestic defense industry and promoting the export of defense equipment abroad.

Oct. 20, 2024: [Highlighting](#) China's repeated acts of hegemony in the East and South China seas, DM Nakatani calls for a free and open Indo-Pacific at a meeting of the G7 defense ministers in Naples, Italy.

Oct. 20, 2024: A *China Daily* editorial [calls](#) Ishiba's political agenda inherently contradictory: he wants to rebalance the alliance with the US to increase Japan's strategic autonomy and foster "constructive, stable" relations with neighboring China through

dialogue and cooperation while at the same time pursuing an Asian version of NATO.

Oct. 21, 2024: During a phone call with Japan's National Security Adviser Akiba Takeo, Chinese foreign minister [says](#) his country's relations with Japan have gotten off to a "good start," following the establishment of Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru's government.

Oct. 22, 2024: China may allow the [resumption](#) of imports of ornamental nishikigoi carp, which had been halted since Nov. 2023 in protest against the release of treated water from TEPCO's Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

Oct. 22, 2024: China's ultra-nationalist "little pinks" call for a [boycott](#) of major milk powder company Feihe following reports that it signed a letter of intent to develop a lactoferrin-based infant formula product with Japan's Kyowa Hakko Biochemical Co.

Oct. 23, 2024: A [report](#) released by the Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies titled "Chinese Modernization in the Eyes of Japanese" on Sept. 11 shows that 61.5% of respondents believe that Chinese modernization is positive for Japan's development and modernization and 43.4% believe that "Chinese modernization is an opportunity for Japan, and active participation in bilateral cooperation can promote common development."

Oct. 25, 2024: Sophie Luo Shengchun wife of jailed Chinese human rights lawyer Ding Jiaxi, [visits](#) Japan, calling for support for the release of her husband and all prisoners of conscience in the PRC.

Oct. 25, 2024: People's Bank of China and the Bank of Japan [agree](#) to renew their bilateral currency swap deal amounting to 200 billion yuan (about \$28.13 billion).

Oct. 25, 2024: China and Japan [hold](#) their 17th round of high-level consultations on maritime affairs in Tokyo, exchanging in-depth views on maritime affairs and agreeing to make the East China Sea a sea of peace, cooperation and friendship.

Oct. 30, 2024: *Yomiuri* [editorializes](#) in favor of Japan, the US, and South Korea strengthening support for the Philippines against Chinese

aggression while appealing to the international community on the need to maintain stability in the South China Sea and to deter China.

Oct. 31, 2024: In the first [transfer](#) in eight years under a bilateral agreement to help conserve the internationally protected crested ibis, 16 birds born in Japan to parents sent by China arrive in Beijing.

Nov. 1, 2024: First-ever Japan-EU Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue is [held](#) in Tokyo. Concerned that "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow," Japan and the European Union [agree](#) to launch a defense and security partnership that will lay the ground for closer cooperation.

Nov. 2, 2024: China [informs](#) Japan that an "unexpected obstruction" was what caused one of its military planes to breach Japanese airspace in August, seemingly attributing the blame to the Japanese defense force's activities prior to the unprecedented intrusion.

Nov. 3, 2024: Citing unspecified government sources, *Yomiuri* [reports](#) that one of the China Coast Guard's largest patrol ships made a rare move of sailing around the Senkaku Islands in June, apparently in response to the United States dispatching a patrol ship to help boost collaboration with Japan and the Philippines.

Nov. 3, 2024: China's National Defense University's College of Joint Operations and the State Key Laboratory of Intelligent Games in Beijing [simulate](#) a scenario involving an attack on Shanghai by stealth fighters from Japan.

Nov. 4, 2024: Japanese national security adviser Akiba Takeo [visits](#) China seeking to lay the groundwork for a meeting between the leaders of the two countries.

Nov. 6, 2024: In its first visit to China in eight years a [delegation](#) of the Japan Association of Corporate Executives calls for China to exempt Japanese short-term visitors from visa requirements. It also calls for China's active participation in the 2025 Osaka-Kansai Expo.

Nov. 6, 2024: Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) Senior Vice President Ishii Yasuo confirms that in July the organization was hit by multiple cyberattacks on staff accounts through

the Microsoft 365 cloud service but declines to provide details.

Nov. 6, 2024: Japan's defense ministry [reports](#) that fighters and helicopters took off from and landed about 20 times from the aircraft carrier Shandong south of Okinawa's Miyako Island.

Nov. 6, 2024: *Huanqiu* [objects](#) to a *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* article claiming that China was provoking the Ryukyu issue.

Nov. 7, 2024: A *Global Times* opinion piece [advised](#) being wary of Japanese nationalism since it has the potential to cause regional waves.

Nov. 9, 2024: [Saying](#) that breaches of Japanese airspace by Chinese and Russian warplanes earlier in the year "not only violated Japanese sovereignty but also threatened the safety of Japan, and are absolutely unacceptable," Ishiba renews a pledge to build up his country's military and deepen its alliance with the United States under President-elect Donald Trump.

Nov. 9, 2024: A new [report](#) from Human Rights Watch states that Chinese authorities are targeting and intimidating people living in Japan and engaging in activities deemed politically sensitive by the Chinese government.

Nov. 10, 2024: Over 800 representatives from government bodies, businesses and institutions from China and Japan [attend](#) the 17th China-Japan Comprehensive Forum on Energy Saving and Environmental Protection in Tokyo on Saturday to explore cooperation opportunities in green transformation.

Nov. 15, 2024: [Japanese economy expands by an annualized 0.9% in Q 3](#) highlighting Japan's frail economic recovery, as consumer spending held up but domestic demand has not fully picked up amid concerns that about a growing risk of a slowdown in the US and further weakness in China's economy that could weigh on exports ahead.

Nov. 16, 2024: Ishiba [holds](#) his first meeting with Xi on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Lima with Ishiba telling reporters that “While there are many differences of opinion between Japan and China, we did agree to continue to hold meetings in the future.”

Nov. 18, 2024: [Aiming](#) to further cooperation in the space domain between US and SDF forces to counter security threats from China and Russia, about 10 members of the US space force will be stationed at Yokota Air Base in December.

Nov. 17, 2024: [Interviewed](#) by *Global Times*, Takeshi Niinami, chair of the Japan Association of Corporate Executives, emphasizes that personal visits to China and firsthand experience of the current state of its economy and society are crucial to fostering a good Japan-China relationship.

Nov. 18, 2024: *Asahi* [editorializes](#) that conditions are ripe for Japan and China to work to improve ties, as with the confrontation between the US and China expected to continue for the foreseeable future, the Xi administration wants to keep China’s relations with neighboring countries as good as possible and has been exploring approaches to improving relations with Japan.

Nov. 21, 2024: Japanese officials are closely [watching](#) to see if China keeps its promise to prevent further violations of Japan's airspace after explaining that an incursion by a Chinese military aircraft nearly three months ago was unintentional and caused by turbulence.

Nov. 22, 2024: China's foreign ministry says that the [requirement](#) for short-term visas for Japanese will be waived from Nov. 30 through the end of next year. They were suspended in March 2020 amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Nov. 24, 2024: *Kyodo* reports that China [intends](#) to remove a buoy it installed inside Japan's exclusive economic zone near the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.

Nov. 25, 2024: Acquisition, Technology & Logistics Agency (ATLA), an external bureau of the Japanese defense ministry, [plans](#) to develop a new model of radar to improve interception capabilities against hypersonic missiles.

Nov. 25, 2024: Japanese foreign ministry [moves](#) up its schedule for placing security guards on school buses for Japanese schools in China from April to the end of March by including the relevant expenses in the fiscal 2024 supplementary budget.

Nov. 28, 2024: A delegation from seven economic groups in the Kansai region [confirms](#) with Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng their desire to cooperate in improving and strengthening Japan-China ties.

Nov. 30, 2024: Uniqlo [faces](#) a storm of online criticism in China after a BBC report quotes the chief executive of its owner as saying the company does not source cotton from the far western region of Xinjiang

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

Trump 2.0, South Korea's Martial Law, and Future of Seoul-Tokyo Relations

ANDY LIM, CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
JI-YOUNG LEE, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY, SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL SERVICE

The year 2025 marks the 60th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Seoul and Tokyo. It was originally expected to be a milestone year for bilateral ties and a fitting culmination of nearly three years of hard work by two leaders: President Yoon Suk Yeol and former Prime Minister Kishida Fumio. But that outlook now seems hung in the balance, with new unknowns on the horizon — both expected and unexpected. In this final issue on Japan-Korea relations, we discuss the key factors that are likely to impact the future of bilateral ties and the Camp David trilateral in four major areas: 1) Trump 2.0, 2) political uncertainty in Seoul, 3) weak political support in Tokyo, and 4) resurfacing history issues. The final months of 2024 have brought new unknowns in the shape of leadership changes in the United States, Japan, and potentially South Korea. It is now possible that come January 2025, the leadership trio — President Biden, Prime Minister Kishida, and President Yoon that has made the Korea-Japan rapprochement and the unprecedented trilateral partnership possible will be gone from office.

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What happens next is impossible to predict, but one hopes that the hard-fought and laboriously planned institutionalization of bilateral and trilateral ties will withstand these changes in leadership. This will be the first true test for Seoul-Tokyo-Washington trilateral partnership since the Camp David summit in August 2023.

Japan's new prime minister, Ishiba Shigeru, and President Yoon [agreed](#) in mid-November to "further elevate the bilateral relationship to new heights" towards 2025 and to promote comprehensive cooperation in areas such as "politics, security, economy, culture and social security." However, following President Yoon's declaration of martial law on Dec. 3, the future of Seoul-Tokyo relations faces a great deal of uncertainty. Given that it was President Yoon's political will that initially facilitated rapprochement, depending on what happens to his political future and who comes into office in South Korea, Seoul-Tokyo relations may experience challenges. While conflicts over long-standing history issues have been consciously minimized during this period of rapprochement, they have not gone away, as demonstrated by their inability to reach a consensus on a joint event on the controversial Sado mine.

Trump 2.0 and US alliances with Seoul and Tokyo



Figure 1 President Yoon Suk Yeol shakes hands with Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba during a bilateral meeting at a hotel in Vientiane, Laos, Thursday. Photo: Yonhap

When thinking about the future of Japan-Korea relations, the most important events in 2024 revolve around (potential) changes in leadership—one expected (the US), one mostly unexpected (Japan), and one possible yet totally unexpected (South Korea). The 2024 US

presidential election and the re-election of Donald Trump has re-introduced uncertainty into the region, casting a shadow of anxiety not only over bilateral Japan-Korea relations but also the future of trilateral cooperation. Foreign policy did not play a big role in this election. But candidates presented starkly different visions regarding US priorities and values. These differences would ultimately influence the fate of the liberal international order, within which the Camp David trilateral cooperation drives its significance.

Despite the unexpected withdrawal of President Biden from re-election, Kamala Harris' candidacy was largely seen as a continuation of his administration's key policies—the institutionalization of trilateral US-Korea-Japan relations and the strengthening of Washington's traditional alliances with Japan and South Korea. In contrast, no one truly knows what the former President Trump will do. If history is any guide, his approach is likely to make these relations more transactional, with less focus on common values.

At the end of the Cold War, a major debate emerged within the US over whether to continue stationing American forces in Asia. Some questioned why the US should bear the cost of defending wealthy Asian countries. Ultimately, the US maintained its presence, guided by the famous rationale put forward by Joseph Nye, then assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, who [argued](#) that "security is like oxygen—you tend not to notice it until you begin to lose it, but once that occurs, there is nothing else you will think about." Fundamentally, Trump does not share this perspective on security. Instead, he views it as just another business transaction.

For both Tokyo and Seoul, there is growing concern about being in Trump's crosshairs, as they may fail to meet two of his sacrosanct priorities—defense spending and trade balance. In the [words](#) of one expert, both countries are in the "danger zone" because they have large trade surpluses with the US, and spend less than 3% of their GDP on defense. This belief has been [consistent](#) with Trump's worldview since the 1990s, with a clear message that it does not matter whether you are an ally or an adversary, it's America first. There are concerns he will ask for the allies to pay more. Furthermore, [according](#) to another expert privy to conversations with Japanese officials in Tokyo, the new Trump team might even add two more conditions: how many US Treasury securities

they have purchased and whether they manipulate their currency.

If Trump's first term is any clues about his second, US alliances with Seoul and Tokyo are likely to experience the "fear of abandonment" — the anxiety that Washington might not be a reliable ally for their national security. Strong deterrence against North Korea is a key area that has repeatedly united Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington. But this may not be taken for granted under a Trump 2.0 administration. In the near term, trilateral multidomain military exercises like the newly-introduced Freedom Edge may be curtailed or stopped because it is expensive.

A remote but plausible development under a Trump 2.0 administration is an intensified discussion of US troop withdrawals from South Korea. In an interview with a South Korean news outlet *Yonhap*, Elbridge Colby, former deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy and force development during Trump's first term — who is being [discussed](#) as a potential defense secretary — [said](#), "South Korea is going to have to take primary, essentially overwhelming responsibility for its own self-defense against North Korea because we don't have a military that can fight North Korea and then be ready to fight China." He further noted, "The fundamental fact is that North Korea is not a primary threat to the US. It would not be rational to lose multiple American cities to just deal with North Korea."

If Washington under Trump 2.0 sends a signal reflecting this stance, this could possibly push South Korea to search for alternative security arrangements. Such alternatives may ultimately result in less optimal outcomes from the perspective of the US-South Korea alliance. Another issue is more political. Trump said little about North Korea during his campaign. But if he chooses to directly engage with Kim Jong Un, while sidelining South Korea, this is not a good signal from the perspective of alliance management.

Therefore, Trump's victory on Nov. 5 immediately created some consternation in both Seoul and Tokyo, with both sides scrambling to find ways to reach the re-elected president's orbit and to brush up on their personal charm. Planning for the return of Trump to the White House has been at the top of every world leader's mind since the election. Without the

effective [Trump whisperer](#) Abe Shinzo, Japan might find it harder the second time around. But Prime Minister Ishiba may find a way to connect with Trump enough to make sure Japanese equities for the next four years are protected. And over in South Korea, President Yoon Suk Yeol reportedly [restarted](#) practicing golf in an attempt to connect personally with Trump, an avid golfer.

Martial Law and Political Uncertainty in South Korea



Figure 2 South Korean soldiers outside the National Assembly in Seoul in the early hours of Wednesday. Images Photo: Chung Sung-Jun/Getty

The most unexpected development is the inexplicable and [short-lived martial law](#) on Dec. 3 in South Korea. In and outside the country, people are genuinely baffled as to why President Yoon suddenly declared martial law, as there was no apparent reason that the public can understand as a basis for such a drastic move. Martial law, introduced in 1948, was last imposed in 1979 before South Korea's democratization. For many South Koreans, martial law is a reminder of the country's authoritarian past, thus prompting many to ask "Are we back to the 1970s before democratization?" Having achieved democratization through years of grassroots struggle, the move caused strong negative reactions against the backdrop of immense pride that South Koreans have for their democracy. Prior to Yoon's declaration of martial law, criticism of his leadership has been mounting within South Korea, largely driven by scandals. Now, impeachment discussions have intensified. Calls for his resignation have grown louder. His political future is highly uncertain.

Yoon's action, which was purely aimed at a domestic issue—the opposition—has created consequences that reverberates far beyond the peninsula, at a time when the regional threat from China, North Korea, and Russia continues to grow. The reverberating effects of that event have left Seoul incapacitated at a critical time not just in domestic politics but in regional relations, with new governments in both Washington and Tokyo. While the quick overturning of the martial law is a resounding victory for democracy and the democratic process, the policy and leadership paralysis as Korea figures out a way forward can lead to “Korea passing” as other regional actors move ahead on critical issues in the new year.

With the political uncertainty in Seoul, all this leads to the pressing question of who will shepherd this very important but prickly bilateral relationship moving forward. The recent improvement in Seoul-Tokyo relations was largely the work of President Yoon, which also laid the groundwork for the Camp David trilateral cooperation. Without him in the picture, the future of Japan-Korea relations becomes highly uncertain. In a hypothetical scenario where South Korea's main opposition leader, Lee Jae-myung, assumes office, the rapprochement between Seoul and Tokyo would likely come to an end. Lee and his supporters would be expected to prioritize demands for Japan to address unresolved historical issues, potentially undoing recent progress in bilateral relations.

In particular, beneath the public debate over the constitutionality, rationale, and implications of the short-lived martial law declaration, there was one paragraph that caught our and others' attention in the conclusion of the first impeachment motion submitted by the six South Korean opposition parties on Dec. 4. The paragraph [read](#) as follows:

“In addition, under the guise of so-called “value diplomacy,” Yoon has neglected geopolitical balance, antagonizing North Korea, China, and Russia, adhering to a bizarre Japan-centered foreign policy, and appointing pro-Japan individuals to key government positions, thereby causing isolation in Northeast Asia and triggering a crisis of war, abandoning his duty to protect national security and the people.”

The line “bizarre Japan-centered” foreign policy and references to “pro-Japan

individuals” clearly illustrates what the opposition party thinks about Yoon's policy to improve relations with Tokyo. This has been a long-standing criticism of Yoon's foreign policy, for being too pro-Japan, overly dependent on the US, and too anti-China and anti-North Korea. We have [pointed](#) out before that Yoon's “low-reward unpopular decision” to reconcile with Japan required a lot of political capital, but it is still very stark to see a disagreement over foreign policy be included in a lengthy impeachment bill focused primarily on domestic issues.

