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PACIFIC  FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

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C O N N E C T I O N S

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

EDITED BY  
ROB YORK  
BRAD GLOSSERMAN

CREATIVE DIRECTOR  
NICHOLAS CIUFFETELLI

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019  
VOL. 21, NO. 3  
JANUARY 2020



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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.

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HONOLULU, HAWAII

# COMPARATIVE CONNECTIONS

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INDO-PACIFIC

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 Carl Baker and Brad Glosserman, with Carl Baker 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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The final trimester of the year is usually a time for Asian multilateralism to take center stage; this year, not so much. The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting, which was supposed to take place in Chile, was cancelled (due to civil disturbances in the host country) while the East Asia Summit (EAS) proceeded without either US President Donald Trump or Vice President Mike Pence (his normal stand-in) in attendance. Regional economic developments (and US trade actions impacting the broader Indo-Asia-Pacific region) grabbed the headlines instead. Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) participants gathered along the EAS sidelines to finalize their trade agreement, sans India, which balked at the last minute. Meanwhile, the White House and US House of Representatives, while locked in a battle over impeachment, nonetheless reached common ground on the US-Mexico-Canada Trade Agreement (USMCA) while the administration announced a “phase one” trade deal with Beijing. There appears to be less than meets the eye in both agreements, but each impacts the region writ large. Finally, not to be overshadowed, the State Department issued its [own explanation](#) of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, complementing the Pentagon’s version, which was [analyzed](#) in our last issue.

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The highlight of 2019 was undoubtedly the US-Japan trade deal. It was two years in the making, but in September, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and US President Donald Trump concluded their much-anticipated trade agreement, ending a worrisome source of dissonance in the relationship. Two focal points characterized this first step in resolving trade frictions: market access in Japan for US agricultural goods and a new set of rules for digital trade. However, Abe got some pushback at home, and the Trump administration cautioned that this was just the first step to redressing the deficit.

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North Korea raised its stakes higher, rejecting diplomatic overtures by the United States and its “[hostile policy](#),” disregarding curtailment of US-ROK military exercises, and testing 27 short range ballistic missiles, as well as multiple rocket launchers and engines, between May and the end of the year. December saw [activity](#) at the once-decommissioned Sohae Launch Facility. At year’s close, Kim Jong Un declared abandonment of North Korea’s long-range missile and nuclear testing moratorium, expectations of continued sanctions and renewed “self-reliance,” and the promise of a “new strategic weapon.”

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Stung by a US delegation to the East Asia Summit of lower rank than previous years, ASEAN leaders retaliated by presenting National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien with a partial boycott of the adjacent US-ASEAN Summit. The Trump administration brushed off the incident with a State Department [fact sheet](#) that began, “US engagement with the ten member states of ASEAN has never been stronger.”

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President Tsai Ing-wen triumphed over her populist Kuomintang (KMT) opponent Han Kuo-yu in Taiwan's January 11, 2020 presidential election, garnering 57.1% of the vote to Han's 38.6%. Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) also retained its majority in the Legislative Yuan (LY), albeit with the loss of some seats to the KMT and third parties. While there has been considerable attention to Beijing's influence operations, the election illustrated Beijing's limited ability to manipulate Taiwan elections. The outcome portends continued deadlock and tension in cross-strait relations in the coming months. Meanwhile, Taipei and Washington have strengthened ties by launching a series of bilateral and multilateral cooperative projects, intended in part to counter both Beijing's influence operations and its continuing diplomatic, economic, and military pressures on Taiwan.

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North Korea conducted five rounds of missile launches in this period as prospects for resuming dialogue with Washington dwindled. Although People’s Republic of China State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi praised Pyongyang’s diplomatic efforts during his September visit to the North, US-DPRK talks in October made no progress. The nuclear impasse loomed over 70th anniversary celebrations of China-DPRK diplomatic ties, highlighting the expanding friendship Chinese President Xi Jinping and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un envisioned last June. Amid concerns over escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing and Moscow proposed a draft UN resolution in December calling for the partial lifting of sanctions.

For their part, Beijing and Seoul advanced their strategic partnership through talks between Xi and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, the China-ROK-Japan summit in December, Wang’s visit to Seoul earlier that month, and the resumption of defense talks in October. But Moon’s latest China visit drew much domestic criticism for failing to secure Beijing’s cooperation on bilateral and regional priorities. Wang’s December visit to Seoul, meanwhile, was most remembered for his attacks on US “unilateralism” and “bullying.” US-China trade tensions and public clashes over Hong Kong present new challenges for the China-ROK partnership.

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If relations between Japan and South Korea were defined by “[cold economics, cold politics](#)” through the summer of 2019 (as we described it in the September issue of Comparative Connections), South Korea-Japan ties at the end of 2019 had begun a tentative thaw. Tensions between the two countries have fallen in the waning months of 2019 from their peak in the summer, when Japan imposed export restrictions on South Korea and Seoul Korea indicated its intent to withdraw from the General Security of Military Information Sharing Agreement (GSOMIA). Following a comparatively quiet but tense period in September and October, both countries took de-escalatory steps starting in November—most notably South Korea’s conditional decision not to withdraw from GSOMIA after all—that improved the atmosphere and created space for diplomacy.



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In the last four months of 2019, Beijing and Moscow continued to broaden and deepen their strategic partnership across political, economic, diplomatic, and security areas with some visible outcomes: the 3,000-km, 38-bcm “Power of Siberia” gas line went into operation and the cross-border rail and road bridges were finally completed after decades of endless negotiations and delays. While Chinese and Russian top leaders jointly steered the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS through challenging times, it was in military relations that breakthroughs were made.

This included Russia’s assistance in the construction of a missile attack early-warning system for China, China’s participation in Russia’s *Center-2019* large-scale exercises, and the first joint naval exercises with Iran in the last few days of 2019. These developments took place amid continuous discussion on both sides about the nature, scope, and degree of an “alliance” relationship, formal or not, in an increasingly fluid and challenging world. With the rapidly deteriorating Iran-US relations at the onset of the new decade, it remains to be seen how Moscow and Beijing can keep their “best ever” relationship short of moving to a formal alliance, a state of affairs they have been trying to avoid for years.

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**BY SATU LIMAYE, EAST-WEST CENTER**

India’s 2019 interactions with the Indo-Pacific were active if measured by diplomatic outreach and defense engagements, but ended with two “whimpers” rather than “bangs.” The first was the decision to drop out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), announced at the ASEAN-convened summits in Bangkok in November. Until the announcement, India seemed ready to join the agreement. The second was the postponement of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s scheduled trip to Assam and Manipur states in northeast India for an annual exchange of prime ministerial visits. The postponement was reportedly decided after discussions between the two governments in the wake of violence against the Indian government’s controversial citizenship bill. The two unrelated developments did speak to two common themes: the first being the limits of India’s East Asia relations, and the second the occasional interruption, by domestic drivers, of India’s continued upward (if not steep) trajectory in relations with the Indo-Pacific region.

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### REGIONAL OVERVIEW

## MOST QUESTIONS REMAIN UNANSWERED AS 2019 STUTTERS TO A CLOSE

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## APEC Leaders Meeting Abandoned

It was perhaps symbolic of multilateralism during the Trump era that the annual Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting, scheduled to take place in Santiago, Chile in November, was canceled weeks before it was to commence. Mass protests triggered by Chilean President Sebastián Piñera's neoliberal economic policies were to blame. If this year's get-together was to have followed in recent tradition, little of substance would have been accomplished at the meeting itself, but US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping were supposed to sign a deal that would signal a truce in their trade war. That signing is now expected some time in January. The US reportedly offered to host the summit but APEC members must reach consensus on an alternative and no such agreement has emerged.



Figure 1 Chile cancels the November 2019 APEC meeting to focus on restoring order and security following mass protests. Photo: BBC

## EAS: Right Message, Wrong Messengers

US participants at the EAS and associated meetings (such as the US-ASEAN 10+1) delivered all the right messages about US commitment to the region. The message was both reassuring—"The Trump administration is extremely engaged in and fully committed to this region"—and blunt: "The region has no interest in a new imperial era where a big country can rule others on the theory that might makes right. America is helping our ASEAN friends uphold their sovereignty." The messengers were US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, in the region for an Indo-Pacific Business Forum, and Robert O'Brien, the newly appointed National Security Advisor who was a complete unknown in Asia (and not exactly a household name in the US).

Trump's decision to send Ross and O'Brien in his place was seen as an insult by many EAS heads of state. Last year, Pence was the senior representative; Ross was the lowest ranking official to ever represent the US at an ASEAN leaders' event. Making matters worse, O'Brien was sent to the US-ASEAN meeting that seven out of 10 ASEAN heads of state boycotted in favor of their foreign ministers. Making matters even more worse, one US diplomat noted, "We are extremely concerned by the apparent decision [to send lower level officials to the meeting]," further noting that "a full or partial boycott by ASEAN leaders will be seen as an intentional effort to embarrass the President of the United States of America and this will be very damaging to the substance of the ASEAN-US relations." Really? O'Brien also relayed the following personal invitation from his boss: "I would also like to take this opportunity to offer an invitation to all the leaders of the ASEAN to join me in the US for a special summit meeting at a time of mutual convenience in the first quarter of 2020." It will be interesting to see if they take him up on this offer.

Meanwhile, the EAS Chairman's Statement contained all the standard elements: the importance of ASEAN centrality, the need for Korean peninsula denuclearization, support for a South China Sea Code of Conduct, and the need "to keep markets open, inclusive and competitive through the rules-based multilateral trading system as well as improving transparency and predictability of the business environment." Participants also remained "mindful of the potential severe impacts of climate change on the region's socio-economic development and people's livelihood."

## India Backs Out, Reshapes RCEP

As Satu Limaye notes in his chapter on India's relations with the region, plans for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a 16-member trade agreement, were jumbled when India decided at the last minute to not join the deal. Talks were launched in 2012, and after numerous delays, agreement was anticipated by year's end. And, indeed, by their November get-together, leaders from 15 of the 16 nations involved—all 10 ASEAN members, Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea—were happy with the deal. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the lone holdout;

Indian officials explained that the agreement was not the “[level playing field](#)” that he sought.



Figure 2 The November 2019 RCEP Summit was held in Bangkok, Thailand. Photo: Bloomberg

Limaye explains Modi’s thinking in depth but the decision warrants mention here for two reasons. First, it rebalances internal dynamics among RCEP members. India was viewed as a strategic counterweight to China; without Delhi, Beijing is the dominant voice in the group. Second, the outcome suggests limits to optimism about India’s engagement in initiatives that would require it to depart from its history of nonalignment or be more forward leaning in the provision of public goods. In short, Delhi still defines its national interest narrowly.

Still, RCEP matters. When it goes into effect—it is expected to be signed early next year—it will be the world’s largest trade agreement by population and GDP. The Brookings Institution [estimates](#) that RCEP could grow global real incomes by \$285 billion annually if in place by 2030, a pace twice that of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). While it is a lowest common denominator deal—in contrast to the “higher level” CPTPP—it makes important progress on several fronts. It provides for single rules of origin for members, reduces tariffs, and steps up intellectual property protections. Analysts note that it fails to advance rules on e-commerce and has limited provisions concerning services, investment, and labor and environment standards. (A detailed assessment is available [here](#).)

If Modi changes his mind, little is required to join. The RCEP provisions that are designed for India will be frozen and the agreement has a general accession provision for later entrants.

## A North American Trade Deal Ripples Through Asia

In December, the US finished political negotiations (between the Trump administration and the Democratically controlled House of Representatives) on the US, Mexico, Canada trade agreement (USMCA), the successor to the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which Trump denounced “[as the worst trade deal in history](#).”

USMCA is a modest improvement over NAFTA; one official assessment [concluded](#) it would have a “moderate” impact on the US economy, creating 176,000 jobs (the US added 266,000 jobs in November) over six years and raise GDP 0.35%. Experts [note](#) that many of the USMCA improvements were in the abandoned Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Still, the deal has a couple of items that matter for the Indo-Pacific region. First, clause 32.10 says that the US can withdraw from the USMCA if signatories sign a free trade agreement with a nonmarket economy—a code phrase generally assumed to refer to China. There is concern that the US will insert that clause in other trade deals to be negotiated, although it is hard to find a case where it might apply. The US has nearly two dozen agreements with other countries in the region and they are unlikely to agree to such a revision. The US is negotiating a trade agreement with the Philippines, but Manila already has an FTA with China through ASEAN. Vietnam could be a target—it is a nonmarket economy—but it is also a member of the CPTPP and the US has sought to improve relations with Hanoi; punishing it in this way is strategic incoherence.

Second, USMCA tightens rules of origin and has a minimum wage rule that will affect automakers that exploit the single North American market by sourcing manufacturing and assembly in Mexico or Canada. The new deal requires 75% of vehicle components to be manufactured in the US, Mexico, or Canada to qualify for zero tariffs; it was 62.5% in NAFTA. USMCA also requires that 40 to 45% of auto manufacturing be done by workers who earn at least \$16 an hour by 2023. Both provisions will force companies to shift supply chains as manufacturers reduce sourcing of parts from cheaper-labor destinations in Asia (and Mexico). These provisions will also raise the price of North America-manufactured cars,

making them less competitive at home and on international markets.

The new rules have forced Japanese automakers in particular to rethink strategies and approaches to the North American market. In some cases, they may change supply chains; in others, they could decide that some products aren't worth selling in the US. Honda Motor Co. Executive Vice President Seiji Kuraishi explained the industry position when he [revealed](#) that "We will think of how to achieve the best allocation in the world."

### The Trade War Spillover

The world is awaiting the terms of the "phase one" trade truce reached between the US and China. (Despite all the attention, as this is being written, actual documents have not been released and the Chinese government has been conspicuously quiet about what it agreed.) Nonetheless, there has been a sense of relief following announcement of a deal. There is virtual unanimity among business strategists and economists that the trade war poses a significant risk for the global economy; Gita Gopinath, IMF chief economist, warned that global GDP would be cut by 0.6% as a result of the fight, adding that additional tariffs would increase the damage. The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) [noted](#) that for the first time in over a decade, Asia-Pacific economies' trade in goods and services will decline by both volume and value.

The impact is uneven. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) noted in its 2019 [Development Outlook Update](#) that GDP expansion in developing Asia, while still strong, is anticipated to slow from 5.9% in 2018 to 5.4% in 2019, then increase to 5.5% in 2020, and the bank attributes part of the decline to the trade fight. (Another factor is a general slowdown in the US and Chinese economies, to which the trade war could also contribute). China experienced a 12% drop in exports in the first half of 2019, compared to the previous first six months of 2018, while exports from other developing Asian countries to the US rose by 10% over the same period. For example, Vietnam's exports to the US were up 33%, while those of Bangladesh rose by 13%. ESCAP data [shows](#) export values from Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea estimated to decline

by 6.9% in 2019; among developing nations as a whole, the fall will be a more modest 2.6%. The overall result is a [net negative](#) in economic terms, however, as Asia's gains are less than China's losses.

There is a second, less obvious but no less damaging, dimension to the trade war: the harm it does to the US role as the country leading and safeguarding an open trade system (or the perception of such). Trump has declared himself "[tariff man](#)" and insists that he will never relinquish that tool of economic statecraft. His unilateralism to ensure "fair trade" has had mixed success at best and, more worrying, inspired other countries to copy him. It has allowed Xi Jinping to argue that he is the status quo power when it comes to economic diplomacy, a case that is in fact hard to justify given China's protectionist policies, but is nonetheless appealing to many (especially given their feelings toward the US president). Fortunately, other leaders have tried to fill the leadership vacuum; Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's efforts are especially praiseworthy.

### FOIP: Take Two

One of the criticisms leveled at the Obama administration's pivot to Asia was that it appeared, the attempt to create a Trans-Pacific Partnership notwithstanding, to be more of a military than a multidimensional strategy. The same has been said for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. In November, the State Department tried to remedy this by putting out its [own report](#) on *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*. It describes a region in which "all countries prosper side by side as sovereign, independent states. That vision, shared with billions of people in more than 35 countries and economies, is based on values that have underpinned peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific for generations. Free, fair, and reciprocal trade, open investment environments, good governance, and freedom of the seas are goals shared by all who wish to prosper in a free and open future."

While the report focused heavily on trade, investment, and economic development, it pulled no punches when it came to China's South China Sea territorial claims, noting that Beijing's "maritime claims in the South China Sea, exemplified by the preposterous 'nine-dash line,' are unfounded, unlawful and unreasonable." It also stressed the importance

of engagement with key allies and partners like Japan, South Korea, and India, while further noting that “We are committed to upholding a free and open Indo-Pacific in which all nations, large and small, are secure in their sovereignty and able to pursue economic growth consistent with international law and principles of fair competition.”

Meanwhile, as official strategy documents continue to talk about the centrality of US alliances as the foundation of any Indo-Pacific strategy, Trump keeps tweeting about the need for four-fold (or more) increases in host nation support from Korea and Japan as the price for keeping US boots on the ground. It’s no wonder US allies in Asia (as elsewhere) remain concerned about Washington’s true commitment to the region.

The first few months of 2020 may well set the tone for the year to follow: negotiations over the US force presence will make plain Trump administration thinking about the value of alliances while the US-China trade deal will demonstrate its commitment to genuinely trying to reform Chinese economic policies. Of course, there is always the prospect of unexpected developments reshaping the narrative—as the world was reminded during the first week of the new year, with the crisis between the US and Iran. With impeachment and an election looming in the US, it promises to be a busy and difficult year.

# REGIONAL CHRONOLOGY

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

**Sept. 2, 2019:** South Korean President Moon Jae-in [meets](#) Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha in Bangkok. They agree to “expand bilateral partnerships to high-tech sectors in response to the fourth industrial revolution.”

**Sept. 2-6, 2019:** Inaugural ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise [begins](#) in Thailand and finishes in Singapore, including eight warships, four aircraft, and more than 1,000 personnel from the US and all 10 ASEAN countries.

**Sept. 3, 2019:** Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad [visits](#) Cambodian Prime Minister Samdech Techo Hun Sen in Phnom Penh. They sign agreements “to boost bilateral trade, investment and tourism.”

**Sept. 2-4, 2019:** Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [visits](#) North Korea and meets Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho. The meeting is described as “an important follow-up step to implement consensus at the highest level between our two parties and countries and to advance bilateral relations.”

**Sept. 4, 2019:** Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi [meets](#) Russian President Vladimir Putin in Vladivostok on the sidelines of the Eastern Economic Forum. They agree to establish “joint development and production of military equipment, spare parts and components as well as improving the system of after sales services.” Modi also [offered](#) a \$1 billion line of credit to Russia to develop its Far East.

**Sept. 4, 2019:** South Korean President Moon [meets](#) Myanmar State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi in Nay Pyi Taw.

**Sept. 5, 2019:** Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo [meets](#) Putin in Vladivostok on the sidelines of the Eastern Economic Forum. They agree to “promote talks for the dispute over four Japanese-claimed, Russian-held islands off Hokkaido and the conclusion of a peace treaty.”

**Sept. 5, 2019:** Modi [meets](#) Mahathir in Vladivostok on the sidelines of the Eastern Economic Forum.

**Sept. 5, 2019:** Mahathir [meets](#) Putin on the sidelines of the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok.

**Sept. 5, 2019:** Moon [meets](#) Laotian President Bounnhang Vorachit in Vientiane. They discuss elevating ties by Korea “investing more in various business sectors” in Laos.

**Sept. 7, 2019:** Pakistan [hosts](#) trilateral meeting of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Raabani, and Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi to discuss “trade, counterterrorism and an end to Afghanistan’s 18-year war.”

**Sept. 9, 2019:** Wang [meets](#) Nepalese Foreign Minister Pradeep Kumar Gyawali in Kathmandu.

**Sept. 9-10, 2019:** US INDOPACOM Commander Adm. Philip Davidson [visits](#) Brunei and meets Second Minister of Defense Awang Halbi bin Mohd Yussof, and Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah.

**Sept. 11, 2019:** Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev [meets](#) Chairman Xi Jinping in Beijing. They agree “to develop a permanent comprehensive strategic partnership.”

**Sept. 11-Oct. 8, 2019:** Royal Australian Air Force and Japan Air Self-Defense Force [hold](#) joint drills in Japan, codenamed *Bushido Guardian 2019*.

**Sept. 16, 2019:** Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama [meets](#) Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison in Canberra. They sign “a comprehensive new partnership agreement covering security cooperation, trade, people-to-people links, greater multilateral cooperation, and increased connections between Australian and Fijian institutions.”



**Sept. 16, 2019:** Solomon Islands announces that it will switch diplomatic recognition to China. Taiwan responds by [breaking](#) diplomatic ties with the Solomon Islands.

**Sept. 16–21, 2019:** China, Russia, India, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan [conduct](#) *Center 2019* military exercise in Western Russia and Kyrgyzstan.

**Sept. 16–21, 2019:** Singapore, India, and Thailand [conduct](#) a joint naval exercise, beginning in Port Blair, India.

**Sept. 17, 2019:** ASEAN and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) [sign](#) Practical Arrangements “to promote cooperation in nuclear science and technology, applications, nuclear safety, security and safeguards.”

**Sept. 18, 2019:** South Korea [revokes](#) Japan’s preferential trade partner status.

**Sept. 18, 2019:** Chinese Premier Li Keqiang [meets](#) Putin at the Kremlin.

**Sept. 19, 2019:** New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern [meets](#) Prime Minister Abe in Tokyo.

**Sept. 20, 2019:** Morrison [visits](#) US President Donald Trump at the White House. Morrison is the second world leader to be given a state dinner by Trump.

**Sept. 19, 2019:** Kiribati [breaks](#) diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Taiwan responds in kind.

**Sept. 22, 2019:** Modi [meets](#) Trump at a “Howdy, Modi!” rally in Houston.

**Sept. 23, 2019:** Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan [meets](#) Trump on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

**Sept. 21–23, 2019:** Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force ships [visit](#) the Philippines.

**Sept. 27, 2019:** China [restores](#) diplomatic ties with Kiribati.

**Sept. 27, 2019:** Japan’s annual defense white paper places China above North Korea as the major threat to Japanese security for the first time.

**Oct. 1, 2019:** China [unveils](#) intercontinental strategic nuclear missile, *Dongfeng-41* at the National Day military parade in Beijing.

**Oct. 2, 2019:** Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Lupesoliai Sailele Malielegaoi [meets](#) Abe in Tokyo.

**Oct. 3, 2019:** Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte [meets](#) Putin in Sochi. They agree to “strengthen their countries’ partnership in the fight against terrorism and enter into more economic cooperation.”

**Oct. 3, 2019:** Vietnam [demands](#) that China withdraw an oil exploration ship from an area in the South China Sea that is claimed by both countries.

**Oct. 3, 2019:** Malaysian telecoms giant Maxis [agrees](#) to buy 5G equipment from China’s Huawei Technologies.

**Oct. 5, 2019:** Officials from North Korea and the United States [meet](#) in Stockholm, but reach no agreement on future talks.

**Oct. 7, 2019:** Japan and the US [sign](#) a bilateral trade agreement. “The agreement will lead Japan to eliminate or reduce tariffs on an additional \$7.2 billion of US food and agricultural products, according to the US Department of Agriculture.

**Sept. 24–Oct. 10, 2019:** Singapore and the US [participate](#) in the bilateral naval exercise *Pacific Griffin* in the waters off the coast of Guam.

**Oct. 7, 2019:** A North Korean fishing trawler [collides](#) with a Japanese patrol vessel in the Sea of Japan (East Sea), within Japan’s exclusive economic zone.

**Oct. 9, 2019:** Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare [meets](#) Premier Li Keqiang at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. They sign bilateral agreements to increase cooperation in foreign affairs, economic technology, and education.

**Oct. 9, 2019:** Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan [meets](#) Xi in Beijing.

**Oct. 11-12, 2019:** Xi [meets](#) Modi in Mamallapuram, India. They agree to establish a new mechanism to discuss trade and resolve India's trade deficit with China.

**Oct. 13, 2019:** Xi [visits](#) Nepal and meets President Bidhya Devi Bhandari and Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli. They agree on a trans-Himalayan railroad link extending from Tibet to Nepal.

**Oct. 16, 2019:** South Korea and Indonesia [reach](#) a preliminary trade agreement.

**Oct. 22, 2019:** Russian military aircraft [enters](#) the Korean Air Defense Identification Zone. In response, South Korea scrambles fighter jets. Russia denies any airspace violations.

**Nov. 2-4, 2019:** The 35<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit, the 22<sup>nd</sup> ASEAN+3 Summit, and the 14<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit are [held](#) in Bangkok along with various 10+1 meetings between ASEAN and its dialogue partners.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** India [withdraws](#) from the RCEP trade agreement.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** China [announces](#) 26 new measures to open its markets to Taiwanese firms and treat Taiwanese the same as Chinese.

**Nov. 11, 2019:** The 12<sup>th</sup> China-ASEAN Conference on People to People Friendship Organizations is [held](#) in Bandung, Indonesia.

**Nov. 15, 2019:** US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper [meets](#) South Korean Defense Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo in Seoul, pressing South Korea to pay more for the cost of stationing US troops.

**Nov. 17, 2019:** China [sails](#) its domestically built aircraft carrier through the Taiwan Strait as part of sea trials. In response, Taiwan scrambled ships and jets to monitor the carrier group.

**Nov. 16-19, 2019:** ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Retreat [is held](#) in Bangkok.

**Nov. 17, 2019:** Thai Prime Minister Prayut and US Defense Secretary Esper [sign](#) the US-Thailand Joint Vision Statement 2020, setting general areas of focus for defense collaboration.

**Nov. 19, 2019:** The US Senate [passes](#) the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act.

**Nov. 19, 2019:** Taiwan's Ministry of Education [welcomes](#) university students fleeing turmoil in Hong Kong to attend lectures at colleges in Taiwan to continue their studies.

**Nov. 20, 2019:** India's Strategic Forces Command test fires two *Prithvi-II* tactical surface-to-surface short-range ballistic missiles as part of its annual training to test the combat readiness of the missile forces.

**Nov. 13-21, 2019:** Indian and US militaries [engage](#) in *Tiger Triumph*, joint tri-service humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercises in Andhra Pradesh, India.

**Nov. 21, 2019:** Tuvalu Foreign Minister Simon Kofe [expresses](#) support for Taiwan and reaffirms strong diplomatic ties. Kofe says that Tuvalu rejected offers from Chinese companies to build artificial islands.

**Nov. 22, 2019:** South Korea [announces](#) its decision to continue the General Security of Military Intelligence Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan, just six hours before the agreement was to expire.

**Nov. 24, 2019:** Hong Kong [votes](#) in district-level elections. The pro-democracy bloc gains control over 17 out of 18 District Councils, and nearly 90% of the overall seats.

**Nov. 25, 2019:** Vietnam [releases](#) its 2019 defense white paper, launched in a ceremony led by Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh.

**Nov. 25, 2019:** Prime Minister Abe [meets](#) Foreign Minister Wang in Tokyo.

**Nov. 25-26, 2019:** Busan [hosts](#) ASEAN-Republic of Korea Commemorative Summit, bringing together the leaders of South Korea and 10 Southeast Asian countries.

**Nov. 26, 2019:** Russia, China, and South Africa [start](#) trilateral maritime exercise off Cape Town.

**Nov. 28, 2019:** Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir [meets](#) President Moon in Seoul and they agree to a strategic partnership.

**Dec. 3, 2019:** US House of Representatives [approves](#) the Uygur Intervention and Global Humanitarian Unified Response Act of 2019.

**Dec. 4, 2019:** Chinese and South Korean Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Kang Kyung-wha [meet](#) in Seoul.

**Dec. 4, 2019:** Kim Jong Un appears atop a white horse at Mt. Kumgang, hinting at a return to a more confrontational stance toward the US.

**Nov. 23–Dec. 6, 2019:** Bougainville voting lasts two weeks, and [results](#) in almost 98% voting in favor of independence from Papua New Guinea.

**Dec. 10, 2019:** South Korea and Australia [meet](#) in Sydney for “two plus two talks” to discuss joint efforts for regional security and other issues of mutual concern.

**Dec. 7–20, 2019:** The eighth joint India–China military training exercise, Hand-in-Hand 2019 takes place in the Indian state of Meghalaya.

**Dec. 13, 2019:** Trump and the US Trade Representative announce a phase one trade deal with China.

**Dec. 24, 2019:** Leaders of China, South Korea, and Japan [meet](#) in Chengdu, where they express their mutual commitment to peace on the Korean peninsula, denuclearization, and a China–Japan–ROK free trade agreement. The meeting is Abe and Moon’s first in 15 months.

**Dec. 27–30, 2019:** China, Russia, and Iran conduct a four-day [naval exercise](#) in the northern part of the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman.

**Dec. 31, 2019:** North Korean state media quotes Kim Jong-un as saying North Korea is no longer bound by its nuclear and long-range missile testing moratorium.



PACIFIC FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

US-JAPAN RELATIONS

## THE FINALE FOR ABE-TRUMP ALLIANCE MANAGEMENT?

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The highlight of 2019 was undoubtedly the US-Japan trade deal. It was two years in the making, but in September, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and US President Donald Trump concluded their much-anticipated trade agreement, ending a worrisome source of dissonance in the relationship. Two focal points characterized this first step in resolving trade frictions: market access in Japan for US agricultural goods and a new set of rules for digital trade. However, Abe got some pushback at home, and the Trump administration cautioned that this was just the first step to redressing the deficit.

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The United States and Japan continued their collaboration on the Indo-Pacific, making modest but important headway. The East Asia Summit provided an opportunity to coordinate and suggest specific opportunities for collaboration. Several quadrilateral meetings took place in the final months of 2019, and a new, better-resourced agency came into being to underscore the need for the United States to bring more funding to meet the demand for Asian infrastructure.

Both Abe and Trump faced difficulties at home. Typhoon Hagibis landed in Japan in October, producing massive flooding and destruction. Airports were closed, train services halted, and recovery efforts across the Kanto region occupied Japan's military and emergency services for days. The Abe cabinet also faced new political scandals, once more causing a downturn in the prime minister's approval rating.



Figure 1 Japan Self-Defense Force soldiers rescue residents in Miyagi prefecture following Typhoon Hagibis. Photo: Kyodo/Reuters

In the United States, a constitutional crisis unfolded. The House of Representatives initiated an impeachment investigation of the president on September 24 over his decision to withhold military aid to Ukraine in return for an investigation into former Vice President Joe Biden, one of Trump's potential rivals in the 2020 election. By year's end, Trump became the third US president to be impeached.

A sad note: on November 29, Japan lost a staunch supporter of the alliance when former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro passed away at the age of 101. Nakasone, who served early in his career as head of Japan's Defense Agency, went on to join US President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the

1980s to accelerate strategic cooperation among the Western allies during the final decade of the Cold War.



Figure 2 Former Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro was a supporter of the US-Japan alliance and passed away at on Nov. 29, 2019 at the age of 101. Photo: Kyodo

## A US-Japan Trade Agreement

After months of negotiations, US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Japanese Economic Revitalization Minister Motegi Toshimitsu [announced](#) on August 23 that the two countries had agreed to a [limited trade deal](#)—separating out a short-term agreement on less contentious products from longer-term negotiations on a more comprehensive deal that covers other goods and services. On September 25, Trump and Abe officially signed the [US-Japan Trade Agreement](#) and [US-Japan Digital Trade Agreement](#) during their bilateral summit on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York. The two leaders issued a [joint statement](#) praising the deal, with Trump calling the pact a “[huge victory for America's farmers, ranchers, and growers](#)” and Abe saying it represented a “[win-win solution for Japan and the United States](#).” Lighthizer and Ambassador of Japan to the United States Sugiyama Shinsuke then [finalized](#) the agreement, signing it on October 7 in Washington, DC.

The [US-Japan Trade Agreement](#) includes efforts by both countries to reduce trade barriers on certain products. Japan agreed to [open up its agricultural market](#) to a variety of US goods including beef, pork, wine, cheese, and wheat to

the same levels as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). The United States for its part [agreed to reduce or eliminate tariffs](#) on some types of manufacturing equipment, industrial goods, and agricultural products such as green tea, persimmons, and soy sauce. In a separate [US-Japan Digital Trade Agreement](#), the two countries agreed on a comprehensive set of rules governing the more than \$38 billion in bilateral digital trade that is meant to represent a new “[gold standard](#)” that goes beyond the CPTPP. The deals were [largely welcomed by American farmers](#), who were [concerned about losing market share](#) in Japan to competitors as well as slow progress on other trade deals with Canada, Mexico, and China.

One area that the [US-Japan Trade Agreement](#) does not explicitly address is automobile tariffs. After US-Japan trade talks officially kicked off in April 2019, Trump threatened in May that he would [raise tariffs on Japanese automobiles](#) from 2.5% to 25% if a deal could not be concluded within six months. The two countries managed to finish a deal within this deadline, yet the text of the agreement does not include a firm promise by the US side to refrain from raising tariffs in the future, nor does it reduce tariffs below 2.5%, as strongly requested by the Japanese side. Instead, the Abe administration settled for language in the [joint statement](#) that “both nations will refrain from taking measures against the spirit of these agreements” and “will make efforts for an early solution to other tariff-related issues.” In a news conference following the conclusion of the agreement, Abe further said that Trump confirmed to him personally that “[no further tariffs will be imposed](#),” a sentiment that was later echoed in comments to the press by Lighthizer.

The deal did not require congressional approval but did need to be ratified by the Japanese Diet, which began deliberations in October during the parliament’s extraordinary session. [Opposition parties](#) quickly honed in on the failure of Abe’s trade team to secure removal of the 2.5% automobile tariff—something that the US side had originally agreed to under the TPP before Trump withdrew the United States from the deal in January 2017. More generally, the opposition also [criticized](#) negotiators in the administration for giving up too much to the US side by granting American farmers the same level of market access as CPTPP partner nations without gaining enough in return.

In the end, the agreement moved swiftly through the Diet despite opposition objections. Deliberations did slow for a bit when [two of Abe’s cabinet members resigned](#) in early November amid allegations of election law violations, but the Lower House [approved](#) the deal on November 19 and the Upper House [followed quickly](#) on December 4. Abe’s ruling coalition thus managed to ratify the deal in “[record time](#),” securing approval within just 10 weeks of the agreement’s signing and less than nine months after negotiations began, paving the way for the deal to take effect on January 1, 2020.

Japan’s successful ratification of the US-Japan Trade Agreement in December coincided with a busy month for the US side, which saw significant progress on other trade agreements yet also faced the impeachment of Trump. On December 10, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced that House Democrats and the White House had [agreed on a deal](#) on the [US-Mexico-Canada Agreement](#), a renegotiation of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The House [passed the new agreement with broad bipartisan support](#) on December 19 (385-41), which came less than 24 hours after the chamber had [voted to impeach Trump almost entirely along party lines](#) (230-197 and 229-198 for the two articles of impeachment). The US-Mexico-Canada Agreement now moves to the Republican-controlled Senate, which is expected to approve it in early 2020, although the timeline is difficult to predict given the Senate’s focus on the impeachment trial. The agreement will enter into force after all three countries ratify it—[Mexico became the first country to ratify the agreement](#) on June 19, whereas deliberations in Canada were complicated by parliamentary elections on October 21.

On December 13, the Trump administration also announced that it had [reached an agreement with China](#) on a phase one trade deal. While details of the agreement have not been made public, media reports suggest that while the deal will [formalize a trade truce](#) between the two countries, it is likely to result in [only a small reduction](#) of existing tariffs. Trump announced via Twitter that he [plans to sign the deal](#) at a White House ceremony with Chinese officials on January 15.

As the US-Japan Trade Agreement and US-Japan Digital Trade Agreement enter into force

on January 1, the question for 2020 will be whether these deals represent the extent of US-Japan trade cooperation or whether the two countries can successfully conclude a more comprehensive agreement. The Trump administration has [long been interested in a far-reaching bilateral FTA](#) that covers a wide range of goods and services, whereas the Abe administration's top priority is in eliminating tariffs on Japanese automobiles. As part of their [joint statement](#) on September 25, Trump and Abe agreed that the two countries would conclude consultations for future trade talks within four months of the deal entering into force. If the two countries are able to follow this timeline, then Motegi and Lighthizer should be able to begin fresh negotiations on a more comprehensive trade deal sometime in the spring.

### Synchronizing Indo-Pacific Strategies

The Trump administration and Abe cabinet worked hard to coordinate their Indo-Pacific policies. In his September 18 [testimony](#) before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell outlined the administration's priorities in the Indo-Pacific. Stilwell emphasized the importance of good governance, transparency, and support for regional institutions, as well as coordination with treaty allies, such as Japan, that have their own Indo-Pacific strategies.

A week later, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [met](#) with the foreign ministers of Japan, Australia, and India on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York. Senior officials [followed up](#) on the economic collaboration among the quad in early November in Bangkok, with all four nations committing themselves to advancing a "free, open, and inclusive" Indo-Pacific during the East Asia Summit meeting at the Indo-Pacific Business Forum. On the sidelines of the East Asia Summit meeting, Japan and the United States released a [joint statement](#) on their bilateral collaboration on "Furthering the Development of Smart Cities in the Indo-Pacific."

Legislation granting increased resources and institutional capacity for the US in development funding resulted in a new entity, the Development Finance Corporation (DFC). With a [budget](#) of \$299 million, Washington is now

poised to considerably expand its role in development financings as part of its Indo-Pacific strategy. Collaboration with other regional partners, especially the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), is expected to help flesh out the opportunities for networked financing of infrastructure and other types of development projects in the region.

### The Final Year of Abe-Trump Era?

Leadership transitions could be ahead for both the United States and Japan in 2020. By the end of 2019, with campaigning already underway in the United States, open speculation about how the US election might affect the alliance surfaced. The 2020 presidential election hovered close to the surface in the House impeachment proceedings, and continues to influence the dynamics of Senate decision making over when and how to proceed with an impeachment trial. The field of Democratic candidates in the primary dwindled by early 2020, with Kamala Harris, Julian Castro, and Cory Booker leaving the race before the final debate prior to the first primary in Iowa on February 3. Six candidates remained on stage: Joe Biden, Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, Pete Buttigieg, Amy Klobuchar, and Tom Steyer. While absent from the debate stage, Mike Bloomberg, former mayor of New York, threw his hat in the ring on November 24, complicating the expectation that voting in the early primaries would narrow the Democratic field even further.

A potential leadership transition also looms large in Japan. The current term of the House of Representatives goes until September 2021, as does Abe's term as leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). But there is growing anticipation that elections – both within the LDP and for the Diet – will happen in fall 2020, after the summer Tokyo Olympics. Abe has [identified](#) several contenders to take his place and continue his policy agenda. In the running are Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide, Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare Kato Katsunobu, and LDP Policy Research Council Chairman Kishida Fumio. But political veteran and former LDP secretary general Ishiba Shigeru might also be in the mix, and could challenge this managed succession scenario. While Abe has said he would like to step down and there are many in the party who would like a shot at the prime minister's office, the results of the US election



could also inform the party's thinking about a post-Abe era.

It is also too early to rule out the possibility that the LDP might change its rules to allow Abe to stay for a fourth term. The prime minister's approval rate [dipped](#) by the end of the year, however, as he once again came under criticism for using a government [cherry blossom party](#) as a fundraising event. Furthermore, two members of his cabinet were forced to step down because of alleged violations of election campaign laws.

### **Complications in US-Japan Military Cooperation**

Events on the Korean peninsula continued to demand alliance coordination. North Korea continued its missile testing, provoking some dissonance between Tokyo and Washington over their import. The Trump administration avoided outright condemnation of short- and medium-range tests, seemingly in an effort to keep the door open for talks with Kim Jong Un. Abe continued to urge international condemnation of testing as a violation of UN Security Council resolutions. Yet, it was Japan's relationship with South Korea that headlined the agenda for alliance management on the Korean peninsula as 2019 came to a close. The rapid deterioration in Tokyo-Seoul ties affected trilateral military cooperation just as Kim renewed his missile testing. By year's end, after the Trump administration scolded Seoul for its threat to abandon the *General Security of Military Information Agreement* (GSOMIA), Seoul and Tokyo signaled willingness to stop the downward spiral in their relationship, but the two US allies remained far from resolving their differences.

Japan's Ministry of Defense (MOD) also ran into some problems as it sought to designate basing for the new AEGIS Ashore system. Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) bases in Yamaguchi Prefecture and Akita Prefecture were seen as ideal, but the GSDF Araya base in Akita Prefecture, initially suggested as the best candidate in the north, faced considerable opposition within the municipality. Errors in the MOD report created confusion and ultimately local rejection of Tokyo's plan. As a result, other GSDF base options in Akita and Aomori prefectures are [being considered](#) as possible alternatives.

Finally, the Abe cabinet [finalized](#) its planning to send the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) to the Middle East for intelligence-gathering operations. Initially, the Trump administration had asked Japan to join a US-led Maritime Security Construct (dubbed Operation Sentinel). However, Japan decided instead to send its Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) independent of the US coalition. The MSDF reconnaissance aircraft will be assigned to this mission from the anti-piracy task force in Djibouti, and a helicopter-capable destroyer will be dispatched from Japan on February 2. After the Trump administration killed Iranian leader General Qassem Soleimani of the Quds Force, the possibility of an escalating conflict between the United States and Iran raised questions in Tokyo over whether to continue with the mission. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani visited Tokyo in December, the first presidential visit in 19 years, providing the opportunity to explain the mission's objectives. On December 27, the Abe cabinet [gave the go ahead](#) for the MSDF deployment of over 200 personnel to operate in the Gulf of Oman to the northern Arabian Sea and Babel Mandeb. Public opinion polling [revealed some concern](#) within Japan, but there was little outright opposition to the SDF independently taking on this new role.

### **Looking Ahead to 2020**

The Abe cabinet managed to put the strains of the trade talks to bed in 2019, but 2020 promises a new challenge: the negotiation of host nation support for US forces stationed in Japan. The US-ROK talks have [soured alliance ties](#) between Washington and Seoul as the Trump administration demanded that South Korea pay up to \$5 billion in support for US forces there. Tokyo is watching carefully to see whether the president will make similar demands on Japan. Timing is in Japan's favor for the moment. The Trump administration has yet to conclude its discussions with Seoul. Popular criticism of Washington is on the rise and South Korean President Moon Jae-in has little room to maneuver at home. But the alliance relationship has suffered. Like Japan, the South Korean government has also decided not to formally join the US maritime coalition in the Middle East. The Abe cabinet will want to avoid a similar strain on US-Japan alliances ties, and the US election will likely push these talks further into 2020.

Leadership transitions in Washington and/or Tokyo will bring an end to the much admired Abe-Trump partnership. This could have downsides for alliance management, especially if Abe steps down and Trump is re-elected. Some in Japan worry that past political history suggests that a return to short-term, revolving door leadership dynamics could return there. In the United States, the focus is largely internal. Who will win in November will have immense consequences for the future role of the United States in the world. On both sides of the Pacific, this concern about the future of the US alliances coupled with the rise in serious challenges to the United States and Japan in Asia suggest that 2020 will be a watershed year for the US-Japan alliance.

# CHRONOLOGY OF US-JAPAN RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

**Sept. 4, 2019:** Parliamentary Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Kiyoto Tsuji [meets](#) with families of former prisoners of war in Tokyo.

**Sept. 9–11, 2019:** Minister of Foreign Affairs Taro Kono [speaks](#) at the 51st Annual Joint Meeting of the Japan–Midwest US Association in Chicago, Illinois.

**Sept. 11, 2019:** Prime Minister Abe Shinzo [reshuffles](#) his cabinet. Taro Kono is appointed defense minister and Toshimitsu Motegi becomes the new foreign minister.

**Sept. 18, 2019:** US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell [testifies](#) before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation on President Donald Trump's Fiscal Year 2020 budget request for East Asia and the Pacific.

**Sept. 18, 2019:** Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell [testifies](#) before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on US policy in the Indo-Pacific region.

**Sept. 20, 2019:** *The Wall Street Journal* [publishes](#) a story alleging that Trump pressured the president of Ukraine to investigate former vice president Joe Biden's son in a July 25 phone call.

**Sept. 22–28, 2019:** Motegi [visits](#) New York to attend the UN General Assembly Meeting.

**Sept. 23–26, 2019:** Abe [visits](#) New York to attend the UN General Assembly Meeting.

**Sept. 23, 2019:** Abe [participates](#) in the UN High-Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage.

**Sept. 24, 2019:** Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi [announces](#) formal impeachment inquiry into Trump.

**Sept. 24, 2019:** Abe gives a [speech](#) at the UN General Assembly Meeting in New York.

**Sept. 24, 2019:** Vice President Mike Pence and Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso [meet](#) on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly Meeting in New York.

**Sept. 25, 2019:** Trump and Abe [hold](#) a US–Japan Summit Meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York. [Remarks](#). During their summit meeting, they [sign](#) the US–Japan Trade Agreement and the US–Japan Digital Trade Agreement.

**Sept. 26, 2019:** Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Motegi [meet](#) on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly Meeting in New York.

**Sept. 26, 2019:** Motegi, Pompeo, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Marise Payne, and Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar [hold](#) a quadrilateral Japan–US–Australia–Indian ministerial meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly Meeting in New York. [Readout](#).

**Oct. 7, 2019:** US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Ambassador of Japan to the United States Shinsuke Sugiyama [sign](#) the US–Japan Trade Agreement and US–Japan Digital Trade Agreement in Washington, DC.

**Oct. 8, 2019:** Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun [meets](#) with Japanese Director General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Shigeki Takizaki and Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Lee Do-hoon in Washington to discuss North Korea.

**Oct. 10–11, 2019:** The 10th meeting of the US–Japan Policy Cooperation Dialogue on the Internet Economy takes place in Tokyo, Japan.

**Oct. 11, 2019:** The 7th US–Japan Cyber Dialogue [takes place](#) in Tokyo.

**Oct. 12–13, 2019:** Typhoon Hagibis [makes](#) landfall in Japan.

**Oct. 22, 2019:** Pompeo and Motegi [speak](#) by telephone to discuss coordination on Iran.

**Oct. 23, 2019:** Abe [meets](#) with US Secretary of Transportation Elaine Chao in Tokyo.

**Oct. 25, 2019:** Japan's Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry Isshu Sugawara [resigns](#) over allegations that he violated election campaign law.

**Oct. 25-27, 2019:** US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell [visits](#) Japan to attend the Mt. Fuji Dialogue and meet with senior officials.

**Oct. 28, 2019:** Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi [announces](#) the next stages in the impeachment inquiry, which will be led by House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff.

**Oct. 28, 2019:** Japan's Ministry of Defense [calls up](#) Self-Defense Forces (SDF) reserves to aid with Typhoon Hagibis disaster relief, marking the first time SDF reserves have been mobilized since the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

**Oct. 31, 2019:** Justice Minister Katsuyuki Kawai [resigns](#) over allegations that his wife violated election campaign laws.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** Senior officials from the United States, Japan, Australia, and India [meet](#) for quadrilateral consultations on advancing a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific on the sidelines of the Indo-Pacific Business Forum in Bangkok, Thailand.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** The United States, Japan, and Australia [announce](#) the Blue Dot Network, an infrastructure development plan led by the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) in cooperation with the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** The United States and Japan release a [joint statement](#) on Furthering the Development of Smart Cities in the Indo-Pacific on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit in Bangkok.

**Nov. 7-8, 2019:** Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Keith Krach [meets](#) with National Security Adviser Shigeru Kitamura and other senior officials in Tokyo.

**Nov. 8, 2019:** Abe [answers questions](#) in the Diet from opposition parties regarding accusations that he used taxpayer-funded cherry blossom viewing parties to reward political supporters.

**Nov. 13, 2019:** Public impeachment hearings for Trump [begin](#) in the Intelligence Committee.

**Nov. 13, 2019:** Abe [cancels](#) cherry blossom viewing party in 2020.

**Nov. 15, 2019:** Senior officials from the United States and Japan [hold](#) a bilateral policy planning conference in Washington, DC.

**Nov. 19, 2019:** Japan's Lower House [approves](#) US-Japan trade deal.

**Nov. 19-25, 2019:** Stilwell [travels](#) to Tokyo and Nagoya for bilateral meetings and to attend the Nagoya G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

**Nov. 20, 2019:** Abe [admits](#) involvement in the guest selection process for the 2019 cherry blossom viewing party.

**Nov. 20, 2019:** Abe's administration [reveals](#) that the guest list for the 2019 cherry blossom viewing party was shredded on May 9, the same day that the document was requested by an opposition lawmaker.

**Nov. 21-24, 2019:** US Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan [travels](#) to Nagoya, Japan to lead the US delegation to the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

**Nov. 22-23, 2019:** The G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting [takes place](#) in Nagoya.

**Nov. 23, 2019:** Sullivan [meets](#) with Motegi on the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Nagoya, Japan.

**Nov. 29, 2019:** Former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone passes away.

**Dec. 4, 2019:** Japan's Upper House [approves](#) US-Japan trade deal, paving the way for its entry into force in 2020.

**Dec. 4, 2019:** The House Judiciary Committee [begins](#) the next phase of the impeachment hearings for Trump.

**Dec. 5, 2019:** Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi [announces](#) that the House Judiciary Committee will draw up articles of impeachment against Trump.

**Dec. 9–11, 2019:** Senior officials from the United States and Japan [hold](#) a meeting of the Extended Deterrence Dialogue in Tokyo.

**Dec. 11, 2019:** Newspaper reports suggest that the Japanese government is [considering](#) a new location for the US-developed Aegis Ashore missile defense system, which was originally set to be deployed in Akita's Araya district.

**Dec. 13, 2019:** The House Judiciary Committee [approves](#) two articles of impeachment against Trump.

**Dec. 15–19, 2019:** Biegun [travels](#) to Seoul and Tokyo for meetings on North Korea.

**Dec. 18, 2019:** Trump is [impeached](#) by the House of Representatives for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress.

**Dec. 19, 2019:** The United States and Japan release a [joint statement](#) on cooperation to advance innovations in quantum information science and technology.

**Dec. 26, 2019:** Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako [visit](#) Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures to meet with victims of Typhoon Hagibis.

**Dec. 27, 2019:** Abe's cabinet [announces](#) plan to deploy Maritime Self-Defense Forces (MSDF) on an intelligence-gathering mission in the sea off Yemen and Oman in early February.

**Dec. 29, 2019:** Abe [names](#) Policy Research Council Chairman Fumio Kishida, Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga, and Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare Katsunobu Kato as his possible successors on Nikkei Sunday Salon television program.



# COMPARATIVE

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## CONNECTIONS

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

### US-CHINA RELATIONS

## “PHASE ONE” TRADE DEAL REACHED, BUT UNLIKELY TO DEFUSE TENSIONS

BONNIE S. GLASER, CSIS  
KELLY FLAHERTY, CSIS

The US and China reached a “phase one” trade deal that includes low-hanging fruit and postpones contentious issues. Sources of friction in the bilateral relationship included President Donald Trump’s signing into law the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, US Navy operations enforcing freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, US support for Taiwan, and China’s arbitrary detention of Xinjiang Uighurs in internment camps. A tweet by the NBA’s Houston Rockets general manager supporting protesters in Hong Kong triggered an unexpected controversy. Top US and Chinese defense leaders met on the margins of the ASEAN Defense Minister’s Meeting-Plus in Bangkok and a joint humanitarian rescue and disaster relief exercise took place in Hawaii. The US continued to take measures to crack down on Chinese espionage.

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## “Phase one” comes to fruition

The US and China reached a “phase one” trade deal in October after several rounds of talks. While both sides came to an agreement on the low-hanging fruit, the most contentious issues in the trade relationship were tabled for future negotiations, including Chinese government subsidies to Chinese businesses.

September began with lingering uncertainty around the status of the talks, following back-and-forth retaliatory tariffs and [heated](#) accusations from both sides in late August. However, a Sept. 5 [phone call](#) between US Trade Representative (USTR) Robert Lighthizer, US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, and Chinese Vice Premier Liu He smoothed things over and put the 13<sup>th</sup> round of negotiations back on track for early October in Washington. Less than one week later, President Trump [announced](#) on Twitter that the tariff increase of 5% on \$250 billion of Chinese goods, originally scheduled for Oct. 1, would be delayed until Oct. 15 “as a gesture of good will” in light of the PRC’s 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary on the original date. China reciprocated this conciliatory measure with one of its own on Sept. 11, [rolling out](#) an exemption list of US goods that would not face additional Section 301 retaliatory tariffs. The following day, while taking questions from reporters on the South Lawn, Trump [voiced](#) his preference for finalizing one comprehensive trade deal versus a piecemeal approach. “Look, if we’re going to do the deal, let’s get it done,” he said.

On Sept. 19 and 20, a large Chinese delegation led by Chinese Vice Minister of Finance Liao Min [came](#) to DC to participate in deputy-level consultations ahead of the principal-level talks scheduled for October. Afterward, the office of the USTR briefly characterized the meetings as “productive,” though the real interest was in what did not happen: a [reportedly](#) scheduled trip to the Midwest to meet with US farmers. Sources later [clarified](#) that the US side requested the farm visits to be cancelled for “domestic reasons,” and the USTR’s office was not even aware of the planned visits until after they were confirmed. While the timing created speculation that the trade discussions had soured, that narrative was seemingly dispelled three days later, when Chinese importers [bought](#) approximately 600,000 metric tons of US soybeans. Trump later [lauded](#) China’s recent “big purchases of ag” for making US farmers

and ranchers “very happy.” At the United Nations General Assembly in New York on Sept. 27, Chinese State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi [underscored](#) China’s commitment to “resolve [trade frictions and differences] in a calm, rational and cooperative manner, and...demonstrate utmost patience and goodwill.”

Concurrently, there were [whispers](#) that the Trump administration was considering delisting Chinese companies from US stock exchanges. Though these conversations were reportedly in the early stages, the stock market still took a hit from the perceived negative consequences that could arise. The next day, a spokesperson for the US Department of Treasury [refuted](#) the reports, asserting that “the administration is not contemplating blocking Chinese companies from listing shares on the US stock exchanges at this time.” Director of the White House Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy Peter Navarro subsequently [slammed](#) the reports as “fake news” and “full of inaccuracies.”

In a simultaneously antagonistic and friendly tweet on Sept. 30, Trump [warned](#) that China “should not have broken the deal we had with them” while wishing the country a happy birthday in advance of the PRC’s 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary on Oct. 1. By early October, US-China trade took a backseat to other, more explosive controversies in the bilateral relationship, including the NBA drama and Xinjiang. However, the focus was back on trade negotiations on Oct. 10, which marked the start of round 13 in Washington, DC. Though Trump initially [played coy](#) on Twitter as the talks began (“They want to make a deal, but do I?”), his attitude brightened 24 hours later when he [tweeted](#), “Good things are happening at China Trade Talk Meeting. Warmer feelings than in recent past...I will be meeting with the Vice Premier today. All would like to see something significant happen!”

At the conclusion of the highly anticipated meeting, Trump [announced](#) to reporters in the Oval Office that both sides had “come to a very substantial phase one deal...subject to getting it written,” with a vague estimate that “it’ll take probably three weeks, four weeks, or five weeks” to finalize the agreement. Liu He’s comments, while in translation, were markedly less committal, characterizing the outcomes as “very good communication” and “substantial



progress in many fields.” The Chinese Ministry of Commerce [echoed](#) this guarded tone, foregoing Trump’s “phase one trade deal” vocabulary and instead commenting on the “substantive progress on agriculture, intellectual property, exchange rate and financial services, expanding trade cooperation, technology transfer and disputes settlement” and agreement to “make joint efforts to achieve the final agreement.”



Figure 1 Liu He and Robert Lighthizer before a meeting at the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative in Washington, D.C. Photo: Bloomberg

Meanwhile, Trump’s bombastic tweets [continued](#) to celebrate what he declared to be “by far, the greatest and biggest deal ever made for our Great Patriot Farmers in the history of our Country.” He also [noted](#) that the 5% tariff hike scheduled for Oct. 15 would be postponed and negotiations for “phase two” of the deal would start immediately after phase one, which he said “can be finalized & signed soon!” Trump ended his Oct. 13 Twitter updates with a flourish, enthusiastically [exclaiming](#) that “CHINA HAS ALREADY BEGUN AGRICULTURAL PURCHASES FROM OUR GREAT PATRIOTS FARMERS & RANCHERS!”

The next day in an interview with CNBC, Mnuchin [reaffirmed](#) that a “fundamental agreement” had been reached and, though he emphasized the need to work out the wording and specifics, dismissed any notion that an “actual deal” was not imminent. While Trump emphasized the agricultural purchases in the phase one deal, Navarro played up the agreement over intellectual property. In an Oct. 24 interview with Fox Business Network, he [claimed](#) that the deal “adopted virtually the entire chapter in the deal last May that [China] reneged on for IP,” referencing the 150-page draft from May that the Chinese backed out of. In this phase one deal, Navarro explained that Beijing agreed that “if they steal our IP we’ll be

able to take retaliatory action without them retaliating.”

On Oct. 25, Lighthizer, Mnuchin, and Liu He [took part](#) in a phone call to continue finalizing the trade agreement. The USTR read-out of the conversation was light on specifics, simply [stating](#) that both sides “are close to finalizing some sections of the agreement” and a principal-level call would occur “in the near future.” Trump echoed this hazy timeline in a press conference on Oct. 28, [maintaining](#) that a finalized agreement was “a little bit ahead of schedule, maybe a lot ahead of schedule” and that “probably, we’ll sign it” at the upcoming Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Chile, which both Trump and Xi were slated to attend in mid-November. However, the summit was abruptly [cancelled](#) by the Chilean government due to widespread protests. Trump [offered](#) reassurance on Twitter that “China and the USA are working on selecting a new site for the signing of Phase One of Trade Agreement.” The Chinese Ministry of Commerce spokesperson [issued](#) a statement on November 1 confirming that both sides had continued progress and consultations, though it still stopped short of calling it a deal. Several days later, spokesperson Gao Feng [revealed](#) that an “important precondition for the agreement” is the “simultaneous and proportionate removal of existing additional tariffs.”

In a move sure to please American farmers, China [announced](#) on Nov. 14 that it would lift a ban on poultry imports from the US, which had been in place since January 2015 because of an avian influenza outbreak. Lighthizer and US Department of Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue hailed the move as “great news for both America’s farmers and China’s consumers” that would see over \$1 billion of poultry exports to China annually. More phone calls between Liu, Lighthizer, and Mnuchin [occurred](#) on Nov. 17 and Nov. 25 to further [solidify](#) the phase one deal.

On Dec. 13, after weeks of phone calls, tweets, meetings, and statements, USTR [announced](#) that the US and China finally reached an official “Phase One trade deal.” The deal was [said](#) to include enforceable and structural changes to China’s economic system, with specific chapters on intellectual property, technology transfer, agriculture, financial services, currency, expanding trade, and dispute resolution. To appease US demands, China agreed to make

“substantial additional purchases of US goods and services in the coming years.” In Xinhua’s reporting, emphasis was [placed](#) on the US’ agreement “to phase out its additional tariffs on Chinese projects.” Trump predictably took to Twitter to share the news, [confirming](#) that the Dec. 15 tariffs would not be rolled out, and phase two negotiations would begin right away.

Trump and Xi spoke the following week by phone. While Trump [portrayed](#) the primary goal of the call as discussing “our giant Trade Deal,” Xinhua [reported](#) that Xi expressed concerns over “negative words and deeds” by the US regarding China’s internal affairs. Nevertheless, Trump closed out the year with a tweet on Dec. 31 [confirming](#) that the phase one deal would be officially signed in Washington on Jan. 15. All in all, the months of negotiations finally seemed to have amounted to a tangible result; it fell short of the comprehensive, all-encompassing deal that both sides once aspired to, but it was something.

### **WTO Battles Rage On**

Outside the trade war, US-China economic sparring continued to unfold in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in September. China [lodged](#) a complaint against the US over its tariffs levied on Chinese goods, marking the third WTO complaint from China against the Trump administration’s tariffs.

In his Oct. 30 speech at the Hudson Institute, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [lamented](#) previous US support for China’s admission to the WTO, accusing China of failing to follow through on its commitments to the organization. The very next day, the WTO [handed](#) down a ruling six years in the making, allowing China to impose tariffs on \$3.6 billion of US goods. The US previously imposed anti-dumping penalties on certain Chinese goods, some of which were judged to be outside WTO-approved practices.

### **Chinese Tech as a National Security Threat**

In early November, sources [reported](#) that the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), which is [designed](#) to review foreign investment in the US that might have national security implications, launched an investigation into Beijing ByteDance Technology Co.’s 2017 acquisition of US app Musical.ly. In this \$1 billion acquisition,

ByteDance secured ownership of TikTok, an extremely popular social media app primarily marketed to US teens. The investigation came at the request of members of the US Congress, who voiced concerns over how TikTok stores user data and Chinese censorship of content. A hearing at the US Senate Judiciary Committee soon [followed](#), focused on “How Corporations and Big Tech Leave Our Data Exposed to Criminals, China, and Other Bad Actors.” ByteDance was quick to [respond](#) by offering reassurance that TikTok stored data solely in the US and operated independently of its Chinese parent company. The US military, however, was not reassured. [Calling](#) the app “a cyber threat,” the US Army banned it in late December from government phones owned by soldiers.

The US Department of Commerce [announced](#) on Nov. 18 that it would extend the Temporary General License allowing US firms to conduct certain business with Huawei Technologies, China’s controversial telecommunications company on the US Entity List because of its potential threat to US national security. US legislators were quick to [criticize](#) the move in a letter to Trump signed by 15 US senators, which said the extension posed “a serious threat to US telecommunications infrastructure and national security more broadly.” Though the Commerce Department seemed to take a soft approach to Huawei, reports [surfaced](#) in early December that the US International Development Finance Corporation planned to pour money into a concerted effort to steer other countries and companies away from using Chinese telecommunications equipment, specifically Huawei and ZTE. Though at one point Huawei seemed like it might be used as a bargaining chip in a trade war deal, that idea was dropped from the rhetoric over the past few months.

### **A Crackdown on Chinese Espionage**

In an interview in late September, US Deputy Assistant Attorney General Adam Hickey [warned](#) US companies to be vigilant against economic espionage, noting an increase in cases traced back to China. The US Department of Justice subsequently reported two instances of trade secrets theft. In the first, a Chinese national [pleaded](#) guilty to charges of theft, unauthorized transmission, and unauthorized possession of a trade secret obtained from his employer, a US oil company. The second case was the arrest of a former Monsanto employee,

[indicted](#) on multiple counts of economic espionage and theft of trade secrets. Both instances offered fuel to the Trump administration's criticisms of Chinese intellectual property theft, which subsequently became a central tenet of the phase one trade deal.

In December, sources [revealed](#) a September incident, kept quiet by both the US and China, that ended with the expulsion of two Chinese diplomats on the grounds of suspected espionage. This marked the first time in over 30 years that Washington expelled Chinese officials from the US. The diplomats, Chinese Embassy officials, allegedly drove onto a sensitive military base in Norfolk and disobeyed an order to turn around. While they claimed to have misunderstood instructions by the security guard, US officials saw the incident as a test of the security measures around the base to potentially organize further intelligence gathering had security been lax. Though the Chinese Embassy voiced private complaints about the incident to the Department of State, there were no apparent retaliatory measures against US diplomats in China.

### **South China Sea FONOPs**

In the closing four months of 2019, the US Navy conducted three freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea. On Sept. 13, the *USS Wayne E. Meyer*, an *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer, [sailed](#) near Chinese-occupied islands in the Paracels. The operation took place only two weeks after the same vessel sailed within 12 nautical miles of Fiery Cross Reef and Mischief Reef in the Spratlys. A spokeswoman for the Navy's 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet said the FONOP demonstrated that the waters inside China's illegally drawn baselines around the entire Paracel Islands group cannot be claimed as internal waters or territorial seas under international law and challenged Beijing's requirement that foreign military vessels must obtain permission or provide notification to sail through the waters.

In a message that was undoubtedly not missed by the Chinese, in the intervening weeks between the two FONOPs the *Wayne E. Meyer* participated in the first-ever joint naval exercises between the US and the nations of ASEAN. The exercise was hosted by Thailand and took place in the Gulf of Thailand, on the

western side of the Indochinese peninsula from the South China Sea.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy deployed ships to monitor the US operation and, according to a statement issued by the Chinese Defense Ministry, the ships [demanded](#) that the US Navy vessels leave the area because they were "trespassing in China's territorial waters...without permission from the Chinese government." In a separate statement, China's PLA Southern Theater Command reaffirmed China's "irrefutable" sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and their nearby waters and accused the US of threatening China's sovereignty under the name of freedom of navigation.

In what may be an unprecedented action, the US Navy [conducted](#) back-to-back FONOPs in November. On Nov. 20, the littoral combat ship *USS Gabrielle Giffords* sailed within 12 nautical miles of Mischief Reef, a low-tide elevation that China transformed into a larger feature with military installations. The following day, the *USS Wayne E. Meyer* conducted another challenge of Chinese restrictions on innocent passage in the Paracel Islands. The two FONOPs took place just days after US Defense Secretary Mark Esper met with Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe in Bangkok. China's Southern Theater Command spokesman [urged](#) the US "to stop such provocative acts immediately so as to avoid unexpected incidents." A statement by US 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet spokesperson reiterated that the US will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows.

### **US Steps Up Support for Taiwan**

Continuing a practice that has been ongoing for more than a decade, US Navy vessels sailed through the Taiwan Strait in September and December. In keeping with the pattern of prior such transits under the Trump administration, both operations were made public. On Sept. 20, the same day Taipei announced that it was severing its diplomatic relations with the Pacific Island nation of Kiribati—because it had established diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China—the *USS Antietam*, a US Navy guided-missile cruiser, [sailed](#) through the Taiwan Strait.

On Nov. 12, the guided-missile cruiser *USS Chancellorsville* [conducted](#) another Taiwan Strait transit. The two Taiwan Strait passages marked

the eighth and ninth sails by US Navy vessels through the Taiwan Strait this year. In every instance, China lodged protests with the US.

China's first domestically built aircraft carrier *Shandong*, along with escort ships [entered](#) the Taiwan Strait from the south, sailing northward, on Dec. 26. According to Taiwan's Ministry of Defense records, this was the [sixth](#) time a Chinese aircraft carrier has transited through the Taiwan Strait since 2017. The last passage took place in mid-November, one day before Esper and Wei met in Bangkok on the sidelines of a multilateral meeting of regional defense chiefs. A US State Department official told the media on background that the US urged China "to abstain from coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people of Taiwan."



Figure 2 The *Shandong* is China's first domestically-built aircraft carrier. Photo: Xinhua

On Oct. 29, the US Senate unanimously [passed](#) the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act, which calls for stronger engagement with countries that strengthen ties with Taiwan and punitive actions against countries that reduce their economic, security, and diplomatic engagements with Taiwan. At the end of the year, Trump signed the US National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for fiscal year 2020, which contained several Taiwan-related provisions. The new law requires the Director of National Intelligence to provide a report to Congress on Chinese influence operations in the runup to Taiwan's January 2020 elections, as well as US efforts to prevent such interference. The NDAA also mandates that the DoD provide a report on US-Taiwan engagement in cybersecurity and assess the feasibility of establishing a bilateral "high-level, interagency" working group.

A spokesperson for the Foreign Affairs Committee of China's National People's Congress [voiced](#) "strong dissatisfaction" with several provisions of the NDAA, including those pertaining to Taiwan. He maintained that the Taiwan portion of the law undermined peace and stability across the Strait.

As Taiwan's presidential and legislative elections neared, Chinese experts appeared to be losing confidence in the prospects for peaceful unification of Taiwan and mainland China. In a speech delivered at the Chinese Cultural Forum at Beijing University in mid-November, former Taiwan Affairs Office Deputy Director Wang Zaixi outlined four big challenges facing cross-Strait relations. Two of the four challenges pertained to the DPP and one of the challenges involved US policy. The remaining challenge Wang identified was that "Taiwan's public sentiment, especially the younger generation is still developing in a direction that is not conducive to reunification." In the conclusion of his article, Wang warned that the resolution of the Taiwan issue has been postponed for 70 years, and "time is running out."

### US-China Mil-Mil Ties

Despite ongoing tensions in US-China relations, some bilateral military exchanges continued. For 10 days in November, the PLA's Eastern Theater Command and the US Army Pacific (USARPAC) participated in a joint humanitarian rescue and disaster relief [exercise](#) in Hawaii. Over 200 officers and soldiers from both sides participated in the drill, intended to provide an opportunity for the two militaries to share experiences in humanitarian rescue and disaster relief. This event marked the 15<sup>th</sup> iteration of the annual exercise, which rotates annually between China and the United States.