While this paragraph is no longer present in the second impeachment motion, it gave us a preview into what an opposition-run South Korean presidency might do in terms of foreign policy. If the current front-runner and Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung wins, we might see a reversal in key positions on China, Japan, North Korea, and the US.

Based on his previous public statements, we cannot discount the possibility of an abrogation of the budding US-Korea-Japan trilateral (which might have happened anyway under Trump 2.0), a bypassing of Japan, and a more balanced and even conciliatory approach to China and North Korea. Lee has in the past [called](#) a trilateral military alliance “unnecessary” because its [exacerbates](#) instability on the peninsula and forces North Korea-China-Russia to align more closely, and have argued forcefully for a more “pragmatic” approach in US-China competition. Lee could possibly come into office in 2025 with a very different geopolitical environment than Yoon's in 2022, with a revived North Korea-China-Russia axis, a de facto military alliance between its two neighbors in North Korea and Russia, and a retrenched United States.

All of this does not bode well for Japan and South Korea, especially with the speed at which the returning US president might shake things up at the start of his second term. People who are worried about the first 100 days of the Trump presidency might now need to buckle up for the first 100 hours as there are now [expectations](#) that the changes coming out of the White House will be breakneck and immediate. For South Korea, unfortunately, there might not be a leader definitively in charge on Jan. 21 to be able to respond to Trump's actions, or to make that all-important personal connection with him.

As of this writing, President Yoon have [vowed](#) to “fight to the end” for a chance to make his case in court during an impeachment hearing. Under this timeline, the impeachment process can take up to six months to resolve in court (to remove or reinstate him), and then a two-month period before a presidential election can be held. We are potentially looking at a dire situation where Korea might be politically unstable and leaderless until August 2025. That’s a long time in any political calendar, and for Seoul, even if it successfully defends its democracy, it might re-emerge much weaker regionally and internationally as the rest of the world moves on.

Ishiba and Weak Political Support in Japan



Figure 3 Shigeru Ishiba, the newly elected leader of Japan's ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) poses in the party leader's office after the LDP leadership election Photo: REUTERS/Kim Kyung-Hoon/Pool

Another change is the [decision](#) by Kishida Fumio to resign in mid-August ahead of the LDP party election in September. The result was not a total surprise, given a series of domestic setbacks for him this year: political fundraising scandal, electoral defeats and consistently poor approval ratings (below 30%). After nearly three years as Prime Minister, Kishida is leaving behind a clear foreign and security policy legacy—increasing defense spending to nearly 2%, reorienting efforts to improve Japan’s security environment, delivering strong support for Ukraine, and most importantly, pushing for rapprochement with Korea. This legacy was apropos of someone who served as Japan’s longest serving foreign minister in the postwar period. As we have discussed often, leaders dictate policy, and it takes two leaders to tango. Kishida’s support for improving prickly Japan-Korea relations—coupled with like-mindedness

from Yoon—made Camp David and rapprochement possible. While regional relations lost a stalwart champion in Kishida this fall, his replacement—the longtime LDP politician and former defense minister Ishiba—is likely to follow a similar well-trodden path in foreign policy.

Ishiba Shigeru, a man who famously ran for LDP leadership four times before succeeding on the fifth try, [came](#) into office in October 2024 after winning a closely-contested leadership contest with a well-documented track record as a defense hawk and some interesting ideas for North Korea and regional relations. While early talks of an “[Asian version of NATO](#)” and [nuclear sharing](#) has subsided after initial pushback—his idea of [working](#) with Pyongyang directly might gain some traction if President Trump resumes his bromance with Kim Jong Un. His plan to [establish](#) liaison offices in both capitals, while not novel, has seen some opposition from families of abductees. For the time being however, the liaison office idea has also been placed on the backburner, as he [reaffirmed](#) during a November 2024 national rally on the abduction issue the standard Japanese policy of normalizing relations with North Korea by first resolving the outstanding abduction, nuclear and missile issues. During that speech, he also reiterated his openness to a summit with the North Korean leader and even implored Kim Jong Un “not to miss this opportunity.”

Before the political debacle in South Korea, Ishiba had already signaled his intention to continue the shuttle diplomacy of his predecessor and to press ahead with efforts to further improve bilateral relations. Ishiba and Yoon have already met twice, [once](#) on the sidelines of the ASEAN summit in Laos, and [again](#) on the sidelines of the APEC Summit in Peru—plus [holding](#) the first and last trilateral in the current leader configuration. During their October and November meetings, the two leaders had [agreed](#) to “further elevate” the bilateral relations in preparation for the important 2025 anniversary. In late November, there were [rumblings](#) of a potential January 2025 visit to Seoul by Ishiba. This early visit would have kickstarted an important year for the bilateral relations, the 60th anniversary of normalization. There were already [speculations](#) earlier this year that the two leaders—then Kishida and Yoon—might make a “future-oriented” joint statement to commemorate the occasion. Furthermore, there were additional

plans for senior Japanese officials to visit Korea in December, including a bipartisan group of lawmakers from the Korea–Japan Parliamentary Federation in mid-December to be [led](#) by former Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide, and an end of the year [visit](#) by Japanese Defense Minister Nakatani Gen, which would have been the first visit in nine years.

But all those plans were unceremoniously [shelved](#) after the shocking situation in Seoul, with Prime Minister Ishiba [saying](#) he is watching the developments with “particular and grave” concern. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin similarly [cancelled](#) a planned stop in Korea—part of his last Asia trip with stops in both Tokyo and Seoul to reassure and commit to trilateralism before a Trump transition. Other trilateral efforts planned for December were also casualties of this “unforeseen circumstance,” [including](#) a session of the Nuclear Consultative Group (plus a related exercise) and a trilateral forum on women’s economic empowerment. With Ishiba’s January visit [called](#) off at the time of this writing, there are increasingly growing [concerns](#) that shuttle diplomacy between the two neighbors will become difficult for the time being until the domestic situation in Seoul is resolved. While it is too early to rule out any breakthroughs for 2025, what is certain now is that the political turmoil in Seoul has thrown off course a carefully calibrated transition and shifted tailwinds into headwinds for the foreseeable future.

Resurfacing History Issues

A [kerfuffle](#) over the commemoration of the controversial Sado mine in November revealed the limits of foreign policy objectives over deep rooted historical grievances. The two sides were unable to reach a consensus on a joint event, and instead [held](#) two separate events. Moreover, ritual offerings by Japanese leaders to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine remains a perennial problem, though the [decision](#) by Ishiba to send an offering, instead of visiting in person in October revealed that he will likely be more cautious in this aspect, unlike what some more conservative members of his party such as Takaichi Sanae—who visited in person—might want from him. Experts have [pointed](#) out that other historical problems, including the potential depletion of third-party reimbursement for forced labor victims might resurface in the coming year. As we [pointed](#) out last year, a binational survey [showed](#) that there

remain three major problems for a true “future-oriented” relations, all of which revolved around the question of history: resolving historical disputes; addressing Dokdo/Takeshima; and improving historical perceptions and education.

And finally, Prime Minister Ishiba will meander into the new year with weak political support, [losing](#) a majority in the October parliamentary election, and [surviving](#) a rare November run-off. The results meant that for the time being, Ishiba will need to focus inwardly on fixing the Japanese economy and addressing voters’ concerns over political scandals. He will not have the wherewithal to focus outwardly anyway because without a parliamentary majority, it would have been difficult to pass some of his bolder foreign policies. The situation in Korea also makes it much harder for any positive developments on either side, setting up an unfortunate lost opportunity in an anniversary year in 2025.



Figure 4 President Yoon Suk Yeol hold hands with Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, fourth from right, and Chinese Premier Li Qiang, second from right, during the 27th ASEAN Plus Three Summit held at the National Convention Center in Vientiane, Laos, Thursday. From left are Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, President Yoon, Ishiba, Laotian Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone, Li and Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Photo: Yonhap

CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

MAY–NOVEMBER 2024

May 8, 2024: South Korean Minister of Science and ICT Lee Jong-ho [vows](#) to protect Korean companies from “unfair treatment” in the midst of Japan’s pressure on LY Corp. and Naver Corp.

May 10, 2024: Top nuclear envoys of Japan, South Korea, and the United States [meet](#) in Tokyo to discuss the North Korean threat and its growing military cooperation with Russia.

May 17, 2024: New Japanese ambassador to South Korea Mizushima Koichi [arrives](#) in Seoul for his new posting.

May 21, 2024: South Korean and Japanese police chiefs [agree](#) to improve joint responses to security and cyberthreats during their meeting in Tokyo, the first talks in fourteen years.

May 22, 2024: South Korean and Japanese foreign ministers [speak](#) on the phone to discuss the upcoming trilateral leader summit with China taking place in Seoul.

May 26, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [meet](#) in Seoul on the sidelines of their trilateral with China and agree to make a “historic leap” in bilateral relations ahead of the 60th anniversary of normalization in 2025.

May 28, 2024: Top nuclear envoys of Japan, South Korea and the United States [speak](#) on the phone and condemn North Korea’s latest satellite test.

May 30, 2024: Top nuclear envoys of Japan, South Korea and the United States [discuss](#) efforts to coordinate responses to the latest North Korean ballistic missile test.

May 31, 2024: South Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Kim Hong-kyun, Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Okano Masataka and US Deputy Secretary of State [hold](#) a trilateral meeting in Virginia to discuss the North Korean threat and efforts to create a trilateral secretariat.

June 1, 2024: South Korean Minister of National Defense Shin Won-shik and his Japanese counterpart Kihara Minoru [agree](#) to prevent a repeat of a 2018 maritime incident over a Japanese patrol aircraft and South Korean warship on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.

June 6, 2024: Japan, South Korea, and the United States [hold](#) the fourth economic security dialogue in San Diego to discuss cooperation on supply chains and emerging technologies.

June 20, 2024: Appellate division of the Seoul Central District Court [reverses](#) a district court ruling and rules that Japan’s Kumagai Gumi have to pay 100 million Korean won (\$72,200) to the bereaved family of a South Korean forced laborer.

June 24, 2024: Japan, South Korea, and the United States [release](#) a joint statement condemning the deepening North Korea–Russia military cooperation after Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a “comprehensive strategic partnership” treaty during his visit to North Korea.

June 25, 2024: South Korean and Japanese finance ministers [meet](#) for the 9th Korea–Japan finance dialogue in Seoul and agree to take “appropriate actions” against excessive currency volatility.

June 25, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [visits](#) the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, an aircraft carrier participating in the first ever, trilateral multi-domain Freedom Edge exercise.

June 26, 2024: Top nuclear envoys of Japan, South Korea and the United States [discuss](#) on the phone coordination on North Korea’s latest ballistic missile launch.

June 27, 2024: Japan, South Korea, and the United States [hold](#) the first ever, trilateral multi-domain Freedom Edge exercise.

June 27, 2024: Japan, South Korea and the United States [launch](#) a trilateral ministerial industry-commerce meeting in Washington, DC to elevate economic cooperation on key technologies, supply chains and economic security issues.

June 28, 2024: South Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Kim Hong-kyun and Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Okano Masataka [meet](#) in Tokyo to reaffirm coordination on dealing with North Korea-Russia cooperation and improving trilateral cooperation.

July 5, 2024: South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul [meets](#) new Japanese ambassador to South Korea Mizushima Koichi to discuss bilateral cooperation.

July 9, 2024: Gwangju District Court [rules](#) that Japan's Nippon Coke & Engineering have to pay compensation ranging from 13 million Korean won (\$9,400) to 100 million Korean won to 11 family members of seven South Korean forced laborers.

July 10, 2024: South Korea and Japan [hold](#) the first director general-level defense meeting in Tokyo for the first time in nine years, since the last one in August 2015.

July 10, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [meet](#) on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Washington, DC and agree to increase security cooperation with NATO to tackle the deepening military cooperation between North Korea and Russia.

July 12, 2024: South Korean foreign ministry [asks](#) Japan to drop its territorial claims to the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islets after it was included in the 2024 defense white paper.

July 18, 2024: The chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of Japan, South Korea and the United States [agree](#) to expand the trilateral multi-domain Freedom Edge exercise during a meeting in Seoul, South Korea.

July 27, 2024: Japan's Sado gold mine is officially [listed](#) as a UNESCO World Heritage Site after Japan and South Korea agree on conditions to reflect the "entire history."

July 28, 2024: Defense ministers of Japan, South Korea and the United States [sign](#) a Memorandum of Cooperation on the Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework, formalizing trilateral security cooperation.

July 31, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [names](#) Park Cheol-hee, the head of the Korea National Diplomatic Academy and a Japan expert as his new ambassador to Japan.

Aug. 6, 2024: South Korean foreign ministry [says](#) Japan refused to use the term "forced" in the museum exhibits for the Sado mine, which was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Aug. 9, 2024: Top diplomats from Japan, South Korea and the United States [discuss](#) on the phone the need for China to "use its influence" with North Korea to stop its threat.

Aug. 15, 2024: South Korean foreign ministry [voices](#) "deep regret" over Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's ritual offering to the Yasukuni Shrine.

Aug. 18, 2024: Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and United States President Joe Biden [issue](#) a joint statement celebrating progress made in trilateral cooperation since the Camp David summit a year ago.

Aug. 21, 2024: South Korean Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok [meets](#) new Japanese ambassador to South Korea Mizushima Koichi to discuss strengthening bilateral economic cooperation.

Aug. 22, 2024: The appellate division of the Seoul Central District Court [reverses](#) a district court ruling and rules that Japan's Nippon Steel Corp. have to pay compensation of 100 million Korean won (\$74,750) to four children of a deceased South Korean forced laborer.

Aug. 29, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol [reaffirms](#) that the trilateral security cooperation with Japan and US will continue despite leadership changes.

Aug. 30, 2024: Seoul Central District Court [rules](#) that Japan's Mitsubishi Materials Corp. have to compensate five South Korean forced laborers.

Sept. 5, 2024: Seoul High Court [reverses](#) a district court ruling and rules that Japan's Nishimatsu Construction Co. need to pay 20 million Korean won (\$15,000) to one of the five forced laborers, and 13 million won each to the four others.

Sept. 6, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [meet](#) in Seoul for the last time to discuss maintaining positive momentum in bilateral relations. This was the 12th and last summit meeting between the two leaders.

Sept. 6, 2024: During the third meeting of the Trilateral Diplomatic Working Group, diplomats from Japan, South Korea and the United States [discuss](#) sanctions and private industry efforts to deal with the North Korean cyber threat.

Sept. 7, 2024: A former South Korean comfort woman [passes](#) away, leaving only eight officially registered surviving victims.

Sept. 10, 2024: During the 15th Defense Trilateral Talks in Seoul, top defense officials from Japan, South Korea and the US [agree](#) to hold the second round of the trilateral, multidomain Freedom Edge military exercise in the near future.

Sept. 12, 2024: Nuclear envoys of Japan, South Korea and US [discuss](#) on the phone North Korea's latest short-range missile launch.

Sept. 12, 2024: Seoul Central District Court [orders](#) the North Korean government to pay 100 million Korean won (\$74,700) each to five former Korean Japanese people who repatriated to North Korea as part of the "paradise on Earth" propaganda program.

Sept. 24, 2024: Foreign ministers of Japan, South Korea and the United States [meet](#) on the sidelines of the UNGA in New York to discuss trilateral cooperation, with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken calling it "vital" despite political transitions in Japan and the US.

Sept. 25, 2024: South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul [asks](#) UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay on the sidelines of the UNGA in New York to monitor Japan's compliance on the Sado mine, which was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Sept. 27, 2024: South Korea and Japan [hold](#) discussions on jointly developing an underwater continental shelf.

Oct. 4, 2024: South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul [holds](#) his first phone call with his new Japanese counterpart Iwaya Takeshi to discuss bilateral ties.

Oct. 10, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru [meet](#) for the first time on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit Meeting in Laos and discuss ways to further elevate the bilateral relationship.

Oct. 10, 2024: Senior diplomats from Japan, South Korea and the United States [discuss](#) trilateral cooperation to counter the North Korean threat.

Oct. 10, 2024: South Korean Minister of National Defense Kim Yong-hyun [hold](#) his first teleconference with his new Japanese counterpart Nakatani Gen.

Oct. 16, 2024: Japan, South Korea, and the United States [launch](#) a new joint multilateral mechanism to monitor North Korean sanctions called the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT), comprising of 11 countries.

Oct. 17, 2024: South Korean foreign ministry [voices](#) "deep regret" over Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru's ritual offering to the Yasukuni Shrine.

Oct. 17, 2024: South Korean first vice foreign minister Kim Hong-kyun and Japanese vice foreign minister Okano Masataka [meet](#) in Seoul to discuss bilateral cooperation and North Korea.

Oct. 18, 2024: Federation of Korean Industries (FKI) and the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren) [co-host](#) the 31st Korea-Japan Business Council in Seoul.

Oct. 18, 2024: Japan, South Korea, and the United States [issue](#) a joint statement after their first trilateral meeting on North Korean human rights in Washington, DC.

Oct. 23, 2024: Yang Geum-deok, a South Korean forced laborer and one of the 15 original plaintiffs that won the 2018 Supreme Court case, [accepts](#) the government-led compensation plan, making her the 12th person to accept the package.