The refocusing of the DoD on risk reduction and prevention and crisis communication under Trump is a central reason for the reduction in US-China military exchanges in the past few years. Occasional phone calls and meetings between defense leaders are among the exchanges remaining on the agenda. In early November, Esper took part in a video call with Wei. The DoD [readout](#) of the call said that the two discussed priorities for the US-China defense relationship "with emphasis on stability, frank and open communication, and enhancing cooperation on areas of common interest." Esper underscored the need to build a

“results-oriented relationship to prevent and manage crises, reduce risk of misunderstanding or miscalculation, and enhance overall cooperation.” According to China’s [readout](#), Wei presented China’s positions on the South China Sea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang, and said that “win-win cooperation is the only correct choice for China and the US.”

The following week, Esper and Wei met for the first time on the margins of the ASEAN Defense Minister’s Meeting-Plus in Bangkok, Thailand. Wei had briefly met Esper’s predecessor, Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan, five months earlier at the Shangri-La Dialogue where the acting Pentagon chief gave him a “gift”—a 32-page book of photos and satellite images of North Korean ships illegally receiving and delivering shipments of oil and coal. At the meeting in Bangkok, Esper and Wei [reached](#) “a consensus to deepen mutual trust so as to make bilateral military relations a stabilizer for the China-US relationship,” according to Xinhua. Wei reportedly asked the US side to handle the Taiwan issue with caution and stop flexing muscles in the South China Sea. Esper reportedly [used](#) the meeting to emphasize his priority of crisis prevention and management.

In early December, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley spoke with the PLA Chief of the Joint Staff Department Gen. Li Zuocheng by phone. The call took place one day after China announced that it was suspending US military ship and aircraft visits to Hong Kong in retaliation for the signing into law of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act. The US [statement](#) released after the phone call said that the two military leaders “both agreed on the value of a productive dialogue, effectively managing differences, and cooperation on areas of common ground.”

When Milley [spoke](#) to reporters in Tokyo after his November meetings with Japanese counterparts, he called China a strategic competitor and charged that China and Russia are trying to alter the rules-based international order. At the same time, he insisted that China doesn’t have to become an enemy and engagement with China is necessary. The following month, Esper offered similar assessments of China in a [speech](#) at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. He maintained that China is the top priority at the Pentagon, with Russia now the number two concern. “There’s no need for them to be an

enemy,” Esper said, adding “I think the more we can build bridges to China, whether it’s economically, diplomatically,” or military to military, the better.

### **Hong Kong Bill Becomes Law**

Protests in Hong Kong that began in June against an extradition bill continued throughout the second half of 2019, with clashes between police and activists becoming increasingly violent. In Trump’s mind, the significance of the unrest in Hong Kong lay in their potential impact on the trade negotiations. In an [interview](#) with “Fox and Friends” on Nov. 22, Trump said that he had told Xi not to send soldiers into Hong Kong because it would “make a tremendous negative impact on the trade deal.” Trump claimed that if he hadn’t issued the warning to Xi, “Hong Kong would’ve been obliterated in 14 minutes.”

A week earlier, [speaking](#) at Rice university, Secretary of State Pompeo said that the US encourages Beijing and the protesters to engage in dialogue and supports protection of “one country, two systems” in Hong Kong. Asked whether Trump might consider using force in Hong Kong, Pompeo refused to rule out such an option, saying “I just never foreclose any possibility for how Trump might think about how we should appropriately respond.”

On Nov. 27, Trump signed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act. In a signing statement, Trump said that he signed the bill “out of respect for President Xi, China and the people of Hong Kong. They are being enacted in the hope that Leaders and Representatives of China and Hong Kong will be able to amicably settle their differences leading to long term peace and prosperity for all.” In addition, he reserved the right to implement the bill as he sees fit, claiming that some aspects of the bill would “interfere” with his “constitutional authority” over foreign policy.

Beijing condemned the legislation as illegal interference in its domestic affairs. In retaliation, China suspended visits to Hong by US warships and aircraft, and said it would impose sanctions on five US-based nongovernmental organizations that allegedly “encouraged” the protesters “to engage in extreme violent criminal acts.”

## NBA Controversy

An unexpected clash was triggered on Oct. 4 when Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey tweeted his support for Hong Kong. The tweet was later deleted, but its removal did not assuage China's rage. In a statement released two days later, the Chinese Consulate in Houston said it was "deeply shocked by the erroneous comments on Hong Kong" by Morey, noting that it had lodged representations and urged the Houston Rockets to "correct the error and take immediate concrete measures to eliminate the adverse impact."



Figure 3 At an NBA pre-season game in Shanghai, a fan covers the NBA logo with the Chinese flag. Photo: WSJ

NBA Commissioner Adam Silver revealed that the Chinese government was asking the league to fire Morey, adding that there was no possibility that the NBA would do so and that it would not even discipline him. In one [interview](#), Silver said "I think as a values-based organization that I want to make it clear ... that Daryl Morey is supported in terms of his ability to exercise his freedom of expression."

The episode prompted 12 of the NBA's 25 sponsors in China to announce they were halting cooperation with the league and several sportswear companies suspended contracts with the NBA. Chinese state television suspended broadcast of the NBA's preseason games in China. Tencent, which owns the digital streaming rights for NBA in China, also announced that it would "temporarily suspend" the preseason broadcast arrangements. A few weeks later, live broadcasts of NBA preseason games resumed, but no matches with the Houston Rockets were aired. When the Rockets played their opening game of the season, Chinese viewers were shown a day-old event from the Military World Games that pitted the

PLA against soldiers from Brazil. According to media reports, tens of millions of Chinese basketball fans watched the opening Rockets game on websites that live-streamed the event using satellite broadcasts.

In a blistering [speech](#) on China hosted by the Woodrow Wilson Center in late October, Vice President Mike Pence lashed out at the NBA and Nike Inc., accusing both of prioritizing business interests over American values. He accused the basketball league of "siding with the Chinese Communist Party and silencing free speech" and acting "like a wholly owned subsidiary of the authoritarian regime" in China.

## Mutually Recriminatory Rhetoric

Senior US and Chinese officials exchanged barbs in the closing months of 2019. In back-to-back speeches on China in October, Pence and Pompeo distinguished between the people of China, with whom the US maintains a valued friendship, and the CCP, that is the root cause of bilateral friction. Acknowledging that the US had been slow to see the risk that divergent systems and ideologies pose to American national security, Pompeo [asserted](#) Washington now recognizes these challenges and is confronting them head-on: "Today, we're finally realizing the degree to which the CCP is hostile to the United States and our values." Pompeo charged that the CCP is "focused on struggle and international domination."

Pence [excoriated](#) numerous Chinese policies, including repressive practices against minorities, theft of intellectual property (IP), strong-armed tactics against foreign fishermen, militarization of the South China Sea, and use of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to gain a military foothold in ports around the world. Nevertheless, Pence insisted that Washington would seek a better relationship with Beijing and highlighted North Korea, arms control, and the enforcement of sanctions in the Persian Gulf as potential areas of cooperation. Beijing launched a campaign to counter US criticisms of Chinese policies. Speaking to an annual [symposium](#) in Beijing in mid-December, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi blasted the US for its "paranoid" behavior. Implicitly contrasting US and Chinese policies, he attributed extant global challenges to "conflicts between multilateralism and unilateralism, integration and isolation, and power politics and bullying."

In an end-of-the-year [interview](#) with CCTV, Wang criticized US policy on several fronts. He denounced interference by the US and other Western countries in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Xinjiang, insisting that their efforts were “doomed to fail.” Speaking about the bilateral relationship, Wang lamented that the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the US and China had been tarnished by US restrictive policies toward China on trade, science, and technology, as well as US challenges to China’s sovereignty.

A phone call between Xi and Trump in December after the trade deal was announced indicated increased friction was also evident at the highest level. According to Xinhua, Xi voiced concern about “the negative words and deeds” of the US on matters related to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet. “These actions have interfered in China’s internal affairs, harmed China’s interests and undermined mutual trust and cooperation between the two sides,” Xi reportedly said to Trump. He also reminded Trump of “the important consensus” that the two had reached in their last meeting in Osaka and asked that the US “pay close attention to and attach importance to China’s concerns, and prevent the interference of bilateral relations and the important agenda.” Following the call, Trump tweeted that he “Had a very good talk with President Xi of China,” adding that Beijing had already started large-scale purchases of US products.

## Xinjiang

Ahead of a meeting with the foreign ministers of the Central Asian states on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in mid-September, Secretary of State Pompeo publicly [called](#) on all countries to resist Beijing’s demands to repatriate ethnic Uighurs. Rejecting China’s claim that its campaign in Xinjiang is to combat terrorism, he charged that China seeks to “erase its own citizens.”

As evidence mounted that up to 2 million Uighurs were being detained against their will in Xinjiang amid a campaign to repress the practice of Islam, Pompeo [announced](#) Oct. 8 that the US was imposing visa restrictions on Chinese officials involved the repression and human rights abuses. Pompeo’s statement called on the PRC to “immediately end its campaign of repression in Xinjiang, release all those arbitrarily detained, and cease efforts to

coerce members of Chinese Muslim minority groups residing abroad to return to China to face an uncertain fate.” The US did not provide details about how many or which officials would be implicated.

The Commerce Department also blacklisted 28 Chinese companies, government offices, and security bureaus over their alleged role in enabling human rights abuses in the Xinjiang region. The Chinese embassy criticized both actions as interference in China’s internal affairs and serious violations of the basic norms governing international relations. A few days later, [speaking](#) at an American Association of Christian Counselors event in Nashville, Tennessee, Pompeo likened the Chinese crackdown in Xinjiang to George Orwell’s 1984.

Major leaks regarding the decision making surrounding the establishment of the Xinjiang camps and the implementation of the campaign against the Uighurs bolstered the US case. On Nov. 16, *The New York Times* published an [article](#) based on 403 pages of internal documents shared by an anonymous CCP official, which it claimed “confirm the coercive nature of the crackdown in the words and orders of the very officials who conceived and orchestrated it.” A week later, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists [reported](#) that it had obtained the operations manual for running the mass detention camps in Xinjiang, revealing guidelines for operating the camps and the role of massive data collection and analysis in the campaign against Uighurs.

In mid-December Mesut Özil, a midfielder for the Arsenal Football Club who is a German Muslim of Turkish origin, criticized China’s treatment of ethnic Uighur Muslims, prompting Chinese broadcaster CCTV to censor Arsenal’s Premier League game. The action led Pompeo to voice his support for Özil. “China’s Communist Party propaganda outlets can censor Mesut Özil and Arsenal’s game all season long, but the truth will prevail,” Pompeo tweeted. “The CCP can’t hide its gross human rights violations perpetrated against Uighurs and other religious faiths from the world.”

Just a few days before 2019 came to a close, Pompeo condemned China’s violations of religious freedom again. He tweeted: “From [#Tibet](#) to [#Xinjiang](#), the Chinese Communist Party’s repressive campaigns are not about combating terrorism. The [#CCP](#) is attempting to

erase its own citizens' faiths and cultures. All societies must respect and protect religious freedom."

### **Summing Up the Year and Looking to 2020**

Developments in US-China relations in 2019 confirmed that the downturn in bilateral ties is unlike prior dips triggered by specific events, such as the 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen Square, the 1999 US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and the 2001 aircraft collision near Hainan. Current tensions in US-China relations are the result of structural shifts, including a narrowing in the gap between US and Chinese power. They are also a consequence of policies adopted by both sides that have intensified strategic competition. The "phase one" trade deal, if it holds, will at best provide a temporary respite. It will not be enough to defuse friction in the relationship because the agreement doesn't begin to address the underlying causes.

With 2020 being a presidential election year in the US, there is likely to be much discussion about China, with the Democratic candidates all condemning Chinese economic and foreign policies that damage US interests. Successful negotiation of a "phase two" trade deal would help tamp down friction, but prospects for reaching such an agreement are slim. Discord will continue across an array of issues, including defense matters such as space and cyber, the South China Sea, development financing and China's BRI, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet. Competition may increase in the ideological sphere and the contest may intensify over whether capitalist or socialist systems are superior in delivering governance to their people. US observers will be on guard against Chinese interference in the US election next November.



# CHRONOLOGY OF US-CHINA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

**Sept. 2, 2019:** China [files](#) a WTO complaint against the US for imposing 15% tariffs on Chinese goods, marking the third lawsuit China has brought to the WTO regarding Trump's China-specific tariffs.

**Sept. 2, 2019:** China's top legislator Li Zhanshu [meets](#) a US congressional delegation in Beijing led by US Senators Steve Daines and David Perdue.

**Sept. 3, 2019:** President Donald Trump [tweets](#): "We are doing very well in our negotiations with China. While I am sure they would love to be dealing with a new administration so they could continue their practice of "ripoff USA"(\$600 B/year),16 months PLUS is a long time to be hemorrhaging jobs and companies on a long-shot...."

**Sept. 3, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#): "...And then, think what happens to China when I win. Deal would get MUCH TOUGHER! In the meantime, China's Supply Chain will crumble and businesses, jobs and money will be gone!"

**Sept. 4, 2019:** Trump unleashes a [tweet storm](#) about climate change: "Which country has the largest carbon emission reduction? AMERICA! Who has dumped the most carbon into the air? CHINA!"

**Sept. 5, 2019:** China and the US [agree](#) to hold the 13<sup>th</sup> round of trade talks in early October during phone [consultations](#) in mid-September between China's Vice Premier Liu He, US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, and US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin.

**Sept. 6, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#) "'China is eating the Tariffs.' Billions pouring into USA. Targeted Patriot Farmers getting massive Dollars from the incoming Tariffs! Good Jobs Numbers, No Inflation(Fed). China having worst year in decades. Talks happening, good for all!"

**Sept. 11, 2019:** Trump [announces](#) delay of increased tariffs in a tweet: "At the request of the Vice Premier of China, Liu He, and due to the fact that the People's Republic of China will be celebrating their 70th Anniversary on Oct. 1st, we have agreed, as a gesture of good will, to move the increased Tariffs on 250 Billion Dollars worth of goods (25% to 30%), from Oct. 1st to Oct. 15th."

**Sept. 11, 2019:** China's Tariff Commission of the State Council [releases](#) two lists [exempting](#) US goods, including pork and soybean, from additional tariffs on \$75 billion worth of US goods.

**Sept. 12, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#): "It is expected that China will be buying large amounts of our agricultural products!"

**Sept. 12, 2019:** Trump [says](#) he would consider an interim trade deal with China.

**Sept. 13, 2019:** *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer USS *Wayne E. Meyer* [conducts](#) a FONOP, sailing near Chinese-held islands in the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea.

**Sept. 16, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#): "Producer prices in China shrank most in 3 years due to China's big devaluation of their currency, coupled with monetary stimulus. Federal Reserve not watching? Will Fed ever get into the game? Dollar strongest EVER! Really bad for exports. No Inflation...Highest Interest Rates..."

**Sept. 17, 2019:** Chinese Vice Minister for Finance Liao Min [heads](#) to the US for trade negotiations on Sept. 18<sup>th</sup> to set the agenda for the 13<sup>th</sup> round of trade talks in October.

**Sept. 19-20, 2019:** Delegation of 30 Chinese officials, led by Liao, [meet](#) US counterparts at US Trade Representative's office for trade discussions in preparation for 13<sup>th</sup> round of trade talks in October.

**Sept. 20, 2019:** Trump discusses relations with China in a [press conference](#) with Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, saying “Obviously, China is a threat to the world in a sense, because they’re building a military faster than anybody. ... right now I’m thinking about trade. But, you know, trade equals military. Because if we allow China to take \$500 billion out of the hide of the United States, that money goes into military and other things.”

**Sept. 20, 2019:** Chinese trade delegation in the US [cancels](#) visit to farms in Nebraska and Montana, changing their travel schedule, reportedly on advice from the US side to avoid becoming embroiled in US politics.

**Sept. 20, 2019:** On the day Taiwan announced diplomatic relations with the Pacific island nation of Kiribati were ending, a US Navy guided missile cruiser [sails](#) through the Taiwan Strait.

**Sept. 22, 2019:** On the margins of meetings at the UN General Assembly in New York, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [condemns](#) China’s repression of Uighurs and calls on all countries to resist China’s demands to repatriate them to China.

**Sept. 22, 2019:** Jim Carroll, director of National Drug Control Policy, accompanied by Acting Commissioner for US Customs and Border Protection Mark Morgan and Chief Postal Inspector Gary Barksdale travels to Beijing with a delegation “to underscore the importance of keeping fentanyl and other synthetic opioids from coming into the United States.”

**Sept. 23, 2019:** China [buys](#) 10 cargoes of US soybeans after trade talks.

**Sept. 23, 2019:** China’s State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi [says](#) in a speech at the UN Climate Action Summit that “China has no intention to play the ‘game of thrones’ on the world stage.”

**Sept. 24, 2019:** Wang delivers [speech](#) at event hosted by the National Committee on US-China Relations in New York.

**Sept. 24, 2019:** US Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan [hosts](#) event at the UN on the human rights crisis in Xinjiang.

**Sept. 25, 2019:** Trump [addresses](#) UN General Assembly. In his speech, he spends four and a half minutes on China, focusing on “America’s new approach on trade” and the situation in Hong Kong.

**Sept. 25, 2019:** Pompeo [announces](#) new sanctions against Chinese companies that transported Iranian oil.

**Sept. 25, 2019:** At bilateral meeting with Japan’s Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in Osaka, Trump [says](#) “China is going to buy more pork than they’ve ever bought by far.”

**Sept. 25, 2019:** Trump [tells](#) reporters a US-China trade deal agreement “could happen sooner than you think.”

**Sept. 25, 2019:** China’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang [criticizes](#) new US sanctions over China’s Iran oil deals: “We always oppose the so-called long arm jurisdiction and unilateral sanctions. We also oppose the bullying practice of the US”

**Sept. 25, 2019:** House Foreign Affairs and Senate Foreign Relations committees unanimously [approve](#) the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019.

**Sept. 26, 2019:** China’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang [says](#) the Hong Kong bill “confuses black and white in disregard of facts...grossly interferes in China’s internal affairs, which fully reveals the ill intentions of some people in the United States to mess up Hong Kong and contain China’s development.”

**Sept. 26, 2019:** China’s Ministry of Commerce spokesperson Gao Feng, [says](#) “We wish the US and China can meet halfway, and on a foundation of equality and mutual respect, find a win-win solution via negotiations. This will benefit China, the US, and the whole world.”

**Sept. 26, 2019:** On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting, Wang [says](#) “we are willing to buy more products that are needed by the Chinese market.”

**Sept. 27, 2019:** Wang [addresses](#) the US-China trade war at the UN General Assembly: “Regarding economic and trade frictions and differences, China is committed to resolve them in a calm, rational and cooperative manner, and is willing to demonstrate utmost patience and goodwill. Should the other side act in bad faith or show no respect for equal status or rules in negotiations, we will have to make necessary responses to safeguard our legitimate rights and interests, and to uphold international justice.”

**Sept. 27, 2019:** Trump reportedly [considers](#) delisting Chinese companies from the US stock exchange.

**Sept. 29, 2019:** Wang Shouwen, vice-commerce minister and key member of China's trade negotiation team, [holds](#) a press briefing after talks in Washington DC and announces the next trade talks will take place Oct. 10-11: “We hope, in the 13th round of trade negotiations, both countries can meet each other halfway based on equality and mutual respect, and can take care of each other's concerns, to resolve conflict through discussion in a calm and rational manner.”

**Sept. 30, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#) “We are winning, and we will win. They should not have broken the deal we had with them. Happy Birthday China!”

**Sept. 30, 2019:** White House trade adviser Peter Navarro [calls](#) the Trump threat to delist Chinese companies from US stock exchanges “fake news.”

**Sept. 30, 2019:** Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb [concludes](#) a trip to China where he met Chinese government and business leaders in Shanghai. He also traveled to Japan, South Korea, and India.

**Oct. 6, 2019:** Trump [unleashes](#) a tweet storm about the Biden family, saying Hunter Biden “separately got 1.5 Billion Dollars from China despite no experience and for no apparent reason. There is NO WAY these can be legitimate transactions?”

**Oct. 6, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#) “@60Minutes ‘forgot’ to report that we are helping the great farmers of the USA to the tune of 28 Billion Dollars, for the last two years, paid for out of Tariffs paid to the United States by China for targeting the farmer. They devalued their currency, therefore paying the cost!”

**Oct. 6, 2019:** Houston Rockets general manager [tweets](#) about freedom for Hong Kong, igniting controversy with the NBA and China over freedom of speech.

**Oct. 7, 2019:** US Department of Commerce Bureau of Industry and Security [adds](#) 28 Chinese governmental and commercial organizations to the Entity List for entities implicated in human rights violations in China's campaign targeting Uighurs in Xinjiang.

**Oct. 7, 2019:** At the [signing](#) of the US-Japan Trade Agreement and the US-Japan Digital Trade Agreement, Trump says “As to whether or not we make a deal, I don't know. But there's certainly a good possibility. ... We think there's a chance we could do something very substantial. I would much prefer a big deal and I think that's what we're shooting for.”

**Oct. 8, 2019:** The US Department of State [announces](#) visa restrictions on Chinese officials “who are believed to be responsible for, or complicit in, the detention or abuse of Uighurs, Kazakhs, or other members of Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang, China.”

**Oct. 9, 2019:** The Chinese Ministry of Commerce spokesperson [responds](#) to the US Department of Commerce sanctioning of 28 Chinese entities by saying the US “took the opportunity to smear China's policies in governing Xinjiang....We strongly urge the US to stop pointing fingers on Xinjiang-related affairs, halt the wrong practice of interfering China's internal affairs, and remove the Chinese entities from the list as soon as possible.”

**Oct. 9, 2019:** Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross [speaks](#) at American Chamber of Commerce in Sydney, Australia: “We do not love tariffs, in fact we would prefer not to use them, but after years of discussions and no action, tariffs are finally forcing China to pay attention to our concerns.”

**Oct. 9, 2019:** Pompeo [tells](#) PBS NewsHour “It may seem that it makes profits in the short run, but the reputational costs ... will prove to be higher and higher as Beijing’s long arm reaches out to them and destroys their capacity for them, their employees – in the NBA’s case, team members and general managers – to speak freely about their political opinion.”

**Oct. 10, 2019:** US-China trade negotiations [resume](#) at the USTR in Washington DC and Trump [tweets](#) “Big day of negotiations with China. They want to make a deal, but do I? I meet with the Vice Premier tomorrow at The White House.”

**Oct. 11, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#) “Good things are happening at China Trade Talk Meeting. Warmer feelings than in recent past, more like the Old Days. I will be meeting with the Vice Premier today. All would like to see something significant happen!”

**Oct. 11, 2019:** Trump and Chinese Vice Premier Liu He [meet](#) at the USTR in DC, where they gave videotaped [remarks](#) announcing a phase one deal that reportedly includes a large purchase by China of US agricultural goods and a currency agreement.

**Oct. 11, 2019:** On the South Lawn, Trump [remarks](#) “So, we just made what, I guess, is one of the biggest deals that’s been made in a long time, with China. The Vice Premier has just left my office. We have a great deal. We’re papering it now. Over the next three or four or five weeks, hopefully it’ll get finished. A tremendous benefit to our farmers, technology, and many other things—the banking industry, financial services.”

**Oct. 11, 2019:** At American Association of Christian Counselors event in Nashville, Tenn., Pompeo [says](#) “The Chinese Communist Party is detaining and abusing more than 1 million Uighur Muslims in internment camps in the Xinjiang region of China. The pages of George Orwell’s 1984 are coming to life there. I wish the NBA would acknowledge that.”

**Oct. 12, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#) “The deal I just made with China is, by far, the greatest and biggest deal ever made for our Great Patriot Farmers in the history of our Country. In fact, there is a question as to whether or not this much product can be produced? Our farmers will figure it out. Thank you China!”

**Oct. 13, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#) “My deal with China is that they will IMMEDIATELY start buying very large quantities of our Agricultural Product, not wait until the deal is signed over the next 3 or 4 weeks. THEY HAVE ALREADY STARTED! Likewise financial services and other deal aspects, start preparing ...”

**Oct. 13, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#): “...I agreed not to increase Tariffs from 25% to 30% on Oct. 15th. They will remain at 25%. The relationship with China is very good. We will finish out the large Phase One part of the deal, then head directly into Phase Two. The Phase One Deal can be finalized & signed soon!”

**Oct. 13, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#) “CHINA HAS ALREADY BEGUN AGRICULTURAL PURCHASES FROM OUR GREAT PATRIOT FARMERS & RANCHERS!”

**Oct. 14, 2019:** When asked about the round of tariffs scheduled for Dec. 15 in an [interview](#) with CNBC, Mnuchin says “I have every expectation if there’s not a deal those tariffs would go in place. But I expect we’ll have a deal.”

**Oct. 15, 2019:** Ross [speaks](#) at the Federalist Society about the Trump administration’s trade policy and long term goals for the US.

**Oct. 16, 2019:** US Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell [testifies](#) before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International Cybersecurity Policy to discuss US policy in the Indo-Pacific region and implementation of the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018 (ARIA).

**Oct. 18, 2019:** Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe have a [phone call](#) in which they “reached consensus on maintaining stable and healthy bilateral military ties.”

**Oct. 22, 2019:** At a press briefing in Bern, Switzerland, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [says](#) the US has forced an unwanted trade war on China and Beijing must take necessary countermeasures to protect its interests.

**Oct. 23, 2019:** US Navy Secretary Richard Spencer delivers a [speech](#) at Brookings Institution on naval modernization and challenges posed by great power rivals to US maritime forces, including China and Russia.

**Oct. 24, 2019:** In an interview with *Fox Business Network*, Navarro [says](#) “The good news about this phase one ... is it adopted virtually the entire chapter in the deal last May that they reneged on for IP. ... Practically it means, if they steal our IP we’ll be able to take retaliatory action without them retaliating.”

**Oct. 25, 2019:** Vice President Mike Pence gives a [speech](#) at the Wilson Center on the future of the US-China relationship.

**Oct. 25, 2019:** Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying [responds](#) to Pence’s speech at the Wilson Center saying “A handful of US politicians headed by Mr. Pence are distorting facts with wanton accusations and slanders to meddle in China’s internal affairs with an attempt to disrupt China’s stability and development.”

**Oct. 25, 2019:** Trump [remarks](#) “We’re doing very well with China. We’re moving along nicely. We’re dealing with them right now. And a lot of good things are happening with China. They want to make a deal very badly.”

**Oct. 25, 2019:** Lighthizer, Mnuchin, and Liu hold a [phone call](#) to finalize an interim agreement to ease trade tensions.

**Oct. 25, 2019:** At a meeting in Moscow, governments of the US, Russia, China, and Pakistan sign [a Joint Statement](#) on Peace in Afghanistan.

**Oct. 28, 2019:** Before departing on Air Force One from Joint Base Andrews, Trump [says](#) “We are looking probably to be ahead of schedule to sign a very big portion of the China deal. And we’ll call it ‘phase one,’ but it’s a very big portion. That would take care of the farmers. It would take care of some of the other things. It’ll also take care of a lot of the banking needs.”

**Oct. 29, 2019:** US Senate unanimously [passes](#) the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act which calls for stronger engagement with countries that strengthen ties with Taiwan and punitive actions against countries whose actions undermine Taiwan.

**Oct. 30, 2019:** Pompeo gives a [speech](#) on China at the Hudson Institute in New York.

**Oct. 30, 2019:** Ninth China-US Dialogue on Rule of Law and Human Rights [takes place](#) in New York, discussing increased exchanges between NGOs and the safeguarding of basic human rights of ethnic groups in Xinjiang.

**Oct. 30, 2019:** State Department Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Consular Affairs Carl Risch and China’s Director of the Department of Consular Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Cui Aimin, [hold](#) 13th round of consular consultations between the US and China in Washington.

**Oct. 31, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#) “China and the USA are working on selecting a new site for signing of Phase One of Trade Agreement, about 60% of total deal, after APEC in Chile was canceled due to unrelated circumstances. The new location will be announced soon. President Xi and Trump will do signing!”

**Oct. 31, 2019:** The Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee examines US wireless security infrastructure and global competitiveness with China in a [hearing](#).

**Nov. 1, 2019:** Lighthizer and Mnuchin conduct a [phone call](#) with Liu He about an interim trade agreement and arrangements for the next round of talks.

**Nov. 1, 2019:** The World Trade Organization [authorizes](#) China to impose \$3.6 billion per year on American goods after US anti-dumping practices on steel and other products.

**Nov. 1, 2019:** The Committee on Foreign Investment in the US (CFIUS) [opens](#) a national security investigation into TikTok, owned by Beijing ByteDance Technology Co.

**Nov. 5, 2019:** Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri brings attention to TikTok in a Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism [hearing](#) on data security: “A company compromised by the Chinese Communist Party knows where your children are, knows what they look like, what their voices sound like, what they’re watching, and what they share with each other.”

**Nov. 5, 2019:** Esper gives a [speech](#) at the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence in DC: “The NDS [National Defense Strategy] prioritizes China first and Russia second as we transition into this era of great power competition. Beijing has made it abundantly clear that it intends to be the world leader in AI by 2030.”

**Nov. 5, 2019:** Esper and Wei have a [video conference](#) during which they discuss priorities regarding the US-China defense relationship, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the South China Sea.

**Nov. 6, 2019:** China’s Ministry of Commerce spokesperson Gao Feng [says](#) tariffs on both countries will be cancelled in stages.

**Nov. 7, 2019:** The US Department of Commerce [announces](#) an affirmative preliminary determination in antidumping case of imports of ceramic tile from China.

**Nov. 7, 2019:** Nine fentanyl traffickers are [sentenced](#) in a Chinese court, in a case involving Chinese and US law enforcement collaboration.

**Nov. 12, 2019:** The *USS Chancellorville* [conducts](#) a Taiwan Strait transit to demonstrate the US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. The US Navy tweets it “will continue to operate anywhere international law allows. #NavyReadiness.”

**Nov. 12, 2019:** Trump gives a [speech](#) at the Economic Club of New York, commenting on China in the WTO, confronting China’s trade abuses, China’s currency devaluation, and trade deficits with China.

**Nov. 12, 2019:** According to the US Department of Justice, a Chinese national [pleads](#) guilty to stealing trade secrets and intellectual property from his employer, Phillips 66.

**Nov. 13, 2019:** Speaking to reporters in Tokyo after his meetings with Japanese counterparts, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley [calls](#) China a strategic competitor and says that China and Russia are trying to alter the rules-based international order.

**Nov. 14-24, 2019:** Over 200 officers from Chinese and US militaries take part in a joint disaster relief training [exercise](#) in Hawaii.

**Nov. 14, 2019:** The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission [releases](#) an annual report to Congress on topics including trade tensions, US reliance on Chinese pharmaceuticals, global military ambitions, and competition in emerging technologies.

**Nov. 14, 2019:** USTR [announces](#) China’s lift of a ban on US poultry imports, estimating the US will now be able to export more than \$1 billion worth of products each year to China.

**Nov. 17, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#) “Our great Farmers will receive another major round of ‘cash,’ compliments of China Tariffs, prior to Thanksgiving. The smaller farms and farmers will be big beneficiaries. In the meantime, and as you may have noticed, China is starting to buy big again. Japan deal DONE. Enjoy!”

**Nov. 17, 2019:** Liu, Lighthizer, and Mnuchin hold a [phone call](#) to discuss concerns on the phase one trade deal.

**Nov. 18, 2019:** Esper and Wei [meet](#) at the ASEAN Defense Minister’s Meeting-Plus in Bangkok, Thailand to discuss the US-China defense relationship.

**Nov. 18, 2019:** US Department of Commerce [announces](#) it will extend the temporary general license for US firms to do business with Huawei for 90 days.

**Nov. 19, 2019:** The US Senate [passes](#) a [bill](#) to support Hong Kong protestors by imposing sanctions on Chinese and Hong Kong officials responsible for human rights abuses in HK.

**Nov. 19, 2019:** Homeland Security and Government Affairs Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations hold a [hearing](#) on “Securing the US Research Enterprise from China’s Talent Recruitment Plans,” covering the national security and economic threat from Chinese talent plans for research and innovation.

**Nov. 20, 2019:** US House of Representatives [passes](#) the Hong Kong bill, sending the legislation to Trump.

**Nov. 20, 2019:** The US Navy littoral combat ship *Gabrielle Giffords* conducts a FONOP, [sailing](#) within 12 nautical miles of Mischief Reef. China’s military says it tracked the passage of the ship through contested waters in the South China Sea.

**Nov. 21, 2019:** The US Navy destroyer *Wayne E. Meyer* [sails](#) through the Paracel Islands.

**Nov. 21, 2019:** In a [letter](#) to Trump, a bipartisan group of 15 senators urges the Department of Commerce to suspend issuing licenses to US firms that conduct business with Huawei, citing national security concerns.

**Nov. 21, 2019:** US Department of Justice [indicts](#) a Chinese national who worked for Monsanto before it was purchased by Bayer AG on economic espionage charges and theft of trade secrets.

**Nov. 22, 2019:** Trump [comments](#) on the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act: “We have to stand with Hong Kong, but I’m also standing with President Xi. He’s a friend of mine.”

**Nov. 22, 2019:** At the New Economy Forum in Beijing, Xi [tells](#) attendees: “We want to work for a ‘phase one’ agreement on the basis of mutual respect and equality.”

**Nov. 23, 2019:** On the sidelines of the G20 meeting in Japan, Wang [says](#): “The United States is broadly engaged in unilateralism and protectionism, and is damaging multilateralism and the multilateral trading system. It has already become the world's biggest destabilizing factor.”

**Nov. 25, 2019:** Top trade negotiators Liu, Lighthizer, and Mnuchin hold a [phone call](#) to discuss remaining issues on the phase one deal.

**Nov. 26, 2019:** Pompeo [addresses](#) Chinese documents regarding Xinjiang that were leaked to *The New York Times* as confirmation of the CCP’s human rights violations and abuses in a press conference at State.

**Nov. 26, 2019:** Trump [says](#) the US is in the “final throes” in the attempt to reach a trade deal with China, but also wants “to see it go well in Hong Kong.”

**Nov. 28, 2019:** The day after Trump signs the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, China [summons](#) US Amb. Terry Branstad to demand the US stop interfering in its internal affairs.