Oct. 25, 2024: South Korean Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok [meets](#) his new Japanese counterpart, Kato Katsunobu in Washington, DC on the sidelines of the G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors Meeting.

Oct. 26, 2024: National security advisors from Japan, South Korea, and the United States [hold](#) a trilateral meeting in Washington to discuss the North Korean troop deployment to Russia and express "grave concern."

Oct. 30, 2024: Third and last surviving South Korean forced laborer [accepts](#) a government-led compensation package.

Nov. 3, 2024: Japan, South Korea and the United States [hold](#) a combined air drill with a B-1B bomber in response to a recent North Korean ICBM launch.

Nov. 7, 2024: Foreign ministers from 10 countries including Japan, South Korea, the United States plus the European Union [release](#) a joint statement expressing “grave concerns” over the North Korean troop deployment to Russia.

Nov. 8, 2024: Vice defense ministers from Japan and South Korea [hold](#) talks in Seoul to discuss cooperation on responding to North Korea-Russia military cooperation.

Nov. 15, 2024: Japan, South Korea, and the United States [wrap](#) up the second round of the trilateral, multidomain Freedom Edge military exercise. The exercise included various warships and aircraft, including the USS George Washington aircraft carrier, and F-35 stealth fighters from Korea and the US.

Nov. 15, 2024: South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Cho Tae-yul and Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Iwaya Takeshi [meet](#) on the sidelines of the APEC Summit in Lima, Peru to discuss bilateral cooperation. This was their first meeting since Ishiba Shigeru became the new Japanese prime minister in October.

Nov 16, 2024: South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru [meet](#) on the sidelines of the APEC Leaders’ Meetings in Lima, Peru and discuss ways to further elevate the bilateral relationship. They also [hold](#) a trilateral meeting with US President Joe Biden to discuss cooperation.

Nov 17, 2024: The total number of air passengers between South Korea and Japan for the months of January to October 2024 [exceeds](#) 20 million, up 33 percent from a year earlier.

Nov. 20, 2024: Japan, South Korea, and the United States officially [launches](#) the secretariat for trilateral cooperation in Seoul, with a rotating secretary general every two years, starting with South Korea.

Nov. 22, 2024: The top air force commanders of Japan, South Korea and the United States [hold](#) the first trilateral meeting (via teleconference) to discuss cooperation, including on joint air exercises.

Nov. 22, 2024: Japanese government [announces](#) that it will send Ikuina Akiko, the parliamentary vice minister at the foreign ministry to attend the memorial ceremony for Sado mine.

Nov. 23, 2024: South Korea [announces](#) it will not attend the Japan-led memorial ceremony for forced laborers at Sado mine.

Nov. 24, 2024: Japan [holds](#) memorial ceremony for forced laborers at Sado mine without participation from the Korean side, who protested the participation by Japanese parliamentary vice minister Ikuina Akiko, who did not mention forced labor in her speech.

Nov. 25, 2024: Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) and Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) [hold](#) the 13th leadership meeting in Osaka, Japan and agree to strengthen cooperation in energy, supply chains and advanced technologies.

Nov. 25, 2024: South Korean government [holds](#) a separate ceremony for family members of Korean forced laborers at Sado mine.

Nov. 25, 2024: Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi Yoshimasa [voices](#) regret that South Korea did not attend the Japan-led ceremony honoring forced laborers at Sado mine.

Nov. 26, 2024: South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Cho Tae-yul and Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Iwaya Takeshi [agree](#) to continue bilateral cooperation despite the Sado mine conflict at a meeting on the sidelines of the G7 foreign ministers’ meeting in Italy.

Nov. 29, 2024: The Seoul Central District Court [rules](#) that Nippon Steel needs to pay 100 million Korean won (\$71,740) each to two South Korean forced laborers. The same court also orders Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to pay 100 million Korean won (\$71,740) to a South Korean forced laborer.

Nov. 28, 2024: South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Cho Tae-yul [calls](#) on Japan to hold a “sincere” memorial ceremony for Sado mine next year, after failing to agree on a joint event this year.

Nov. 29, 2024: South Korea and Japan [hold](#) a joint meeting of foreign affairs and defense officials to reaffirm the bilateral security cooperation.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

Moscow and Beijing at the Dawn of A Grave New World of Trump 2.0

YU BIN, WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY

The election of Donald Trump as the 47th US president changed the chemistry between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing so much and yet so little. It was so much because the war-ending rhetoric of the president-elect was in sharp contrast to his predecessor's steadfast support of Ukraine. It was so little because the war in Ukraine not only continued but even escalated after Trump's decisive electoral win in early November as the Biden administration rushed arms to Ukraine with much relaxed restrictions (on ATACMS, etc.). Meanwhile, Beijing-Moscow relations continued to broaden and deepen throughout 2024 despite Trump's repeated vows to split the Russia-China entente. Xi and Putin met three times in six months (May, July, and October). Their joint enterprises (SCO, BRICS, etc.) also expanded steadily while experiencing growing pains. Meanwhile, the two large powers considerably stepped up their mil-mil interactions with more exercises, exchanges, and joint patrols. It remains to be seen how Trump would operationalize his campaign rhetorics not just to capture a pivotal position within the Moscow-Beijing-Washington triangle, but more importantly, to avert the Kissingerian dark prophecy of a grave new world of WMD and AI racing toward World War III.

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Putin 5.0 and Russia's China-Pivot

In his first 2024 campaign rally in March 2023, [Trump](#) blamed Biden for the devastating war in Ukraine, “casual talk” about nuclear war with Russia, and a China-Russia unity to “carve up the world.” A year later, Putin won his fifth term and then found himself in China, the [first foreign visit](#) of his fifth term in the presidency. It was also his first official visit since the outbreak of the Ukraine War in February 2022 (his October 2023 trip was defined as a “[working visit](#)” for the annual BRICS summit). 2024 was also a time of the 75th anniversary of China-Russian/Soviet diplomatic ties.

Despite the war, Moscow and Beijing managed to maintain and even deepen their bilateral ties. This time, Putin brought with him almost the entire Russian government (except the prime minister) to China, including [six deputy prime ministers](#) and heads of various governmental departments (foreign affairs, defense, national security, finance, economics, nuclear power, aerial space, railroad, nuclear power, etc.). These senior officials and their staff, along with hundreds of Russian businesspeople, filled up more than [20 large aircraft](#).

In Beijing, Xi and Putin held several hours of “[sincere and cordial meetings](#) covering many topics.” A [joint statement](#) was issued after the meeting. The 10,000-word document stressed the principles of nonalignment and equality in bilateral relations for a world order of “multipolarity and democracy” (Part I). As two large powers who suffered the most in WWII, the two sides said they would strongly defend the post-WWII world order by opposing distortion of war history and any effort to revive Nazism/militarism.

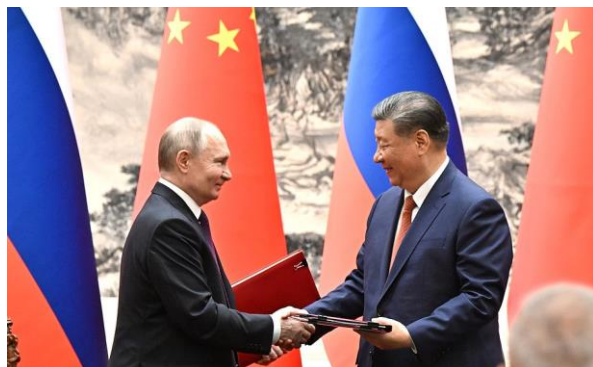


Figure 1 Following the talks, Putin and Xi signed a Joint Statement. Photo: Sergei Savostyanov

The statement covers nine functional areas for cooperation: security (parts II, VII, and X), economics (III), societal exchange (IV), multilateralism including the UN, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS (V, VI), the environment (VIII), and Ukraine (IV). Part III on economics listed 20 sub-areas for cooperation including the “Bilateral Investment Cooperation Planning Outline” (pending), the key to China’s large investment in Russia. The document has two noticeable additions: setting up an Arctic route cooperation subcommittee and a trilateral dialogue with North Korea regarding Chinese vessels’ access to the sea via the lower reaches of the Tumen River. While the former would open much of the Russia-controlled northern sea route and port facilities to China, the latter would play a key role in revitalizing China’s northeastern provinces.

The bulk of the joint statement (three parts) was about security. Part II, for example, called for “steady development for defense cooperation for both regional and global security.” The two sides needed to “deepen mutual trust and coordination,” and expand joint exercises and joint naval/aerial patrol. Communication and dialogue at various levels should be enhanced, the statement read, as well as coordination in multilateral forums (UN, SCO, BRICS) for anti-terrorism, law enforcement, and emergency management coordination. Part VII highlighted the danger of nuclear war, proliferation, militarization of outer space, weak international regulations on chemical/biological weapons, AI, and US deployment of intermediate-range missiles in the Asia-Pacific.

The emphasis on security was further underscored in Parts V (UN), VI (regional forums), VIII (environment), and IV (Ukraine) in which security issues were considered paramount for a just and enduring security for all. Lengthy joint statements between the two sides are not uncommon. The tone of the document, however, indicated a much stronger and more direct criticism of Washington’s “unilateralism” and rule-breaking behavior across all issue areas.

Is it Still the Economy...

Despite the war, Russia remained the world’s [4th largest economy](#) in 2023 in PPP terms, and 11th in nominal GDP. Meanwhile, massive Western sanctions on Russia led to a marked increase in Russia-China economic transactions. In 2023,

bilateral trade reached [\\$240 billion](#), up from \$108 billion in 2020. While China's [import of Russia's oil](#) increased by 24% to 107 million tons, China's [553,000 vehicles](#) exported to Russia accounted for [49%](#) of Russia's auto market, up from [19%](#) in 2022. Bilateral trade was "not only developing but also flourishing," remarked [Putin](#) in his meeting with visiting Chinese Premier Li Qiang on Aug. 21.

At the 29th prime ministerial meeting in Moscow, Li and Russian PM Mikhail Mishustin conducted "[a detailed discussion](#) on the entire range of trade, economic and humanitarian cooperation issues." Eighteen documents were signed, including one to upgrade the outline of an investment cooperation plan [to be finalized](#) by the yearend. For many Chinese business leaders, Russia's domestic law and regulations for foreign investment were quite "complicated," and the sweeping Western sanctions made it worse. A new version of the investment plan would facilitate China's 86 large investment projects in Russia totaling [\\$200 billion](#). While most of these projects would be [in the "traditional areas"](#) such as energy, transportation, agriculture, auto industry, and home electronics, Premier Li stressed the need to "explore [new areas](#) of technological and industrial cooperation," including [digital economy, biomedicine, green development](#), etc.

For decades, economic and trade relations were the weakest links between China and Russia, as both tried to integrate into the West-dominated global trading system. The Ukraine War and the tightening of their strategic space led to a marked broadening and deepening of their economic intercourse.

Moscow and Beijing had so far refrained from moving to a formal alliance. Yet for Washington, [Zbigniew Brzezinski's](#) 1997 warning regarding the emergence of a dominant and antagonistic Eurasian power is now descending across the vast Eurasian continent. The potential for a "marriage," [convenient](#) or not, between the world's energy/raw material and manufacturing giants seemed "unlimited" in both geoeconomic and geopolitical terms.

Multilateralism to Go

One key area of China-Russian cooperation in 2024 was to manage the "growing pains" of the SCO and BRICS against the ever-changing and more complex world. Xi and Putin met twice on

the sidelines of the annual summits of the SCO in Astana (July) and BRICS in Kasan (October).

In Astana, they [agreed](#) to enhance cooperation for regional security. While Xi called for more "[strategic coordination](#)," Putin echoed that Russian-Chinese cooperation in global affairs served as "[a main stabilizing factor](#)." Both vowed to strengthen the SCO for regional stability. Twenty-four [agreements](#) were inked, including a development strategy until 2035, several cooperation programs to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism for 2025-2027, an anti-drug strategy for the next five years, and its corresponding action program. As for global issues, participants endorsed the "Initiative On World Unity for a Just Peace, Harmony and Development" proposed by Kazakhstan for a new, democratic, and equitable international order.

This global vision of the regional security group got an instant boost in Astana as Belarus officially ascended became the SCO's 10th member. A few days after the Astana summit, more than 100 PLA special forces were airlifted to Belarus for an 11-day "anti-terrorist" exercise (code-named "[Attacking Falcon 2024](#)," July 8-19) in areas close to Poland and Ukraine. Despite its label as anti-terrorist, it was carried out by the regular PLA unit from the [80th Group Army](#) of the Northern Theater Command at the time of heightened tension between Belarus and Ukraine.

Despite these institutional gains, there was a growing gap between the SCO's numerous adopted agreements/declarations and its ability to implement them, according to Professor [Pan Guang](#), a prominent scholar on Central Asia in China. Part of the problem was SCO's unanimity-based decision-making mechanism, which frequently led to inaction. SCO's small and weak institutional setup (Secretariat in Beijing and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure in Tashkent, Uzbekistan), too, badly needs an update.

Perhaps more than anything else, Russia's influence in Central Asia steadily declined largely because of its preoccupation with the Ukraine war. A case in point was the final agreement [in June 2024](#) regarding the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railroad that had been put on hold for 30 years by disagreement over its finance and [Moscow's hesitation](#). With a projected annual capacity of 15 million tons of cargo, [CKU](#) represents the shortest route

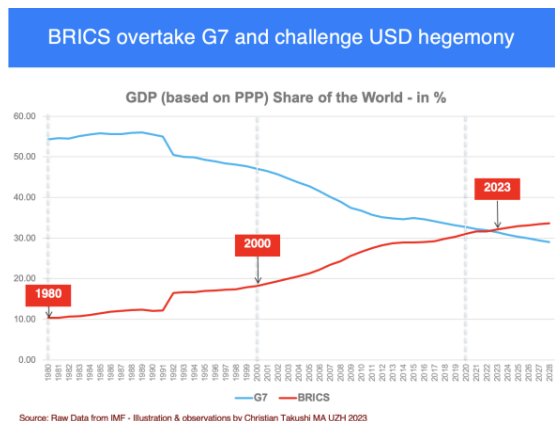
between Shanghai and Paris. In the foreseeable future, Russia may have to live with a [more proactive China](#) in its traditional backyard. Alternatively, Washington and its allies will make further inroads into the post-Soviet space where de-Russianization was already irreversible.

More “Breaks” onto BRICS

As the SCO moved beyond its regional confine, BRICS also added more strategic and global dimensions. Putin and Xi [met again](#) in Kazan (Russia) prior to the BRICS group summit. Their “in-depth exchange of views on major international and regional issues of common concern” was described as “a key moment” of the annual summit, said Chinese FM [Wang Yi](#). Both leaders spoke highly of the bilateral ties. While [Putin](#) described it as “a paradigm of how inter-state relations should be constructed,” [Xi](#) emphasized the principles of non-alignment, non-confrontation, and non-direction against third parties.

With the [theme](#) “Strengthening Multilateralism for Just Global Development and Security,” the Kazan summit was the first enlarged BRICS gathering with five new members (Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia). As BRICS’ rotating host, Russia organized more than 200 events. [Thirty-six countries](#), including 22 heads of government/state and UN Secretary-General [Antonio Guterres](#), joined the annual gathering. BRICS Business Forum also attracted more than [a thousand participants](#).

In his speech to the BRICS business forum, Putin noted that the [10-member group](#) now had 46% of the global population, 36% of the world’s landmass, and 45% of oil output. But even before its expansion, BRICS had overtaken the G7 in PPP terms ([37.4% vs 29.3%](#)).



The BRICS summit ended with the signing of the Kazan Declaration, a 134-clause document covering every conceivable area of global issues. The long document “is a declaration for a new global order,” according to [Andrey Kortunov](#) of the Russian International Affairs Council and Professor Zhao Huashen of Fudan University in Shanghai. BRICS did not merely add new members but was becoming a platform for the entire Global South, noted Kortunov and Zhao in a jointly penned article. Four areas of cooperation were emphasized: multilateralism (Articles 6–23), global/regional stability and security (Articles 24–56), economic/financial development (Articles 57–118), and societal exchange (Articles 119–132). Of these areas, security and development were highly interdependent, noted Kortunov and Zhao.

Ukraine was briefly mentioned in Article 26, stressing the need to comply with the UN principles and make all efforts to end the conflict. The bulk of the security section dealt with conflicts and challenges around the world, particularly in the Middle East including the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which reflected the views of the BRICS four new Islamic members (Iran, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia).

While multilateralism was a platform, the three functional areas of security, development, and cultural/humanitarian exchanges largely reflected the three “proposals” outlined by Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#) in the past few years for global development (2021), global security (2022), and civilizational dialogue and coexistence. This was also the theme of [Xi’s speech](#) in Kazan. China’s vision for the BRICS future, therefore, was largely accepted by its diverse members.

BRICS' trajectory, however, was not to rival, but to parallel the existing global system dominated by the West. It does, however, serve the interests of the Global South, argued [Kortunov and Zhao](#). At a minimum, BRICS' highly diverse constituents are fundamentally different from the largely exclusive Western institutions such as G7, the European Union, and NATO, whose members are similar in political, economic, and cultural/religious construct. Hence the need for an interface for the diverse interests of its vastly different members.