**Dec. 2, 2019:** Retaliating against the US for the new Hong Kong law, China [suspends](#) US military vessels and aircraft visits to Hong Kong and announces sanctions against five US NGOs for supporting the protesters.

**Dec. 2, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#) “U.S. Markets are up as much as 21% since the announcement of Tariffs on 3/1/2018—and the U.S. is taking in massive amounts of money (and giving some to our farmers, who have been targeted by China)!”

**Dec. 2, 2019:** Stilwell gives a [speech](#) at the Brookings Institution on pluralism and the US and Chinese visions of the world and the Indo-Pacific region.

**Dec. 3, 2019:** Trump [suggests](#) to reporters in a meeting with the NATO secretary general in London that he could wait until after the 2020 presidential election for a trade deal with China: “I have no deadline. In some ways I like the idea of waiting until after the election for the China deal.”

**Dec. 3, 2019:** Chief Executive Officer of the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) Adam Boehler [shares](#) plans to use some of the new agency’s \$60 billion budget to ensure there is a viable alternative to Huawei and ZTE.

**Dec. 3, 2019:** US Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Intellectual Property holds a [hearing](#) on fraudulent trademarks, viewed as economic warfare, and [points](#) to China as one of the primary offenders.

**Dec. 3, 2019:** Gen. Milley [speaks](#) by phone with the PLA’s Chief of the Joint Staff Department General Li Zuocheng.

**Dec. 8, 2019:** Trump [releases](#) tweet storm, including “Why is the World Bank loaning money to China? Can this be possible? China has plenty of money, and if they don’t, they create it. STOP!”

**Dec. 9, 2019:** Trump [says](#) the US is doing well with China in pursuing a trade deal.

**Dec. 9, 2019:** China's Assistant Commerce Minister Ren Hongbin [says](#) Beijing hopes to reach a trade agreement with the US: "...we wish that both sides can, on the foundation of equality and mutual respect, push forward negotiations, and in consideration of each others' core interests, reach an agreement that satisfies all sides as soon as possible."

**Dec. 10, 2019:** US House Committee on Foreign Affairs holds a [hearing](#) on "Authoritarianism with Chinese Characteristics: Political and Religious Human Rights Challenges in China."

**Dec. 12, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#) "Getting VERY close to a BIG DEAL with China. They want it, and so do we!"

**Dec. 12, 2019:** Stilwell gives [speech](#) on "US-China Bilateral Relations: The Lessons of History" at the Center for Strategic and International Studies:

**Dec. 13, 2019:** Esper delivers [speech](#) at the Council of Foreign Relations in New York in which he states: "We have entered a new era of great-power competition. China first and Russia second are now the department's top priorities."

**Dec. 13, 2019:** Wang delivers [speech](#) at the annual symposium on China's diplomacy and the international situation in Beijing.

**Dec. 13, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#): "We have agreed to a very large Phase One Deal with China. They have agreed to many structural changes and massive purchases of Agricultural Product, Energy, and Manufactured Goods, plus much more. The 25% Tariffs will remain as is, with 7 1/2% put on much of the remainder ...."

**Dec. 13, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#): "...The Penalty Tariffs set for December 15th will not be charged because of the fact that we made the deal. We will begin negotiations on the Phase Two Deal immediately, rather than waiting until after the 2020 Election. This is an amazing deal for all. Thank you!"

**Dec. 13, 2019:** The USTR [announces](#) a phase one trade agreement with China and publishes a [fact sheet](#) explaining the commitments made in the agreement.

**Dec. 14, 2019:** China's State Council's customs tariff commission [suspends](#) retaliatory tariffs [planned](#) to be implemented on Dec. 15.

**Dec. 14, 2019:** At the Doha Forum conference in Qatar, Mnuchin [comments](#) on the phase one deal: "We expect it will be fully executed in January. And then we get to phase two. The most important issue is – let's make sure we implement phase one with an enforceable agreement, which it is. And then we start negotiating phase two."

**Dec. 15, 2019:** Suspected of espionage, two Chinese embassy officials are [expelled](#) from the US after driving onto a sensitive military base in Virginia in September.

**Dec. 16, 2019:** China's National Bureau of Statistics spokesman Fu Linghui [says](#) China and the United States should continue bilateral trade talks and work toward removing all existing tariffs.

**Dec. 16, 2019:** China and Russia propose a draft UN resolution seeking partial sanctions relief, including the lifting of sanctions on North Korean exports of statues, seafood and textiles. The US [rejects](#) the resolution.

**Dec. 17, 2019:** In an [interview](#) with FOX Business, Lighthizer comments on the phase one trade agreement: "Is this agreement going to solve all the problems between the United States and China? No, for sure not, but it has real, real structural change."

**Dec. 18, 2019:** The State Department [re-designates](#) China, along with Burma, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan as Countries of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated "systematic, ongoing, [and] egregious violations of religious freedom."

**Dec. 19-20, 2019:** US Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Beigun [visits](#) Beijing to discuss "the need to maintain international unity on North Korea" after China and Russia proposed lifting some UN sanctions.



**Dec. 19, 2019:** China's Customs Tariff Commission of the State Council [releases](#) a list of US products that will be exempted, including special synthetic resin, white oil, a food-grade petroleum wax, and types of polyethylene and polypropylene, the second exemption list since Sept. 17, 2019.

**Dec. 19, 2019:** Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Christopher Ford formally [invites](#) China to begin a strategic security dialogue on nuclear risk reduction and arms control.

**Dec. 20, 2019:** Trump and Xi hold a [phone](#) call. They discuss the trade deal, North Korea, and Hong Kong.

**Dec. 20, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#): "Had a very good talk with President Xi of China concerning our giant Trade Deal. China has already started large scale purchaes of agricultural product & more. Formal signing being arranged. Also talked about North Korea, where we are working with China, & Hong Kong (progress!)."

**Dec. 31, 2019:** Trump [tweets](#): "I will be signing our very large and comprehensive Phase One Trade Deal with China on January 15. The ceremony will take place at the White House. High level representatives of China will be present. At a later date I will be going to Beijing where talks will begin on Phase Two!"

*Chronology by CSIS Research Intern Sloane Rice*



# COMPARATIVE

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## CONNECTIONS

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

### US-KOREA RELATIONS

## GAPS WIDEN, TENSIONS RISE

STEPHEN NOERPER, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

US footing on the Korean Peninsula grew less firm as both Koreas resisted moves by Washington. The initial White House call for [an increase](#) in annual South Korean host-nation support (HNS) for US Forces in Korea to \$5 billion was met with incredulity among the Republic of Korea's officials and public. By yearend, there were media reports of a lowering of the US ask and agreement by Seoul to arms purchases, but the challenge of finalizing the Special Measures Agreement (SMA) and a residue of resentment remained. Seoul, too, was unhappy with Washington's lack of progress with Pyongyang, a foil to President Moon Jae-in's peace ambitions.

North Korea raised its stakes higher, rejecting diplomatic overtures by the United States and its "[hostile policy](#)," disregarding curtailment of US-ROK military exercises, and testing 27 short range ballistic missiles, as well as multiple rocket launchers and engines, between May and the end of the year. December saw [activity](#) at the once-decommissioned Sohae Launch Facility. At year's close, Kim Jong Un declared abandonment of North Korea's long-range missile and nuclear testing moratorium, expectations of continued sanctions and renewed "self-reliance," and the promise of a "new strategic weapon."

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The post-Hanoi blues (following the failed US-DPRK summit in February 2019) gave way to malaise around denuclearization talks, despite consistent efforts by the US administration to re-engage in dialogue. North Korea rebuffed overtures by US Special Representative Stephen Biegun, with the exception of one day of talks in Stockholm in October. Those ended with a split in North Korean (bad) and US (good) interpretations, and in retrospect were simply seen by North Korea as an opportunity to deliver its statement on US “hostile policy” and remind the US of its Dec. 31 deadline for progress before Pyongyang pursued a “new path.”

North Korea continued its diplomatic trajectory post-Hanoi, avoiding the US and at the same time distancing itself from South Korea, which had brokered the 2018 opening and righted the faltering US-Korea negotiations in the leadup to the Singapore summit and in the subsequent fall, when Moon visited New York to push for progress at the UN and in US circles for a path to peace. A year on, North Korea failed to turn up for the United Nations General Assembly opening, its UN ambassador speaking on the final day of statements after Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho stayed home. Kim extended a politely worded apology to Moon on [skipping](#) an ASEAN summit in Busan in late November, yet the dye was set, reflecting Pyongyang’s decision to adopt a harder line. That continued with the North’s rejection of Biegun’s overture to meet during his mid-December sojourn in Seoul.

Perhaps by design, Pyongyang’s more insular bent post-Hanoi widened gaps between South Korea and the United States. Moon saw success in establishing dialogue with Kim for both himself and US President Donald Trump, but Trump’s walk away in Hanoi, despite his call after from Air Force One to Moon, was a blow to a South Korean administration bent on dramatically improved inter-Korean relations. By year’s end, Kim pronounced dialogue with the US futile and braced for a long-term struggle, leaving Moon—only months out of what promises to be a hotly contested National Assembly election—in a bind.

The atmosphere between South Korea and the United States was already clouded by Trump’s statements. Since the early days of his administration, the US president had complained about alliances, though at times he praised them, as was the case with NATO. Trump was bruising in his condemnations of

European and Asian allies who failed to shoulder sufficient defense burden costs as “freeloaders,” and Seoul planners were particularly susceptible to the insult. This, coupled with broader regional concerns about US reliability and regard for norms and institutions, worries South Korea. On the economic front, the sting created by the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) renegotiations persisted.

Seoul took steps on multiple fronts to negate the impression of unfairly benefitting from US or other largesse. In late October, Seoul acquiesced and abandoned its [developing country status](#) in the WTO after White House comments. The debate over defense burden sharing was less easy, fostering new friction in US-South Korea ties.

### Host Nation Support

The biggest challenge in the United States-South Korea bilateral relationship this period stemmed from the White House request for \$5 billion in South Korea’s annual host-nation support for US troops positioned on the Korean Peninsula. The initial request, which came only months after contentious discussions produced the Feb. 10, 2019 signing of the latest Special Measures Agreement (SMA), caught South Korean officials and the public—as well as many US policy observers—off-guard.



Figure 1 In Seoul, South Koreans rally to denounce U.S. demands for raising costs for stationing troops in South Korea. Photo: The Washington Post

A Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) [poll showed](#) 96% of South Korea’s public opposed paying more. Surprise and resistance to the White House move was exacerbated by the economic decline in South Korea over 2019; exports [fell markedly](#) the first 11 months and

only declined less in December, suggesting a possible upturn at yearend, as South Korea wrestled with the impact of the US-China trade war and plummeting chip demand.

US Defense Secretary Mark Esper traveled to Seoul in mid-November to argue for greater and more “equitable” support, as well as rein in Seoul’s intent to abandon its General Security of Military Information (GSOMIA) pact with Tokyo on Nov. 23. The Republic of Korea had announced it would abandon the military intelligence-sharing pact after a summer of economic sparring between it and Japan—to include the removal, by each, of the other on preferential trade white lists. However, South Korea underestimated the blowback from the United States, which was concerned by the discord when North Korea was stepping up short-range ballistic missile tests and displaying other military advances. Seoul argued that the pact had had limited employment in practice, but Washington believed it was hard won and highly symbolic, and its disintegration a vulnerability benefitting Pyongyang, and by extension Beijing and Moscow.



Figure 2 Mark Esper meets Jeong Kyeong-doo in Seoul on Nov. 15, 2019. Photo: Reuters

Cognizant of US sentiment, Seoul agreed at the last hour to [postpone cancellation](#), quietly hoping that the move would lessen demands at the SMA negotiation table as well. Unfortunately, the initial round of SMA talks broke off with the US lead arguing a lack of ROK commitment to demands for greater equity. By late December, however, Bloomberg and South Korea’s *Chosun Ilbo* were reporting significant declines in the US request, with suggestions of an increase of between 10% and 20% per annum and possible arms sales. The State Department rebuffed these reports, but expressed hope for an agreement in early 2020.

Critics of the initial ask—both in South Korea and the United States—underscored the need for enhanced transparency in the process. With the proposed budgetary expansion, some observers puzzled at how such a large increase could be spent (or where it came from). Many also questioned the White House timing relative to the shared priority on denuclearization dialogue with North Korea. South Korea may have approached the matter knowing that this US administration makes large initial overtures that would be followed by more reasonable demands, and the inclusion of arms sales and other contributions could provide an offset and allow an offramp to a more practical agreement, one that might best return to a five-year renewal cycle to avoid flareups.

### Joint Exercises

Alliance relations involve give-and-take, and a positive and practical reflection on US and South Korea coordination and flexibility centered on the cancelation and postponement of large-scale joint exercises this period. The move aimed to provide room for denuclearization dialogue, and reflected a continuation of cooperation between Seoul and Washington and a preference for diplomacy over force.

However, consistent with its diplomatic hunkering down, North Korea criticized, rather than welcomed, the downtick in joint exercises. More telling, Kim Jong Un [twice surveyed](#) North Korean air exercises over three days in mid-November, after the United States and South Korea postponed their combined flying training exercise.

Reflecting a limit to those cancelations, however, the US shared photos with Reuters in late December showing a [joint commando exercise](#) simulating a raid aimed at enemy leadership. Secretary Esper and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark A. Milley also reminded North Korea of the “high state” of US and ROK readiness, despite stated hopes for a return to negotiations. Trump too underscored US resolve, warning on Christmas Eve that in the event of a North Korean provocation, the US would “deal with it.”

### North Korean Policy Shift

In his reportedly seven-hour address at the close of late December’s four-day party plenum, Kim voiced a fundamental, [strategic shift](#) away

from dialogue with the US. His experiment with diplomacy followed North Korea's last long range ballistic missile test in November 2017 and grew from his 2018 New Year address and the goodwill surrounding the Pyeongchang Olympics.

Two years on, Kim's December 2019 plenum address—designed first and foremost for domestic consumption and different in form from his shorter, televised past New Year's addresses—signaled the shift. Although it tacked toward economic change, a buildout of his “economy-first” policy launched in April 2018, it also returned to *byeongjin*, the simultaneous pursuit of economic development alongside nuclear weapons development.

The underpinning of Kim's address was disappointment in the experiment of negotiating with the United States. Kim portrayed North Korea's nuclear and missile moratorium as unilateral and unrequited by the US administration. Although not attacking Trump by name—allowing room for future summits—Kim made clear that the pursuit of dialogue with the United States and sanctions relief was no longer the correct approach. He called for resolve and self-reliance and invoked the lack of progress with the US as an attack on North Korea's “dignity.” In doing so, Kim reflected the likely need to placate potentially restive voices among elites, some of whom may have wondered at the approach with the US and meetings with Trump, and all of whom were asked to tighten belts.

This watershed shift in North Korea's position dramatically raises stakes for the United States and South Korea. Kim's recognition of the futility of dialogue with the United States and subsequent push for military readiness—doubled down on the week prior to the party plenum in a meeting of the party's Central Military Commission—implied a step up and, more fundamentally, a long term stand against the US.

Critically, also, over time the military is regaining its influence. Though the days of Kim Jong Il's military-first policy and organization under the National Defense Commission are behind, the emergence of the party's Central Military Commission as a node of principal influence—albeit party-based and under the State Affairs Commission (SAC)—underscores a harder line in decision-making.

## Growing Disregard

Kim Jong Un's break from recent policy is evident over this reporting period and in retrospect. North Korea's warning of its self-imposed yearend deadline was voiced by a variety of North Korean officials at several levels. Post-Hanoi, North Korea stepped up its launch of short-range missiles—with all but one taking place after the Trump-Kim meeting at the DMZ. Repeated engine tests—real or implied, took place twice in December at the reactivated Sohae Launch Site, a sign of further hardening of resolve. Worrying are enhancements to the modified Iskander [KN-23](#) short-range missiles and of solid-fuel technology—amplified with potential placement on improved transporter erectors launchers (TELs), and given the [Oct. 3 launch](#) of the *Pukguksong-3* second-generation submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM).

In diplomacy, the one-day Stockholm talks on Oct. 5 allowed North Korea's delegation to deliver only a blunt communique. In late November and early December, North Korea issued a flurry of statements from the foreign ministry advisor and vice foreign minister levels, as well as from the SAC—railing in one form or another against Washington's “hostile policy” and reminding the US of North Korea's impending deadline.

The name-calling associated with the earlier “fire and fury” phase [returned](#) too, with Trump hailing his relationship with Kim multiple times, but referring to Kim as “Rocket Man” in one statement. North Korea in turn invoked the earlier “dotard” label (via Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui) and dismissed Trump as “heedless and erratic” (from Party Vice Chairman Kim Yong Chol); the young leader did not make the comments himself, a hedge against damaging his personal relationship with Trump.

Kim Jong Un for his part took to appearing atop a [white steed](#) at the base of Mount Paektu, the symbolic birthplace of the Korean nation and, by legend, the birthplace of his grandfather, Kim Il Sung. Designed to invoke notions of resistance to foreign/US intervention in the young leader's domestic audience and change to come, Kim appeared alone in mid-October photos and then with a cadre in support riding behind in early December. Broadcasts of him galloping the slopes also appeared after the

plenum address. The images marked the shift in policy and reinforced Kim's lineage and legitimacy for his elites and public.



Figure 3 Kim Jong Un rides across the snowy Mount Paektu.  
Photo: KCNA

## Conclusion

In his policy shift, Kim may have banked on domestic constraints in 2020 hindering Trump in the US and Moon in South Korea. Arguably, Trump's distractions over impeachment and election year priorities and the perceived referendum on Moon in the April 15 National Assembly elections may check their attention. But North Korea may misread these constraints as rendering the US administration less potent or cooperation between the White House and Blue House less likely. It is important for Washington and Seoul to get it right, especially at a time of new volatility with Pyongyang.

The US and South Korea must weigh new realities in a clear-eyed manner and prepare contingencies. A satellite test may be in the offing, possibly on or around the February or April birthdays of Kim Jong Il or Kim Il Sung, respectively. That would neatly fit North Korea's outreach to China and Russia, both of whom have argued for a weakening of international sanctions and would argue a space test is acceptable. Trump too might tack away from a return to fire and fury and explain away a space test as less provocative—though analysts would look hard at any first-stage solid fuel core.

A seventh nuclear test would put North Korea beyond the Indian and Pakistani threshold and might anger Beijing and Moscow, as the international community would unite at the UN Security Council. A blatant long-range ballistic missile test too would cross thresholds and embolden proponents of maximum pressure 2.0.

Trump and Moon will not want to abandon diplomacy and their successes in 2018 and 2019. These include the long-range and nuclear testing moratorium, a return (in the glow of Singapore) of 54 sets of US war remains, and the inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement—which saw the destruction of guardposts and a meeting of Korean troops—along with the highly symbolic leaders' meetings, three each between Kim and Moon and Kim and Trump.

Kim's late December shift has led many observers to argue for enhanced ballistic missile defense, civil safety readiness, or a return to US-ROK joint military exercises. Accordingly, the US and South Korea will have to work better together and with Japan—a challenge as the US allies weather significant tension.

Globally, the deterioration of relations between the US and Iran must impact North Korean thinking. The decapitation strike that eliminated Iranian major general Qasem Soleimani and concern about Trump's volatility could check Pyongyang's instinct to experiment, yet widespread international concern and condemnation and the initial, quick de-escalation of tensions might falsely embolden North Korea's young leader.

The US and ROK must engage in better ways at understanding one another's core strategic objectives—eliminating the clear and present danger of North Korea's nuclear threat for the one and a stable integration and ultimate unification for the other. So too, Washington needs to more fully incorporate an understanding of Korea's domestic political realities and constraints. Moon is a progressive president who tacks left, yet underscores backing US priorities. He faces opposition from the right, albeit divided, but also pulls from the left and civic, church, provincial, and municipal entities—all of which make for difficult politics. The complexity of the political divide in South Korea is profound, as are domestic divisions in Washington. These often temper policymakers' better instincts; therein lies a fundamental challenge to maximizing relations between the US and South Korea.

# CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

**Sept. 1, 2019:** North Korea says its hopes for more dialogue with the White House are “gradually disappearing,” and threatens to reconsider its conciliatory gestures.

**Sept. 4, 2019:** North Korea tells the UN to cut its international staff given undue US influence.

**Sept. 6, 2019:** US Special Representative Stephen Biegun confirms that denuclearization talks have stalled.

**Sept. 9, 2019:** North Korea says it is willing to resume talks late month, but calls for a new US approach.

**Sept. 9, 2019:** North Korea fires missiles despite moves to restart talks with the US.

**Sept. 10, 2019:** North Korea’s state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reports a test of a “super-large” multiple rocket launcher.

**Sept. 13, 2019:** US sanctions three North Korean state-sponsored groups linked to hacking and high-profile ransomware attacks.

**Sept. 15, 2019:** North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [reportedly invites](#) US President Donald Trump to visit Pyongyang, according to South Korea’s *JoongAng Ilbo*.

**Sept. 16, 2019:** Trump says he “probably” won’t visit Pyongyang for a next round of talks with Kim, but might in the future.

**Sept. 20, 2019:** Bolton contends that Trump’s courtship of Kim is increasing North Korea’s power.

**Sept. 20, 2019:** North Korea praises Trump’s “[wise political decision](#)” to fire National Security Adviser John Bolton.

**Sept. 26, 2019:** KCNA reports that a lack of US progress casts doubt on future talks.

**Sept. 27, 2019:** North Korea urges Trump to adopt a bold move toward reviving diplomacy.

**Oct. 1, 2019:** KCNA announces working-level talks with the US within a week.

**Oct. 3, 2019:** North Korea announces a submarine-launched ballistic missile test, though with Kim absent during testing.

**Oct. 5, 2019:** The United States and North Korea hold working-level talks in Stockholm.

**Oct. 5, 2019:** North Korea describes the US as having arrived at the talks “[empty-handed](#),” although the US dismissed the assertion as not reflecting the “content or spirit” of the dialogue.

**Oct. 16, 2019:** Kim rides a white horse on Mt. Paektu, revered as the birthplace of the Korean nation, symbolizing resistance to the US and a significant move in the near future.

**Oct. 17, 2019:** Bolton writes in a letter to his political action committee that North Korea “isn’t our friend and will never be” and that they will “never give up their nuclear weapons. Period.”

**Oct. 19, 2019:** South Korean students break into the US ambassador’s residence in protest over increased host-nation support.

**Oct. 21, 2019:** North Korea asks for new US and South Korea solutions for conflict. The US wins a court battle over control of a North Korean cargo ship used to skirt sanctions.

**Oct. 25, 2019:** South Korea abandons its status as a developing country in the WTO after Trump criticism.

**Oct. 28, 2019:** North Korean Central Committee Vice Chair Kim Yong Chol warns that the good relationship between Kim and Trump is no guarantee that tensions will not flare and that an exchange of fire could happen at any time.

**Nov. 1, 2019:** North Korea tests a “super-large” multiple rocket launcher and short-range missiles, marking a dozen different tests since May.



**Nov. 3, 2019:** South Korea and the US suspend an air-power drill for a second straight year.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** A South Korean parliamentarian suggests North Korea and the US will resume talks in mid-November.

**Nov. 8, 2019:** North Korea says the “window of opportunity” for talks with the US is closing.

**Nov. 9, 2019:** South Korea reiterates its intent to terminate its intelligence-sharing pact with Japan, raising concerns in Washington.

**Nov. 13, 2019:** North Korea warns of retaliation over reduced—but not ended—US and South Korea military drills.

**Nov. 14, 2019:** Esper arrives in Seoul, with an eye to alliance management with Korea and Japan in general, and host-nation support talks in particular.

**Nov. 15, 2019:** Esper presses Seoul to pay more for US troops and maintain its intelligence-sharing pact with Japan.

**Nov. 17, 2019:** The US and South Korea postpone joint Combined Flying Training event to allow for diplomacy with North Korea.

**Nov. 18, 2019:** Kim supervises air force drills for the second time in three days despite US and South Korea’s postponement of drills.

**Nov. 18, 2019:** South Korea and the US resume talks over US demands for enhanced host-nation support.

**Nov. 19, 2019:** US walks out of military cost-sharing talks with South Korea; lead negotiator James DeHart [describes South Korea](#) as “not responsive to our request for fair and equitable burden-sharing.”

**Nov. 20, 2019:** Biegun suggests Kim hasn’t empowered his negotiators to engage seriously in talks.

**Nov. 20, 2019:** Esper denies reports of a US threat to cut troops over host-nation support.

**Nov. 22, 2019:** South Korea backs away from scrapping its intelligence-sharing pact with Japan after US pressure.

**Nov. 23, 2019:** South Korea asks US for help in resolving issues with Japan.

**Nov. 28, 2019:** North Korea test fires two ballistic missiles on the US Thanksgiving holiday and a day ahead of the two-year anniversary of its long-range missile and nuclear testing moratorium.

**Nov. 29, 2019:** FBI arrests US [blockchain expert](#) who aided North Korea.

**Dec. 3, 2019:** North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Ri Thae Song described the US as dragging out talks and [warns](#) that that it is “entirely up to the US what Christmas gift it will select to get.”

**Dec. 3, 2019:** Trump states confidence in Kim, but also describes him as “Rocket Man.”

**Dec. 4, 2019:** Kim appears atop a white horse at Mt. Paektu, with cadre following, hinting at a more confrontational stance moving forward.

**Dec. 5, 2019:** Commercial satellite imagery shows movement at North Korea’s Sohae Launch Facility, and Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui warns against the “relapse of the dotage of a dotard” in Trump.

**Dec. 6, 2019:** US Ambassador to the UN Kelly Craft warns that the Security Council is united against North Korea’s repeated missile tests. In a nod to diplomacy, US [withholds support](#) for a North Korea human rights debate at the UN.

**Dec. 7, 2019:** Trump and Moon speak by phone and underscore that talks with North Korea should continue. North Korea says it carried out a “very important test” at Sohae.

**Dec. 8, 2019:** North Korea’s UN Ambassador Kim Song says denuclearization is off the negotiating table with the US.

**Dec. 9, 2019:** Trump downplays North Korean missile tests, [saying](#) Kim Jong Un is “too smart and has far too much to lose.” Senior North Korean official Kim Yong Chol [decries](#) Trump as sounding like a “heedless and erratic old man.”

**Dec. 10, 2019:** Secretary of State Mike Pompeo says he is “very hopeful” North Korea will abide by its commitments. North Korea lashes out at Pompeo and his calls for sanctions enforcement.

**Dec. 11, 2019:** Craft says the US is prepared to “simultaneously take concrete steps” with North Korea, but that the United Nations Security Council must respond to provocations.

**Dec. 12, 2019:** US Assistant Secretary of State David Stilwell cautions North Korea against “ill-advised behavior” and notes that the US has “heard threats before.”

**Dec. 14, 2019:** North Korea says its undertook a “crucial” test at Sohae the day before.

**Dec. 15, 2019:** Biegun arrives in South Korea for a three-day visit, urging North Korea to drop its “hostile” tone and return to nuclear talks.

**Dec. 16, 2019:** Esper [suggests](#) North Korea will test if it doesn’t “feel satisfied.”

**Dec. 20, 2019:** Esper says he is hopeful for a restart of diplomacy with North Korea, although he and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Milley also describe the US “high levels of readiness.”

**Dec. 21, 2019:** North Korea criticizes the US for targeting its human-rights record and warns it will “pay dearly.” Kim Jong Un convenes a meeting of the Central Military Commission.

**Dec. 23, 2019:** Bolton laments Trump’s “failure” on North Korea.

**Dec. 23, 2019:** US provides Reuters with photos of US and ROK commandos simulating a raid on an enemy facility.

**Dec. 23, 2019:** The US and its allies call on UN members to report compliance on returning North Korean workers.

**Dec. 24, 2019:** Trump says if North Korea tests an ICBM, the US will “deal with it.”

**Dec. 25, 2019:** Media report that the US is backing down from its demand for a five-fold increase in host-nation support.

**Dec. 27, 2019:** US denies reports that it asked South Korea to pay 10% to 20% more for US troops.

**Dec. 29, 2019:** National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien says the US would be “extremely disappointed” should Kim resume testing and will “demonstrate” that disappointment.

**Dec. 30, 2019:** Kim calls for North Korea’s “positive and offensive security measures” at a year-end party plenum.

**Dec. 30, 2019:** Microsoft Corp. says it has [taken control](#) of 50 web domains used as a “command and control infrastructure” by North Korean hacking group Thallium to steal information.

**Dec. 31, 2019:** KCNA reports that Kim said North Korea is no longer bound by its moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests. Kim suggests a “new strategic weapon” will be unveiled in the near future.

PACIFIC FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

**US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS**

## ENGAGEMENT IN ABSENTIA? ASEAN WORRIES OVER LACK OF US ATTENTION

CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Stung by a US delegation to the East Asia Summit of lower rank than previous years, ASEAN leaders retaliated by presenting National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien with a partial boycott of the adjacent US-ASEAN Summit. The Trump administration brushed off the incident with a State Department [fact sheet](#) that began, "US engagement with the ten member states of ASEAN has never been stronger."

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Although ASEAN's disappointment was real, the record suggests that Washington had stepped up momentum in relations with Southeast Asia in the final months of 2019. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper made his Southeast Asia debut in his new capacity at the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus in November. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell and Commander of the US Pacific Fleet Adm. John Aquilino also visited Southeast Asian countries in their new roles. Institutionally, the US and ASEAN crossed new thresholds: an agreement to begin formal negotiations on linking the ASEAN Common Window to US electronic customs; inauguration of the US-ASEAN Maritime Exercises; and the first US-ASEAN Dialogue on Cybersecurity.

This period was not without divergence, even disagreement, between the United States and ASEAN countries. Washington continued to press Southeast Asian leaders to choose a Western hardware provider for fifth-generation (5G) technology over Chinese companies, particularly Huawei. And although neither ASEAN nor Myanmar's neighbors support repression of the Muslim Rohingya by the Myanmar Armed Forces (Tatmadaw), ASEAN's consensus-based process makes direct action difficult.

But the strongest dynamic in US relations with Southeast Asia in late 2019 remained the impact of US-China trade tensions. Some Southeast Asian countries, particularly Vietnam, benefit from diversion of trade and investment, but that advantage is offset by a pervasive climate of trade uncertainty and continued pressure from Washington when trade surpluses with the United States increase. In mid-December, the announcement that China and the United States had reached agreement on the [first phase](#) of a trade agreement was met with some relief in Southeast Asia, but this was not viewed as a resolution to US-China trade friction.

The latter months of 2019 also saw internal political adjustments and issues in Southeast Asia. Inaugurated for a second term as president, Indonesia's Joko Widodo announced his cabinet picks, intended to invigorate economic reform. However, the appointment of his political rival, Prabowo Subianto, as defense minister adds a wrinkle to US-Indonesia security relations. In Thailand, judicial proceedings against a prominent opposition

figure raised questions about the strength of Thailand's newly revived democracy.

### Diplomatic Spat

Thailand had hoped to cap its year as ASEAN chair with a high-profile East Asia Summit (EAS) that brought US President Donald Trump to Bangkok for the first time in his presidency. From the start, however, the chances of Trump attending were slim, since he was more focused on the APEC meeting that had been expected to take place in Chile, and the anticipated announcement—with Chinese President Xi Jinping—of the conclusion of the first phase of a new trade agreement. When Chilean President Sebastián Piñera cancelled the APEC meeting (and a major climate change conference), Bangkok renewed hope that Trump would attend the EAS.

At the last minute, the White House [decided to send](#) National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien in Trump's place. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross was also in the delegation, but not a participant; his role in Bangkok was as co-chair of a business forum that brought a number of high-profile US companies to Southeast Asia. The US delegation was the lowest-ranking ever since the United States entered the EAS in 2011. The summit also lacked Xi, who, like Trump, had opted for Chile over Bangkok, but Premier Li Keqiang attended in his place. Russian President Vladimir Putin was also absent, but he customarily does not attend the EAS. As with the Shangri-La Dialogue in June, China overshadowed the United States at the EAS by virtue of its higher representation.

Responding to the perceived snub from Washington, only [three heads of government](#)—from Thailand (then 2019 ASEAN chair); Vietnam (the 2020 ASEAN chair); and Laos (the current ASEAN Coordinator for relations with the United States)—attended the US-ASEAN Summit on the margins of the EAS. The other seven ASEAN states sent foreign ministers. The Trump administration likely anticipated a negative response: O'Brien, co-chair of the US-ASEAN Summit, came armed with an invitation from Trump for a special US-ASEAN Summit in the United States in early 2020. No agreement on a time or place for the meeting was reached in Bangkok, and ASEAN leaders are of mixed feelings about its utility under difficult political circumstances in the United States.

## Raising the US Defense Profile

Another ASEAN meeting, the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus in Bangkok Nov. 16-17, was the occasion for Mark Esper, the new US secretary of defense, to initiate relations with his Southeast Asian counterparts. Esper followed the ADMM-Plus with visits to the Philippines and Vietnam. Throughout his trip, Esper followed the hard line on China that has been the hallmark of the Trump administration at regional and security meetings over the past year. This extends to new US criticism of the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct on the South China Sea negotiation process, to the extent that Singapore Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen publicly pushed back at the ADMM-Plus, a sign of growing ASEAN concern over US-China tensions.

While in Manila, Esper [encouraged](#) Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana to be more vocal publicly about Chinese incursions into the Philippine EEZ. As Secretary of State Pompeo did when he visited the Philippines in March, Esper reaffirmed that the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) covered attacks on Philippine naval vessels in the South China Sea. Although no assurances were made, Esper did not actively oppose Lorenzana's request to review the MDT; Manila is expected to make a formal request to do so at the next meeting of the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Board in 2020. In Hanoi, Esper announced that the Pentagon would give a second Coast Guard cutter to Vietnam.

## The Prabowo Dilemma

Arguably the most significant moment of Esper's Southeast Asia trip was his bilateral meeting with new Indonesian Defense Minister [Prabowo Subianto](#) on the margins of the ADMM-Plus. During the regional meeting, Prabowo was conspicuously courted by his counterparts from China and Russia, signalling a new competition for security ties with Indonesia. In the 1990s US-Indonesia security relations were strained by the human rights abuses of Kopassus, the Indonesian military's special forces unit, in East Timor and against student protestors. US military assistance to Indonesia was removed under sanctions heavily endorsed by the US Congress. Since then, Prabowo has been denied entry into the United States, most recently in 2012.

Different circumstances may apply in the current security environment in Southeast Asia. The return of Islamic State fighters to Southeast Asia from the Middle East; rising religious tensions in the region; and increasing Chinese assertiveness in regional waters have intensified US-Indonesian security relations. As a result, since February 2018 the Pentagon has quietly attempted to resume ties with Kopassus, leaving open the question of whether it should also be free to work with former Kopassus leaders.

Prabowo's selection as defense minister pushes this question into new territory. Washington and Jakarta agreed (through public press releases) that the meeting between Esper and Prabowo was cordial, even productive. The two defense officials agreed that a greater number of Indonesian military officers would receive US training, a traditional signal of increased momentum in US relations with a security partner. Esper was invited to visit Indonesia and said that he looks forward to doing so in the near future.



*Figure 1 US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Indonesian Prime Minister Prabowo Subianto meet on the margins of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus in Bangkok on November 17, 2019. Photo: jakartaglobe.id*

## Trade: Waiting the Wings

With the first phase of a US-China trade agreement scheduled for signing on Jan. 15, Southeast Asian leaders are relieved that Beijing and Washington have come to terms on aspects of their trade dispute. However, enforcement mechanisms for reported aspects of the first phase, such as China's agreement to cease pressuring US companies for technology transfer, are unclear. This is in keeping with a growing perception in Southeast Asia that the first phase was a victory for China: Beijing was able to dodge significant structural changes,

particularly on government subsidies and the use of state-owned enterprises. Such issues are reserved for the second phase, the timing and outcome of which are uncertain.

More fundamentally, the past year in US-China trade relations and its impact on Southeast Asia, have raised serious issues about the future direction of international trade and the principles on which it will operate. The Trump administration's trade policy shows signs of a managed trade approach. The first phase of the China agreement contains specific levels for Chinese imports of US products, for example. This is a corollary to Washington's insistence that Southeast Asian countries reduce their trade surpluses with the United States by increasing their imports. Equally important, it signals a retreat by the United States from the global liberal trade order.

That Southeast Asia is still committed to that order is evident in ASEAN's attempts to bring the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to completion. Apart from the reduced US delegation in Bangkok, ASEAN was also disappointed that the RCEP agreement, scheduled to be formalized on the margins of the EAS, was derailed at the last minute when India [refused to sign](#). Hanoi has set February of this year as the new target date for completion; ASEAN hopes that Tokyo will be able to persuade New Delhi to sign, but there was little indication of that at year's end. Nevertheless, even without India RCEP will become the world's largest trading bloc, including 45% of the global population and a third of the world's GDP.

In the near term, it is less clear the extent to which Southeast Asia will benefit from the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership (CPTPP). A reconfiguration of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) following US withdrawal, the CPTPP has only two of the four Southeast Asian TPP partners, Singapore and Vietnam—Brunei and Malaysia have yet to ratify. The original lure of the TPP was greater access to the US market in a regional FTA. Although the CPTPP is viewed by some countries, particularly Australia, as a potential “docking station” for the US to return to the TPP, Southeast Asians see no hope of that if Trump is re-elected in 2020.

Nor do Southeast Asian trade ministers see much hope for new and more liberal trade agreements with the United States in the near

term. If anything, the momentum seems to be in the opposite direction: Washington has suspended trade preferences for Thailand and Indonesia under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP); Bangkok and Jakarta are now focused on attempting to negotiate their partial or full restoration. However, US trade officials point out, with justification, that there is room for expansion in regional and bilateral US trade and investment framework agreements (TIFAs). In late 2019, the US and ASEAN agreed to begin formal negotiations to link the ASEAN Single Customs Window to US electronic customs, which is expected to streamline and facilitate US-Southeast Asian trade.

### The Rohingya in Focus

For much of 2019, the Trump administration's singular focus in its human rights policy for Southeast Asia has been the plight of the Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar, most of whom are now in camps in Bangladesh. Since the outbreak of violence in August 2017 in Rakhine State, and the crackdown on Rohingya by Myanmar's armed forces, US relations with Myanmar have been on a downward slide, particularly in the nascent military-to-military relationship developing since the 2012 elections. Formal dialogue between the two militaries has been suspended and the Department of Defense depends primarily on multilateral events (usually organized by ASEAN) for contact with the Tatmadaw. Myanmar was included in the first-ever US-ASEAN Maritime Exercises in September in Thailand, but as observers rather than full members, and over the vociferous objections of the US Congress.



Figure 2 State Counselor Aung Sang Suu Kyi arrives at the Hague to lead Myanmar's defense against charges of genocide before the International Court of Justice, December 14, 2019. Photo: thehindu.com

With nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees still in Bangladesh and no tangible near-term prospects for improvement in the situation, Congress has increased pressure on Myanmar through enhanced sanctions. However, the legislature has shown some restraint: there seems to be little desire on the Hill to return to the broad sanctions of the 1990s. On June 11, H.R. 3190, the Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act of 2019 was introduced in the House of Representatives. Over three months, the bill acquired 54 sponsors—a large number—from both Democratic and Republican quarters. On Sept. 24 the bill was approved in the House by a [large margin](#)—95% in favor—and referred to the Senate, where it is under consideration by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It is expected to be approved in the Senate and become law.

The bill has three main objectives: (1) to extend the current policy of “targeted” sanctions; (2) to increase assistance to minorities; and (3) to attempt to weaken the Tatmadaw’s financial base by tightening restrictions on Myanmar gem imports to the United States (without prohibiting them altogether). Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing and three of his top generals [were entered](#) onto the US Treasury Department’s list of Specifically Designated Nationals (SPD) in August; the new legislation would encourage the administration to dig deeper and include lower-level officials involved in the 2017 crackdown. It would also narrow the number of Myanmar gem companies permitted to export to the United States and require that the State Department report to Congress on war crimes in Myanmar.

The Rohingya issue was given even higher profile in December when Myanmar was called to the International Court of Justice in The Hague in December to respond to charges of genocide related to the Rohingya brought by Gambia (with the backing of the 57 members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation). Aung Sang Suu Kyi, in her capacity as foreign minister, chose to lead her country’s delegation to the ICJ and to make remarks [defending the government](#) against the charges. Her defense was centered on two points: that the Tatmadaw was responding to an attack by Rohingya insurgents in August 2017, and that the government had conducted an accountability exercise to investigate the crackdown and punish those responsible for it. She also

admitted that the force of the military’s response “may have been considered excessive by some.” Although the government in fact court-martialed some military officials involved in the events of 2017, human-rights groups maintain that the probe was neither wide nor deep, and that the offenders were given light sentences.

The case could take years before a final ruling, but Gambia has asked the ICJ for an order of provisional measures to protect the Rohingya. If an order is issued, it will likely be a signal for the United Nations Security Council to consider a binding resolution laying out consequences for genocidal acts on the part of the Tatmadaw. Rulings on provisional measures are usually made quickly in the ICJ, and a decision could come in early 2020.

### Cybersecurity and the 5G Debate

On Oct. 3 the United States and ASEAN conducted their first [formal dialogue](#) on cybersecurity, an outgrowth of a joint statement released at the US-ASEAN meeting on the margins of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Bangkok in August. The dialogue took place in Singapore and co-chaired by Laos and the United States. The joint statement issued after the dialogue indicated that the group discussed 5G wireless networks, the digital economy, and cyber capacity-building. As with most new forms of cooperation between ASEAN and its external partners, however, the primary “deliverable” was the meeting itself. It is expected that the dialogue will continue on an annual basis, but no firm plans for a 2020 meeting have been made.

Three main partners have emerged for ASEAN to help strengthen cybersecurity: Japan, the United States, and the European Union. There is no clear division of labor among these three as yet, but a rudimentary framework is beginning to emerge. Japan has become the primary provider of expertise and funds for training in cybersecurity, primarily through the ASEAN-Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Center (AJCCBC) in Bangkok, which opened in 2018. Courses in cyber defense, forensics, and malware analysis are included in the curriculum.

The European Union provides assistance in regulatory reform for cybersecurity, through dialogue and through the negotiation of its free

trade agreements with individual ASEAN states. As in other areas of regional integration, ASEAN looks to the EU as a model for the role of cybersecurity in economic integration.

It is not yet clear what role the United States will play in this division of labor other than convening regional dialogues. One blot in Southeast Asia's perception of Washington as an neutral broker in cybersecurity is the intense campaign to dissuade Southeast Asian countries from acquiring 5G networks from Chinese companies such as Huawei Technologies. Below the regional level, however, the United States provides considerable bilateral assistance on cybersecurity to ASEAN states, primarily through military-to-military relations.

Most Southeast Asian states are on the fence about the choice of a 5G provider, and some are attempting to split the difference between China and the West. In October the Viettel Group, Vietnam's largest mobile carrier, announced that it would launch a trial service of 5G networks in Lao; the group already operates in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar. While Viettel rejects using equipment from Huawei domestically, it has not specified whether it will use Chinese technology for its networks in other parts of Southeast Asia. Viettel is owned by Vietnam's Ministry of National Defense, and its technology choices carry considerable weight in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia.



Figure 3 Southeast Asia hopes to side-step pressure from Washington to choose between Chinese or Western 5G providers. Photo: aspistrategist.org.au

### Political Transitions and Adjustments

When Indonesian President Joko Widodo's announced his cabinet picks in October, [his choice](#) of his chief political rival, former Gen. Prabowo Subianto, as defense minister was

motivated largely by a desire to prevent Prabowo's party, Gerindra, from blocking government reform initiatives. Prabowo also has more support from Indonesia's Islamic community, and his inclusion in the cabinet, as well as that of Vice President Ma'ruf Amin (himself a cleric), was designed to shore up critical religious support.

When he was elected to a second term in April, Joko Widodo made clear that his main policy priorities would be economic, to stimulate growth and help Indonesia avoid the "middle income trap." These include attracting more investment for Indonesia, developing human capital, job creation, and infrastructure spending. Although his investment goals have an obvious international dimension, this list is largely domestic. That the newly reelected president has planned no major new initiatives in foreign policy was reinforced with his re-appointment of Retno Marsudi as foreign minister.

To encourage this economic reform and public acceptance of it, the cabinet is a mixture of political figures, technocrats, and a few young entrepreneurs who Joko hopes will attract support from Indonesia's millennials (42% of Indonesians are under age 25). Although he is not a member of the economic team per se, the surprise appointment of 35-year-old Harvard-trained Nadiem Makarim, founder of the ride-sharing Gojek, as minister of culture and education is considered a nod to the "new economy."

In Thailand, the challenge for Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha has been less in forming a Cabinet and more in managing the unwieldy government coalition in Parliament. His civilian pro-military government, formed after March elections after five years of junta rule, began with an 19-party coalition. His backup is the appointed senate, most of whose 250 members come from or were chosen by the military. Nevertheless, in the lower house the ruling coalition holds only a slim margin, which will make the passage of each budget or major law a challenge for Prayuth. Historically, large government coalitions stimulate money politics in Thailand and raise corruption, which in turn increases the chances of a military takeover.

For the time being, however, the political focus is on Thailand's second-largest opposition party, the Future Forward Party, and its



embattled leader, tycoon Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit. On Nov. 20 Thantahorn was [convicted](#) by the Thai Constitutional Court of conflict of interest, having made investments in a media company while he was campaigning for Parliament, and the court stripped him of his parliamentary seat. FFP leaders fear an attack on the party itself through the courts, a repeat of the dissolution of two pro-Thaksin parties in the late 2000s. On Dec. 16 Thanathorn was charged by police with leading a public protest against perceived judicial activism against the FFP, although the legal basis for the charges was not clear.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia has had little problem quelling his own political opposition. On Nov. 7 Sam Rainsy, an exiled leader of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), the main opposition group, attempted to fulfill a longstanding promise to return to Cambodia, taking a Thai Airways flight from Paris to Bangkok and onward to Phnom Penh. Hun Sen made strong protests to the Thai government, and Rainsy was [not permitted](#) to board the flight in Charles de Gaulle Airport. Mu Sochua, the exiled vice president of the CNRP, also attempted to enter Cambodia but returned to the United States after having been detained in both Bangkok and [Kuala Lumpur](#). Rainsy and Sochua had hoped to reach Phnom Penh by Nov. 9, Cambodian Independence Day. However, partly to defuse international protest over treatment of Rainsy and Sochua, Hun Sen [released](#) CNRP leader Kem Sokha from house arrest in Phnom Penh.

### Looking Ahead

In 2020, ASEAN leaders are bracing for a tumultuous year in US politics that will likely sideline US-Southeast Asian relations further. By the end of 2019, few governments had said definitively that they would attend a US-ASEAN Summit in the United States, wary that the meeting would be an attempt to divert attention from a Senate trial over Trump's impeachment.

More seriously, Southeast Asian leaders fear that they will be drawn into US efforts to move to more "maximum pressure" policies on both Iran and North Korea in 2020, given deteriorating US relations with both countries. Tehran is not a major player in the region, but has recently pressed for stronger relations with ASEAN and acceded to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2018. Greater US-Iran

tensions could also raise the terrorism threat in Southeast Asia: Hezbollah cells have been uncovered in the region [in the past](#). Early in the Trump administration, Southeast Asian governments were pressured by Washington to cut diplomatic and economic ties with North Korea; the apparent downturn in Trump's rapport with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un will likely cause a return to that pressure.

US-China relations will continue to complicate Southeast Asian dynamics with China in 2020. Conclusion of a second phase of the US-China trade agreement in 2020 is unlikely, leaving questions about the nature and direction of global trade up in the air. As the 2020 ASEAN Chair, Vietnam will welcome Washington's rhetoric against Chinese activities in the South China Sea but that is not likely to alter fundamental dynamics. Nevertheless, Hanoi and other security partners will seek to deepen security relations with the United States. The 2020 campaign and election all but guarantees a distracted US government at the highest levels. In this interval, Southeast Asian leaders will look for, and likely receive steadier attention from US Indo-Pacific Command than from the White House.

# CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

**Sept. 2-6, 2019:** The first ASEAN-US Maritime Exercises [are conducted](#), involving eight warships, four aircraft from seven countries, and more than 1,000 personnel representing the 10 ASEAN member states and the US. Co-led by the US and Thai navies, the exercises had shore-based activities in Thailand, Singapore, and Brunei and a sea phase in international waters, including the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea.

**Sept. 3-6, 2019:** Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources Francis Fannon travels to Thailand to attend the ASEAN Ministers of Energy meeting and related regional energy conferences. Fannon's trip was also intended to advance the new Japan-US Mekong Power Partnership (JUMPP) announced in August 2019.

**Sept. 12, 2019:** Senior leaders of US Army Pacific and the Royal Thai Army come together for a [handover](#) of Stryker helicopters, which Thailand purchased through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program. The Strykers are symbolic of the restoration of full military-to-military relations following Thailand's general elections in March 2019.

**Sept. 16-20, 2019:** Idaho National Guard soldiers and airmen participate in an [expert exchange](#) with members of the Cambodian Armed Forces at the UN Peacekeeping Operations Center in Phnom Penh. They trained with member of Cambodia's Peacekeeping Directorate preparing to deploy to several countries for mine clearance activities.

**Sept. 23, 2019:** On the margins of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, President Donald Trump and Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien-Loong [renew](#) the 1990 US-Singapore Memorandum of Understanding Regarding United States Use of Facilities in Singapore, extending the agreement for another 15 years.

**Sept. 24, 2019:** US House of Representatives passes HR 3190, the Burma Unified Rigorous Military Accountability Act of 2019, which seeks to tighten sanctions on Myanmar and strengthen support for the Muslim Rohingya. The bill is under consideration by the Senate.

**Sept. 24, 2019:** US announces an additional [\\$127 million](#) in humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees and host communities in Bangladesh, as well as to internally displaced Rohingya in Rakhine State. Since the outbreak of violence in Rakhine in August 2017, the US has contributed \$669 million in humanitarian aid.

**Sept. 27-Oct. 4:** Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs Marie Royce [visits Thailand and Myanmar](#). In Bangkok she attends the 2019 Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) meeting. In Myanmar she delivers remarks on elections and the importance of democracy at the American Center in Yangon.

**Oct. 2-5, 2019:** Marines and sailors from the Boxer Amphibious Ready Group and the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit participate in [Tiger Strike exercises](#) in Malaysia to promote interoperability between US and Malaysian armed forces.

**Oct. 3, 2019:** US and ASEAN convene first session of the US-ASEAN [Cyber Dialogue](#) in Singapore, co-chaired by the United States and Laos, and addresses 5G technology, the digital economy, and cyber capacity building.

**Oct. 15-21:** US and Philippine navies and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force conduct Third Annual Maritime Training Activity Sama Sama. [The exercises](#) feature both shore-based and at-sea activities.

**Oct. 20, 2019:** Joko Widodo is [inaugurated](#) as president of Indonesia for a second term, after winning the April 2019 election with 55.5% of the popular vote against Prabowo Subianto. He is sworn in under high security, since an Islamic State-linked bombing plot related to the election was foiled in the early summer. On Oct. 23 Joko announces his new Cabinet, with a surprise appointment of former general Prabowo Subianto as defense minister.

**Oct. 24-26, 2019:** Adm. John Aquilino, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, [visits Singapore](#), his first trip to the country in his current capacity.

**Oct. 27-Nov. 1, 2019:** On his way to the East Asia Summit in Bangkok, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell makes two first-time trips to Southeast Asian countries in his new capacity. He visits Myanmar [Oct. 27-30](#), which trip includes Rakhine State where he meets government and community leaders, as well as with victims of violence in the ethnic conflict. In Malaysia Oct. 30-Nov. 1, Stilwell follows an agenda that touches on the full complement of policy areas in the US-Malaysia relationship.

**Oct. 31, 2019:** US Department of Justice announces that it has struck a deal to [recoup \\$1 billion in funds](#) allegedly looted from the 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) by fugitive financier Jho Low, by seizing assets Low was holding in the US, including a private jet and real estate in Beverly Hills. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad responded with a statement that Malaysia would file a claim on the forfeited assets.

**Nov. 2, 2019:** Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom [Sam Brownback](#) visits Thailand to deliver remarks at the 5th Annual Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief Conference.

**Nov. 3, 2019:** 2019 Indo-Pacific Business Forum, co-chaired by Thailand and the United States, opens in Bangkok. It brings together nearly 1,000 government officials, private sector actors, and analysts to expand cooperation in areas such as energy, infrastructure, and the digital economy. On the margins of the forum, the US and ASEAN [announce](#) that they will begin formal negotiations to streamline customs procedures through the ASEAN Single Window.

**Nov. 3, 2019:** The State Department releases [progress report](#) on implementation of the US whole-of-government strategy for the Indo-Pacific region, presented on the margins of the East Asia Summit (EAS) by Keith Krach, undersecretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy Security and the Environment.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** The 14th East Asia Summit is held in Bangkok. Eighteen governments participated in the summit, which was chaired by Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, the 2019 ASEAN Chair. Compared to previous years, the US delegation was reduced, represented by Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** Protesting scaled-down US representation at the EAS, seven of 10 ASEAN governments reduce their representation at the follow-on US-ASEAN Summit by sending their foreign ministers rather than heads of government.

**Nov. 16-18, 2019:** The 6th iteration of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus, the only official Defense Ministers dialogue framework in the Asia-Pacific region, is held in Bangkok. The 10 ASEAN defense ministers and their counterparts from the US, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and Russia participate.

**Nov. 16, 2019:** On the margins of the ADMM-Plus, US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper meets Prabowo Subianto, newly appointed Indonesian minister of defense. They agree to expand military education for Indonesian armed forces.

**Nov. 19-20, 2019:** Esper makes [first visit](#) to the Philippines in his new capacity. He meets Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana and Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin. In response to continued pressure from Manila to review the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, Esper reiterates the US commitment to the MDT.

**Nov 20–22, 2019:** Esper visits Vietnam in his new role. [In a speech](#) at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, he accuses China of using coercion against smaller Asian nations to impose its will in the South China Sea. In a meeting at the headquarters of the Vietnamese Communist Party he expresses strong US opposition to “violations of international law by China and excessive claims in the South China Sea.” Esper also announces that the US will provide Vietnam’s Coast Guard with a surplus US ship in 2020.

**Nov. 21–22, 2019:** Amb. Nathan Sales, State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism, visits Manila to discuss joint US-Philippine efforts to stem terrorism financing.

**Dec. 9, 2019:** Esper and Singaporean Minister of Defense Ng Eng Hen meet on the sidelines of the Reagan National Defense Forum in Washington and sign a nonbinding MOU to establish a Singapore Air Force permanent fighter training facility in Guam. Training will commence in 2029.

**Dec. 9, 2019:** The State Department [designates](#) Cambodian government official Kun Kim, his wife, and children as foreign officials involved in significant corruption under Section 7031(c) of the 2019 State Department Authorization Act. Kun Kim was a senior general in the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and allegedly profited from relationships with a Chinese state-owned enterprise. The Treasury Department subsequently announces that it will impose sanctions on him.

**Dec. 10, 2019:** Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte approves a recommendation to [end martial law](#) in the southern Philippines, more than two years after the Armed Forces of the Philippines defeated militants linked to the Islamic State (IS), who took over the city of Marawi for 5 months in 2017.

**Dec. 10–13, 2019:** Commander of the US Pacific Fleet Adm. John Aquilino [visits Thailand](#) to strengthen relations with the Thai Navy and to witness the procession of the Royal Barge.

**Dec. 11–13, 2019:** US and Indonesia convene a Nuclear Security Insider Threat Mitigation Workshop in Serpong, Indonesia, bringing to completion eight years of cooperation to strengthen nuclear security in Indonesia.

**Dec. 11–14, 2019:** James Richardson, State Department director of US foreign assistance resources, [visits Vietnam](#) to review US assistance under the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership. On Dec. 13 he tours Bien Hoa Airbase, where USAID is helping to design a plan to remediate the largest remaining hotspot of dioxin contamination in Vietnam. On Dec. 5 the US and Vietnamese governments officially launched [remediation operations](#) at Bien Hoa; the US has committed to provide \$300 million to restore the airbase and surrounding areas.

**Dec. 14, 2019:** Myanmar State Counselor Aung Sang Suu Kyi addresses the International Court of Justice in The Hague, responding to charges of genocide by Myanmar against Muslim Rohingya.

**Dec 16, 2019:** Thai police [file charges](#) against Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, leader of the opposition Future Forward Party, for mounting a public demonstration to protest government actions against the FFP. On Nov. 20 the Thai Constitutional Court stripped Thanathorn of his seat in Parliament for having invested in a media company while he was a candidate in the March election.

**Dec. 16–18, 2019:** Assistant Secretary of State Stilwell visits Hanoi to commemorate the [25th anniversary](#) of the normalization of US-Vietnam relations and discuss priorities for Vietnam’s chairmanship of ASEAN in 2020 and its term membership on the United Nations Security Council in 2020–2021.

**Dec. 18, 2019:** The State Department re-designates Myanmar as one of 10 “Countries of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, for having engaged in or tolerated “systemic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom.” The primary reason for designating Myanmar, the only listed Southeast Asian country, is the repression of Muslim Rohingya.

**Dec. 23, 2019:** The *Abraham Lincoln* carrier strike group, commanded by Rear Adm. Michael Boyle, [hosts leaders](#) of the Royal Thai Army, Navy, and Air Force to allow them to see US naval carrier operations firsthand.

PACIFIC FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

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C O N N E C T I O N S

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

**CHINA- SOUTHEAST ASIA**

## **BEIJING LEADS REGIONAL AGENDA, REJECTS US CHALLENGES**

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The annual heads of government regional meetings convened by ASEAN leaders in Bangkok, topped by the 14<sup>th</sup> East Asian summit on Nov. 4, saw Beijing's leaders set the pace for slow-moving negotiations on a China-ASEAN Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. They also celebrated the conclusion of negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a trade accord that excludes the United States.

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The annual heads of government regional meetings convened by ASEAN leaders in Bangkok, topped by the 14th East Asian summit on Nov. 4, saw Beijing's leaders set the pace for slow-moving negotiations on a China-ASEAN Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. They also celebrated the conclusion of negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a trade accord that excludes the United States.

These achievements contrasted with sharp attacks by the US delegation, led by National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, on Chinese bullying to compel acceptance of China's wide-ranging claims to the South China Sea, which have been found illegal by a UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) arbitration panel. Chinese media and lower-level officials rebuked the Americans for their efforts at getting regional support to thwart China's commanding influence in Southeast Asia. Underlining American weakness, they noted the less-prominent US officials attending the meetings, seeing "White House indifference" to ASEAN and regional matters.

For China, the highlight of the meetings was the end of RCEP negotiations, a seven-year process involving the 10 ASEAN members and six other Asia-Pacific countries (China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand), with India dropping out at the last minute. Chinese officials and [media](#) saw the achievement as a "milestone" for greater economic integration and development in East Asia. The agreement countered what Beijing saw as the "rampant unilateralism and protectionism" from the US-initiated trade war with China. It fostered momentum for China-backed efforts to reach agreements on an enhanced China-ASEAN free trade area and a China-Japan-Korea free trade area and to follow through with the China-ASEAN agreement announced at the Bangkok meetings. This would integrate China's Belt and Road Initiative with the master plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025.

As US trade with China declined over the past year, official Chinese [commentary](#) placed more emphasis on ASEAN's importance for China's development and trade. ASEAN became China's second-largest trading partner in January 2019. Total trade in 2018 was valued at \$587.8 billion. For the first 11 months of 2019 the value increased 12%, fastest among China's three top trading partners (the European Union, ASEAN,

and the United States), with China-ASEAN leaders discussing in the Bangkok meetings the possibility of soon reaching a bilateral annual trade level of \$1 trillion.

Positive [publicity](#) on conclusion of the RCEP talks also included reference to the difficulties and shortcoming during the 28 rounds of consultations—and 18 rounds of ministerial meetings—leading to the final pact. The RCEP process established trade rules seen to fill the gaps in the weakening WTO-led world trading system. Unlike the recently concluded 11-member Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement and the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, RCEP was viewed as giving priority to developing countries, with relatively less emphasis on "high standards" and "openness."

At the Bangkok meetings, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang urged his ASEAN counterparts to keep making steady progress in following the "agreed timetable" on achieving the Code of Conduct for the South China Sea. The first reading of the text of the draft code was completed in July 2019. Li called for completing the second reading of the draft code in 2020, which he said would lay a "solid foundation" for completion of the negotiations before the end of 2021.

The overall low priority of the above issues in Southeast Asia in current Chinese foreign policy seemed evident in State Councilor and Foreign Minister's Wang Yi's year-end [address](#) at a symposium on Chinese Foreign Relations in 2019. The RCEP pact, the upgrading of the China-ASEAN FTA, and progress on the Code of Conduct were noted positively, as were achievements in Southeast Asia as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) involving the China-Laos Railway and the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway. Wang devoted special attention to criticizing abrupt US cutbacks in economic and other exchanges with China and related US efforts to undermine China's sovereignty regarding Hong Kong, Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Tibet. But there was no mention of US challenges to China and its sovereign claims in the South China Sea or other issues in Southeast Asia. In an end-of-year interview on Chinese television later in December, Wang also was optimistic about South China Sea developments.

## Military Tensions in the South China Sea — Serious Trouble Ahead?

Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe strongly criticized US infringements on Chinese sovereignty in a keynote address to the Xiangshan Forum in China in October. Meeting with US Defense Secretary Mark Esper on the sidelines of the ASEAN and dialogue partners' defense ministers' meetings in Bangkok in November, Wei [warned](#) specifically against US military activities in the South China Sea. He urged Esper to “stop flexing muscles” in the South China Sea and avoid provocation and escalating tensions in the South China Sea. Related official Chinese complaints over ongoing US military exercises and freedom of navigation exercises challenging Chinese island claims in the sea were handled in a routine way, consistent with recent practice.

Chinese muscle flexing to counter the US came in the Dec. 17 commissioning of China's second aircraft carrier, *Shandong*, with President Xi Jinping participating in a ceremony at a naval base in Hainan Island in the South China Sea, where the carrier is stationed. In November, China undertook naval aviation warplanes exercises, which commentary in official Chinese media said were substantially more advanced than previous exercises in preparing for confrontation with foes in the sea.



Figure 1 The Chinese navy's second aircraft carrier, *Shandong*. Photo: National Interest

The Chinese and US militaries also competed in relations with Southeast Asian nations. Following China's first naval exercise with ASEAN in 2018, the United States and ASEAN carried out their first maritime exercise in September 2019. In November, China hosted an antiterrorism exercise involving 800 officers from ASEAN countries and dialogue partners from the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-

Plus, in which both the United States and China participate.

Cooperation between the United States and its allies and partners in challenging Chinese interests in the South China Sea remains a serious Chinese concern. Japan and Australia have long been targets of Chinese criticism for working with the US against China. A Chinese government South China Sea [expert](#) in September focused on European powers – France, Great Britain, and Germany – issuing statements in support of the United States in opposition to Chinese militarization of the South China Sea on island claims the UNCLOS tribunal deemed illegal. Vietnam, the incoming chair of ASEAN, and Japan also were said to have lobbied for the European statements challenging China in the South China Sea. France and Great Britain have sent naval forces to the South China Sea challenging China, as has India. In November, a US Merchant Marine vessel conducted a publicized replenishment-at-sea operation with an Indian warship in the sea.

Philippines-based South China Sea expert Richard Heydarian [argued](#) in December that Chinese competition with the US needs to take account of the strong regional role played by Japan, America's closest Asian ally. Japan has been strengthening coast guard forces and the maritime domain awareness capacity of Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines; it provided Manila reconnaissance aircraft and an armored vehicle unit. On the economic front, Japan remained ahead of China in investment in Southeast Asia and in competition for financing and the building of large infrastructure projects. Fitch Solutions placed the value of Japan's infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia at \$367 billion, vs \$255 billion for China's. Japan was well-ahead of China in Vietnam and the Philippines.

### Coercing South China Sea Claimants

The Thayer Consultancy Background Briefs and the CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative Briefs thoroughly covered China's continued coercive efforts in the South China Sea against Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines during this reporting period. The Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia are key instruments Beijing uses to compel these claimants to acquiesce to China's presence in their exclusive economic zones (EEZs). China also presses the claimants to have the proposed Code of Conduct

preclude coastal states from employing international oil firms to develop offshore resources and preclude the US and other outside powers from conducting military operations in the South China Sea. At year's end, China's Coast Guard and Maritime Militia sustained an intimidating presence in key South China Sea locations claimed by others, including Luconia Shoal (claimed by Malaysia), as well as Second Thomas Shoal and Scarborough Shoal (claimed by the Philippines).

The major confrontation between Vietnam and China that began in June continued into October. The Chinese Coast Guard's harassment of resupply ships for a gas drilling vessel employed by the Russian firm Rosneft, carrying out work for Vietnam, was followed by a Chinese survey vessel, starting in July, surveying a large area of seabed close to the Vietnamese coast but within the boundaries of China's nine-dash line. The Vietnamese reportedly sent "dozens" of protests and eventually complained publicly about the Chinese survey vessel and its accompanying Chinese Coast Guard forces. They also reportedly mobilized 50 ships to face off with the Chinese forces. On Oct. 22, the Vietnamese-employed drilling vessel stopped its work and went to a Vietnamese port. The day after, the Chinese survey vessel stopped its work and, with its accompanying Coast Guard vessels, returned to Hainan Island.



Figure 2 A Chinese oil survey ship. Photo: SCMP

The impasse continued to fester. Most notably, Vietnam's deputy foreign minister, in an address to a conference in Hanoi on Nov. 6, said Vietnam would look to arbitration and litigation if negotiations with China did not result in solutions. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson responded two days later with a [warning](#) that Vietnam "needs to avoid taking actions that may complicate matters or

undermine peace and stability in the South China Sea as well as our bilateral relations."

#### Outlook

US specialist Oriana Skylar Mastro, writing in *The Economist* in early November, argued that these dynamics indicated serious trouble ahead for the South China Sea situation. Later that month, Philippines-based Heydarian also forecast higher tensions as "the United States and China have doubled down on their struggle for dominance in the South China Sea." China's most prominent South China Sea expert Wu Shicun [agreed](#), arguing that the US-China competition will "heat up" the South China Sea, posing the most important threat to regional stability. Thus far, these assessments have not resulted in dire predictions from the senior ranks of concerned governments, though the situation is volatile and tense.

#### China-Philippines Relations—Positives and Negatives

On the positive side, in late August it was [reported](#) that the Chinese side accepted responsibility and was making compensation for the sinking of a Philippines fishing boat in the disputed Reed Bank of the South China Sea, which prompted a public outcry in the Philippines in June. Duterte disclosed on Sept. 11, following his visit to Beijing in late August, that Xi offered a lucrative 60-40 split favoring the Philippines on gas from proposed joint development in Reed Bank. The main requirement was that the Philippines "set aside" the 2016 UNCLOS arbitral ruling. Duterte did not say if he accepted Xi's offer.

September reports said the Philippines [put aside](#) US and allied warnings about Chinese penetration of communications systems and moved ahead with deals involving control of Philippines communications by Chinese firms Huawei and China Telecommunications Corporation, including deals involving Philippines armed forces' communications. In a gesture to China in November, Duterte's government reversed the previous government's practice of refusing to stamp Chinese passports displaying a map showing China's expansive South China Sea claims.

On the negative side, China continued deploying intimidating Coast Guard forces against Philippine outposts and claimed territories in



the South China Sea, Chinese survey vessels in sensitive Philippines territorial waters, and the use of flares to warn away Philippines reconnaissance aircraft from areas Manila claims. Major gaps in the implementation of deals on Chinese financing of infrastructure and other assistance to the Philippines, signed during Duterte's visit there three years ago, have become subject to criticism and ridicule. In September, Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin [told](#) the Asia Society in New York that "we signed up to this and that agreement [with China], but they hardly materialized." Locsin also [spoke](#) against China's pressure tactics in Code of Conduct negotiations, advising that, in the end, the code will involve "a manual for living with a hegemon or the care and feeding of a dragon in your living room." Against this background, the US alliance is widely seen in the Philippines military and other parts of the government as an essential foundation of the country's security. The military has avoided substantial interchange and exercises with Chinese counterparts while carrying out an active agenda of exercises and other interchange with the United States.

### Briefly Noted

The intensifying US-China rivalry heads the list of factors causing regional countries to maneuver for a better position amidst changing regional dynamics, with many hedging against one or the other power.