Enhanced Mil-Mil Ties

In his meeting with Putin in Kazan, [President Xi](#) described the world undergoing “unprecedented tectonic transformation” and “serious changes and upheaval...unseen for centuries.” 2024 witnessed a significant increase in Russia-China mil-mil interactions. In July-September, for example, several large-scale joint exercises/operations even overlap with one another:

- July 2-16: Three Chinese naval ships and one Russian corvette conducted a [15-day joint patrol](#) of the Western Pacific and the South China Sea, the fourth joint patrol since 2021.
- July 12-17: the annual (since 2012) “[Exercise Joint Sea-2024](#)” was held off the Zhanjiang naval port in southern China. Seven Chinese and Russian naval vessels joined the drill for “maritime security threats.”
- In late July, Chinese naval ships were present in both [St Petersburg](#) and [Vladivostok](#) for the 328th anniversary of the Russian Navy.
- July 24: Russian and Chinese strategic bombers carried out a joint patrol of Far East Russia and the Bering Sea near Alaska, the [8th strategic aerial patrol](#) by the two militaries since 2019. For the first time, the joint patrol reached international airspace near [Alaska](#).

August was quiet with only one military exchange: commander of the PLA Ground Forces Gen. Li Qiaoming led a delegation to the annual “[Army-2024 Forum](#)” outside Moscow. He held talks with Russian Ground Forces' Commander-

in-Chief Oleg Salyukov. By September, the high-frequency exercise mode returned:

- On Sept. 10-15, China launched the [first phase of the annual “Northern/Interaction-2024”](#) naval exercises with Russia. Unlike the 2023 series primarily in the Sea of Japan, the 2024 version extended to the Sea of Okhotsk which had been carefully guarded as an “[internal sea](#),” or “Russia’s Great Lake,” by Soviet/Russian authorities since the end of WWII. The Chinese press referred to Russia’s “fortified waters” ([堡垒海域](#)) presumably for deploying Soviet/Russia’s strategic nuclear submarines for second/retaliatory strikes.
- On the same day (Sept.10), Russia began its “[Ocean 2024](#)” strategic command-and-staff exercises. Some 90,000 troops and more than 500 ships and aircraft drilled across the Pacific and Arctic Oceans, and the Mediterranean, Caspian and Baltic seas. China was the only country that participated in the exercise.
- The “recess” between the two phases of China’s “Northern/Interaction-2024” was not wasted. Between Sept. 16 and 20, Chinese and Russian coast guard ships held a joint drill near Peter the Great Bay off Vladivostok. This was followed by a [first-ever joint patrol](#) of the northern Pacific beginning Sept. 21. By Oct. 1, the patrol ships reached the [Arctic Ocean](#), which was a first for the Chinese Coast Guard ships.
- No sooner had the Coast Guard ships departed from the northern Pacific than the second phase of the Northern/Interaction-2024 joint exercise began on Sept. 21. This was immediately followed by the [5th joint patrol](#) of the northern Pacific by the same naval vessels of the two navies, which was the first time for the two sides to conduct [two joint maritime patrols within one year](#).

The high frequency and intensity of the Sino-Russian interactions occurred against a backdrop of heightened tension in the West Pacific. From

late June to early August, the US-led Rim of the Pacific 2024 exercises ([RIMPAC 2024](#)), the largest in the world, drilled around the Hawaiian Islands with 40 surface ships, three submarines, 14 national land forces, over 150 aircraft, and more than 25,000 personnel from 29 countries.

It was during the multi-nation “Sama Sama” exercises that the PLA launched a 13-hour massive [Joint Sword-2024B](#) drill around Taiwan on Oct. 14. The exercise was a simulated blockade of the island shortly after Lai Ching-te’s speech on Oct. 10 (ROC’s national day), which was deemed as “[provocative and dangerous](#)” and aimed toward nominal independence. On the same day, Russian Defense Minister [Andrei Belousov](#) traveled to Beijing and held talks with Chinese counterpart Dong Jun. Military cooperation between Russia and China was important in safeguarding global and regional peace and stability, said Belousov.

While exercises came and went, the US deployment of an intermediate-range missile system in Japan and the Philippines was considered a long-term grave threat [to China and Russia](#). “[L]and-based intermediate-range missiles in the Asia-Pacific region will pose the biggest security threat to the region,” TASS cited PLA’s Lt. Gen. [He Lei](#) on Sept. 12. The 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty prohibited the deployment of intermediate-range missiles but Washington withdrew from it in 2019.

Amidst these heightened military activities in 2024 was China’s effort to elevate/demonstrate its nuclear capabilities, with or without Russian cooperation. On Sept. 25, China tested, for the first time in [44 years](#), an ICBM ([DF-31AG](#) with a range of 12,000 km) from Hainan Island to the South Pacific. To this, Russian Presidential Spokesman Dmitry [Peskov](#) remarked “[T]his is China’s sovereign right... We respect [this].” In the Nov. 29–30 ninth joint strategic aerial patrol with Russia, China dispatched, for the first time, two long-range H-9N strategic bombers with refueling capabilities for a combat radius of [6,500 km](#). The [nuclear-capable](#) bomber could carry YJ-12 supersonic antiship missiles, CJ-100 cruise missiles, and even an air-launched variant of the hypersonic (Mach 10) [DF-21 anti-ship ballistic missiles](#) (see photo below). Many in China viewed this as a crucial step toward China’s [first](#) credible and operational airborne strategic deterrence.



Figure 3 H-6N Bomber with Ballistic Missile Photo: Military Watch Magazine

Intensified China-Russian mil-mil interactions occurred when Russia continued to be bogged down on its western front. Its vast east and Pacific regions were increasingly exposed despite Putin’s 2023 [declaration](#) that “the Far East is Russia’s strategic priority for the 21st century.” Enhanced military interactions with China were therefore highly desirable given China’s growing military capabilities.

For the PLA, Russia remained the sole source of real combat experience regardless of Russia’s battle performance in Ukraine. At the operational level, interoperability between the two militaries in 2024 meant more access to each other’s facilities for refueling and resupply. In the case of the joint bomber patrols of the northern Pacific, the flying range was much shorter for China’s H-6 bombers to reach their intended area off Alaska as they took off from [an airfield in northeast Russia](#). Some Chinese [military experts](#) were speculating that a shorter route via Russia’s Arctic air space would make China’s strategic bombers a more viable and flexible deterrent than PLA’s land and sea options.

Embracing Trump “Shock-n-Awe” 2.0

Although Putin remarked [jokingly](#) in early September that he wanted the Democratic candidate Harris to win, he was clearly [avoiding comments](#) on Trump’s win at the annual Valdai Forum on November 7. The Russian president nonetheless said Trump “impressed” him as a “courageous man” in “extraordinary conditions” (the assassination). Meanwhile, Trump’s words about ending the Ukraine conflict and improving relations with Russia “deserve attention.”

As to Trump’s repeated rhetoric of splitting the Beijing-Moscow partnership, Putin said that

Russia would not team up with the US in dealing with China. Relations with China “have reached a historical high and are based on mutual trust, which is something we lack in our relations with other countries, above all with Western countries,” Putin replied to a question from [Prof. Feng Shaolei](#), a top Russologist in China. He further suggested that “everyone would win and there would be no losers if the United States ... treats both Russia and China by moving away from its double containment policy towards a trilateral cooperation framework.”

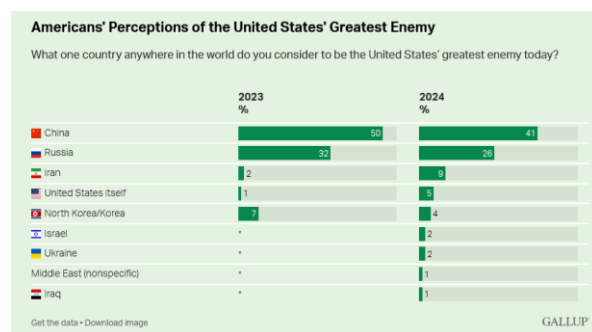
There were good reasons for Russia to be more careful with Trump’s huge win, given the highly charged US domestic chemistry and two assassination attempts against candidate Trump. “I believe he is still not entirely safe,” remarked [Putin](#) in late November. Meanwhile, Trump’s Cabinet picks reportedly received multiple [threats](#) against them. Even under the best circumstances, converting Trump’s campaign rhetoric into policies would be difficult.

While Russia could afford to adopt a wait-and-see posture regarding Trump, Beijing perceived Trump’s return with visible unease for at least four reasons. One was Trump’s solid record of “China-heavy-and-Russia-lite” in both words and deeds in the previous eight years. And there has been no indication of any deviation from that.

Second, Biden’s China policy, which was seen as bad enough—“endless trouble, endless frictions, and endless struggles” (麻烦不断 摩擦不断 斗争不断) according to [Wu Xinbo](#), director of American Studies Center of the prestigious Fudan University in Shanghai—would have to be interrupted if not disrupted given the gathering of China hawks under Trump. In this “you-go-low-I-go-lower” “China race,” Taiwan and the South China Sea could be the next flash points between Washington and Beijing.

Third, the US trade war with China, which was started by Trump in 2018, will likely escalate rapidly, further disrupting the already fragile supply chains of the world trading system. In contrast to Russia’s raw-material-based economic structure (oil, gas, grain, etc.), China’s globalized production chains, extensive energy supplies, and trading/shipping networks are [far more vulnerable](#) to sanctions and disturbances than [Russia](#) even under normal circumstances.

Last, a growing number of China’s [foreign policy analysts](#) came to see an eerily yet persistent “[civilizational](#)” factor permeating the Trump camp, in that white communism of the Soviet type and its post-Soviet variant were seen in a far more favorable light than “a great power competitor (China) that is not Caucasian” (words by [Kiron Skinner](#), director of policy planning at the State Department during Trump’s first term). To China’s surprise and perplexity, Skinner herself is African-American. No matter how much Russia is demonized, Putin, and particularly his “[healthy conservatism](#),” always has a strong appeal among [conservative segments](#) in the US/West. Such a sense of [racial hierarchy](#) may help explain why recent [polls](#) continuously show that more Americans view China as a greater enemy than Russia despite Russia’s war-prone propensity and China’s zero record of use of force in the past 45 years.



Moscow and Beijing, despite their long-term strategic partnership and being targets of Washington’s “[dual containment](#)” strategies, assume very different cultural/racial identities in the US domestic scene. It remains to be seen [how far](#) this genre of US identity politics will find its way to policies toward Moscow and Beijing under Trump 2.0.

End the War or the World?

Trump made his historic comeback a year after the passing of Henry Kissinger in November 2023. In their 2017 meeting in the White House, [Trump](#) described his “long-time” friend (Kissinger) as “a man of immense talent, experience, and knowledge.”

Despite the huge difference between the world’s most powerful salesman and the realpolitik thinker/practitioner, both men showed strong aversions to the Ukraine conflict. That said, the biggest difference between them is how the

conflict may end. For more than six months, Trump repeatedly promised to end it [in 24 hours](#).” Kissinger, however, warned that ending a conflict was far more difficult than starting one. “The test of policy is how it ends, not how it begins,” argued [Kissinger](#) shortly after the 2014 Crimea crisis.

For Beijing, the Trump-Kissinger discourse, regardless of the outcome, would put China between a rock and a hard place. As a profoundly conservative country, the ending of the Ukraine war, or any war, is good for China’s sprouting business around the world, particularly its [Belt and Road Initiative](#) now in its second decade with more than 150 countries. Such a prospect, however, would divert more attention and resources to America’s “China issue.”

Regardless, the Ukraine war was moving steadily toward a breaking point in the waning days of the Biden administration. On Nov. 17, [Biden authorized](#) Ukraine to use long-range ATACMS missiles (300-mile range) for deeper strikes into Russia, which [Ukraine did](#) two days later. On the same day, [Putin](#) approved changes to Russia’s [nuclear doctrine](#). Now an attack from a non-nuclear state, if backed by a nuclear power, would be treated as a joint assault on Russia. On Nov. 21, the Ukrainian city [Dnipro](#) was struck by Russia’s newest nuclear-capable intermediate-range hypersonic (Mach 10) ballistic missile code-named [Oreshnik](#) (or “Hazel Bush”) with six independently-guided warheads.

Moscow and Beijing reacted very differently to this escalation. For Russia, it was “a qualitatively new round of escalation of tensions and a qualitatively new situation...in this conflict,” remarked the Kremlin spokesman [Dmitry Peskov](#). Meanwhile, [Beijing](#) urged all sides to de-escalate and find a political solution. The strongest reaction came from Trump’s supporters who almost unanimously depicted the ATACMS reversal as an “[escalation move](#)” toward WWII. “It’s another step up the escalation ladder and nobody knows where this is going,” said Trump’s incoming national security adviser, Florida [Rep. Mike Waltz](#).

Just a few days after Biden’s ATACMS decision, the [New York Times](#) reported that some officials of the Biden administration floated the idea of returning nuclear weapons to Ukraine as a deterrent against Russia. Although this was dismissed a few days later by National Security Adviser [Jake Sullivan](#), the 21st-century version of

the 1983 made-for-TV film [The Day After](#) was rapidly unfolding as *Newsweek* published a series of simulated impacts of nuclear blasts on major metropolitan centers in [Europe](#), [North America](#), [Russia](#), [China](#), and [North Korea](#).

Russia’s reaction, or lack of reaction, to the *Newsweek* extravaganza may be uncharacteristic. Or it was exactly what Russia wanted. In contrast, China’s netizens [erupted](#) with disbelief and anger at *Newsweek*’s “coldblooded calculation” “reducing the untold human cost to lifeless statistics.”

For incoming US President Donald Trump ending the war in Ukraine is now a far more complex and difficult, if not impossible, issue. Meanwhile, time is limited for Trump, and perhaps for all other world leaders, to avert what [Henry Kissinger](#) warned, 11 months before his passing, was a global catastrophe (WWIII) in a grave new world of WMD and AI.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

MAY-NOVEMBER 2024

May 3-9, 2024: China's special envoy for the Ukraine crisis Li Hui conducts his [3rd shuttle diplomacy](#) by traveling to Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

May 16-17, 2024: Russian President [Putin](#) pays official visit to China. He and Chinese President Xi Jinping hold “a sincere and cordial meeting covering many topics.” The two sign a joint statement on deepening the comprehensive strategic partnership between their two nations. After Beijing, Putin visits China's northernmost provincial city [Harbin](#), the most Russianized city in China. He co-chairs the opening ceremony of the 8th Sino-Russian Expo, visits a Chinese tech university and Saint Sophia Cathedral (built in 1907), the largest Russian Orthodox church in the Far East.

May 20, 2024: Chinese FM Wang Yi and Russian FM Lavrov [meet](#) on the sideline of SCO's annual foreign ministerial meeting in Astana of Kazakhstan.

May 30-31, 2024: China and Russia hold a “[high-level think tank forum](#)” in Moscow. More than 100 representatives join. It was launched in 2018 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC).

June 10, 2024: Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Lavrov [meet](#) on the sidelines of the BRICS foreign ministers meeting in Nizhny Novgorod of Russia.

July 2-16, 2024: Chinese and Russian navies conduct [15-day joint patrol](#) of the Western Pacific and the South China Sea. Three Chinese naval ships and the Russian corvette *Sovershenny* of the Pacific Fleet participate in the 4th joint patrol. Unlike the previous two patrols, which were an extension of the annual “Northern/Interaction” series, this was a separate operation.

July 3, 2024 : Presidents Xi and Putin [hold a meeting](#) ahead of the 24th SCO summit in Astana.

July 8-19, 2024: China and Belarus conduct an 11-day joint anti-terrorist exercise code-named “[Attacking Falcon 2024](#)” in Belarus close to borders with Poland (5 klm) and Ukraine (60 klm).

July 9-13, 2024: China's top legislator [Zhao Leji](#) pays official goodwill visit to Russia and attends 9th meeting on parliamentary cooperation. Putin meets Zhao in St Petersburg on July 11.

July 12-17, 2024: Chinese and Russian navies conduct a joint naval exercise “[Exercise Joint Sea-2024](#)” at a military port in Zhanjiang in south China's Guangdong Province. The Joint-Sea exercise series started in 2012. This time, the seven Chinese and Russian vessels focus on “joint response to maritime security threats.”

July 21-23, 2024: Chinese Vice Premier [Ding Xuexiang](#) visits Moscow for: the 11th meeting of the China-Russia Investment Cooperation Committee, the 21st meeting of the China-Russia Energy Cooperation Committee, and the sixth China-Russia Energy Business Forum.

July 22-24, 2024: BRICS member states hold [9th Counter-Terrorism Working Group Session](#) in Moscow at the departmental/bureau level, the first enlarged meeting with new members (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates). Prior to this, Director of the External Security Bureau of China's Foreign Ministry Bai Tian chairs the “de-radicalization” session of the meeting.

July 23, 2024: SCO member states conduct the “[Interaction-2024](#)” joint counter-terrorism exercise in northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. This is the first time all SCO

member states participate in a joint counter-terrorism live drill.

July 23-27, 2024: Ukrainian FM [Dmytro Kuleba](#) visits Guangzhou. He and Chinese FM meet on July 24 for [three hours](#).

July 23-29, 2024: [Two Chinese naval ships](#) (Jiaozuo and Honghu) visit the St Petersburg Port for the 328th founding anniversary of the Russian Navy.

July 24, 2024: Four Russian and Chinese strategic bombers carry out [a five-hour joint patrol](#) of Far East Russia and the Bering Sea near Alaska, the 8th since 2009. The two Tu-95MS and two Chinese H-6 bombers are “intercepted” by US F-35, F-16, and Canadian F-18 fighters in international airspace near Alaska.