### Malaysia

Relations with China generally continued on the upswing that began a few months after the installment of the Mahathir government in 2018. Mahathir reportedly [told](#) a New York audience in September that Malaysia is too small to confront China over the Chinese ships surveying its waters for oil and gas without permission. "We watch what they are doing, we report what they are doing, but we do not chase them away or try to be aggressive," he said. Mahathir offered a similar rationale for avoiding criticism of harsh Chinese treatment of Muslim Uighurs in China's Xinjiang region. Tilting toward China on issues sensitive to the United States, Malaysia declared in September that it was open to the controversial firm Huawei building its 5G network, and Mahathir in November called for ASEAN to unite against Trump administration trade policies. A notable exception to this pattern came on Dec. 12 with

Malaysia's new submission to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf implicitly challenging China's South China Sea claim. The Malaysian foreign minister subsequently told a media interviewer that China's South China Sea claim was "ridiculous."

### Thailand

China substantially advanced its military sales relationship with Thailand as a result of September's signing of a contract for a Chinese firm to build an amphibious transport dock ship for Thailand—the largest ship ever produced by China for export. Also, that month saw the start of construction of the first of three submarines Thailand agreed to buy from China, putting the program on course for the subs' delivery over the next decade. In November, Li Keqiang followed the ASEAN-convened summit meetings in Bangkok with an official visit to Thailand marked by agreements to synchronize the BRI with Thai development strategies. China has been Thailand's largest trading partner since 2013; annual trade is valued at about \$85 billion and more than 10 million tourist visits by Chinese to Thailand in 2018 represented about 28% of the foreign tourists entering the country.



Figure 3 Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha meets Premier Li Keqiang in Bangkok. Photo: Reuters

### Singapore

In September the United States renewed its agreement allowing US forces access to the city state's naval and air bases until 2035. Singapore is the main maintenance center for US forward-deployed Littoral Combat Ships in the Pacific. Reflecting a careful balance, Singapore in May agreed to deepen military ties with China, with a second joint naval exercise in 2020, following one in 2015. The two countries' defense

ministers met in October and worked out the details of the enhanced military relationship.

#### *Cambodia*

Cambodia is widely viewed as the Southeast Asian country most closely aligned with China. For many years it has followed China's interests in thwarting efforts by Vietnam and others to register complaints about Chinese claims and pressures on the South China Sea in ASEAN pronouncements. It is reportedly preparing the way for China to establish its first foreign military base on the South China Sea in Cambodia. Nevertheless, strongman leader Hun Sen responded positively to Trump administration efforts to improve relations by toning down attention to differences over human rights and free elections. The Cambodian leader welcomed Trump's invitation to attend a planned US-ASEAN summit in the United States in 2020.

#### *Laos*

Another Southeast Asian country heavily dependent on and aligned with China, Laos warmly welcomed November's extended visit by one of the seven members of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee. In December, it took part in its first ever joint military exercise with Russia and publicized details of Laos' longstanding arms sales and related military technical cooperation with Russia. Whether China has been consulted on such sensitive ties remains unknown but Russia's advantage in this area shows in 2010-2017 arms sales to Southeast Asia, valued at \$6.6 billion versus \$1.8 billion for China and \$4.58 billion for the United States.

#### *New Zealand*

A close ally of Australia and one of the "five eyes" countries (along with the United States, Australia, Canada, and Great Britain) sharing sensitive intelligence, Wellington is wary of Chinese influence operations and Huawei even as it fosters close economic ties with China. A defense white paper in October dealing with the Pacific Islands, long an area of keen strategic interests to New Zealand, took aim at self-serving Chinese ambitions leading to adverse consequences. Beijing, for its part has emphasized a proposal that New Zealand serve as the "southern link"—a way station between

China and its burgeoning economic relationships with South America.

#### *Australia*

The prime minister's office in December set up a "foreign interference task force" to protect the country from foreign influence operations. It came after disturbing events in November involving China:

1. A self-proclaimed Chinese intelligence officer based in Australia, who told the media he was employed in clandestine operations to influence politics in Hong Kong and Taiwan, attempted to defect and seek asylum in Australia.
2. A businessman was found dead after telling authorities about a Chinese plot to install him in Parliament. China media endeavored to debunk and discredit the alleged intelligence operative's story.

#### *The Pacific Islands*

Media reports said large Chinese payments to Solomon Island leaders influenced the government's decision to switch relations from Taipei to Beijing despite the advice of the United States, Australia, and other developed countries. Tuvalu announced, amid a flurry of US statements advising staying with Taiwan, that it would not switch to Beijing. China continued to march forward with its high-level treatment and seemingly generous BRI, to attract Pacific Island states including those closest to the United States: the three members of the Compact of Free Association, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Marshall Islands, and Palau. Only FSM has diplomatic relations with Beijing. In December, Xi welcomed the FSM president for an official visit in Beijing.

#### **Taking Stock, Seeking Improvement—China's Rise in Southeast Asia**

For many years, assessing Chinese influence in the region has continued to involve measuring of economic, military, diplomatic, cultural, and other conventional elements of power and influence. This has resulted in continued debate among specialists regarding the actual strength of Chinese influence; 2019 was no exception. As in the past, some today see China as increasingly dominant, in line with the view of China as a regional hegemon. Others see the United States having strong roots via deep regional involvement, plus willingness and ability to

provide needed security and stability along with a set of values involving rule of law, the right of small nations not to be dominated by big nations, and popular empowerment considered attractive in the region. Others hail the power of ASEAN and Southeast Asian governments' adroitness and resiliency in the face of China's power and US pressure. They highlight efforts by Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia and even the Philippines to strengthen against feared Chinese dominance through individual and collective efforts. A wide array of Southeast Asian leaders urge the United States to avoid pressing ASEAN states to choose between the US and China in their intensifying competition in Asia and the world.

#### *Unconventional Levers of Power and Influence*

The practice of relying on conventional metrics to assess China's rise and its implications is incomplete and no longer viable. China's heretofore often-disguised, hidden, denied, or otherwise neglected unconventional levers of power have been revealed by in-depth studies and reports by the US and other governments, by progressive, moderate, and conservative think tanks—in the US, Europe, Australia, and elsewhere—and by a broad array of investigative journalism and scholarship in Western-aligned countries, plus those around China's periphery. The information casts a broad shadow over Chinese foreign relations that cannot be ignored or dismissed.

Heading the list of China's unconventional sources of power now receiving growing attention is its mendacity, espousing economic globalization while doubling down on a three-decades-long strategy: use of state-directed development polices to plunder foreign intellectual property rights and undermining international competitors with hidden and overt economic coercion, egregious state subsidies, import protection, and export promotion via subsidized products to drive out foreign competition in key industries. The massive profits flow into efforts to achieve dominance in major world industries and build military power to secure China's dominance in Asia. They allow companies like Huawei to attempt to dominate international communications enterprises; the profits support the massive state-directed efforts to lead in high-tech industries that will define global economic and, eventually, military leadership. China may remain "hemmed in" by US and allies/partners in major parts of nearby

Asia, but it may outflank US power with a breakthrough providing high-technology control.

Specific examples of China's unconventional measures to influence Southeast Asia and nearby areas to follow its preferences and undermine the interests of the US and its allies and partners are:

1. Corrupt practices in development projects associated with the Belt and Road Initiative, and earlier involving the military regime in Myanmar, the Arroyo government in the Philippines, the Razak government in Malaysia, and arguably today in the Philippines, Laos, and Cambodia, along with several Pacific Island states.
2. Chinese leaders' corrupt practices, special economic (and other) benefits for the Hun Sen regime of Cambodia, notably during Hu Jintao's stay in the country in 2012. Cambodia then posed as the main obstacle to the Philippines and Vietnam's efforts in ASEAN to challenge Chinese expansionism at their expense in the South China Sea. It later became clear that China used leverage with Hun Sen to develop ports and airfields useful for eventual Chinese military operations in the country.
3. Cambodia joined Laos and Myanmar—also strongly influenced by Chinese largess provided in non-transparent development projects and other means—to shape ASEAN deliberations to emphasize the positives and ignore the negatives of China's expanding influence and control in the region, including the creation, occupation and militarization of South China Sea territories claimed by Southeast Asian states.
4. Chinese influence operations involved special benefits for leading officials and others in Australia, New Zealand, several Pacific Island states, as well as penetration and control of the Chinese diaspora (including student groups), their chambers of commerce, and media, along with other media in Singapore and other regional countries.
5. The BRI worked in tandem with Huawei's subsidized efforts to expand control of regional communications that the US government and others viewed as easing Chinese penetration and manipulation of regional communications, as well as providing Chinese companies with

advantages in the race for leadership in high-tech industries.

6. Beijing's hidden hard sticks, along with BRI carrots, continue in unpublicized coercion of Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, included chilling private warnings to the first two that contesting Chinese claims would lead to defeat in war, and harassment of oil and gas exploitation efforts.

7. Beijing is positioned as key to Myanmar satisfactorily resolving the longstanding differences it has with the impressive armed forces of the Wa state and other nearby independent forces along the Chinese border that have decades of close collaboration with the Chinese security forces. A more recent source of regional leverage comes from China's ever-closer cooperation with Russia in the common aim of weakening the US security position, and those of its allies along Asia's rim. Putin's Russia shows strong support for China in the South China Sea through joint exercises in the sea and criticism of the ruling against China's claim in an UNCLOS tribunal in 2016.

Beijing routinely seeks to disguise and divert attention from the above unconventional uses of power with strong publicity for vague values of "win-win" and "the community of shared future." Nevertheless, the recent wave of government, think tank, journalistic, and scholarly assessments has depicted a formidable authoritarian power determined to remove serious obstacles in its headlong pursuit of interests at the expense of others. The perceived obstacles involve the interests of the United States and its allies and many partners.

Those interests include: a) the rule of law; b) the rights of small nations in contested issues with large nations, including the right to join with other powers in protecting themselves and their interests in the face of dominance; c) transparent, free, and fair economic dealings in line with governance accountable to populations concerned; d) popular political rights—including the rights to dissent and popular empowerment, leading to a government accountable to the people, political freedom, human rights, and democracy; and e) religious freedom and nondiscrimination against minorities.

There is no easy answer for the United States and like-minded states in countering these kinds of often-disguised, hidden, denied, or

otherwise unappreciated unconventional applications of Chinese power. It remains unclear how seriously they impact US and regional interests. What is clear is that they have become more important with China's rise, and that they need careful examination in any assessment of the US rivalry with China and what it means for Southeast Asia.

Gone are the days when the US or other observers could reassure themselves with China's authoritative pledges, throughout the previous decade, that its rise to power would be benign. And Americans can no longer take comfort that continued US support for state sovereignty, accountable governance, investment and free and transparent trade would place them on the side of "the good guys" in world politics, assuming that such practices, along with free and fair economic competition, would assure continued US primacy. The record shows Beijing is unbridled in pursuit of key ambitions, and in Asia, as in much of the world, there are many self-serving, authoritarian, and/or corruptible leaders inclined to side with an enabling China.

In sum, this conundrum and the analysis that goes with it will preoccupy specialists for years to come. One clear impact of the problem is that it weighs heavily in support of those in the US, other Western-aligned countries, and many of China's neighbors who argue against significant improvement in their relations with China without considering thoroughly the negative implications of closer exposure to the guile and mendacity of China's unconventional statecraft. In the short term this impact will intensify the competition between the United States and China, posing difficult choices for them and for regional countries.

# CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

**Sept. 12, 2019:** Vietnam's Foreign Ministry raises objections regarding Chinese survey ship *Haiyang Dizhi 8's* activities in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone and continental shelf, citing a violation of its sovereignty and jurisdiction in the territorial waters.

**Sept. 13, 2019:** Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi and visiting Malaysian counterpart Saifuddin Abdullah meet in Beijing and announce that China and Malaysia agree to set up a new joint dialogue mechanism for discussing South China Sea issues. China has similar bilateral consultative mechanisms on the maritime dispute with Brunei and the Philippines.

**Sept. 16, 2019:** China and Thailand sign a shipbuilding agreement that will see the China State Shipbuilding Corp build and transfer an amphibious transport dock ship for Thailand. The ship is expected to be the Royal Thai Navy's largest navy ship.

**Oct. 1, 2019:** A Pew Research Center [survey](#) finds that public opinion on China among its neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region is turning negative. The regional survey covers five countries, including two Southeast Asian nations, Indonesia and the Philippines. Favorable views of China in Indonesia fell from 73% in 2002 to 36% in 2019.

**Oct. 7, 2019:** Myanmar's Kachin State government [announces](#) that it intends to sign a new deal with China to develop the Namjim Industrial Zone. The project is expected to cost more than \$400 million, including around 500 factories and 5,000 buildings, as well as new paved roads and infrastructure projects in and around the development zone.

**Oct. 20, 2019:** China and Singapore agree to upgrade their defense pact to include more frequent high-level dialogues, the establishment of a bilateral hotline, and larger scale joint military exercises.

**Oct. 23, 2019:** China's Ministry of National Defense pledges to provide \$84 million in aid to Cambodia's national defense, doubling China's military aid to Phnom Penh next year.

**Oct. 23, 2019:** Speaking on the sidelines of the Xiangshan Forum, senior Chinese and Vietnamese defense chiefs agree to deepen bilateral military ties and increase communication and cooperation through the ministerial-level defense policy dialogue mechanism.

**Oct. 24, 2019:** Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte meets visiting Chinese Vice Premier Hu Chunhua in Manila. Both sides agree to "fast-track" bilateral cooperation through the BRI to develop the bilateral comprehensive strategic partnership.

**Oct. 24-26, 2019:** Senior economic officials and business delegations from China and Vietnam meet in Quang Ninh, Vietnam for the ninth conference on bilateral economic corridor cooperation. Established in 2004, the bilateral discussion focuses on increasing cross-border economic ties, transportation and infrastructure links, and tourism.

**Nov. 1-4, 2019:** China and ASEAN mark the 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their strategic partnership in the regional ASEAN-related summit in Bangkok, Thailand, with regional leaders agreeing that ASEAN-China relations are advancing across diplomatic, economic, and security fronts. They finalize negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Regional leaders appear optimistic that ASEAN and China are on track and working toward a timely completion of the Code of Conduct for the South China Sea, citing the first reading of the single draft negotiating text of the regional accord in mid-2019.

**Nov. 18, 2019:** Officials from Cambodia, China, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam [agree](#) to increase regional law enforcement cooperation and cross-border investigations to address the transnational criminal narcotics networks operating in the lower Mekong area.

**Dec. 9, 2019:** Wang visits Myanmar and meets Myanmar's State Counselor and Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi. Both sides pledge to strengthen bilateral cooperation as the two countries celebrate seven decades of diplomatic relations next year. Among other issues, the meeting focuses on the Rakhine issue, with China agreeing to provide repatriation assistance and promote economic development in Rakhine.

**Dec. 16, 2019:** Senior Chinese and Indonesian defense chiefs meet in Beijing to discuss the strengthening of bilateral military and security ties. Indonesia is seeking Chinese support to help develop and modernize its defense and weapon systems.

**Dec. 17, 2019:** Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Quoc Dung calls on China to refrain from engaging in provocations that would undermine regional peace and security in the maritime dispute in 2020, when Vietnam takes over the rotating chairmanship of ASEAN.

**Dec. 22, 2019:** *The New York Times* reports that China is building and developing the longest airstrip at the Dara Sakor International Airport in Cambodia, amid speculation that the airport facilities would turn into a new military base for China. The Cambodian government officially denies the report and insists that there will be no Chinese military presence in Cambodia. Dara Sakor, leased to China for 99 years, is located less than 50 miles from Ream Naval Base, Cambodia's largest naval base. In July, *The Wall Street Journal* reported on a secret draft agreement between China and Cambodia that granted China exclusive access to parts of the Ream Naval Base for three decades.

PACIFIC FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

CHINA- TAIWAN RELATIONS

## ELECTION PORTENDS CONTINUED TENSION

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President Tsai Ing-wen triumphed over her populist Kuomintang (KMT) opponent Han Kuo-yu in Taiwan's January 11, 2020 presidential election, garnering 57.1% of the vote to Han's 38.6%. Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) also retained its majority in the Legislative Yuan (LY), albeit with the loss of some seats to the KMT and third parties. While there has been considerable attention to Beijing's influence operations, the election illustrated Beijing's limited ability to manipulate Taiwan elections. The outcome portends continued deadlock and tension in cross-strait relations in the coming months. Meanwhile, Taipei and Washington have strengthened ties by launching a series of bilateral and multilateral cooperative projects, intended in part to counter both Beijing's influence operations and its continuing diplomatic, economic, and military pressures on Taiwan.

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## Presidential Election Campaign

Throughout the fall campaign, Tsai Ing-wen steadily improved her prospects for winning reelection in the January 11, 2020 presidential election, enjoying a double-digit lead in more reliable December polls. This is a remarkable turn-around from a year ago, when Tsai resigned as DPP party chairperson following her party's devastating losses in the 2018 local elections. At that time, the DPP was demoralized and divided; now Tsai has the party united behind her. Party chairman Cho Jung-tai is her supporter. Lai Ching-de, her primary opponent, served as her running mate. Former presidents Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian have endorsed her candidacy. Despite her moderate approach to relations with China, an alliance of pro-independence groups also supports her reelection.



Figure 1 President Tsai and former Premier Lai register as the presidential and vice presidential candidates of the Democratic Progressive Party. Photo: Taiwan News

Ironically, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Chairman Xi Jinping has played a significant role in Tsai's rebound. In January, Xi forcefully reaffirmed his determination to pursue peaceful reunification under the "one country, two systems" (1C2S) formula. Tsai's prompt rejection of this long unpopular proposal won wide approval. Pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong since June and the CCP's support for their harsh suppression have made clearer in Taiwan the dangers inherent in the 1C2S formula. The democracy demonstrators have evoked strong and sustained public support in Taiwan. A mass sympathy rally took place in Taipei on September 29. Tsai has skillfully drawn parallels emphasizing the need to protect democracy on Taiwan and to oppose the CCP's increasingly authoritarian policies. Tsai has

used existing policies to demonstrate sympathy for Hong Kong by accepting fleeing Hong Kong activists seeking temporary residence in Taiwan and welcoming students from disrupted Hong Kong universities. Beijing's opposition to compromise with democracy activists has fueled continuing demonstrations in Hong Kong, which has kept the issue alive throughout the Taiwan presidential campaign to Tsai's benefit.

Divisions within the KMT opposition and the lackluster and problem-prone campaign of Tsai's opponent, Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu, have also helped Tsai. The KMT primary campaign was divisive. Han's main opponent, former Hon Hai chairman Terry Gou (Kuo Tai-ming) decided to withdraw from the KMT in September and briefly considered running independently. It was not until November that Han chose a running mate, former Premier Simon Chang, and only in December did he appoint a campaign chairman, former party chairman Chu Li-lun. In the face of strong public interest in Hong Kong, Han had difficulty promoting his populist economic message and exploiting public dissatisfaction with Tsai's domestic reforms. Han made unrealistic "get rich quick" promises of economic growth and accused the DPP of pervasive corruption. He made offensive remarks about immigrants, and in October, outrageously described Taiwan as China's "bastard" child. His campaign was hurt by revelations that he owns a luxury apartment unaffordable to ordinary Taiwanese and allegations that his in-laws are operating an unlicensed gravel business. When public opinion polls showed Han's support steadily declining, James Soong, the founder of the People's First Party (PFP) and perennial candidate, saw an opportunity to again enter the presidential race, further dividing the pan-blue base that might otherwise support Han.



Figure 2 KMT presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu. Photo: Reuters



Han has also been hurt by the perception that he is both pro-China and without significant ties with the US. Han has defined himself as the candidate who can restore cross-strait peace and strengthen economic ties with China. However, DPP criticism and the Hong Kong demonstrations have kept Han on the defensive on cross-strait issues. Han has been forced to defend himself by affirming his support for Taiwan's separate interpretation of the 1992 Consensus on One China and his opposition to Beijing's 1C2S formula. After former President Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT said Taiwan should be open to unification, Han had to reiterate that unification was not on his agenda. Throughout the fall, Han considered whether he should visit Washington, as previous opposition candidates have done. In October, he announced that he would not, creating further questions about his relations with the US.

### **The Legislative Yuan Elections**

In addition to the two major parties, three other significant parties and many minor parties contested the LY elections. The PFP shares the pan-blue side with the KMT. The reformist, pro-independence New Power Party (NPP) competes with the DPP on the pan-green side. The Taiwan People's Party (TPP), founded by Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je in August, aims to appeal to the roughly 50% of voters who do not identify with either of the two main parties. The LY elections consist of three parts: 73 single member district seats, 34 party list seats and six seats reserved for Taiwan's original indigenous people.

Here too the DPP is running a reasonably unified campaign, with few disaffected members opting to run against the party's authorized candidates. By contrast, again, the internal struggle within the KMT between candidate Han and party chairman Wu Den-yih has hampered the KMT. The infighting was symbolized by the struggle over the KMT's original party list slate, which included several old-line pro-unification figures and placed Wu high enough on the list to guarantee his election. This proposed list was so harshly criticized within and outside the party that it was revised, with Wu moved lower to a place where he would only be elected if the party did extremely well. Nevertheless, the dissatisfaction with DPP reforms, reflected in the party's local election defeat a year ago is still real, and could result in the KMT doing well in the district LY races.

The TPP is the most interesting new element in the LY races. Mayor Ko has said that ideally the LY should be made up of three parties, none of which has a majority. He clearly aims for the TPP to become the swing party in a new LY. The TPP has nominated 18 district candidates and a party list lead by young, progressive figures. The nominees include some former DPP and KMT members, as well as independents, including one affiliated with Terry Gou. Gou has joined Ko for campaign photos with the TPP candidates, and Ko has hinted at financial support from Gou. Polling indicates that the TPP will draw more support away from the DPP than from the KMT. As the TPP is polling slightly over 10%, it is quite certain that it will win a few seats in the new LY. Despite its recent internal problems, the NPP is also likely to have some members in the new LY. Whether the PFP will be represented remains uncertain.

### **Beijing's Approach**

Beijing is concerned that Tsai will be freer to pursue her "independence" agenda if elected for a second term. That Lai Ching-de is her running mate, and that Lai reiterated after his nomination that he is "realistic worker for Taiwan independence" has reinforced that fear. The DPP retaining a majority in the new LY would only add to Beijing's concerns.

As noted, CCP policy has helped Tsai's campaign and consolidated opposition in Taiwan against the 1C2S formula. The CCP leadership may well believe that crushing the Hong Kong democracy movement will ultimately be beneficial to its Taiwan policy by conveying a message that resistance is impossible. Regardless, Beijing's Taiwan policy has sought to undermine Tsai through constant criticism, through increased international pressures (see below), through election interference, and through continued efforts to integrate Taiwan and to co-opt Taiwanese economically and socially.

The Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) of State Council in Beijing has blamed the DPP for such pressure. After the Solomon Islands switched diplomatic relations to Beijing, *Xiakedao*, a well-connected WeChat account, threatened that if the DPP didn't change its separatist ways, Taiwan's allies could be reduced to zero. When Chinese tourist arrivals were substantially lower in the fall (because of restrictions Beijing imposed earlier in the year), Beijing blamed the DPP and

its independence policies. Each time Taiwan was excluded from an international meeting, the TAO reiterated this was because the DPP had not accepted the 1992 Consensus on One China. When Lai reiterated his pro-independence stance, the TAO said that his remarks threaten cross-strait peace and stability.

At the same time, Beijing has continued to highlight the opportunities available through closer economic cooperation. In early November, the State Council announced 26 new measures, half to benefit Taiwanese companies and half to help Taiwanese individuals on the mainland. The economic measures state that Taiwan companies could compete in several important sectors on an equal basis with domestic companies. The Tsai administration dismissed the new measures as a plot to influence the elections. However, the Taiwan General Chamber of Commerce described some aspects of the measures as concrete and beneficial. In December, a large number of Taiwanese enterprises were invited to Shanghai for a high-profile forum on opportunities for Taiwan in the Yangtze Delta Development Program. In discussing these initiatives, TAO Director Liu Jieyi again stressed that only when cross-strait relations are good can Taiwan grow and Taiwanese prosper. Liu's theme dovetailed with Han Kuo-yu's proposals for strengthening economic ties with China.

### **Countering PRC Influence Operations**

Tsai and officials in her administration have repeatedly expressed concern about the threat of Chinese election interference. KMT officials have seldom mentioned the issue. US Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell and other State Department officials, as well as American Institute in Taiwan Director Brent Christensen have expressed concerns similar to the DPP's.

Beijing's manipulation of traditional and social media and its use of united front contacts to influence the elections have continued. However, it is not easy to document their actions in real time. The press has not reported specific examples of Chinese interference. Most of the stories of social media manipulation have involved Taiwanese. For example, the activities of social media influencer Slow Yang (Yang Huei-ru) and her "green camp internet army" have been in the news, with allegations that she has received funds from the government and

politicians of the main parties to hype particular stories.

Despite the paucity of examples, several incidents have kept the Chinese interference issue before the public. In November, the defection of alleged PRC intelligence officer Wang Liqiang in Australia led to the detention of two possibly related Chinese citizens entering Taiwan on suspicion of election interference and espionage. In December, retired Gen. Luo Wen-shan, chairman of the pro-China Chinese Huangpu Four Seas Alliance Association in Taiwan, was found guilty of accepting NT\$10 million (about US\$333,000) from Hui Chi-ming, a Hong Kong member of Beijing's Chinese People's Political Consultation Conference (CPPCC), and for using the funds to buy election advertisements supporting former President Ma in 2008 and 2012. Taipei prosecutors are investigating several travel agencies and shell organizations for orchestrating a scheme that used false letters of invitation and fictitious itineraries to facilitate the unauthorized travel of CCP officials and operatives to Taiwan. Chang An-le, the founder of the local China Unification Promotion Party (CUPP) has been questioned as part of this investigation.

Washington and the Tsai administration have conducted programs to counter the threat. In September, the US and Taiwan-led Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) conducted its second conference on Defending Democracy Through Media Literacy in Taipei. The US has also assisted Taiwan in urging the US social media companies block Chinese election interference. In November, Google announced that, during the campaign, it would ban platforms related to the Taiwan election and Taiwan election-related advertisements. Facebook announced that it would release the names of election advertisement purchasers and only allow Taiwan citizens to purchase ads. Subsequently, Facebook announced actions it had taken to remove such content.

The DPP has also promoted new legislation to constrain China's influence operations. The initial aim was to pass a "Chinese agents" bill, similar to the US Foreign Agents Registration Act. KMT legislators saw this as a threat to people's freedom of speech and association when taking part in legitimate cross-strait exchanges. As it proved difficult to reach agreement on a definition of a Chinese agent, this legislation was postponed indefinitely. In

late November, the DPP proposed an alternative “anti-infiltration” bill that would penalize persons who accept guidance or funding from China to contribute to political organization, election campaigns and other political activities. The DPP planned to push this bill through the LY by year end. Its plan was roundly criticized in the December TV debates and in numerous public forums by the KMT and other pan-blue actors on both substantive and procedural grounds. The bill was adopted on Dec. 31. As expected, the TAO criticized both these initiatives as blatant attempts to restrict cross-strait exchanges. In December, the LY also adopted amendments that will broaden the scope and increase penalties under the National Intelligence Service Act. The amendments strengthen means to counter covert election interference.

### Strengthening US-Taiwan Ties

Washington and Taipei took steps to consolidate their already excellent relationship. Most notably, the two governments launched a series of bilateral and multilateral cooperative initiatives that are intended to counter PRC pressure against Taiwan as well as enhance Taiwan’s constructive role within a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).

The State Department released a [report](#) on the execution of its Indo-Pacific vision to date, with Taiwan receiving several mentions. As revealed by the Trump administration in 2017, the US’ Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept rests on three pillars: transparent economics, good governance, and security partnerships.

In light of FOIP’s governance pillar and in recognition of Taiwan’s vibrant democracy as a model for the region, the US and Taiwan held their inaugural meeting of the US-Taiwan Consultations on Democratic Governance in the Indo-Pacific Region on September 12 in Taipei. The forum is intended to “formalize, regularize, and deepen cooperation” between the United States and Taiwan on promoting good governance in the Indo-Pacific. Scott Busby, deputy assistant secretary of state in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor headed the US delegation.

To help Taiwan maintain its remaining diplomatic allies in the South Pacific, as well as counter growing Chinese influence in the region, the US and Taiwan held their first US-

Taiwan Pacific Islands Dialogue on October 7 in Taipei. Ambassadors from Nauru, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands posted to Taiwan attended the dialogue. Sandra Oudkirk, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands represented the United States. The dialogue, to be held annually, will explore ways Washington and Taipei can team up to meet the specific development needs of Taiwan’s Pacific allies.



Figure 3 The Pacific Islands Dialogue was held on Oct. 7, 2019. Photo: AIT

The US, Taiwan, and Japan also organized some workshops under the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF), a platform for Taiwan to share its expertise with the world despite its international isolation. In September, Taipei hosted a GCTF workshop on “Defending Democracy through Media Literacy,” with 12 countries participating. In November, Australia joined the three GCTF sponsoring countries to host a workshop in Taipei on “Good Energy Governance in the Indo-Pacific.” US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Energy Elizabeth Urbanas represented the US side at the forum, which included 11 participant countries, excluding the hosts.

The US military continued to fly and sail around Taiwan even as the PLA reduced military exercises around Taiwan during the campaign. Two US warships made separate voyages through the Taiwan Strait in September and November, bringing the total number of US Navy transits in 2019 to nine. China’s first domestically produced aircraft carrier also passed through the Taiwan Strait on November 17, sending Taiwan fighter jets and navy reconnaissance vessels scrambling. On December 4, two US B-52 bombers stationed in Guam entered Taiwan’s flight information region as it undertook a flight over the East China Sea to airspace south of Okinawa.

Taiwan's *United Daily News* revealed in late November that US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia Heino Klinck had made an unannounced visit to Taipei days earlier. Klinck is the most senior Pentagon official to visit the island in a decade. The same week of Klinck's visit, the LY approved, with KMT support, an \$8.1 billion multi-year special budget for the purchase of 66 F-16 Block 70 fighter aircraft from the United States. In December, Taiwan's Air Industry Development Center (AIDC) and Lockheed Martin announced plans to establish an F-16 maintenance center in Taiwan.

The US Congress advanced some Taiwan-friendly legislation. The Senate on October 29 passed the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act, which would require the executive branch to advocate for Taiwan's membership in international organizations. The House of Representatives is expected to consider the legislation in 2020. The House on December 11 also passed the Fiscal Year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act, which contains provisions encouraging US cybersecurity cooperation with Taiwan and mandates a report detailing Chinese interference in Taiwan's January 11 elections. President Donald Trump signed the authorization bill into law on December 20.

There have been renewed calls for a US-Taiwan free trade agreement by political figures in both Taipei and Washington. Tsai reiterated her desire to sign a trade pact with the United States when meeting Deputy Assistant Secretary of Commerce Ian Steff in December. On December 20, 161 members of the US House of Representatives sent a bipartisan letter to US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, urging USTR to begin discussions with Taiwan on "fair, reciprocal, and high-standard" bilateral trade agreement. US trade negotiators last held formal talks with their Taiwan counterparts in 2016, under the TIFA framework.

### **International Pressure**

Beijing continues to squeeze Taiwan's international space wherever possible and make efforts to poach Taipei's diplomatic partners.

The Solomon Islands government voted to cut ties with Taiwan on September 16. Within the same week, Kiribati, lured by promises of Chinese aid, announced that it was switching

recognition to Beijing. The twin losses concerned Taipei and Washington, who worry Taiwan's four remaining South Pacific allies might follow suit. The US criticized China's actions as destabilizing to the cross-Strait status quo. The Trump administration also announced that it was reassessing its development aid to the Solomon Islands, and Vice President Mike Pence canceled a scheduled meeting with the prime minister of the Solomon Islands at the UN to further demonstrate the consequences of abandoning Taipei. Washington also found ways to cooperate with Taiwan on programs to benefit its remaining allies, such as the Pacific Islands Leadership Program in Taipei.

Taipei continues to make efforts to shore up relations with its 15 remaining allies. In October, Tsai signed an economic cooperation agreement with the president of the Marshall Islands during the latter's four-day visit to Taiwan. Later in the month, Foreign Minister Joseph Wu led a Taiwan business delegation to Paraguay to explore trade opportunities in the agriculture and renewable energy sectors. In November, Taiwan increased its food aid to Haiti, as the latter struggles with food shortages caused by social and political unrest. China, which maintains a trade office in Port-au-Prince, reportedly offered the Haitian government interest-free and concessional loans in early September if it switched sides.

China, in keeping with its practice since 2016, blocked Taiwan's participation in the September assembly of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). Similarly, in November it blocked Taipei's participation in the annual Interpol assembly, and in December its participation in the UN's Climate Change Conference (COP-25) in Madrid.

### **The Trade War's Impact on Taiwan**

Contrary to initial expectations, Taiwan has emerged as a big winner in the US-China trade war. A study released by the UN Conference on Trade and Development in November identifies Taiwan as the biggest beneficiary of redirected Chinese exports to the United States. The report found that Taiwan gained \$4.2 billion in additional exports at China's expense through June 2019, ahead of both Mexico (\$3.5 billion) and Vietnam (\$2.6 billion). This trend continued into the rest of year, with Taiwan exports to the United States growing at 17.8% between June

and November over their 2018 level, according to Taiwan's Ministry of Economic Affairs. The Taiwan government now estimates that Taiwan's GDP growth will reach 2.64% in 2019, while the other former Asian tiger economies will experience weak or negative growth this year. Thanks to Taiwan's trade war gains and the healthy state of its economy overall, the Taiwan Stock Exchange reached a three-decade high in mid-December.

Taiwan suppliers with extensive processing facilities in China, such as Foxconn and TSMC, also narrowly avoided tariff impact in mid-December, thanks to Trump's decision to cancel tariffs on \$165 billion worth of Chinese imports under the announced but not yet finalized Phase 1 US-China trade deal. These "List 4B" tariffs, had they gone into effect, would have for the first time covered smartphones and laptops, for which Taiwan firms supply the bulk of components globally.