July 25, 2024: A [trilateral foreign ministerial meeting](#) is held in Vientiane, Laos between Lao Deputy Prime Minister and FM Saleumxay Kommasith, Chinese FM Wang Yi, and Russian FM Sergey Lavrov, representing ASEAN, SCO and BRICS, respectively. It is held on the sidelines of the [57th ASEAN foreign ministerial meeting](#) chaired by Laos. Wang and Lavrov express support for ASEAN centrality of ASEAN. Wang and Lavrov then hold [a separate meeting](#).

July 26-29, 2024: A [Chinese naval task force](#) comprised of the comprehensive landing ship *Longhushan* and training ship *Zheng He* visit Vladivostok for the 328th anniversary of the Russian Navy. A total of 1,100 sailors and [naval cadets](#) from China’s Naval Aviation University in Yantai (Shandong Province) participate.

July 28-Aug. 7, 2024: China’s special envoy for the Ukraine crisis [Li Hui](#) conducts his 4th round of shuttle diplomacy by traveling to Brazil, South Africa and Indonesia.

Aug. 7-8, 2024: Director-General of the Department of Treaty and Law of the Foreign Ministry Ma Xinmin holds talks on “international law issues of mutual interest and concern” in Moscow with Director of the Legal

Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry [Musikhin Maksim Vyacheslavovich](#). Ma then has a [first-ever consultation](#) on the peaceful uses of outer space with Special Coordinator of the Russian Foreign Ministry for the International Cooperation Sergey Sergeevich Belousk.

Aug. 12-14 2024: Russia holds annual “[Army-2024 Forum](#)” at the Patriot Congress and Exhibition Center. The theme of the forum is Russia’s “special military operation experience.” About 100 militaries around the world join the close-door forum along with more than 120 foreign arms manufacturers. China, Belarus, India, and Iran [bring in their display items](#). Gen. Li Qiaoming of the PLA Ground Forces leads a delegation to the forum and holds talks with Russian Ground Forces' Commander-in-Chief Oleg Salyukov on [issues of “military cooperation.”](#)

Aug. 17, 2024: Vice FM [Ma Zhaoxu](#) holds consultations in Beijing with Russian Deputy FM Ryabkov Sergey Alexeevich. The two exchange views on bilateral relations, global strategic stability, BRICS cooperation, and other issues.

Aug. 20-21, 2024: Chinese Premier [Li Qiang](#) visits Moscow for the 29th annual prime ministerial meeting with Russian counterpart Mikhail Mishustin. The focus is to update the bilateral investment protection agreement signed in 2006 for the pending [¥1.4 trillion yuan](#) (about \$700 billion) China’s investment in 86 large projects in Russia. Li’s trip is his first official visit to Moscow as premier. [Putin](#) meets Li in the Kremlin after the regular PM meeting.

Sept. 4-6, 2024: Chinese Vice President [Han Zheng](#) visits Vladivostok for the 9th Eastern Economic Forum (EEF, Sept. 3-6). He is received by [Putin](#) on Sept. 4.

Sept. 10-12, 2024: BRICS’ Senior security officials meet in St. Petersburg for [14th annual session](#) chaired by Russian Security Council Secretary Sergey Shoigu. Chinese FM Wang Yi meets [Shoigu](#) and Russia’s Secretary of the Security Council on Sept. 10 prior to joining the

session. This is the first time new BRICS members (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates) participate in the annual session. They also hold a session with security officials representing 13 “[Global South](#)” countries. Putin meets the BRICS participants on Sept. 12. [He](#) then holds a separate meeting with Chinese FM Wang Yi.

Sept. 10–15, 2024: China conducts the [first phase of the “Northern/Interaction-2024”](#) naval exercises with Russian naval and air forces in the Sea of Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk. A China-Russia [joint commanding headquarters](#) is set up on Sept. 8 in Vladivostok.

Sept. 10–16, 2024: Russia conducts “[Ocean 2024](#)” strategic command-and-staff exercise involving some 90,000 troops and more than 500 ships and aircraft across the Pacific and Arctic Oceans, as well as the Mediterranean, Caspian and Baltic seas. Fifteen “friendly nations” send observers and China is the only one to participate in the exercise.

Sept. 13, 2024: [Geng Shuang](#), China's deputy permanent representative to the UN, says that “China has not supplied weapons to either party, and we have consistent and rigorous controls over dual-use items. We maintain normal trade and economic cooperation with all countries around the world, including Russia and Ukraine.”

Sept. 16–20, 2024: Chinese and Russian coast guard ships hold a joint drill near Peter the Great Bay off Vladivostok. This is followed by a [first-ever joint patrol](#) of the northern Pacific on September 21. On Oct. 1, the patrol ships reach the [Arctic Ocean](#). This is the first time that Chinese Coast Guard ships patrol the Arctic waters.

Sept. 21–27, 2024: The Northern/Interaction-2024 joint exercise conducts its [2nd phase](#) in the Sea of Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk. This is followed by the [5th joint patrol](#) of the northern Pacific by the two navies.

Sept. 27, 2024: Chinese FM Wang Yi and Brazilian special presidential advisor Celso Amorim launch

a “[Friends of Peace](#)” platform on the Ukraine crisis at the UN headquarters in New York. Fifteen other countries from the Global South join the platform including Algeria, Bolivia, Columbia, Egypt, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Mexico, South Africa, Turkey, and Zambia. [France and Switzerland](#) join the meeting as observers. A joint statement is issued. Russian FM [Lavrov](#) urges the group to produce a specific action plan for achieving peace and “fully take into account... the root causes of the crisis.” Ukrainian President Zelensky criticized the plan as “destructive.”

Sept. 27, 2024: Chinese FM Wang Yi and Russian FM Lavrov attended the [third informal meeting](#) of the foreign ministers of China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran on the Afghan issue on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session in New York. A joint statement was issued calling for greater cooperation in dealing with security and economic challenges in Afghanistan.

Oct. 2, 2024: Russian and Chinese heads of state exchange greetings for the 75th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations.

Oct. 4, 2024: Sixth regular meeting (Moscow format) on [Afghanistan](#) is held in Moscow. Senior officials from Russia, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan attend. Acting FM of Afghanistan Amir Khan Muttaqi takes part as the main guest. [A joint statement](#) is issued calling for cooperation on the security and development of Afghanistan. Russia is reportedly removing Afghanistan from its list of [terrorist states](#).

Oct. 14–15, 2024: Russian Defense Minister [Andrei Belousov](#) travels to Beijing and holds talks with Chinese counterpart Dong Jun. Belousov says that military cooperation between Russia and China is important in safeguarding global and regional peace and stability. Belousov is also received by [Zhang Youxia](#), deputy chairman of the military commission of the CCP.

Oct. 22–24, 2024: BRICS holds its annual summit in [Kazan](#), Russia. President Putin and President

Xi Jinping meet on October 22 on the sideline of the BRICS summit.

Oct. 29, 2024: Assistant FM [Liu Bin](#) holds consultations with Russian Deputy FM Rudenko Andrey Yurevich in Beijing. The two discuss SCO and other regional issues.

Oct. 30, 2024: Chinese FM [Wang Yi](#) meets Russian Deputy FM Andrey Rudenko in Beijing. The two exchange views on the Ukraine crisis.

Nov. 7, 2024: Putin speaks highly on relations with China during the annual [Valdai Forum](#) in Sochi, Russia. Mentioning China more than 30 times in his three-hour speech and Q&A session, Putin also affirms Russia's support for China's claim over Taiwan, while blaming the US and Taiwan for "instigating a crisis in Asia" similar to that of Ukraine.

Nov. 11-14, 2024: Russian Security Council Secretary [Sergey Shoigu](#) pays a working visit to China. Shoigu holds "strategic security consultations" with Chinese FM Wang Yi on Nov. 12 and meets CCP's Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission overseeing national security and intelligence Cheng Wenqing. Shoigu also visits the Airshow China 2024 in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province.

Nov. 18, 2024: Chinese FM Wang Yi and Russian counterpart Lavrov hold talks in Brazil's Rio de Janeiro on the sidelines of the G20 annual summit. They discuss issues of [Korea, Ukraine](#), etc

Nov. 22, 2024: Assistant FM [Liu Bin](#) meets Russian Ambassador to China Igor Morgulov in Beijing. They exchange views on China-Russia relations, high-level exchanges and practical cooperation.

Nov. 27, 2024: China's Assistant FM [Liu Bin](#) holds consultations with Russian Deputy FM Galuzin Mikhail Yuryevich in Beijing. They discussed CIS and other regional issues. Yuryevich also meets with Chinese Assistant FM [Miao Deyu](#).

Nov. 29-30, 2024: Two Russian Tu-95MS and two Chinese H-6N ([nuclear capable](#)) strategic bombers conduct the [9th joint strategic patrol](#) of the East China Sea and Western Pacific. They are escorted at various stages of the patrol by Su-30SM, MiG-31 and J-16 fighters of the two air forces. A Chinese oil tanker (Y-20A) and [two Chinese Y-9](#) electronic surveillance/warfare planes also join the operation. During the two-phase joint patrol, Russian bombers land and take off from a Chinese airfield.

Dec. 1, 2024: Chinese FM [Wang Yi](#) chairs the 5th China-Central Asian Foreign Ministerial meeting in Chengdu, China. They discuss the work for the 2nd China-Central Asian summit in Astana, Kazakhstan in 2025. A [joint communique](#) was issued after the meeting.

Dec. 2, 2024: China's special envoy for Middle Eastern affairs [Zhai Jun](#) meets Russian Deputy FM Sergei Vershinin on the sidelines of the Urgent Humanitarian Response for Gaza Conference.

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

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

AUSTRALIA-US/EAST ASIA
RELATIONS

VOTERS CONSIDER, TRUMP COMES, CHINA COERCION COOLS

GRAEME DOBELL

Australia's politicians prepare for the national election that must be held by May. In judging the first term of Anthony Albanese's Labor government, the key concern for Australia voters is the cost of living, while international issues are bracketed by the United States and China—the return of President Donald Trump and the cooling of China's trade coercion of Australia. The Albanese government tells Australians they face “[fraught and fragile](#) global conditions” in a “a time of [great global uncertainty](#),” in “the most [complex and challenging](#) strategic environment since the Second World War.” Canberra's approach to the Trump administration will emphasize traditional alliance ties while reinforcing new elements: AUKUS nuclear submarines, the Quad, the increase of US forces on Australian soil, and steps toward free trade in defense equipment and technology to achieve more integration between US and Australian industries.

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Australia's Election, Trump's US Election

One of the many unusual impacts of Trump's return to the presidency is the influence he will have on the federal election Australia will hold by May 2025. Prime Minister Albanese chooses the day, but the three-year federal election cycle means the latest date for the vote on the House of Representatives and half the Senate is May 17, 2025. The parliamentary sitting calendar for 2025 is shaped by the election deadline. Australia's annual budget is usually presented to Parliament in May. But the date for the 2025 budget is brought forward to March 25, 2025. An early budget and then a May federal poll is the same timetable used by Scott Morrison's Liberal-National Coalition government in the previous elections in 2019 and 2022.

Issues that resonated in the US election will echo in Australia—the cost of living, housing, and migration levels. The opposition leader Peter Dutton will mobilize an Australian version of the question Trump asked US voters: “Are you better off than you were three years ago?” Labor's response will be to ask voters: “Who is going to make you better off in the next three years?”

In the lower house of Parliament, where governments are formed, Labor goes to the voters holding the thinnest of majorities—78 seats in the 151-seat House of Representatives (redistributions will reduce the House to 150 seats at the election). The possibility of Labor being pushed into minority government looms as an equal or even stronger possibility than Labor hanging on to its majority. The Liberal-National Coalition holds 55 seats, while independents and minor parties hold 18. The Coalition will need a net gain of 20 seats from Labor and the cross-benches to return to office. The global electoral trend to punish incumbent government means the Albanese government has lost its lead in the opinion polls. Polls now deliver a near 50-50 split in the two-party vote for Labor and the Coalition; the polling margin of error decides which side is leading in individual polls.

The doyen of the Canberra press gallery, Michelle Grattan, observes that Trump's victory in the United States will [affect the climate](#) of Australia's campaign: “One obvious point of debate would be how either leader would potentially handle an unpredictable Trump. A Trump presidency might [favor] Opposition Leader Peter Dutton's national security focus. But an opposite view, held in Labor circles, is it could make people stick

to the status quo. Trump's triumph would also be fodder for the Greens in their attack on Labor's closeness to the US. For its part, Labor would argue the Australia-US alliance is enduring regardless of individual US and Australian leaders and governments.”

Finishing her term in Canberra, US Ambassador Caroline Kennedy emphasized what will be a key Australian talking point to Trump as she pointed to “the [continuity that has characterized this alliance](#) for more than a century.” Kennedy expressed the great alliance story Australia will seek to tell Trump: “Australia may be a middle power, but to the United States, you are number one. We have no more trusted or capable ally. In every dimension of our relationship, I've seen the United States rely on Australian leadership and experience. Australia is no longer America's ‘deputy sheriff’ or whatever the critics like to say. Australia is our partner and often our teacher as the United States navigates a multipolar world. That's true in our bilateral relationship. It's true in multilateral fora, and it is vital in this region.”

After phoning Trump to congratulate him the day after the US election, Prime Minister Albanese said they “talked about the importance of the alliance, and the strength of the Australia-US relationship in security, AUKUS, trade and investment. I look forward to working together in the interests of both our countries.”



Figure 1 U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during a joint news conference with Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison in the White House in Washington on September 20, 2019. Photo: Jonathan Ernst/Reuters

Albanese told a press conference: “President Trump has run a campaign [based on change](#) and he's made it clear he's going to do things differently--so we shouldn't be surprised as things change. But equally, we should be really

confident in ourselves and our place in the world as well, and our ability to deliver on our interests together as Australians.”

Albanese denied any need to apologize for previous negative comments on Trump’s first presidency. The most notable example was in 2017, when Albanese was an opposition frontbencher. Asked then how he would deal with Trump, Albanese answered “[with trepidation](#),” going on to say “he scares the s--t out of me and I think it's of concern the leader of the Free World thinks that you can conduct politics through 140 characters on Twitter overnight.”

Now as prime minister, Albanese says he will work with Trump, adding that he has demonstrated “my ability to work with world leaders and to develop relationships with them which are positive.” Australia’s ambassador in Washington, the former Labor prime minister, Kevin Rudd, acted swiftly after the US election to delete his previous criticisms of Trump. Media turned up plenty of examples of Rudd attacks, calling Trump, “the [village idiot](#)” and “the most destructive president in history.” A statement from the Australian embassy announced Rudd’s [clean-up](#):

“In his previous role as the head of an independent US-based think tank [the Asia Society], Mr. Rudd was a regular commentator on American politics. Out of respect for the office of President of the United States, and following the election of President Trump, Ambassador Rudd has now removed these past commentaries from his personal website and social media channels. This has been done to eliminate the possibility of such comments being misconstrued as reflecting his positions as Ambassador and, by extension, the views of the Australian Government. Ambassador Rudd looks forward to working with President Trump and his team to continue strengthening the US-Australia alliance.”

Rudd’s previous criticisms were quoted in an interview with Trump in March by the British politician, Nigel Farage. In response, Trump responded by calling Australia’s ambassador “a little bit nasty,” and “[not the brightest bulb](#).” While saying that the ambassador “won’t be there long,” Trump ended his response to the

question about Rudd by noting, “I don’t know much about him.” After Trump’s election, the Albanese government expressed full confidence in Rudd and said he would stay as ambassador. Foreign Minister Penny Wong noted that Trump is “a pretty robust individual” while the alliance “[is bigger than any individual or past comments](#).” And in terms of Kevin, Kevin Rudd’s been an excellent Ambassador. He’s delivered an enormous amount for Australia, and I have great confidence that he’ll continue to do so.”

Australia will use the same lines that worked with Trump in his first term. The US has a trade surplus with Australia; or, in Trump-speak, America gets a good deal out of Australia. The balance of trade in America’s favor helped Australia avoid Trump tariffs on Australian steel and aluminum last time round. Australia’s talking points to Trump will highlight the transactional wins the US gets from the relationship. The bilateral free trade treaty with the US, the [Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement](#) reaches its 20th birthday in January 2025. The US is Australia’s top foreign investment destination, while the US is Australia’s top foreign investor, as Australia’s Foreign Affairs Department outlines:

“The United States is our [largest two-way investment partner](#), with two-way investment stock reaching A\$2.3 trillion in 2023. The United States is by far the largest investor in Australia, with investment stock worth A\$1.17 trillion at the end of 2023. The United States is our largest foreign investment destination, with outbound investments reaching A\$1.196 trillion in 2023. The United States is our third largest trading partner and two-way trade stood at \$98.7 billion in 2023.”

Australia’s tactics for Trump 1.0 will run again for Trump 2.0. When Canberra finds it hard to embrace Trump’s language or agenda, the focus will switch to the greatness of the US, the depth of the bilateral relationship, and the history of military alliance. The alliance narrative during Trump 1.0 was the idea of “[100 years of mateship](#),” dating from 1918 when troops from the two nations fought side by side at the Battle of Hamel on France’s Western Front. Elements of tradition and transaction will be used with Trump 2.0. The alliance tradition will be the long history of mateship, while the transaction will be the promised growth in defense spending to

show Australia is no military free rider. The economic pitch will always start from a business bottom line—Australia’s trade deficit means America is in profit.