While Taiwan has benefitted from US tariffs on China and shifts in the global supply chain, the island's technology firms are caught in the middle of the growing US-China technology war. Taipei's *Economic Daily News* has reported that Huawei has contracted with Foxconn, TSMC, and Largan Precision Co. to produce its 5G phones in 2020. As the US tightens exports controls over technology to China, Washington is beginning to urge its friends and allies to do likewise. Washington in particular is concerned about the export of dual-use items to China. The *Financial Times* reported in early November that US officials have pressed Taipei to restrict the sale of semiconductors by TSMC, Taiwan's largest chip contractor, to Huawei. Nearly 60% of TSMC's revenue is generated from sales to US technology firms, but China is its second largest and fastest growing customer. The Tsai administration denied that Washington had ordered it to restrict tech exports to China.

### Looking Ahead

A number of factors will determine whether Tsai's re-election will merely continue or further exacerbate current cross-strait frictions and tensions. Whether the DPP maintains a majority in the LY will be an important consideration. Another will be how effectively Tsai can reassure Beijing, and Washington, that she will abide by her commitment not to pursue initiatives that provoke the mainland government. Will Lai Ching-de restrain himself?

If Beijing decides to ratchet up military pressure on Taiwan to warn "separatists," that would heighten tension and reverberate in Washington. Another factor will be whether the administration in Washington continues to adhere to its current China policy framework or yield to proposals from some in Congress that would challenge Beijing's redlines. As always, maintaining peace in the strait will require prudence by all parties.

# CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

**Sept. 10, 2019:** A Canadian naval vessel transits the Taiwan Strait.

**Sept. 10, 2019:** GCTF hosts forum on media literacy and disinformation.

**Sept. 11, 2019:** The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council in Beijing spokesman urges the Democratic Progressive Party to stop interfering in Hong Kong.

**Sept. 11, 2019:** Taipei releases the 2019 National Defense Report.

**Sept. 12, 2019:** Scott Busby, the deputy assistant secretary in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor at the US Department of State, launches US and Taiwan Consultations on Democratic Governance in Indo-Pacific.

**Sept. 16, 2019:** The government of the Solomon Islands votes to switch relations from Taipei to Beijing; Taipei severs diplomatic relations.

**Sept. 19, 2019:** Taipei severs diplomatic relations with Kiribati following its decision to switch relations to Beijing.

**Sept. 24, 2019:** The International Civil Aviation Organization Assembly opens with Taipei's participation again blocked.

**Oct. 7, 2019:** Secretary Sandra Oudkirk, US Department of State senior official for APEC and deputy assistant secretary for Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands attends the inaugural US-Taiwan Pacific Islands Dialogue in Taipei.

**Oct. 7, 2019:** US-Taiwan Defense Industry Conference opens in Ellicott City, Maryland.

**Oct. 10, 2019:** US Sen. Ted Cruz attends ROC national Day ceremony in Taipei.

**Oct. 15, 2019:** American Institute of Taiwan (AIT) Chairman James Moriarty meets Tsai in Taipei.

**Oct. 15, 2019:** The Interpol assembly opens with Taipei's participation again blocked.

**Oct. 18, 2019:** Moriarty of the AIT meets Kuomintang presidential nominee and Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu.

**Oct 21, 2019:** Guatemalan President-elect Alejandro Giammattei visits Taipei.

**Oct. 25, 2019:** Marshall Islands President Hilda Heine meets Tsai in Taipei.

**Oct. 29, 2019:** The Legislative Yuan (LY) passes a NT\$250 billion (US\$8 billion) special budget for the F-16 purchase program.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** The State Department releases its Indo-Pacific strategy report, which includes several mentions of Taiwan.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** Beijing bars Chinese participants from the International Air Safety Summit in Taipei.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** The TAO announces 26 new measures to promote cross-strait economic integration.

**Nov. 17, 2019:** Tsai formally announces that former Premier Lai Ching-de will be her running mate.

**Nov. 17, 2019:** New People's Liberation Army Navy aircraft carrier and escorts transit the Taiwan Strait.

**Nov. 20, 2019:** US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia Heino Klinck pays an undisclosed visit to Taiwan.

**Nov. 23, 2019:** The Golden Horse Film Festival and Awards ceremony takes place in Taipei despite a PRC boycott.

**Nov. 25, 2019:** Two PRC citizens are detained as part of an election interference investigation.

**Nov. 26, 2019:** US Congressmen Bill Flores and Guy Reschenthaler meet Tsai.

**Dec. 1, 2019:** UN Climate Change Conference COP 25 opens with Taiwan again barred from participation.

**Dec. 7, 2019:** British Navy vessels transit the Taiwan Strait.

**Dec. 9, 2019:** Deputy Assistant Secretary for Manufacturing at the US Department of Commerce Ian Steff visits Taipei and meets Tsai.

**Dec. 10, 2019:** The Taiwan-US Digital Economic Forum opens in Taipei.

**Dec. 14, 2019:** Facebook removes numerous websites for violating guidelines regarding the Taiwan election.

**Dec. 17, 2019:** Lockheed Martin and AIDC sign an F-16 aircraft maintenance agreement.

**Dec. 18, 2019:** Taiwan signs an updated investment agreement with Vietnam.

**Dec. 21, 2019:** US President Donald Trump Signs the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act, which includes provisions favorable to Taiwan.

**Dec. 26, 2019:** The People's Liberation Army Navy Carrier *Shandong* sails back up Taiwan Strait after its December 17 commissioning.

**Dec. 28, 2019:** Vice President Chen Chien-jen visits Palau.

**Dec. 31, 2019:** The ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) pushes the Anti-Infiltration Bill through the LY.





PACIFIC FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

**NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS**

## STILL NOTHING DOING

AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

2019 was a bad year between the two Koreas, undoing advances made in 2018. North Korea eschewed contact with the South, while continuing with weapons tests, which the South finally protested in November. In a pattern of negativism, Pyongyang hosted (because it had to) a most unsporting inter-Korean soccer match. Both states were hit by swine fever, yet the North refused help from or to share data with the South. In a policy U-turn, Kim Jong Un told South Korea not to revive Mt. Kumgang tourism, but to come and take away its “shabby” and “ugly” facilities built there. Seoul’s stance on the North’s human rights attracted criticism. Yet President Moon Jae-in remained strangely upbeat. His New Year address reiterated a broad agenda for cooperation—whereas a big speech by Kim ignored the South completely. 2020 is unlikely to see any improvement.

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The final four months of 2019 saw no improvement in inter-Korean relations, continuing the pattern already set in the first two-thirds of the year. In stark and sad contrast to 2018's three summits and two meaty treaties, in 2019 Kim Jong Un stomped off the field and took his bat home, so everything which had begun so promisingly ground to a halt. Such a total U-turn can only mean 2018 was a sham: Kim used Moon Jae-in to get to Trump, then ditched him.

Yet Moon continued to exude an odd optimism. Like Dr. Pangloss in Voltaire's timeless satire *Candide*, insisting amid any disaster that "all is for the best, in the best of all possible worlds," South Korea's president seemed unfazed by Northern slings and arrows, including multiple tests of various new weapons systems threatening the ROK. Only in late November did Seoul at last formally protest, over an island artillery drill that it said violated the September 2018 inter-Korean military accord. Much else the South took in stride, with at best mild deprecation. It also showed quixotic persistence in its dogged efforts to send food aid, despite the North's repeated and explicit rejection of any such charity. At this writing, Seoul is still trying.

It is tempting, but inaccurate, to say that the last few months showed North Korea at its worst. The examples of petty spite—sometimes self-defeating—catalogued below pale beside the Kim regime's WMD threats, or its appalling gulags. Yet such recent actions as hosting inter-Korean soccer with no spectators or live feed allowed, noncooperation on swine fever, and threatening to tear down ROK-built (and owned) tourist facilities at Mt. Kumgang—more detail on all these, and more, below—bespeak a wilful nastiness which lacks any justification. For its part South Korea ended its backing for a UN resolution on the North's human rights, and for the first time ever sent two would-be defectors back to certain death. Overall, neither Korean government exactly came up smelling of roses as 2019 drew to a close.

### **Were They Abducted?**

The period under review began with an oldish bone of contention, resurrected. On Sept. 4 the International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL) issued a preliminary report after investigating the "Ningbo 12," a dozen DPRK waitresses who defected en masse from China in 2016. Pyongyang has always maintained that

they were in effect kidnapped, under a deal between their manager—who got them on the plane by telling them they had been assigned new jobs in Malaysia—and the ROK spy agency, the National Intelligence Service (NIS). In July 2018 the manager, Heo Gang-il, seemed to confirm that version of events.

The IADL as such has little credibility. A communist front during the Cold War era, it is still reliably leftwing—note that North Korea's official lawyers' association is an affiliate. Visiting both Koreas, IADL's investigative team received full assistance from the DPRK, but ROK authorities refused co-operation, so they did not actually get to meet the women—who have remained out of the public spotlight, as is their right. In a rather strange move, the ROK authorities gave *Reuters* sight of documents from the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), which investigated the case and confirmed that all the women came to Seoul of their own free will. But the NHRC's report seems unlikely to be published, so many questions remain. Naturally Pyongyang made hay of IADL's report, renewing its demand for the 12 to be repatriated. Yet only one minor DPRK website featured this. The issue is no longer a potential deal-breaker between North and South, as it was when the story broke. Kim Jong Un now has other fish to fry to make Seoul squirm, like Mt. Kumgang.

### **Awkward Anniversary**

September also saw the last of this year's awkward one-year inter-Korean anniversaries, with Southern celebrations marred by the North's absence. The classic case was April's festivities at the DMZ, one year after the first Moon-Kim summit. Artistes from several nations took part, but not North Korea. The Moon government clutched at what straws it could. At a seminar in Seoul on Sept. 16 to mark a year since the two Koreas signed what is now styled their Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA), Jeong Kyeong-doo, the ROK minister of national defense (MND), insisted that this accord does not leave South Korea vulnerable. That rang a little hollow, coming days after yet another DPRK missile test on Sept. 10. KCNA identified this as a "super-large multiple rocket launcher," adding that Kim again oversaw the launch, as he had on the MLR's first outing on Aug. 24. This time, two rockets flew some 330 km east across the peninsula. They could just as easily fly south; it is obvious whom these

advanced new short-range weapons—of several types—threaten.

Yet Seoul has been strangely unwilling to protest. When North Korea began these tests in May, the South was even reluctant to identify what it called “projectiles” as ballistic missiles (BMs), which are banned under UN sanctions. Latterly it does at least call a spade a spade. But still Seoul soft-pedalled its criticisms until Nov. 25, when the Korean People’s Army (KPA) conducted an artillery drill—again guided by Kim—on Changrin, an islet close to the Northern Limit Line (NLL), the de facto maritime border in the Yellow/West Sea. The next day, by its own account, the MND lodged a “strong complaint” at this violation of the CMA, using the inter-Korean military communication line. So at least that is still working.

### Unsporting

October brought what a year earlier would have been two happy inter-Korean encounters of a sporting kind. By chance, the two Koreas were drawn against one another in Group H of the second Asian qualifying round for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, hosted in Pyongyang. In vain did the (South) Korea Football Association (KFA) attempt to make the normal arrangements. All their enquiries, including about broadcasting and bringing a cheering squad, met a stony silence. Only at the last minute did the North admit the South’s team and staffers, but no ROK media or supporters. Not only was the match on Oct. 15 not broadcast, but the stands were virtually empty of spectators. Some intrepid diplomats, notably the Swedish ambassador, did their best to live-tweet the game; they were later reportedly warned to limit their use of social media, especially photographs. A physical and ill-tempered match—Southern players said they were lucky to emerge uninjured—yielded a 0-0 draw. The North provided a DVD to take home, but the video quality was so poor that KBS, the ROK state broadcaster, decided not to air it. Unsurprisingly, the KFA complained to asked the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), asking it to consider punishing North Korea for its uncooperative behavior.

The second encounter went better, no doubt because it was international rather than bilateral—so the DPRK had no choice but to behave. The 2019 Youth and Junior Asian Weightlifting Championships in Pyongyang in late October (20-27), were a qualifying event for

the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Wary after the soccer debacle, South Korea was relieved to finally receive an invitation, albeit at just a few days’ notice. This time, the 65-strong ROK party included two journalists. A gushing [account](#) by the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) said that this “demonstrated the power of sport to unite people in friendly and peaceful competition.” Misleadingly, IWF also said that the ROK team “crossed the border” into the DPRK; in fact they flew in via Beijing, the normal route. Despite Southern fears, the North duly displayed the ROK’s proper name (*Taehan Minguk*), hoisted its flag (the *Taegukgi*) and played its national anthem—all normally anathema in the DPRK—when South Koreans won medals, as they did in five events including one gold. This may have caused the hosts some chagrin. All political ploys aside, weightlifting is one of North Korea’s strongest sports.



Figure 1 ROK triumph and DPRK dejection at the youth weightlifting competition in Pyongyang. Photo: Korea Herald

### Kumgangsan: Tear It All Down?

Meanwhile, Kim Jong Un had other pots to stir. On Oct. 23 the DPRK leader paid his first known visit to Mt. Kumgang (*Kumgangsan*). Specifically, not the fabled eponymous east coast mountain beauty spot as such, but rather the nearby resort facilities, built by Hyundai and other ROK firms in happier times for South Korean tourists. No fewer than 1.8 million made the trip—by sea at first, and later overland—during the Sunshine era (1998-2008). That all ended abruptly in July 2008 when a middle-aged female tourist was shot dead, apparently having taken a wrong turn. North Korea refused to apologise or let the South investigate. The conservative Lee Myung-bak, newly elected as ROK president and no fan of Sunshine, seized

the chance to suspend tourism—which is how matters have remained ever since.

KCNA’s list of the facilities Kim inspected shows how the resort had grown. “Kosong Port, Haegumgang Hotel, House of Culture, Kumgangsan Hotel, Kumgangsan Okryu Restaurant, Kumgang Pension Town, Kuryong Village, Onchon Village, Family Hotel, Onjong Pavilion No. 2, Kosong Port Golf Course, Kosong Port Immigration Office, etc. which were built by the south side...” But he was not impressed, calling it “just a hotchpotch with no national character at all...like makeshift tents in a disaster-stricken area or isolation wards...very backward in terms of architecture...shabby...unpleasant-looking.” And much more.

Kim has a point. Any facilities unused for over a decade (except for rare family reunions, as in August 2018, when the South hastily spruces them up) are going to look tatty. Some were not exactly beautiful in the first place. Moreover, South Korea later admitted that about 340 metal containers, used for offices and accommodation in the early days, are still cluttering up the place. But it was not prepared for what followed. Kim gave the order “to remove all the unpleasant-looking facilities of the south side with an agreement with the relevant unit of the south side and to build new modern service facilities our own way that go well with the natural scenery of Mount Kumgang.”

That is radical, to put it mildly. It is also unfeasible. The containers could and should go. A rather ugly floating hotel—the world’s first, in its day—built in Australia could be tugged away.



Figure 2 Kim Jong-un visits the resort complex at Diamond Mountain. Photo: KCNA via New York Times

But for the rest, this seems simply destructive. It is also a startling and troubling volte-face from Kim’s stance as expressed just months earlier. In his 2019 New Year address he said:

“...We are willing to resume the Kaesong Industrial Park and Mt Kumgang tourism without any precondition and in return for nothing, in consideration of the hard conditions of businesspersons of the south side who had advanced into the Kaesong Industrial Park and the desire of southern compatriots who are eager to visit the nation’s celebrated mountain.”

Not anymore. Kim has had a major rethink. Now he sees Mt. Kumgang as “our famous mountain” (ie the DPRK’s) rather than “a common property of the north and the south.” That in turn lead him to “sharp criticism of the very wrong, dependent policy of the predecessors who were going to rely on others when the country was not sufficient [sic] enough.” This can only mean his late father Kim Jong Il. The implied *lèse-majesté* is startling.

Is Kim serious? Conceptually, his rethink makes a kind of sense. Something needs to be done about *Kumgangsan*. It should not be an eyesore, nor lie idle. But narrow Northern chauvinism is a far cry from the pan-Korean dreams that drove Hyundai’s late founder, the legendary Chung Ju-yung—who was born nearby—to push this project. And given the huge disparity between the two Korean economies, relying on Southern money makes good business sense: the North is starved of capital. Moreover, Pyongyang shamelessly milked Hyundai for all it could get—then confiscated its assets. This is hardly dependence.

What makes no sense is Pyongyang’s explicit refusal to discuss any of this face to face. South Korea naturally asked for a meeting, but the North refused, insisting this can all be done by exchanging documents—presumably via fax. That is so obviously impractical as to give the game away. Basically, and very negatively, Kim’s main aim here seems to be to make life difficult for Moon Jae-in. Besides being an ingrate, he seems insouciant how this will play in the South—where in 2018 he had amassed considerable goodwill, all is now squandered.

And he may be bluffing. As of mid-January neither side has yielded, and everything at Mt. Kumgang seems to be still standing. Perhaps 2020 will bring a more constructive approach.

## Swinish Behavior

Elsewhere North Korea's negativity is simply self-defeating. Like other east Asian countries, notably Vietnam and China, both Koreas were hit in 2019 by outbreaks of African swine fever (ASF): harmless to humans but fatal to hogs, and highly contagious. Since animals and their ailments are no respecters of human-made barriers like the DMZ—wild boar have been seen swimming across, and storms may have washed infected soil and water downstream from North to South—it is sheer self-interest for the two Koreas to share information and cooperate in fighting ASF. But it is [not happening](#), even though the third Moon-Kim summit in September 2018 included an agreement to work together in such cases. And there is a precedent: back in 2007 the two Koreans cooperated to combat foot and mouth disease.

Pyongyang reported an outbreak of ASF in May. But it has given no details, ignoring Seoul's repeated entreaties and offers to help. In September, the NIS told lawmakers that ASF is now widespread in North Korea, wiping out the pig population in North Pyongan province on the northwestern border with China. That same month the virus spread to South Korea, where so far over 400,000 pigs have been culled, making a stream run [red](#) with blood and pork prices spike. (Much more so in the North, reportedly, where pork is the major source of protein.) While ROK authorities cannot be sure that their ASF originated north of the DMZ, even basic data on its incidence in the DPRK would help them hugely. None has been forthcoming.



Figure 3 A wild boar infected by ASF was found over the DMZ. Photo: Yonhap

## Send Them Back

November saw North Korean human rights in the spotlight for two separate reasons, neither of which reflected well on South Korea. On Nov. 14, the ROK [withdrew](#) from a list of over 40 states which sponsor an annual UN General Assembly resolution condemning human rights abuses in the DPRK. This is the first time Seoul has not been a co-sponsor since 2008. It did so, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ([MOFA](#)), “in comprehensive consideration of the overall circumstances, such as the current situation on the Korean Peninsula.” But it did support the resolution, which passed the Third Committee without a formal vote.

This withdrawal was condemned as “baffling” by Human Rights Watch (HRW) in an open [letter](#) a month later, on Dec. 16. This was signed by 67 human rights-related NGOs and 10 individuals, who included both the current UN Special Rapporteur on DPRK human rights, Tomás Ojea Quintana, and his predecessor Marzuki Darusman. Accusing the ROK more broadly of “increasing disengagement with (sic) ongoing human rights violations by the ... DPRK,” the letter also cited a separate disquieting incident a week earlier.

On Nov. 7, for the first time ever, South Korea [repatriated](#) two would-be North Korean defectors—squid fishermen, whose boat had entered Southern waters—against their will. Bound and blindfolded, they were handed over at Panmunjom to almost certain death. No one might ever have known, had not a journalist photographed a text message on the phone of a senior Blue House aide. Facing fierce criticism from the opposition as well as human rights groups, the government defended its decision, saying both men were “heinous criminals” who confessed separately to murdering the captain and no fewer than 15 of their fellow crewmen. Even so, critics argued, they should have faced justice in the South, there being none in the North. As it was, they were denied due process: access to lawyers, a court hearing, or any right of appeal. Even if the facts are as officially stated, this leaves a bad taste and sets a worrying precedent.

## Kim's Predictable No-show

A prime example of the oddity of Moon's approach was seen in late November, when he hosted a [summit](#) for leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Busan. Nothing strange about that—except that for

some reason Moon was publicly very keen for Kim Jong Un to attend. For sure, the two Korean leaders should meet again, as Kim mendaciously promised they would a year ago. They have much to discuss. But why would you tack on a fourth North-South summit as a sideshow at some quite different jamboree?

Moreover, this could only ram home to the DPRK leader how much clout the ROK wields thanks to its economic prowess, in a region where, by contrast, Pyongyang's star, never bright, has waned. (Similarly, successive ROK presidents, Moon included, have seen fit to issue lofty vistas of cooperation from Berlin or Dresden, oblivious of how Germany's path to unification—the demise of the GDR—looks when viewed from Pyongyang.) Moon's idea that this would help get Kim some useful introductions was no less crass and patronizing. Kim does not need South Korea's assistance to make a global splash, as his deft diplomacy in 2018 showed.

Needless to say, Kim did not come to Busan. More surprisingly, Pyongyang explained why. An unusually enigmatic KCNA [commentary](#), quite different from its usual bluster, thanked Moon for “politely” and “earnestly” sending a personal letter of invitation to Kim. More embarrassingly, it disclosed that the South had made “full preparations of the highest level including escort and ceremonies” for Kim in Busan, and then frantically asked Pyongyang to send someone else if not Kim. But then the sarcasm kicked in. While “we...fully understand the distress and agony of President Moon Jae-in,” South Korea must realise this was not the right time or place: “We know well enough that the sentiment pervading the land of the south is not clean.” Cue a familiar litany of Seoul's perfidy in Pyongyang's eyes, castigating:

*the impure attempt of the south side to give impression that dialogue is going on between the top leaders of the north and the south although no settlement of the fundamental issues ... is being made, and to insert the north-south issue to the corner of the 'neo-southern policy' masterminded by it. How can the hand-shaking and photo-taking in the complicated international meeting of no great interest to us be compared with the historic moment when the top leaders of the north and the south held their joined hands high up on Mt Paektu, the sacred mountain of the nation.*

There was much more, including a typically wacky metaphor: “If children mulled over piling up eggs on a horn, it can be ascribable to their innocence.” No such excuse is granted to Moon (for [more](#) depth and detail, see my analysis for NK News on Nov. 22).

## 2020 Vision?

At this season it is our practice to look forward to the new year as well as back at the old one. A convenient peg for this is normally Kim Jong Un's New Year address: a custom of his grandfather Kim Il Sung which he restored, replacing the more anonymous Joint Editorial in major newspapers with which his father Kim Jong Il, who disliked speech-making, had used during his own 17-year reign. Appropriately for our purposes, Kim's address almost always has a good deal to say about inter-Korean relations.

This year was different, in two ways. First, Kim did not give a new year address as such. That would have been redundant, since days earlier he had delivered a marathon seven-hour [speech](#) at a big event: the 5th Plenary of the 7th Central Committee (CC) of the ruling Workers Party (WPK). Unusually long—four days, Dec. 28-31—this key meeting signalled both change and continuity. The change, as widely predicted (and doubtless discussed elsewhere in this issue), was Kim's formal abrogation of his two year moratorium on testing nuclear weapons and ICBMs. The continuity—or perhaps one should say, step back to the future—was an unrelenting emphasis on self-reliance and struggle that could have come straight from his grandfather's playbook. Having (for my sins) been reading DPRK rhetoric for half a century, I can testify that whole chunks of this could have been uttered unchanged in the 1960s, '70s, or '80s.

And on South Korea? Nothing. Not a word—except once, almost tangentially. Claiming that his testing moratorium had elicited no corresponding US concessions, Kim complained that:

*the US, far from responding ...with appropriate measures, conducted tens of big and small joint military drills which its president personally promised to stop and threatened [the DPRK] militarily through the shipment of ultra-modern warfare equipment into south Korea.*

That was all. On inter-Korean relations as such, Kim was completely silent. He did not even bother to criticize South Korea or Moon, but simply ignored them. It may be some small consolation that Moon was not the only one treated thus. So fixated was Kim on the US and his new domestic “arduous march” that he omitted the wider international arena entirely. No other country got a mention, including China and Russia, who give Kim valuable support diplomatically. This is quite peculiar, even for a regime as self-centered as the DPRK.

### Keeping the Faith

After a whole year of being cold-shouldered by Kim, Moon appeared unfazed by this latest twist. In a striking asymmetry, his own New Year’s [address](#), delivered on Jan. 7, had much to say about inter-Korean relations. We reproduce the relevant section as an appendix below. Without repeating that here, what is striking is how Moon continues to keep the faith despite all the slings and arrows. Admitting “it is regrettable that we’ve not been able to make further progress in inter-Korean cooperation over the past year,” Moon nonetheless reiterated all his familiar themes: relinking roads and railways, reviving the Kaesong and Mt. Kumgang joint ventures (no mention of the unresolved row about the latter), turning the DMZ into a peace zone, and so on, while renewing his invitation to Kim to visit Seoul.

In a further notable asymmetry, despite all Pyongyang’s attacks and insults, Moon uttered no criticism of North Korea’s behavior, except indirectly: “a show of force and threats are not helpful to anyone.” Remarkably, he also failed to mention denuclearization. While implicitly admitting problems, his solution just seems to be more of the same: “This is the time when—more than ever before—we desperately need faith in peace and national unity.”

Amen, but is this really enough? In some ways, Moon’s stance is admirable. Patently sincere and steadfast, he seems determined to turn the other cheek and keep smiling, no matter what North Korea does. Yet this approach also has three large downsides. First, it is ineffectual. After a whole year in which Pyongyang has consistently rebuffed Seoul in every way and at every turn, it is past time for policy makers to rethink their playbook: it isn’t working. But the second downside is that they deny this. All too often Moon and his administration carry on as if

the peace process launched in 2018 is a work in progress, when patently it is now defunct.

Third, this makes South Korea look weak. If nothing must be allowed to upset the North, that has baleful consequences. These include making light (until recently) of tests of new weapons that directly threaten the ROK; relaxing pressure on the DPRK over its appalling human rights abuses; silence on denuclearization; and so on. But why? No one is impressed: certainly not Kim, but also two other vital constituencies. The ROK’s allies can only wonder what Moon’s true priorities are and how committed he really is to the sanctions that his predecessors urged them to sign up to. (Admittedly, as discussed elsewhere, neither of the two key allies is helping their case: Japan with its sanctions on South Korea—although Moon is not blameless either—and the US under its current mercurial leader, who *inter alia* is seriously undermining the alliance with absurdly large burden-sharing demands for US forces in Korea.)

Above all, what do South Koreans think of Moon and his policies? We shall know on Apr. 15, when the contrast between the two Koreas will be vividly on display. North Korea’s quasi-monarchy will mark the Day of the Sun, Kim Il Sung’s birthday, with its usual ceremonial pomp—and perhaps a big bang of some kind. The same day, South Koreans will get to choose who governs them, voting in four-yearly parliamentary elections. Moon himself still has over two years to serve: his single five-year term (running again is forbidden) ends in May 2022.

That time limit tends to make all ROK presidents lame ducks toward the end: more so if they face a hostile legislature, though the National Assembly wields little real power. So far Moon has lacked a [majority](#), unless his Democrats (DP) ally with other progressive parties to pass legislation. After three years an incumbent government might expect a backlash; but with the rightwing opposition in some [disarray](#), the outcome is as yet hard to call. North Korea is not the main issue, which as everywhere tends to be the economy. Also, South Koreans’ views on the North are complex, conflicted, and various. Many were enthused by 2018’s advances in inter-Korean relations, but the subsequent impasse has not produced a widespread backlash.

That could change. While Moon in his New Year address urged the North to join in marking 20 years since the first ever inter-Korean summit in June 2000—prediction: they won't—that is preceded by a much grimmer 10-year anniversary. On March 26, 2010, the ROK corvette *Cheonan* mysteriously [sank](#) with 46 lives lost, mostly young conscripts who drowned while asleep in their bunks. The DPRK has always denied responsibility, but few believe them. Today, any fresh Pyongyang provocation is likelier to be in the realm of WMD, aimed — in every sense—at Washington. If, however, North Korea were to do anything injurious to the South before April 15, it could seal the election outcome. That would be perverse of Kim, since Moon Jae-in is a patsy for him to deal with compared to the hardliners of the main opposition Liberty Korea Party. An LKP-controlled Parliament would make life difficult for Moon and Kim on all fronts, including “nordpolitik.”

Overall, on the Korean peninsula, as in much of the world, 2020 brings an air of foreboding. No one knows yet what exactly Kim Jong Un will do, nor how Donald Trump might react. (Recent [revelations](#) that in 2017, having belatedly learned how close Seoul lies to the DMZ, Trump bizarrely said (twice) “They have to move,” scarcely inspire confidence.) Whatever happens, and despite Moon's best efforts, South Korea looks likely to remain sidelined if—as must be feared—Kim and Trump square off for a dismaying reprise of 2017's “fire and fury.”

The English edition of the center-right *JoongAng Ilbo*, Seoul's leading daily, reported the president's New Year address under the apt [headline](#): “Moon keeps the faith in engagement of Kim.” If nothing improves, the inevitable question will be: Are faith-based policies enough?

#### **Appendix: Excerpt from President Moon Jae-in's New Year's Address**

Fellow Koreans,

We are now at a time when we must show endurance for the sake of peace on the Korean Peninsula. This is the time when—more than ever before—we desperately need faith in peace and national unity.

For us, peace on the Korean Peninsula is not a matter of choice but the path we must take while overcoming all difficulties.

Following the inauguration of my Administration, expectations and hope for peace have risen as never before. The dark clouds of war that hovered over the Korean Peninsula until 2017 have cleared, and peace has now become a more attainable goal. However, it is regrettable that we've not been able to make further progress in inter-Korean cooperation over the past year.

It is true that as dialogue between North Korea and the United States began in earnest, both the South and North put those talks ahead of everything else. The expectations were that if the talks were successful, the door for inter-Korean cooperation would open up more quickly and broadly. The momentum for North Korea-U.S. dialogue should continue; a show of force and threats are not helpful to anyone. My Administration will also do all it can to promote dialogue between the two sides.

However, there are now concerns that inter-Korean relations themselves could suffer a setback amid the stalemate in the talks between North Korea and the United States. In addition to efforts to promote the success of the dialogue, the need to find realistic ways to further advance inter-Korean cooperation has become all the more urgent.

Internationally coordinated solutions are required to adhere to the three principles for peace on the Korean Peninsula: zero tolerance for war, mutual security guarantees and common prosperity. Still, there are things that can be accomplished through inter-Korean cooperation. I propose that South and North Korea put their heads together and have earnest discussions.

The two Koreas not only share a border but also represent a “community of life” where coexistence is imperative. I also propose that cooperation in the border area be started for the common safety of the 80 million Koreans. I believe that Chairman Kim Jong Un has the same determination.

A joint hosting of the 2032 Summer Olympics will serve as a golden opportunity to show to the world that the two Koreas consist of one nation and to make a leap forward together. It is an agreement between the leaders of the two Koreas as well as a promise to the international



community as our intention to co-host has already been forwarded to the IOC.

I hope that we will be able to come together through continuous sports exchanges so that a joint hosting will be realized without fail. I am looking forward to talented North Korean athletes participating in the 1st East Asian Weightlifting Championships and ITTF 2020 World Team Table Tennis Championships, both of which will take place in South Korea this year. We should also continue consultations over athletes from both Koreas marching in together at the opening ceremony of the Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo and the formation of a single unified team.

If South and North Korea identify realistic ways to implement projects to reconnect inter-Korean railroads and roads, it will not only lead to international cooperation but also provide a big boost to the resumption of inter-Korean tourism and the revitalization of North Korea's tourism.

The idea of transforming the Demilitarized Zone into an international peace zone was proposed in a bid to guarantee mutual security for the two Koreas, both institutionally and realistically, and to gain international support. The two Koreas have already jointly registered ssireum on the representative list of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The DMZ's value is enormous and relates to ecology, history, peace and reconciliation between the South and North. Jointly registering the DMZ on the list of UNESCO World Heritage is something we can start right away. I am looking forward to a positive response from North Korea.

The path we intend to follow through peace is ultimately a peace-driven economy. The peace economy will usher in an era where division no longer acts as an obstacle to peace and prosperity so that both Koreas as well as neighboring countries can thrive together.

I am willing to meet time and again and constantly engage in dialogue. Efforts to resume operation of the Gaeseong Industrial Complex and Geumgangsán tourism will also continue. Looking back upon the agreements that were not kept last year and reflecting on the reasons for the people's expectations not being met, we will continue to move forward by taking one step or even a half of one step.

This meaningful year marks the 20th anniversary of the June 15 South-North Joint Declaration. I hope that the two Koreas will work together so that conditions for Chairman Kim Jong Un's reciprocal visit to the South can be put in place as soon as possible in addition to the hosting of joint events to solidify our commitment to peaceful reunification.

# CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA–SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

**Sept. 4, 2019:** The left-leaning International Association of Democratic Lawyers ([IADL](#)) [claims](#) that 12 North Korean waitresses who defected en masse to the South from China in 2016 were in effect abducted. Visiting both Koreas, the IADL's investigative team received full assistance from the DPRK; but ROK authorities refused co-operation, so they did not actually meet the women. IADL's full [report](#) is later published on Sept. 30.

**Sept. 5, 2019:** Ahead of the first anniversary of the opening of a permanent inter-Korean liaison office at Kaesong on Sept. 14, the ROK Ministry of Unification (MOU) [confirms](#) that once again the two sides' co-heads will skip their supposedly weekly meeting. They have not met since the second US-DPRK summit in Hanoi in February.

**Sept. 5, 2019:** In Vladivostok to attend the [5th Eastern Economic Forum](#), DPRK Vice-Premier Ri Yong Nam [urges](#) Seoul to “implement issues specified in the [Pyongyang] joint declaration and Panmunjom declaration.” Otherwise, “how can [inter-Korean talks] happen?”

**Sept. 6, 2019:** Under the headline “KCNA Commentary Urges S. [sic] Korean Military Warmongers to Behave Themselves,” the official DPRK news agency [savages](#) the ROK's deployment of two further F-35A fighter jets as allegedly part of a military build-up for a pre-emptive attack. It adds: “They generate a handshake of peace in public but behind the scene, grind a sword for confrontation and war. This is an unpardonable act of perfidy.”

**Sept. 6, 2019:** MOU now [says](#) that the 50,000 tons of rice which South Korea offered in June as food aid to the North via the UN World Food Program (WFP) is unlikely to be delivered this month as planned, since it remains unclear whether Pyongyang will accept it. (See also Aug. 23 in the previous issue of *Comparative Connections*, and below.)