Canberra’s script will follow the line Foreign Minister Penny Wong used after Trump’s victory: “We have an alliance that's based on our values, on our history and on our [shared strategic objectives](#). It is a timeless alliance, and we look forward to working with him.”

The US Alliance

“The Biden administration advanced the most [consequential and ambitious](#) bilateral security agenda with Australia since World War II.”

US Ambassador to Australia Caroline Kennedy, Nov. 19, 2024

Allowing for normal diplomatic gloss, the ambassador reflects new dimensions in an alliance that is shifting, not merely evolving. Responding to big geopolitical trends, Joe Biden deepened and broadened the alliance and gave it a sharper Australian focus. In its eighth decade, the alliance is coming to Australian soil. The ANZUS history has been Australia joining America’s wars (Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and “the war on terror”). Now the commitment is what America is doing in, with, and for Australia in:

- The AUKUS [nuclear submarine](#) agreement;
- the evolution of the Quad grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the US;
- America’s step-up in the South Pacific, as Washington declared a “[renewed partnership with the Pacific Islands](#),” responding to Australia’s view that China’s challenge creates “a [state of permanent contest](#) in the Pacific”;
- the build-up of US military muscle in Australian soil in a new era of [alliance integration](#), with more US troops, planes, and ships in Australia;
- the creation of a US–Australia combined intelligence center in Canberra;
- prepositioning in Australia of US stores, munitions and fuel;
- the lifting of US restriction to reach toward free trade in defense equipment and technology, to achieve more integration of US and Australian industries.

Canberra’s National Defense Strategy, issued in April 2024, said that Australia “must work even more closely with the US, our closest ally and principal strategic partner.” The US is increasing investment in “infrastructure, capability and equipment” on Australian soil, while Australian policy is to strengthen military engagement with the US to:

- focus joint exercises and capability rotations with the US on collective deterrence and force posture cooperation;
- collaborate on defense innovation, science and technology;
- drive interoperability and interchangeability with US systems and capabilities;
- “leverage Australia’s strong partnership with Japan” in the trilateral relationship with the US;
- speed reforms to US “export controls, procurement policy and information sharing to deliver a more integrated industrial base.”

In the words of a Washington Post headline in August, “Australia offers US a [vast new military launchpad](#) in China conflict.” On a visit to Darwin, the chairman of the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, Michael McCaul, said: “This provides a central base of operations from which to project power.” Building that base means the “[biggest expansion](#) of the US military presence in Australia since World War II,” according to James Curran, international editor of the *Australian Financial Review* and professor of modern history at Sydney University.

Curran writes that the change in America’s approach since “the mid-1990s has been [nothing short of staggering](#).” After the election of John Howard’s Liberal-National government in 1996, he notes, Canberra offered the Washington training facilities for US marines in northern Australia. The US declined. As the times have changed, so the US has altered its view of the military worth of Australia’s geography. See the official start point for that shift as November 2011, when President Barack Obama announced agreement for an annual marine rotation through Darwin.

The US presence or “posture” in Australia has had bipartisan political support. Noting that political consensus, James Curran questions how the US role in Australia is shifting the alliance

foundation from deterrence to offense. “For Australia, the US alliance has always been the critical deterrent – any power considering hostile action towards Australia at least has to keep the existence of the ANZUS treaty in mind,” Curran writes. The central issue for Curran is whether Australia is being transformed “into a base for offensive US operations into Asia. Government language stresses deterrence rather than projection, but the debate is on as to where that line now blurs.”



Figure 2 Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, U.S. President Joe Biden, and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak hold a press conference during the AUKUS summit on March 13 in San Diego, California. Photo: Leon Neal/Getty Images.

The elements of the increased US use of Australia’s geography are known as the US [Force Posture Initiatives](#), driven by a bilateral working group formed in 2021. Australia’s Defense Department calls the force posture work “a key component of the alliance” and a “tangible demonstration of the strength of the alliance.” The initiatives involve:

- Enhanced air cooperation “to deepen air-to-air integration that allows for seamless operation” and delivers security and stability across the Indo-Pacific region. Major air bases at Darwin and Tindal (near Katherine) in the Northern Territory are being upgraded. Tindal will be able to house up to six US B-52 bombers. Surveys are being done for upgrades to two air bases in Western Australia and one in northern Queensland. The US pledges to “continue [frequent rotations](#) of bombers, fighter aircraft, and maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft.”
- Prepositioning: the US is working on the requirements for long-term positioning

of Army equipment material in Australia, plus the creation of a logistics support area in Queensland.

- Enhanced land cooperation involves “complex, integrated and combined” exercises and training with allies and partners in the region. The US Army provides capabilities and personnel, fuel infrastructure and explosive ordnance storage.
- During Exercise Talisman Sabre 2025, the US and Australia will test “new operating assumptions” in exercises “across the breadth of Australia.”
- The US [supports](#) Australia’s planned infrastructure upgrades at the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean midway between Australia and Sri Lanka.
- Enhanced maritime cooperation to lift the logistics and sustainment capabilities of US surface and subsurface vessels in Australia.
- In Perth, in August, the USS *Hawaii*, a *Virginia*-class submarine undertook a maintenance package, the first time that a US nuclear-powered submarine has had maintenance performed outside the US or a US base, or had such work performed by non-US citizens. The *Hawaii* starts the process of creating a [submarine rotational force](#) operating from Western Australia, from the Stirling naval base in Perth. The aim as early as 2027 is to have five conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines rotating through Stirling— one sub from the UK and four from the US.

Prime Minister Albanese says work on [critical minerals and clean energy](#) has become “a third pillar” to the alliance, to stand alongside security and economic cooperation. The “[compact](#)” signed by Albanese and President Biden established climate and clean energy as “a central pillar of the Australia-United States alliance.” The work will deepen collaboration on the “critical minerals and materials that are vital to clean energy as well as defense supply chains.” Australian public opinion about the US is still warm, but trust declines. In the lead-up to the 2024 US presidential election, the annual Lowy Institute poll on [how Australians view the world](#) found levels of trust in the United States dropped five points from 2023 to 56%. This continues the fall since 2022, the second year of the Biden

presidency, when Australian trust in the US stood at 65%. Using a “feelings thermometer,” Lowy asked Australians about “feelings toward” the US. While still warm, the 2024 measure fell four degrees to 59°, its lowest reading in the 20-year history of the Lowy poll, and down from an all-time high of 73° in 2015.

AUKUS

Australia’s quest for AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines is a thought bubble that turned into a huge project, driven by ambition and beset by anxiety. Canberra’s instant political consensus is a striking element of how quickly the bubble became policy. The Labor-Liberal unity ticket was set at the moment the AUKUS vision was announced by Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States in September 2021.

The distance covered in three years was emphasized by and Defense Minister Richard Marles when he told Parliament on Aug. 12: “When we came to power, AUKUS was really not much more than a [thought bubble](#), but since then we have been turning it into a reality.” Marles says the thought is sailing along an “actual pathway,” steered by the [Australian Submarine Agency](#), established last year. Some thought! Some bubble! Yet even the believers see an extraordinary journey—the [Optimal Pathway](#), an outline plan for project execution, stretches out to 2053, with the first Australian-built AUKUS submarine due in “the early 2040s.” In August, a [naval nuclear propulsion treaty](#) was unveiled, providing the legal basis for AUKUS and the creation of an AUKUS trade zone for exchange of defense goods and technology. The [treaty](#) went to the Australian Parliament and US Congress in August and the UK Parliament in September. Marles signed the treaty in Washington on Aug. 5, describing it as “a [foundational part](#) of the legal underpinning” of building the nuclear-powered submarine.

The trilateral agreement will operate until 2075. The pact allows the transfer of nuclear propulsion plants to Australia, makes Australia responsible for “management, disposition, storage, and disposal of any spent nuclear fuel and radioactive waste” and gives an Australian indemnity to the US and Britain for any “liability, loss, costs, damage or injury” from nuclear risks. The treaty gives Britain and the US the right to terminate AUKUS and demand the return of nuclear material and equipment. The termination clause can be used if Australia seeks

to reprocess nuclear material, builds a nuclear weapon, or breaches its obligations to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the International Atomic Energy Agency. As part of its nonproliferation pledge, Australia is negotiating a treaty with the IAEA to meet its Article 14 comprehensive safeguards [obligations](#).



Figure 3 Navy Sailors assigned to the Los Angeles-class fast-attack submarine USS Annapolis (SSN-760) and HMAS Stirling Port Services crewmembers prepare the submarine to moor alongside Diamantina Pier at Fleet Base West in Rockingham, Western Australia, March 10, 2024. Photo: US Navy.

In September, the three nations adopted an AUKUS zone for free trade of defense equipment and expertise. The exemptions remove licensing requirements for most controlled goods, technologies, and services. The AUKUS zone will have license-free trade for 70% of defense exports from the US to Australia that are subject to arms traffic regulations, and 80% of defense trade under US export regulations. The deal eliminates the need for 900 export permits covering Australian exports to the US and Britain, valued at \$5 billion annually. Taking lessons from the AUKUS effort to cut red tape, the US has also set out principles to build an Indo-Pacific [defense industry base](#).

Richard Marles says a license-free seamless defense industrial base for AUKUS will have “a [profound impact](#),” describing it as one of the biggest reforms to defense trade in decades. In dealing with the new US administration from January, Canberra will push AUKUS as the top policy commitment it wants to reinforce with Trump. After Trump’s victory, Foreign Minister Penny Wong said “obviously we look to particularly prioritising AUKUS in our engagement, which is the thing that we have been [most focussed on](#) in the lead up to this election.”

Australia's Strategy

Summing up foreign policy in a speech on [Australia in the world](#), Albanese said Australia is investing in “deterrence and diplomacy,” transforming defense capability with the AUKUS pact, restoring relations in the South Pacific, revitalizing the Quad, taking a “patient, calibrated and deliberate approach” to China, and supporting the “fundamental guardrail” of US-China dialogue. In a stark view of strategic settings, Albanese and the deputy PM, Richard Marles, declared: “Australia faces the most [complex and challenging](#) strategic environment since the Second World War.” The Labor leaders offered that judgement on April 17, 2024, when releasing the [National Defense Strategy](#). The strategy said: “While a major conflict is not inevitable, this new reality is making the pursuit of Australia’s interests more challenging.”

The strategy aims to double defense spending in the next 10 years to lift it from [2% to 2.4%](#) of GDP by 2033-34. The increase in annual funding would see the defense budget grow to more than A\$100 billion by 2033-34. The policy document described a strategic environment that continues to deteriorate:

“The optimism at the end of the Cold War has been replaced by the uncertainty and tensions of entrenched and increasing strategic competition between the US and China. This competition is being framed by an intense contest of narratives and values. The competition is playing out in military and non-military ways, including economic and diplomatic. It is accompanied by an unprecedented conventional and non-conventional military build-up in our region, taking place without strategic reassurance or transparency. The effects of this build-up are occurring closer to Australia than previously. This build-up is also increasing the risk of military escalation or miscalculation that could lead to a major conflict in the region.”

The Albanese government has scrapped the old “balanced force” model for the Australian Defense Force (ADF). The balanced force demanded lots of capabilities to keep options open. The balanced force could be adjusted to respond to whatever needs, contingencies, or dangers appeared on the horizon. An unbalanced future has arrived, and the balanced force is judged unfit for purpose. The ADF must become “an integrated, focused force” to face what Defense identifies as strategic risks that “have

continued to deteriorate.” The new guidance to Defense from government is capitalized as “a Strategy of Denial,” calling for an ADF that can:

- defend Australia and our immediate region;
- deter through denial any adversary’s attempt to project power against Australia through our northern approaches;
- protect Australia’s economic connection to our region and the world;
- contribute with our partners to the collective security of the Indo-Pacific region;
- contribute to the maintenance of the global rules-based order.

A Strategy of Denial is appropriate for a nation that’s been through the stages of grieving for the disintegration of the liberal international order (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance).

Canberra proclaims it will take a “more [focused approach](#) to its international engagement.” The “focused” thinking can mean Australia is less willing to look beyond its region. Thus, in December, 2023, Canberra [rejected Washington’s request](#) to send an Australian Navy ship to the Red Sea as part of international efforts to safeguard cargo from attacks by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. Richard Marles said Australia would not contribute a ship or plane to the Combined Maritime Forces that patrol the shipping route: “We need to be really clear around our strategic focus, and our strategic focus is our region—the northeast Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Pacific.” The disappointed response from a US official was that Australia could not “pretend [global problems](#) don’t require global solutions.”

Australian responds to US-China competition as “a primary feature of our security environment,” a struggle over the global balance which will be “sharpest and most consequential in the Indo-Pacific.” The National Defense Strategy describes China’s expanding gray-zone activities and “coercive tactics” in its forceful handling of territorial disputes and unsafe intercepts of vessels and aircraft operating in international waters and airspace. China is improving its capabilities in all areas of warfare at a “pace and scale not seen in the world for nearly a century,” with no transparency about its strategic purpose, prompting this Canberra judgement: “The risk of a crisis or conflict in the Taiwan Strait is

increasing, as well as at other flashpoints, including disputes in the South and East China Seas and on the border with India. There is increasing competition for access and influence across the Indian Ocean, including efforts to secure dominance over sea lanes and strategic ports. That said, US-China dialogue, both at the leader-level and military-level, is useful in preventing miscalculation and ensuring differences can be worked through in a way that supports stability.”

China: Seeking Balance as Economic Coercion Cools

“China does not see itself as a status quo power. It seeks a region and a world that is much more accommodating of its [ambitions and its interests](#).”

Prime Minister Albanese, Dec. 20, 2023

“Over the past decade, we have made some progress in China-Australia relations and also witnessed some [twists and turns](#). That trajectory has many inspirations to offer. Now, our relations have realised a turnaround and continues to grow, bringing tangible benefits to our two peoples.”

President Xi Jinping, Nov. 18, 2024.

Australia’s understanding of China’s future strategic pressure is shaped by Beijing’s recent unsuccessful, but costly, economic coercion. China’s trade sanctions on Australia have been wound back. Beijing’s refusal to talk to Australian leaders has ended. A relatively conventional diplomatic rhythm has resumed. Labor came to office in 2022 saying it would “stabilize” dealings with China, and stability has been achieved. China has scrapped its tariffs and unofficial customs bans on coal, barley, beef, wine, timber, lobsters, and cotton. Australia’s Trade Minister, Don Farrell, says nearly A\$20 billion worth of [“trade impediments](#) on Australian exports to China have been removed.”

While defrosting with Beijing, the Albanese government kept getting warmer with Washington. The symbolic expression of this was in the prime minister’s back-to-back visits to the US and China. First, Albanese went to Washington at the end of October 2023. Then, a week later, he was in Beijing, the first visit by an Australian leader in seven years.

In Washington, Biden and Albanese proclaimed a [new era](#) of strategic cooperation to build what Albanese calls [“an alliance for the future.”](#)

As Australian journalists and TV crews gathered in the Oval office to record the grip-and-grin between Biden and Albanese, the president offered the Australians some unprompted remarks about the [dragon in the room](#). “I was asked by Xi Jinping a couple of years ago why I was working so hard with your country,” Biden noted. “I said, ‘we’re a Pacific nation.’ He looked at me and I said, ‘Yeah, we’re a Pacific nation, the United States, and we’re going to stay that way.’”

China welcomed Albanese in November 2023, seeking to cement the reset in relations, blaming past troubles on Australia’s previous Liberal-National government. The official China Daily described the trip as “ice-breaking” after dialogue halted in 2016 “because of the previous Australian government’s adversarial stance toward China.” Part of the thaw has been an end to China’s ban on Australian journalists. In August 2024, Will Glasgow, a correspondent for Rupert Murdoch’s paper, *The Australian*, returned to China, almost exactly four years since Australian correspondents fled the country. Glasgow wrote: “The beginning of the return of Australian media is another manifestation of the [improvement in diplomatic](#) relations with China under the Albanese government, which continues despite a host of ongoing disagreements...It is by no means an exclusively Australian problem. The size of the English-language foreign-media presence here is a fraction of what it was when I was based in Beijing for *The Australian* in the first half of 2020.”

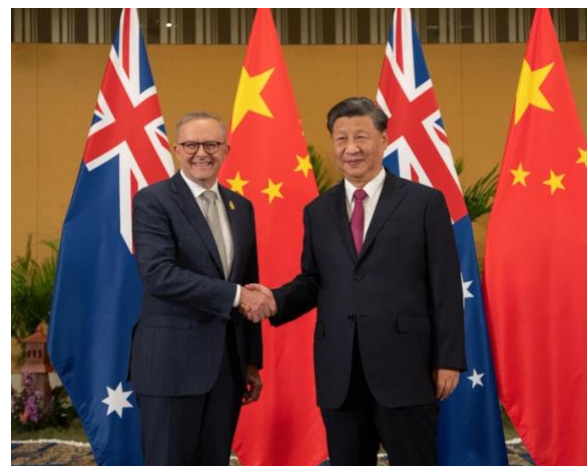


Figure 4 Anthony Albanese meets Xi Jinping in Beijing.
Photo: Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

One of the continuing disagreements is China's suspended [death sentence](#) on the Australian citizen, Dr Yang Jun. The sentence was denounced by Foreign Minister Wong in February, saying Australia was "appalled" at the "harrowing news" The "many years of uncertainty" since Yang's detention on national security charges in 2019 were "extraordinarily difficult," Wong said, and Australia would protest "in the strongest terms." In November, Wong attacked the sentencing of Australian citizen Gordon Ng in Hong Kong "for organising and participating in an [election primary](#)." Wong said Australia is gravely concerned at China's broad application of the national security law and its use against Australian citizens

In Australia, public sentiment toward [China remains low](#). The Lowy Institute survey of Australian attitudes to the world found only 17% of Australians say they trust China "somewhat" or "a great deal" to act responsibly in the world (only Russia ranks lower in Australian opinion). This is steady from 2023 and a minor increase on 2022, when trust in China reached a record low (12%). The low numbers are a contrast with the figure just six years ago, when half (52%) of Australians trusted China. The suspicion of China reflects the icy years of trade coercion, and publicity about Chinese cyber-attacks on Australia.

Australia's chief spy-catcher, Mike Burgess, acknowledges that all nations spy, but charges that China's "behavior goes well [beyond traditional espionage](#)." The director-general of security says: "The Chinese government is engaged in the most sustained, scaled and sophisticated theft of intellectual property and expertise in history. It is unprecedented and it is unacceptable. China has developed a ruthless business model to seize commercial advantage. Stealing intellectual property is the first step. Then they use talent programs, joint ventures and acquisitions to harvest the expertise required to exploit the intellectual property. Sometimes the technology is put to military use, often it's given to favoured companies to mass produce it, under-cutting and undermining the innovator."

Australia in Comparative Connections: 2009-2024

The first annual account of Australia's connections with the US and East Asia appeared in this series in 2009. Thus, this year's report is the 16th in the series I have written. My initial chat with the doyen of Pacific Forum, Ralph Cossa, set the scene for the warmest partnership any journalist could ask for. How long should my annual piece be? "Whatever it needs," replied Ralph. Subject range, I asked? "Over to you," responded Ralph. And so it has gone, ever since. Apart from Americanizing my spelling, the words have all be mine. Would that all editors were so generous of spirit, liberal about length, and open on content.

Looking back, that first 2009 effort offered two big themes that have endured. One pole was the continuity and comfort of the alliance fundamentals between Australia and the US. The other pole was the "tectonic effects being exerted by China's rise. As with the rest of the Asia-Pacific, Australia is adjusting significant aspects of its foreign and security policy to the magnetic pull of China." Official Australian usage is now "Indo-Pacific" not "Asia-Pacific." But much else has endured, as one other line from that first effort observed: "For the first time in Australia's history, its most important market is not also an alliance partner. Instead, it will be its major ally's strategic competitor, perhaps even challenger."

The 2011 report observed that Australia had decoupled from the US economy in ways unimaginable in the 20th century. In the first decade of the 21st century Australia did not follow the US into recession in 2001 and 2008. Asia's business cycle now drives Australia's economy: "Australia's alliance commitment with the US no longer mirrors, as it once did, the economic ties to the US." This annual series traced the 12-nation negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, launched in 2008, as the talks (and arm wrestling and haggling) crawled toward an ever-shifting finish line. In the arcane world of trade negotiators, the battle between the US and Japan was trench warfare lit by pyrotechnics. As Barack Obama observed, the TPP was an ambitious US effort to write the future trade rules of the Asia-Pacific, reflecting American interests in areas such as intellectual property rights, and labor and environmental standards.

The TPP was signed but then Australia watched in horror as the 2016 US presidential campaign

trashed the agreement.” In the Australian interpretation,” I wrote in 2016, “a US that turns away from the TPP would also be turning away from Asia.” In his first week in office in 2017, Trump signed an executive order formally withdrawing the US from the TPP. Yet Washington commentary noted this was mere formality, because the treaty was already dead in Congress. My 2017 comment: “Can you create an enhanced trade structure to buttress the US strategic role in the Asia–Pacific if the US opts out of that trade pact?” A US turning protectionist is going to stress test the link between security and trade.

To end this round up of commentary/judgements, turn to the professionals in the game—the ambassadors (one Australian and two Americans) and an academic.

When an Australian jumps out of a New York taxi and prepares to make a dash across 5th Avenue, the habit of a lifetime is to look the wrong way for the traffic. Australia drives on the left; America drives on the right. It’s a simple metaphor for the many ways of looking and moving of the two nations. Rushing for a late-night drink in the city that never sleeps, Australia’s ambassador to the US, Joe Hockey (2016–2020), stopped his taxi by Central Park and dashed across the avenue, checking in the Australian direction. That “near-fatal error,” Hockey observed in his [memoir](#), was “like so many who think they understand America.”

In 2010, the US and Australia marked the 70th anniversary of their formal diplomatic relationship. US Ambassador to Canberra, Jeffrey Bleich (2009–2013) said the relationship existed long before the 1940 treaty and extended far beyond words on paper: “Before there were diplomats in each other’s capitals, there were world-travelling whalers and miners, sailors of the Great White Fleet and their gracious Australian hosts, yanks and diggers hunkered down in trenches in World War I. We’ve trusted each other... We’ve valued each other’s freedom, self-reliance, open markets and sense of fair play. We’ve taken our work seriously, without taking ourselves too seriously. And when we’ve disagreed, we’ve done it without being disagreeable.”

During the 2013 Australian election, the American intellectual Francis Fukuyama visited and judged that the bitterness of Australian

politics has not reached the intensity of the US: “Australia has got the fewest big long-term problems of any developed democracy I know. In policy terms, the fight within Labor, or even between Labor and the Liberals seem minor when compared to the things that [polarize] Americans, such as the legitimacy of taxation, dealing with the deficit, abortion and guns.”

Wrapping up her time in Canberra, the 27th US ambassador to Australia, Caroline Kennedy, used a farewell at the National Press Club in November to sketch what [Australia means to her](#): “I will miss the Australian sense of humor and the fact that everyone has a nickname. I will miss the way Australians are up for anything and pitch in to help each other out. I will miss the amazing creatures here, from the magpies and whale sharks to my two new embassy sheep, Louie and Eli. I can’t wait to come back and visit. There is so much left to see and do. Most of all, I know the best days for our alliance are yet to come.”

CHRONOLOGY OF AUSTRALIA/US-EAST ASIA RELATIONS

OCTOBER 2023–NOVEMBER 2024

Oct. 11, 2023: After three years detention in China, Australian citizen Cheng Lei [returns](#) to Australia. The Australian government has been seeking the journalist's release since she was detained in August 2020.

Oct. 14, 2023: In a national referendum, Australia's voters reject a constitutional amendment to recognize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the nation's first people and create a Voice to Parliament advisory body.

Oct. 20, 2023: A federal government [review](#) of a Chinese company's 99-year lease on the Port of Darwin finds "robust" regulations and "monitoring mechanisms" mean it is "not necessary to vary or cancel" the 2015 sale.

Oct. 24, 2023: PM Albanese [opens](#) the new Australian Embassy in Washington.

Oct. 25, 2023: After White House talks, President Biden and PM Albanese proclaim a [new era](#) of US–Australia strategic cooperation.

Oct. 27, 2023: Unable to address the US Congress because of the House of Representatives' wrangle over a new speaker, PM Albanese instead delivers an address at the US State Department on "[An alliance for the future.](#)"

Nov. 7, 2023: In Beijing, PM Albanese [meets](#) China's president, Xi Jinping.

Nov. 9, 2023: Pacific Islands Forum [leaders meeting](#) held in Cook Islands.

Nov. 10, 2023: PM Albanese and Prime Minister of Tuvalu Kausea Natano [announce](#) a "union" of Australia and Tuvalu. Requested by Tuvalu, the union creates a "special pathway" for its citizens to settle in Australia. Canberra's security guarantee means it will have oversight of any

partnership or engagement Tuvalu has with other states on security and defense.

Nov. 14, 2023: In international waters inside Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone, HMAS *Toowoomba* stops so divers can clear fishing nets entangled around propellers. A Chinese destroyer in the vicinity generates sonar pulses, causing "minor injuries" to the Australian divers. Australia expresses [serious concerns](#) to the Chinese government about this "unsafe and unprofessional misconduct."

Nov. 17, 2023: APEC summit held in San Francisco. PM Albanese says APEC's "focus on practical action is [pivotal in supporting an open trade](#) and investment environment."

Nov. 20, 2023: Second India–Australia 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, between [foreign and defense ministers](#), is held in New Delhi.

Nov. 25, 2023: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defense Richard Marles [signs](#) a Strategic Partnership with President of the Philippines Ferdinand R Marcos Jr.

Dec. 2, 2023: US Secretary of Defense, Lloyd J Austin, [hosts](#) Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defense Marles and UK Secretary of State for Defense, Grant Shapps, at the Defense Innovation Unit Headquarters in California, to discuss AUKUS.

Dec. 4, 2023: Annual [South Pacific Defense Ministers' meeting](#) convenes in New Caledonia.

Dec. 7, 2023: In Canberra, PM Albanese and Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea James Marape, [announce](#) a Bilateral Security Agreement covering defense, policing, border and maritime security, and nontraditional areas of cyber

security, climate change, gender-based violence and critical infrastructure.

Dec. 19, 2023: In a foreign policy speech on [Australia in the world](#), PM Albanese said Australia is investing in “deterrence and diplomacy,” transforming defense capability with the AUKUS pact, restoring relations in the South Pacific, revitalizing the Quad, taking a “patient, calibrated and deliberate approach to China, and supporting the “fundamental guardrail” of US-China dialogue.

Dec. 20, 2023: Australia [rejects](#) appeal from the US to send a Navy ship to the Red Sea to respond to attacks on commercial shipping, citing its [focus](#) on the Indo-Pacific.

Jan. 12, 2024: Australia joins Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, UK, and the US in a statement on the Red Sea, [condemning](#) “illegal, dangerous, and destabilising Houthi attacks against vessels.”

Jan. 15, 2024: To “support international diplomatic efforts toward a durable peace in the Middle East,” FM Penny Wong leaves to [visit](#) Jordan, Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and United Arab Emirates.

Feb. 1, 2024: Inaugural Australia-New Zealand [ministerial consultations](#) on foreign affairs and defense held in Melbourne.

Feb. 5, 2024: Australian citizen Dr. Yang Jun receives a suspended death sentence in Beijing. FM Wong says Australia is [“appalled”](#) at the “harrowing news.” China has held Yang since January 2019 on national security charge. Wong said Australia will communicate its response “in the strongest terms.”

Feb. 8, 2024: Papua New Guinea PM James Marape becomes the [first South Pacific](#) leader to [address](#) the Australian Parliament. Marape and PM Albanese held the fifth Papua New Guinea-Australia Annual Leaders’ Dialogue [pointing](#) to

the “cultural, historical and geographical” bonds between the two countries.

Feb. 14, 2024: Australian House of Representatives [passes a motion](#), urging the US and the UK to end their prosecution of Australian citizen Julian Assange, founder of Wikileaks.

Feb. 15, 2024: PM Albanese issues a [joint statement](#) with the prime ministers of Canada and New Zealand expressing “grave concerns” at Israel’s plan to begin an offensive into Rafah, saying the military operation would be “catastrophic.”

Feb. 20, 2024: The federal government [releases its blueprint](#) to double the combat fleet of the Australian Navy, planning for 26 major surface ships and 25 minor war vessels.

Feb. 29, 2024: Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr [addresses](#) Australian Parliament, vowing not to yield an “inch” to China and praising the strategic partnership with Australia as “more important than ever.”

Mar. 19, 2024: Prompted by a British interviewer, former President Donald Trump attacks Australia’s ambassador to Washington, Kevin Rudd, calling him [“nasty”](#) and claims Rudd will not last as Australia’s ambassador. FM Wong responds that Rudd is doing an “excellent job” and will remain ambassador if Trump wins the presidential election in November.

Mar. 20, 2024: China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi has [talks](#) in Canberra with FM Wong in the seventh Australia-China Foreign and Strategic Dialogue. The trip makes Wang the most senior Chinese government visitor to Australia since 2017.

Mar. 28, 2024: China’s Ministry of Commerce announces the end of tariffs on Australian wine, a punitive measure that had wiped out an export trade worth A\$1.2 billion. The wine tariff is one of the last elements of China’s campaign of economic coercion against Australia.

Mar. 30, 2024: US Marines arrive in the Northern Territory for an eight-month rotation, the [13th rotation of Marines](#) to Darwin.

Apr. 5, 2024: United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres appoints former Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop (2013-18) as his [Special Envoy on Myanmar](#).

Apr. 7, 2024: Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and US [conduct “Maritime Cooperative Activity”](#) in the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone, involving naval/maritime and air force units, “in recognition of rights in international law and UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.”

Apr. 9, 2024: PM Albanese announces that the Vice Chief of the Australian Defense Force, V. Adm. David Johnston, will take over as the [new Chief](#) of the Defense Force.

Apr. 9, 2024: AUKUS partners, Australia, the US, and United Kingdom, announce they are “considering [cooperation with Japan](#)” on AUKUS Pillar II advanced capability projects.

Apr. 10, 2024: In Washington, President Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio [announce](#) work on a trilateral “networked air defense architecture” with Australia. The joint statement flags cooperation with Japan on “AUKUS Pillar II advanced capability projects.”

Apr. 17, 2024: Deputy PM and Defense Minister Marles [launches](#) the National Defense Strategy and Integrated Investment Program, doubling defense spending in the next 10 years from 2% to 2.4% of GDP by 2033-34.

Apr. 22, 2024: PM Anthony Albanese travels to Papua New Guinea to meet Prime Minister Marape to spend two days [walking](#) the Kokoda Track used during WW2 and commemorate Anzac Day.

Apr. 27, 2024: Deputy PM and Defense Minister Marles [visits](#) Ukraine to express support and announce extra military help.

May 1, 2024: The defense and foreign ministers of Australia and South Korea meet in Melbourne to advance the [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#).

May 4, 2024, In Hawaii, defense ministers of Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and US agree to step-up [military drills](#) with the Philippines. Australia’s Richard Marles refers to the West Philippine Sea, snubbing China’s usage of the South China Sea.

May 4, 2024: A PLA Airforce fighter aircraft intercepts Australian Defense Force helicopter and releases flares across its flight path. The Australian helicopter was embarked on HMAS Hobart, which was contributing to UNSC sanctions enforcement against North Korea.

May 14, 2024: Annual federal budget is presented to Parliament.

Jun. 4, 2024: Australian Defense Force will open recruitment for non-Australian citizens. Permanent Australian residents from Canada, New Zealand, the UK and US will be able to enlist in the ADF.

Jun. 26, 2024: Wikileaks founder Julian Assange returns to Australia after walking [free](#) from a US court in Northern Mariana Islands, under a [plea deal](#), ending a 14-year fight against [extradition](#) and US espionage charges.

July 1, 2024: Sam Mostyn is sworn in as the [28th governor-general](#) of Australia, the second female to serve as the representative of Australia’s Head of State.

July 7, 2024: Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Marles leaves for the US to attend the [NATO summit](#) and the Australian-American Leadership Dialogue.

July 11, 2024: Russian-born Australian army private and her Russian-born husband are arrested on [espionage charges](#) after allegedly working to steal sensitive defense information for Russia.

Aug. 5, 2024: Australia raises official terrorism threat level to [“probable,”](#) defined as a greater than [50% chance](#) of an attack in the next 12 months. The announcement reverses the November 2022 decision to lower the alert level to “possible.”

Aug. 7, 2024: Annual [AUSMIN](#) talks held in Annapolis, involving Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin with Australia’s FM Wong and Deputy Prime Minister and DM Richard Marles.

Aug. 12, 2024: Australian government [tables](#) in Parliament a further AUKUS agreement with the UK and the US, enabling the transfer of material and equipment for Australia’s future nuclear-powered submarines.

Aug. 19, 2024: Indonesia’s President-elect Prabowo Subianto [visits](#) Canberra to announce that the Australia-Indonesia Defense Cooperation Arrangement will be upgraded to a [treaty level agreement](#).

Aug. 21, 2024: Australia gives environmental approval for the “largest [solar precinct](#) in the world” -- a \$19 billion project to transport electricity from Darwin to Singapore via a 2,670-mile submarine cable.

Aug. 30, 2024: The 53 Pacific Islands [summit](#) held in Tonga. Leaders endorse Australia’s [Pacific Policing Initiative](#).

Sept. 21, 2024: Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the US meet in Delaware for the [Quad summit](#).

Sept. 22, 2024: FM Penny Wong leads Australia's delegation to the 79th session of the United Nations [General Assembly](#).

Sept. 26, 2024: Defense ministers of Australia, the UK, and US meet in London to discuss [AUKUS](#).

Oct. 3, 2024: [South Pacific Defense](#) Ministers’ Meeting is held in New Zealand.

Oct. 10, 2024: PM Albanese visits Laos for [East Asia Summit](#) and the [ASEAN-Australia Summit](#).

Oct. 17, 2024: Australia gives 49 [Abrams tanks](#) to Ukraine, bringing the total value of Australia’s military assistance to Ukraine to A\$1.3 billion.

Oct. 22, 2024: Australia will spend A\$7 billion to buy [long-range missiles](#) from the US.

Oct. 24, 2024: PM Albanese attends the [Commonwealth Heads of Government](#) summit in Samoa.

Nov. 5, 2024: The [15th Australia-India](#) Foreign Ministers’ Framework Dialogue is held in Canberra.

Nov. 12, 2024: Inaugural [Australia-Philippines Defense Ministers’](#) Meeting is held in Canberra.

Nov. 16, 2024: PM Albanese attends the [APEC summit](#) in Peru.

Nov. 17, 2024: 14th [Trilateral Defense Ministers’](#) Meeting is held in Darwin, involving Australian DM Marles, Japanese Defense Minister Nakatani Gen, and US Secretary of Defense Austin.

Nov. 18, 2024: Third [bilateral summit](#) between PM Albanese and China’s leader Xi Jinping, held on the sidelines of the G20 meeting in Brazil. The meeting marks the 10th anniversary of the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two nations

Nov. 19, 2024: PM Albanese attends the [G20 summit](#) in Brazil.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

See-Won Byun is an assistant professor of international relations at San Francisco State University. Her research centers on Chinese politics and international relations in Asia. She focused on US-Asia policy issues as a research associate at The Asia Foundation's Center for US-Korea Policy in Washington, and non-resident Kelly Fellow of Pacific Forum CSIS. Before joining SF State, she taught Asian politics and international relations at Bates College. She received a Ph.D. in political science and M.A. in international affairs from George Washington University, an M.A. in international studies from Yonsei University, and B.A. in economics from Brown University.

Kyle Churchman is Associate Vice President of Global Policy at AdvaMed, the world's largest association of medical technology companies. He completed his master of arts concentrating in China studies at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. Prior to attending SAIS, he was a resident junior fellow at the Center for the National Interest, where he published articles on cross-strait relations, Taiwan's domestic politics, and Chinese foreign policy for The National Interest. He previously served as a researcher for the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission and the National Bureau of Asian Research. He graduated magna cum laude from George Washington University with a B.A. degree in international affairs and Chinese.

Ralph A. Cossa is former president and Worldwide Support for Development-Handa Chair at the Pacific Forum. He is a lifelong contributor to *Comparative Connections* and coauthors the regional overview chapter. Cossa is a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Experts and Eminent Persons Group. He is a founding member of the multinational track two Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP). He co-chairs the CSCAP study group aimed at halting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Asia Pacific region and is the executive director of the US CSCAP Member Committee (USCSCAP). He serves on the Board of the Council on US-Korean Security Studies and the National Committee on US-China Relations (NY). He is a frequent contributor to regional newspapers, including

the *Japan Times*, *Korea Times*, and *International Herald Tribune*. His publications include *The United States and the Asia-Pacific Region: Security Strategy for the Obama Administration* (Washington DC: Center for a New American Security, 2009); "US-Japan Relations: What Should Washington Do?" in *America's Role in Asia: Recommendations for US Policy from Both Sides of the Pacific* (San Francisco: Asia Foundation, 2008); and *An East Asian Community and the United States*, Ralph A. Cossa and Akihiko Tanaka, eds., (Washington, D.C.: CSIS Press, 2007).

Catharin Dalpino is professor emeritus at Georgetown University. For the past eight years she has co-chaired the monthly Southeast Asia Roundtable, sponsored by The Asia Foundation. Dalpino also served as a deputy assistant secretary for democracy at the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, US Department of State. She has published several books on US policy in Asia, as well as numerous articles and op-eds, and has testified frequently before Congress on US relations with Southeast Asia and is a frequent commentator for major news outlets on Southeast Asia.

June Teufel Dreyer is professor of political science at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida, where she teaches courses on China, US defense policy, and international relations. Dreyer has lectured to, and taught a course for, National Security Agency analysts, consults for organizations including the National Geographic and Centra Technology. She is a senior fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute and a member of International Institute for Strategic Studies. Formerly senior Far East specialist at the Library of Congress, Dreyer has also served as Asia policy advisor to the Chief of Naval Operations and as commissioner of the United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission established by the US Congress. Her most recent book, *Middle Kingdom and Empire of the Rising Sun: Sino-Japanese Relations Past and Present*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2016. The tenth edition of her *China's Political System: Modernization and Tradition*, is scheduled for publication in 2018. Dreyer received her B.A. from Wellesley College and her M.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard. She has lived in China and Japan and has

made numerous visits to Taiwan. She has served as a United States Information Agency lecturer, speaking in 14 Asia-Pacific countries. Dreyer has published widely on the Chinese military, Asian-Pacific security issues, China-Taiwan relations, China-Japan relations, ethnic minorities in China, and Chinese foreign policy. In 2017, she received the University of Miami's faculty senate award as Distinguished Research Professor.

Aidan Foster-Carter is an honorary senior research fellow in sociology and modern Korea at Leeds. He is also a freelance analyst and consultant: covering the politics and economics of both South and North Korea for, amongst others, the *Economist Intelligence Unit*, *Oxford Analytica*, and *BBC World Service*. Between 1991 and 1997 he lectured on sociology at the universities of Hull, Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), and Leeds. A prolific writer on and frequent visitor to the Korean Peninsula, he has lectured on Korean and kindred topics to varied audiences in 20 countries on every continent. He studied Classics at Eton, Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at Balliol College Oxford, and Sociology at Hull.

Sourabh Gupta is a senior Indo-Pacific international relations policy specialist with two decades of Washington, D.C.-based experience in a think tank and political risk research and advisory capacity. His key area of expertise pertains to the intersection of international law, both international maritime law (Law of the Sea) and international trade and investment law, with the international relations of the Indo-Pacific region. His areas of expertise include: analysis of U.S.-China relations as well as major power relations in the Indo-Pacific region, U.S.-China trade and technology competition, analysis of developments in World Trade Organization and Asia-Pacific economic regionalism, and analysis of outstanding territorial disputes and maritime law-related developments in the Indo-Pacific. At ICAS, he heads its Trade n' Technology Program. Prior to joining ICAS, from 2000 to 2015, he was a senior research associate at Samuels International Associates, Inc, an international consulting firm specializing in government relations and global trade and investment matters. Gupta has appeared on or been quoted in international media, including the BBC, CBS, NPR, CNBC, CGTN and the South China Morning Post, among others. He holds master's degrees in security studies and international relations from the Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, and the Maxwell School of

Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, respectively. His bachelor's degree was awarded by the University of Mumbai.

Brad Glosserman is deputy director of and visiting professor at the Tama University Center for Rule Making Strategies and senior advisor for Pacific Forum, where, among other things, he co-edits *Comparative Connections*. For 15 years, he was the executive director of Pacific Forum. He is the author of *Peak Japan: The End of Grand Ambitions* (Georgetown University Press, 2019), and co-author, with Scott Snyder, of *The Japan-ROK Identity Clash* (Columbia University Press, 2015). He has authored dozens of monographs on topics related to US foreign policy and Asian security. His opinion articles and commentary have appeared in media around the world. Prior to joining Pacific Forum, he was, for 10 years, a member of *The Japan Times* editorial board, and continues to serve as a contributing editor for the newspaper. Glosserman has a J.D. from George Washington University, an M.A. from Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and a B.A. from Reed College.

Chin-Hao Huang is assistant professor of political science at Yale-NUS College. Prior to this, he served as researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in Sweden, and at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC. He specializes in international politics, especially with regard to China and the Asia-Pacific region. Huang is the recipient of the American Political Science Association (APSA) Foreign Policy Section Best Paper Award (2014) for his research on China's compliance behavior in multilateral security institutions. His publications have appeared in *The China Quarterly*, *The China Journal*, *International Peacekeeping*, and in edited volumes through Oxford University Press and Routledge, among others. He has testified and presented on China's foreign affairs before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, and has also served as a consultant for US and European foundations, governments, and companies on their strategies and policies in Asia. He received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Southern California and B.S. with honors from Georgetown University.

David J. Keegan is adjunct lecturer in the Chinese Studies Program at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, where he

teaches a seminar on Taiwan and its relations with the United States and mainland China. He has also taught area studies courses on China, Northeast Asia, and the Pacific at the State Department Foreign Service Institute. holds a Ph.D. in Chinese History from the University of California, Berkeley. Dr. Keegan served as a Foreign Service Officer in the U.S. State Department for thirty years, specializing in China, Taiwan, and the Asia Pacific region. Among his assignments, he served as Deputy Director of the American Institute in Taiwan and Deputy Chief of Mission and Chargé at the U.S. Embassy in New Zealand. Dr. Keegan also served as: Director of the Office of Taiwan Policy in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

Ji-Young Lee is a political scientist who teaches at American University's School of International Service. She is the author of *China's Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination* (Columbia University Press, 2016). Her current work concerns historical Korea-China relations with a focus on military interventions, as well as the impact of China's rise on the U.S. alliance system in East Asia. She has published articles in *Security Studies*, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, and *Journal of East Asian Studies*. Previously, she was a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in Politics and East Asian Studies at Oberlin College, a POSCO Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center, a non-resident James Kelly Korean Studies Fellow with the Pacific Forum CSIS, an East Asia Institute Fellow, and a Korea Foundation-Mansfield Foundation scholar of the U.S.-Korea Scholar-Policymaker Nexus program. She received her Ph.D. and M.A. from Georgetown University, an M.A. from Seoul National University, and a B.A. from Ewha Womans University in South Korea.

Andy Lim is an Associate Fellow with the Korea Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), where he manages the internship program, social media, events, and supports research for Dr. Victor Cha. He is also responsible for several grant projects, including the U.S.-Korea NextGen Scholars Program, and the ROK-U.S. Strategic Forum. His research interests are the U.S.-ROK alliance, Northeast Asia and North Korea. His work on Chinese predatory liberalism has appeared in *The Washington Quarterly* (with Victor Cha) and on North Korea has appeared in *Foreign Policy* (with Victor Cha). He earned a B.A., *cum laude* with

honors in international studies from American University's School of International Service.

Graeme Dobell, a journalist since 1971, has been reporting on Australian and international politics, foreign affairs and defence, and the Asia Pacific since 1975. In 2013, he became Journalist Fellow with the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, writing for ASPI's blog, *The Strategist*. From 2008 to 2012, he was Journalist Fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy, filing *The Canberra Column* for *The Interpreter* blog. Starting as a newspaper journalist in 1971 in Melbourne on *The Herald*, Graeme joined the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's international service, *Radio Australia*, in 1975 and concentrated on politics and international affairs, serving as a correspondent in Canberra, Europe, America and throughout East Asia and the South Pacific. Graeme was the ABC's Southeast Asia correspondent, based in Singapore, and did several stints as the Canberra-based Foreign Affairs & Defence Correspondent for *Radio Australia* from 1978 to 2008, reporting also for ABC radio news and current affairs programs and ABC television. He worked as a journalist in the Parliamentary Press Gallery in Canberra in 1978-81, 1986-89 and 1991-2008. In reporting on Asia, Graeme covered the security dialogue of the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit and a dozen APEC summits. Assignments in his career as a correspondent have included the Falklands War, coups in Fiji, Thailand and the Philippines, Beijing after the crushing of the pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen Square and the return of Hong Kong to China. He is the author of the book *Australia Finds Home — the Choices and Chances of an Asia Pacific Journey*, published in 2000. In 2011, he was made a Fellow of the Australian Institute of International Affairs "for his distinguished contribution to journalism through his reporting on politics and international affairs."

Charles T. McClean is Japan Foundation CGP Postdoctoral Associate in East Asian Studies at the Yale MacMillan Center. Previously he was the Toyota Visiting Professor at the University of Michigan's Center for Japanese Studies and a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Program on U.S.-Japan Relations at Harvard University. His research interests include comparative politics in advanced democracies with a focus on political institutions, elite behavior, and Japan. He is also interested in age and representation, the age orientation of social welfare programs, and how

societies confront the challenges of aging populations. He earned his B.A. in International Relations and Japanese from Tufts University (*summa cum laude*), his M.A. from Harvard's Regional Studies East Asia program, and his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California, San Diego. Prior to UCSD, McClean worked on Japanese politics and U.S.-Japan relations as a research associate at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Akhil Ramesh is Director of the India Program and Economic Statecraft Initiative at Pacific Forum. He holds an M.S. with a concentration in global macroeconomics from New York University in New York, a certificate in business and geopolitics from HEC Paris, France and a BBA from Amity University, India. He is the current Senior Resident Fellow at Pacific Forum. Born and raised in India, Akhil started his career in the Philippines, and over the past seven years, he has lived and worked across three continents, wearing different hats with risk consulting firms, think tanks and governments. Most recently, he worked with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade on geo-economic issues in southern India. Prior to that, based out of New York City, worked as a project coordinator and lead of the mapping project of China's Belt and Road Initiative at the EastWest Institute. With research interests at the nexus of geoeconomics and security policy, he is currently working on a number of projects related to infrastructure development in Asia, supply chains, grand strategy in the Indo-Pacific. His analysis has been widely published across global and regional journals such as *Nikkei Asia*, *South China Morning Post*, *The Hill*, *The Diplomat*, *National Interest*, *Economic Times* and *Hindustan Times*.

Dr. Mason Richey is Associate Professor of international politics at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (Seoul, South Korea), and Senior Contributor at the Asia Society (Korea). Dr. Richey has also held positions as a POSCO Visiting Research Fellow at the East-West Center (Honolulu, HI) and a DAAD Scholar at the University of Potsdam. His research focuses on U.S. and European foreign and security policy as applied to the Asia-Pacific. Recent scholarly articles have appeared (inter alia) in *Pacific Review*, *Asian Security*, *Global Governance*, and *Foreign Policy Analysis*. Shorter analyses and opinion pieces have been published in *38North*, *War on the Rocks*, *Le Monde*, the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, and *Forbes*, among other venues. He is

co-editor of the volume *The Future of the Korean Peninsula: Korea 2032* (Routledge, forthcoming 2021).

Sheila A. Smith, an expert on Japanese politics and foreign policy, is senior fellow for Japan studies at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). She is the author of *Intimate Rivals: Japanese Domestic Politics and Rising China* (Columbia University Press, 2015) and *Japan's New Politics and the U.S.-Japan Alliance* (Council on Foreign Relations, June 2014). Her current research focuses on how geostrategic change in Asia is shaping Japan's strategic choices. In the fall of 2014, Smith began a new project on Northeast Asian Nationalisms and Alliance Management. Smith is a regular contributor to the CFR blog *Asia Unbound*, and frequent contributor to major media outlets in the United States and Asia. She joined CFR from the East-West Center in 2007, where she directed a multinational research team in a cross-national study of the domestic politics of the US military presence in Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. She was a visiting scholar at Keio University in 2007-08 and has been a visiting researcher at two leading Japanese foreign and security policy think tanks, the Japan Institute of International Affairs and the Research Institute for Peace and Security, and at the University of Tokyo and the University of the Ryukyus. Smith is vice chair of the US advisors to the U.S.-Japan Conference on Cultural and Educational Exchange (CULCON), a bi-national advisory panel of government officials and private sector members. She teaches as an adjunct professor at the Asian Studies Department of Georgetown University and serves on the board of its *Journal of Asian Affairs*. She earned her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the Department of Political Science at Columbia University.

Robert G. Sutter is professor of practice of international affairs at the Elliott School of George Washington University. His earlier fulltime position was visiting professor of Asian studies at Georgetown University (2001-2011). A Ph.D. graduate in History and East Asian Languages from Harvard University, Sutter has published 21 books, over 200 articles and several hundred government reports dealing with contemporary East Asian and Pacific countries and their relations with the United States. His most recent book is *U.S.-China Relations: Perilous Past, Uncertain Present* (third edition: Rowman & Littlefield 2018). Sutter's government career (1968-2001) saw service as the director of the

Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division of the Congressional Research Service, the National Intelligence Officer for East Asia and the Pacific at the US Government's National Intelligence Council, and the China division director at the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research.

Rob York is Director for Regional Affairs at the Pacific Forum. He earned his Ph.D. in Korean history from the University of Hawaii at Manoa in 2023, where he also received his master's degree in Asian studies in 2014. Before joining the Pacific Forum, York worked as a production editor at *The South China Morning Post* and as chief editor of NK News, a specialist site focused on news and analysis of North Korea. York's research specialties include North Korean diplomacy and leadership politics, as well as East Asian trade and media discourse. He has worked for newspapers in the United States, South Korea and Hong Kong, and earned his bachelor's degree in communications from Southern Adventist University in Tennessee.

Yu Bin (于滨, Ph.D Stanford) is professor of political science and director of East Asian Studies at Wittenberg University (Ohio, USA). Yu is also a senior fellow of the Shanghai Association of American Studies, senior fellow of the Russian Studies Center of the East China Normal University in Shanghai, and senior advisor to the Intellisias Institute in Guangzhou, China. Yu is the author and co-author of six books and more than 150 book chapters and articles in journals including *World Politics*, *Strategic Review*, *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, *Asia Policy*, *Asian Survey*, *International Journal of Korean Studies*, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, *Harvard International Review*, *Asian Thought and Society*. Yu has also published numerous opinion pieces in many leading media outlets around the world such as *International Herald Tribune* (Paris), *Asia Times*, *People's Daily* (Beijing), *Global Times* (Beijing), *China Daily*, *Foreign Policy In Focus* (online), *Yale Global* (online), Valdai Club, the BBC, Public Radio (USA), Radio Beijing, Radio Australia. Previously, he was a fellow at the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) of the US Army War College, East-West Center in Honolulu, president of Chinese Scholars of Political Science and International Studies, a MacArthur fellow at the Center of International Security and Arms Control at Stanford and a research fellow at the Center of International Studies of the State Council in Beijing.