**Sept. 10, 2019:** Hours after First Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui expressed readiness to resume denuclearization talks with the US, North Korea [test-fires](#) what South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) call two “short-range projectiles.” Launched from Kaechon, 80 km north of Pyongyang, these fly east for 330 km across the peninsula at a maximum altitude of 50–60 km, presumably landing in the East Sea. This is the tenth such launch this year. In response, the ROK holds an emergency National Security Council (NSC) meeting.

**Sept. 10, 2019:** Reuters [reports](#) that the ROK National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) found no foul play in the 2016 defection of 12 DPRK waitresses, contrary to claims that they were abducted (see Sept. 4). The agency was shown relevant NHRC documents, but was told that the full report is unlikely to be published.

**Sept. 11, 2019:** KCNA [describes](#) the weapons system tested yesterday as being a “super-large multiple rocket launcher.” Kim Jong Un again oversees the launch, as he did the first time on Aug. 24, and says its capabilities have been “finally verified in terms of combat operation.”

**Sept. 12, 2019:** In a pep talk to ROK army frontline troops just before the Chuseok (harvest festival) holiday, Minister of National Defense (MND) Jeong Kyeong-doo [calls](#) for “vigilance and intense drills to keep peace on the Korean Peninsula.”

**Sept. 13, 2019:** ROK President Moon Jae-in—himself born to Northern parents—[says](#) that he regrets “slow progress” in implementing last year's agreement to hold regular inter-Korean family reunions. Yet he is oddly even-handed: “It's wrong that governments in both the South and North have not given them even a chance for such a long time.” In fact only one of the two Korean governments—not the one he heads—is currently blocking such contacts.

**Sept. 13, 2019:** The same day, Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [tells](#) a group of families with relatives in the North that family reunions will be Seoul's top priority if inter-Korean dialogue resumes. The group has met annually for Chuseok at Imjingak, a park close to the DMZ, since 1970. A year ago the two Koreas agreed to set up a permanent family reunion center, promote video reunions and allow the exchange of letters. None of this has happened.

**Sept. 16, 2019:** MOU [says](#) Seoul is trying to talk to Pyongyang about two upcoming sports fixtures upcoming there: a soccer World Cup qualifier on Oct. 15—the two Koreas have been drawn against each other—and an international junior weightlifting event (Oct. 20–27). North Korea has not yet invited the South to the latter, and has not replied regarding the former.

**Sept. 16, 2019:** Speaking at a seminar in Seoul for the first anniversary of the inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA), and days after North Korea's latest missile test (see Sept. 11), Defense Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo [insists](#) that the CMA in no way renders South Korea vulnerable. On the contrary, “the Sept. 19 agreement can be successfully implemented only based upon our military's strong power and water-tight readiness posture.”

**Sept. 18, 2019:** [Meari](#), a Korean-language DPRK website for external audiences, [renews](#) the demand that 12 former restaurant workers in China who defected in 2016 be repatriated. It cites the recent findings of the IADL enquiry (see Sept. 4 and Sept. 10, above).

**Sept. 18, 2019:** MOU [says](#) South Korea has notified North Korea of two more confirmed cases of African swine fever (ASF) at farms near the DMZ, stressing the need for quarantine cooperation, Pyongyang, which reported its own first ASF case in May, has not replied.

**Sept. 18, 2019:** Contra media [claims](#) that North Korea has deployed MLRs or other weapons systems on Hambak—an islet in the West (Yellow) Sea only 20 km from South Korea's much larger Ganghwa island—the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) [insists](#) that “not a single attack weapon exists on the island.” Some ROK maps erroneously [give](#) Hambak as ROK territory; MND says this will be corrected.

**Sept. 25, 2019:** MOU [says](#) it is “reviewing a comprehensive plan on the peaceful use of the DMZ.” This will include President Moon's idea, put to the UN General Assembly yesterday, to transform it into a peace zone by opening international offices there, including the UN's. However the ministry says it is too early to discuss such schemes with North Korea.

**Sept. 25, 2019:** Pyongyang's propaganda website Meari [slams](#) Seoul for expressing the hope that a US–DPRK meeting would improve inter-Korean relations, calling this “an abominable behavior of subordination to an outside force.”

**Sept. 30, 2019:** MOU [says](#) it expects the ROK flag (*Taegukgi*) to fly in Pyongyang on Oct. 15 as international norms dictate, when the two Koreas play a FIFA World Cup soccer qualifying match. North Korea is still ignoring the South's efforts to make concrete arrangements, including its [request](#) to send a cheering squad.

**Oct. 2, 2019:** *Rodong Sinmun*, the DPRK's leading paper and organ of its ruling Workers' Party (WPK), [says](#): “The South Korean authorities have been passing the buck for the current stalemate in the North–South relations.” It accuses Seoul of “betrayal behaviors” and “very impure words and actions that reverse black and white.”

**Oct. 7, 2019:** With the inter-Korean soccer derby in Pyongyang barely a week away, and North Korea still refusing to discuss whether Southern fans can attend, MOU [admits](#) that the prospects for this happening “appear to be not easy from a physical perspective.”

**Oct. 8, 2019:** The DPRK website Uriminzokkiri [attacks](#) “south Korea's leader on a US tour” (it does not name Moon Jae-in) for “behav[ing] indecently in a servile attitude” by yielding to Washington's “coercion” to buy more US-made arms.

**Oct. 11, 2019:** MOU [calls](#) it “disappointing” that North Korea is still blanking the South's urgent and repeated requests to discuss issues like sending fans and live broadcasting of the inter-Korean soccer match, now imminent. Some might have used stronger language.

**Oct. 11, 2019:** ROK military helicopters [spray](#) disinfectant over the DMZ, after a wild boar infected by ASF was found dead there. Seoul first duly consulted the UN Command and also notified Pyongyang, which still refuses to co-operate in combating this shared epidemic.

**Oct. 14, 2019:** South Korea's three major terrestrial TV networks—KBS, MBC and SBS—[say](#) that tomorrow's inter-Korean soccer match will not be broadcast live, as arrangements “fell apart.” North Korea has still not replied to the South's request to send a cheering squad, tantamount to refusal.

**Oct. 15, 2019:** The inter-Korean Group H World Cup qualifier takes place in a virtually empty Kim Il Sung Stadium in Pyongyang. North Korea, which refused to admit South Korean fans, gave no advance warning that there would be no spectators at all. Headlined as a “chippy” game by Yonhap—four yellow cards, two each—this ends in a scoreless draw. In the absence of live broadcasting, the Swedish Ambassador [provides](#) glimpses and commentary on [Twitter](#).

**Oct. 15, 2019:** MOU [says](#) North Korea has promised to provide a DVD of the inter-Korean soccer match before the Southern team leaves tomorrow. It duly does so, but the video quality is so poor that KBS decides not to air it.

**Oct. 15, 2019:** MOU [says](#) the DPRK has officially invited the ROK to the 2019 Asian Youth & Junior Weightlifting Championships, an Olympic qualifying event upcoming in Pyongyang on Oct. 20-27. The 65-strong South Korean contingent will include two journalists.

**Oct. 18, 2019:** The ROK's Korea Football Association (KFA) [says](#) it has asked the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) to consider punishing North Korea for its uncooperativeness, in breach of AFC rules, regarding arrangements for Oct.16's inter-Korean soccer match.

**Oct. 21, 2019:** The militant defector group Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK) [says](#) it sent 500,000 leaflets across the DMZ by balloon on Oct. 20, criticising the DPRK for holding the inter-Korean soccer match behind closed doors. The cargo also included 2,000 one-dollar bills, 1,000 USB drives and 500 booklets. The Moon government disapproves of such antics.

**Oct. 21, 2019:** North Korea [denies](#) still holding South Koreans from an aircraft hijacking in 1969, calling this charge a “stereotyped anti-DPRK political plot pursued by hostile forces.” Pyongyang insists that the 11 (out of 50) who were not returned chose to stay in the North. It further claims that nobody in North Korea has been “forcibly detained against his or her will.”

**Oct. 22, 2019:** MOU [says](#) it will permit South Korean municipal authorities to pursue their own aid projects with the North, rather than them having to partner with NGOs as currently.

**Oct. 22, 2019:** Two North Korean websites, Meari and Uriminzokkiri, [attack](#) various South Korean plans to conduct missile tests and develop new weapons: “Reckless military schemes will not go unnoticed. (We) will make them regret to the backbone” (sic).

**Oct. 22, 2019:** Yonhap [reports](#) that according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) data, South Korea is North Korea's largest aid donor this year, giving \$9 million to WFP. This is almost 30 percent of the total donations of \$30.55 million.

**Oct. 23, 2019:** KCNA [reports](#) that Kim Jong Un has inspected Mount Kumgang: presumably on Oct. 22. This is his first known visit. Criticising the mothballed resort's South Korean-built facilities as shabby and unpleasant-looking, he orders their removal, by “agreement with the relevant unit of the south side.” In a major policy U-turn, he insists that Kumgangsan is “our [the DPRK's] famous mountain” rather than “a common property of the north and the south.”

**Oct. 25, 2019:** After hearing nothing for two days, MOU [says](#) North Korea has notified it of Kim's order on Mt. Kumgang, and proposes to discuss this by exchanging documents.

**Oct. 27, 2019:** Jeju provincial government [announces](#) another inter-Korean soccer match. The two Koreas have been drawn in the same group, with Vietnam and Myanmar, for the third round of the Asian qualifiers for women's soccer for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. All matches will take place on the ROK island during Feb. 3-9, 2020.

**Oct. 28, 2019:** Following North Korea's demand that the South remove all its facilities from the Mount Kumgang resort, Seoul [offers](#) to hold talks about the future of tourism there.

**Oct. 29, 2019:** South Korea [adds](#) that it is prepared to discuss the safety of individual tourists to Mount Kumgang with the North. (This is an olive branch: individual, as opposed to group tourism would not breach sanctions). Rebuffing Seoul's offer of talks, Pyongyang perversely [insists](#) that the issue be dealt with by exchanging documents rather than meeting face to face.

**Oct. 30, 2019:** MOU [reiterates](#) that a face to face meeting is needed to discuss Kumgangs.

**Oct. 31, 2019:** The Blue House (Cheong Wa Dae, the ROK presidential office cum residence) [announces](#) that Kim Jong Un sent condolences for the death on Oct. 29 of President Moon Jae-in's 92 year old mother, Kang Han-ok, who fled North Korea during the Korean War. Kim's message was delivered via Panmunjom.

**Nov. 6, 2019:** MOU [discloses](#) that 828 North Koreans defected to the South in 2019 so far (January-October), suggesting the full-year figure will be close to 2018's 1,137. Numbers have fallen since Kim Jong Un took power. The cumulative total is not large, around 32,000.

**Nov. 7, 2019:** MOU [admits](#) that for the first time, South Korea repatriated would-be Northern defectors against their will. Two squid fishermen in their 20s were handed over at Panmunjom, five days after the ROK Navy seized their boat in the East Sea following a two-day chase. On Seoul's account, both men confessed in separate interrogations to killing their captain and 15 crew members. The ROK therefore treated them as "heinous criminals" fleeing justice. It had no plan to disclose any of this; only a journalist's [vigilance](#) brought it to light.

**Nov. 8, 2019:** After yesterday's deportations, South Korea also [returns](#) their fishing boat to North Korea. The 15-meter, 20-ton vessel was handed over at the East Sea maritime border.

**Nov. 11, 2019:** Twenty ROK human rights groups [condemn](#) the Nov. 7 deportations, calling it a "shameful decision" that violated due process and the suspects' right to justice. MOU [refutes](#) such criticisms. It does not comment on media reports that the decision to deport came from the Blue House National Security Office, without consulting either the NIS or MOU.

**Nov. 11, 2019:** DPRK media [lambast](#) the US and ROK over their burden-sharing talks. Washington wants to quintuple the amount Seoul pays to host US forces in Korea (USFK). *DPRK Today* calls the US "a shameless robber group bent on extorting an astronomical amount of taxpayers' money from south Korea ... It is stupid that South Korean authorities are ready to give all it has, while lauding such a robber as a savior and blood ally."

**Nov. 11, 2019:** Though not publicized until Nov. 15, Pyongyang sends Seoul an [ultimatum](#) (their word) threatening to "unilaterally [pull] down" Southern facilities at Mt. Kumgang unless the South removes them on the North's terms.

**Nov. 12, 2019:** The New York-based NGO Human Rights Watch [condemns](#) the ROK's Nov. 7 deportations as "illegal under international law."

**Nov. 12, 2019:** Seoul Metropolitan Government becomes the first local authority permitted (by South Korea) to independently pursue aid projects in North Korea. Whether the DPRK will allow this is another question. On Nov. 21, MOU [extends](#) the same permission to Incheon city and Gyeonggi province, which abut and surround Seoul respectively.

**Nov. 14, 2019:** For the first time in a decade, the ROK is not among some 40 states that [sponsor](#) an annual UN General Assembly resolution condemning human rights abuses in the DPRK. It does however support the resolution, which is passed without a formal vote.

**Nov. 14, 2019:** ROK Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [meets](#) Hyun Jeong-un, chairperson of Hyundai Group. They discuss how to resolve the Mt. Kumgang issue.

**Nov. 15, 2019:** KCNA and other DPRK media carry an [article](#) headlined: “Mt. Kumgang Is Not Common Property of North and South.” Uncompromising in content and sneering in tone, it reiterates the threat “to demolish without trace the south side's facilities that sprawled out only to mar the beautiful scenery.” It concludes: “There is no room for south Korea to find its place there [at Kumgangs].”

**Nov. 15, 2019:** Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) [says](#) it is in touch with the ROK government regarding the Nov. 7 repatriation of two DPRK would-be defectors. OHCHR clarifies that this is not a formal investigation. The same day, MOU [insists](#) there is no doubt that the two deportees were murderers. Each separately admitted their crimes, while DPRK authorities corroborated the broad picture.

**Nov. 18, 2019:** 21 years to the day after Hyundai Asan launched South Korean tourism to Mt. Kumgang, Seoul [urges](#) Pyongyang to come to the table and hold talks on the future of the resort, rather than issue ultimatums while insisting on communicating only via documents.

**Nov. 21, 2019:** Pyongyang politely, if also sarcastically, [declines](#) Moon Jae-in's invitation for Kim to attend the upcoming ROK-ASEAN summit in Busan. A KCNA commentary says that such a visit would be inappropriate, giving several cogent reasons.

**Nov. 25, 2019:** MND [says](#) that North Korea conducted artillery firing drills on Changrin, an islet just north of the NLL, in violation of 2018s inter-Korean military agreement. The same day KCNA [reports](#) an inspection visit to Changrin by Kim, including an order to fire. Contra some press reports, neither side states exactly when this happened (but see next item).

**Nov. 26, 2019:** The ROK uses the inter-Korean military hotline to [make](#) a “strong complaint” about the KPA's recent coastal artillery drill, whose date it now gives as Nov. 23, the ninth anniversary of the DPRK's shelling of nearby Yeonpyeong, which killed four South Koreans.

**Nov. 26, 2019:** MOU [says](#) the two Koreas remain “far apart” on the Mt. Kumgang issue.

**Nov. 27, 2019:** A propos Kumgangs, the DPRK propaganda website *Uriminzokkiri* [says](#) “It is our unwavering will to remove all the South's unpleasant-looking facilities that have been spoiling the landscape of this famous mountain and turn it into a ... modern international cultural, tourist zone.” Other DPRK media carry similar articles.

**Nov. 27, 2019:** MOU [says](#) South Korea is closely watching developments at Jangjon on the DPRK's east coast. Previously a military port, from 1998 it became the main harbor used by ROK ships bringing tourists to Mt. Kumgang. A Seoul newspaper claims it is now reverting to a naval base. That would dash hopes of resuming Kumgangs tourism as a joint venture.

**Nov. 30, 2019:** ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) [says](#) it will build a memorial for the fallen near Arrowhead Ridge in the DMZ—the site of a major Korea War battle—in Cheorwon, 90 km northeast of Seoul. South Korea recently completed an eight-month dig in the area, retrieving 2,030 pieces of bones from 260 soldiers on both sides. They also removed over 450 land mines, some 5,700 unexploded shells and 35 tons of scrap iron. This was meant to be a joint endeavor, but North Korea pulled out.

**Dec. 2, 2019:** ROK Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [admits](#) that some facilities at Mount Kumgang need repair, and that about 340 containers lie abandoned there. He neither confirms nor denies a media [report](#) that Seoul has accepted Pyongyang's demand to remove such items.

**Dec. 4, 2019:** Park Won-soon, mayor of Seoul and a political ally of Moon Jae-in, [tells](#) the inaugural Seoul Peace Conference that “the most important task in establishing reconciliation and integration in Northeast Asia is to realize a 'peace community,' and the Seoul-Pyongyang co-hosting of the 2032 Olympics will provide a precious opportunity to accomplish the goal.” Meanwhile in the real world, North Korea is refusing to discuss fielding some joint teams—as it had earlier agreed to do—with the South at the Tokyo Olympics, now just months away.

**Dec. 6, 2019:** MOU [announces](#) that South Korea will donate \$5 million to the World Health Organization (WHO), to improve healthcare for mothers and babies in North Korea. Seoul had supported this project until 2014, when it was suspended as inter-Korean ties worsened.

**Dec. 10, 2019:** MOU [says](#) it expects WHO to launch an ROK-aided program in the DPRK (see Dec. 6 above) as early as this year.

**Dec. 12, 2019:** MOU [announces](#) that despite the current North-South stalemate, the budget of its Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund (IKCF) will increase by 9 percent next year to 1.2 billion won (\$1 billion). That includes 489 billion won for economic projects and 127.5 billion won for co-operation in forestry. The ministry says this allocation reflects “our will to improve relations”: a quasi-admission that these funds may not actually get spent any time soon.

**Dec. 13, 2019:** Citing “government sources,” Yonhap [reports](#) that Seoul is preparing to assist the North in fighting swine fever—despite the North’s non-reply to its several offers of help. MOU’s preparations include calling a meeting with civilian experts and NGOs.

**Dec. 13, 2019:** Hours before the deadline, the KFA [says](#) it is withdrawing its bid to host the 2023 FIFA Women’s World Cup in soccer. Urged on by FIFA’s President, Gianni Infantino, the two Koreas had planned a joint bid, but the freeze in North-South ties has thwarted this.

**Dec. 16, 2019:** Human Rights Watch (HRW) publishes a [letter](#) to President Moon Jae-in from 67 human rights-related NGOs, criticising the ROK for “increasing disengagement with (sic) ongoing human rights violations by the...DPRK.” This cites the Nov. 7 repatriation of two would-be defectors, as well as Seoul’s “baffl[ing]” decision a week later not to sponsor the annual UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution on North Korea’s human rights situation. The letter is also signed by ten individuals, including both the current UN Special [Rapporteur](#) on DPRK human rights, Tomás Ojea Quintana, and his predecessor Marzuki Darusman.

**Dec. 16, 2019:** Reuters [reports](#) that China and Russia have circulated a joint draft resolution to the UN Security Council (UNSC) proposing relaxation of a range of sanctions against the DPRK, including exemptions for inter-Korean rail and road co-operation projects.

**Dec. 17, 2019:** MOU [says](#) the ROK will continue to try to give the DPRK 50,000 tons of rice via the UN World Food Program (WFP), despite Pyongyang’s repeated rejection of this plan (first mooted in June). The budget for this, almost \$35 million, will be rolled over to 2020.

**Dec. 18, 2019:** A propos moves to ease some sanctions on North Korea (see Dec. 16 above), MOU [emphasises](#) that “the inter-Korean railway connection project is ... a non-commercial public infrastructure project.” However, Seoul does not formally endorse the proposal by Beijing and Seoul as such.

**Dec. 19, 2019:** ROK Vice Unification Minister [Suh Ho visits](#) the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong, to be briefed on the past year’s work and plans for 2020. That will not have taken long, for the office is practically idle. Suh has not met with his DPRK counterpart and co-head since the US-DPRK summit in Hanoi collapsed in February.

**Dec. 20, 2019:** MOU [rejects](#) as “fake news” claims by a defector body in Seoul that the two Northern fishermen repatriated last month (see Nov. 7) were not murderers, as the ROK government claimed, but brokers who tried to help their 16 fellow crew members defect.

**Dec. 23, 2019:** South Korea’s inter-Korean Exchange and Cooperation Promotion Council (IKECPC) [approves](#) aid worth 2 billion won (\$1.72 million), to be sent via the Red Cross to assist North Korean villages hit by typhoons earlier this year. Yonhap admits it is unclear whether or not Pyongyang will accept Seoul’s assistance.

**Dec. 25, 2019:** In melancholy Christmas news, Yonhap [tallies](#) statistics on South Koreans who registered with MOU and the ROK Red Cross in the hope of meeting their relatives in North Korea. Of 133,365 who signed up since 1988, only 52,997 were still alive at end-November. With 63.4 percent of the survivors aged 80 or more, this attrition by mortality will continue.

**Dec. 25, 2019:** An online poll by Seoul Metropolitan Government [finds](#) that 74.2 percent of residents of the ROK capital (in a sample of 2,000) believe that the two Koreas should be reunified. That percentage is the same as last year. But 17 percent also reckon reunification is impossible; whereas 25.6 percent anticipate it in 20 years, while 20.2 percent say 30 years. On inter-Korean ties, a perhaps surprising 39.5 percent expect relations to improve in the next five years; 12.4 percent say they will worsen, while most (48.2 percent) expect no change.

**Dec. 27, 2019:** ROK Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [calls](#) on the US and DPRK to first pursue “an interim deal as a stepping stone to a final agreement,” in order to keep nuclear dialogue alive.

**Dec. 28-31, 2019:** North Korea’s ruling Workers’ Party (WPK) holds a major [meeting](#): the 5th Plenary of the 7th Central Committee (CC). Kim Jong Un gives a wide-ranging and hard-line speech, lasting seven hours. (In view of this, Kim does not deliver his customary New Year address.) Personnel changes are announced, while others apparently go [unannounced](#).

**Dec. 31, 2019:** MOU [says](#) that with official North-South ties deadlocked, it will encourage members of separated families to pursue private contacts with their Northern kin. This includes offering government financial support for meetings in third countries.



# COMPARATIVE

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## CONNECTIONS

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

**CHINA - KOREA RELATIONS**

## NUCLEAR WEAPONS CLOUD 70 YEARS OF FRIENDSHIP

SEE-WON BYUN, SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY

North Korea conducted five rounds of missile launches in this period as prospects for resuming dialogue with Washington dwindled. Although People's Republic of China State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi praised Pyongyang's diplomatic efforts during his September visit to the North, US-DPRK talks in October made no progress. The nuclear impasse loomed over 70th anniversary celebrations of China-DPRK diplomatic ties, highlighting the expanding friendship Chinese President Xi Jinping and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un envisioned last June. Amid concerns over escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing and Moscow proposed a draft UN resolution in December calling for the partial lifting of sanctions.

For their part, Beijing and Seoul advanced their strategic partnership through talks between Xi and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, the China-ROK-Japan summit in December, Wang's visit to Seoul earlier that month, and the resumption of defense talks in October. But Moon's latest China visit drew much domestic criticism for failing to secure Beijing's cooperation on bilateral and regional priorities. Wang's December visit to Seoul, meanwhile, was most remembered for his attacks on US "unilateralism" and "bullying." US-China trade tensions and public clashes over Hong Kong present new challenges for the China-ROK partnership.

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## China's Regional Diplomacy vs. "Unilateralism" and "Bullying"

Moon met Xi and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on Dec. 23–24 before joining Li and Prime Minister Abe Shinzo for the 8<sup>th</sup> China–ROK–Japan summit in Chengdu. Moon invited Xi to Seoul in 2020, an event that would [signify](#) the full normalization of bilateral ties since the THAAD dispute, according to some Korean analysts. The trilateral summit produced an ambitious joint [vision](#) for cooperation over the next decade. While global attention centered on the North Korean nuclear issue, Moon's visit ignited a domestic uproar in South Korea over Seoul's perceived accommodation of Beijing. Urging Seoul to protect its national interests in dealing with Beijing and Tokyo, a *Korea Times* editorial [noted](#) two "embarrassing" highlights.

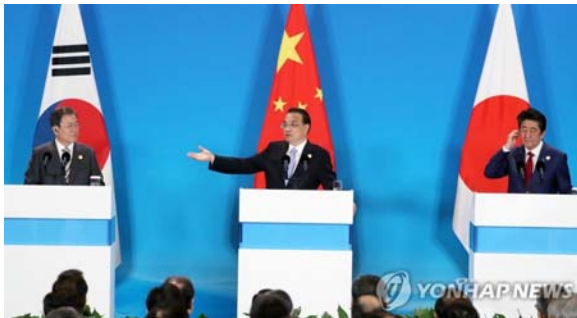


Figure 1 Moon, Li, and Abe discuss the results of the 8<sup>th</sup> China–ROK–Japan summit in Chengdu. Photo: Yonhap

First, a Japanese official angrily interrupted Moon's opening remarks with Abe to confront the press, demonstrating recent strain in Seoul's ties with Tokyo. Second, the PRC Foreign Ministry [quoted](#) Moon's position to Xi that "Hong Kong affairs and issues concerning Xinjiang are China's internal affairs," a statement that Seoul's [briefing](#) did not include. While the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson [confirmed](#) Moon's remarks, the ROK Presidential Office scrambled to pacify the South Korean public. A *JoongAng Daily* editorial [concluded](#) that the Xi–Moon summit "fell far short of our expectations" on producing consensus on restraining Pyongyang and lifting Chinese tourism and other restrictions since the THAAD fallout. China's *Global Times* soon joined the debate by arguing that "South Korean media must restrain their sensitive nerves" and criticizing the conservative media for calling China a "fake friend."

Wang's Dec. 4–5 visit to Seoul, three months after visiting Pyongyang, ended with a similar

disappointment. Wang met his ROK counterpart Kang Kyung-wha for the second time after meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York on Sept. 25. He also met Moon, leader of the ruling Democratic Party and former Prime Minister Lee Hae-chan, and former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. In addition to reaffirming their commitment to denuclearization and peace, Wang and ROK counterparts agreed to coordinate Xi's Belt and Road Initiative and Seoul's development strategies, and advance trade via the China–ROK FTA, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and proposed trilateral FTA with Japan. For Lu Chao of Liaoning Academy of Social Sciences, Wang's visit [signaled](#) a mutual willingness to restore ties amid strain in Beijing and Seoul's respective relations with Washington and Tokyo.



Figure 2 Foreign Ministers Wang and Kang meet in Seoul. Photo: Yonhap

But rather than elevating the China–ROK "strategic cooperative partnership," Wang's visit left its biggest mark through what appeared to be attacks on Washington. During his meeting with Kang, he [identified](#) "unilateralism" and "bullying acts" as the biggest global threats. He made the same claims to Moon, [calling](#) for cooperation "to safeguard multilateralism, free trade and adhere to basic principles of international relations." As [reported](#) by Chinese state media, Wang warned Ban Ki-moon that "the superpower" has become a "troublemaker" by "violating international rules, ignoring its own international obligations and adopting unilateral and bullying behaviors." Wang's visit also reminded Seoul of Beijing's continued opposition to the US–ROK military alliance. As Lee Chang-hyung of the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses [indicated](#) to the *Global Times*, the visit was intended to ensure "South Korea doesn't totally tilt toward the US" as Moon faces

pressure from Washington and conservatives at home to join the Indo-Pacific strategy. Beijing's regional diplomacy also drew comparisons with the Trump administration's frictions with its Korean ally over burden-sharing. As the *Global Times* asked, "is the 66-year-old alliance in deep trouble?"

Chinese multilateral engagements in Asia further showcased Beijing's active diplomacy toward neighbors. In a *Global Times* [interview](#) in September, Moon Chung-in, President Moon Jae-in's special advisor for foreign affairs and national security, identified China as an important mediator between Seoul and Tokyo. The three neighbors joined ASEAN, Australia, and New Zealand for the 3<sup>rd</sup> RCEP summit in Bangkok on Nov. 4, which produced what Li Keqiang called a "[breakthrough](#)" in advancing the trade deal, despite India's decision to opt out. To be formally signed at the 2020 summit, the "China-led RCEP," according to the South Korean media, [remains](#) widely perceived as a threat to Donald Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy. PRC Commerce Minister Zhong Shan, South Korea's Trade, Industry and Energy Minister Sung Yun-mo, and Japan's Economy and Trade Minister Kajiyama Hiroshi pledged their support for both the trilateral FTA and RCEP during the 12<sup>th</sup> round of trade talks in Beijing on Dec. 22. Despite the consolidation of the China-ROK economic partnership, Chinese analysts [cautioned](#) that Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy may still lure Seoul into regional security networks designed to counter China's rising influence.



Figure 3 Li attends the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Summit in Bangkok. Photo: Xinhua

### China and North Korea's Anniversary Celebrations

In talks with DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho and Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) Vice Chairman Ri Su-yong in early September, Wang reiterated China's willingness to cooperate in the multiple areas the Xi-Kim summit outlined

in June. Wang's three-day trip was expected to revive regional dialogue as Pyongyang grew increasingly frustrated over stalled nuclear talks with Washington. He last visited Pyongyang in May 2018 before Kim's second summits with Xi and Trump. But while Wang praised Pyongyang's efforts to resume dialogue, working-level talks with Washington in Stockholm on Oct. 5 produced no results. Later that month in Pyongyang, Miao Hua, director of the Chinese Central Military Commission (CMC)'s political affairs department, and Kim Su-gil, director of the DPRK army's general political bureau, reaffirmed China and North Korea's strategic alignment. China's Defense Minister Wei Fenghe and DPRK Vice Defense Minister Kim Hyong-ryong also met on the sidelines of the Oct. 20-22 Xiangshan Forum in Beijing, where Kim criticized Washington and Seoul for impeding the Korean peace process.

The lack of progress on denuclearization loomed over China and North Korea's joint celebrations of national events. In his message on Sept. 9 marking North Korea's 71<sup>st</sup> founding anniversary, Xi noted his five meetings with Kim so far as a clear indication of their "common understanding." Kim recognized the PRC's 70<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary on Oct. 1 by promising to support China's "struggle to defend the stability and the core interests of the country," in response to which Xi praised Kim's policy focus on development. The two leaders [exchanged](#) letters on Oct. 6 commemorating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic ties. Xi not only reassured Kim of the "high priority" given to the relationship, but also appreciated their personal "mutual trust and friendship." Nov. 23 marked the 66<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the China-DPRK agreement on economic and cultural cooperation, which according to North Korean state media outlet *Rodong Sinmun*, [consolidated](#) the relationship based on their "common struggle for anti-imperialist independence."

For China's Korea experts like Wang Sheng of Jilin University, Beijing and Pyongyang's landmark October anniversary affirmed that "China's role is unique, irreplaceable, and essential" as a third-party mediator in the nuclear impasse. As Wang [indicates](#), regional differences over the definition of denuclearization and how to achieve it are the key obstacle. Pyongyang envisions a phased process coordinated with a peace mechanism, while Washington emphasizes complete and verifiable denuclearization first. Wang Fudong

of China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations argues the reconsolidation of ties under Xi and Kim presents an opportunity for advancing wider regional cooperation. The long-term success of China-DPRK relations most importantly [requires](#) sharing the same historical and strategic goals as “emerging socialist countries...even though they are not always on the same development path.” While the nuclear issue has long impeded Northeast Asian cooperation, Kim’s current focus on development aligns with Xi’s reform drive, raising the prospects for bilateral and regional engagement.

### **Finding Space for a Diplomatic Solution on the Korean Peninsula**

Pyongyang’s military threats, however, present an immediate challenge to the envisioned friendship with China. A series of missile tests throughout this reporting period accompanied North Korean proposals for the resumption of denuclearization talks with Washington. China’s Foreign Ministry again urged Pyongyang and Washington to “meet each other halfway” after the two sides offered conflicting assessments of bilateral talks in October. According to Zhang Liangui, formerly at the Central Party School, Kim’s multiple visits to China are merely moves to “[play](#) the Beijing card when dealing with the American president.” But given Washington and Beijing’s “common interest” in denuclearization, “China won’t support everything the North wants.”

As South Korea’s *Yonhap News* reported on Nov. 15, a US State Department official [told](#) Chinese counterparts that “space for a diplomatic solution is quickly closing.” After a month of anticipation, cancellation of the North Korean Moranbong Band’s China tour to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic ties at the end of the year suggested similar strains with Beijing. The band’s last planned performance in 2015 was also canceled, apparently due to differences over a performance featuring North Korea’s nuclear and missile development. Still, at a UN Security Council (UNSC) meeting on Dec. 11, China’s Permanent Representative to the UN Zhang Jun made [clear](#) that maintaining global consensus on a political solution remains the top priority.

China-ROK security exchanges focused on advancing US-DPRK denuclearization talks. In

September, South Korea’s nuclear envoy Lee Do-hoon met his PRC counterpart Luo Zhaohui, who accompanied Wang to North Korea that month. Defense ministers Wei Fenghe and Jeong Kyeong-doo met on Nov. 17 on the sidelines of the 6<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) in Bangkok, where they discussed regional security issues and bilateral priorities including the expansion of military hotlines. Those priorities were raised during the 5<sup>th</sup> China-ROK vice-ministerial strategic defense dialogue in Beijing on Oct. 21. Deputy Chief of the Central Military Commission Joint Staff Department Lt. Gen. Shao Yuanming and ROK Vice Defense Minister Park Jae-min led the dialogue, which last took place in 2014 before tensions over THAAD led to a four-year suspension. Park also met Wei Fenghe on Oct. 20 and attended the 9<sup>th</sup> Xiangshan Forum, China’s version of the Shangri-La Dialogue.

### **The China-ROK Strategic Partnership**

China’s illegal fishing in South Korea’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and incursions into the Korean Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ) are two major points of friction in the bilateral relationship. China’s ambassador for Yellow Sea Affairs Wang Xiaodu and Director-General of the ROK Foreign Ministry International Legal Affairs Bureau You Ki-jun led working-level talks on EEZ demarcation in Seoul on Oct. 24. South Korea’s Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries and Coast Guard reported multiple seizures of Chinese fishing boats in the Yellow Sea in October-November. The Joint Chiefs of Staff reported two PRC incursions in KADIZ during the same period, although China sent prior notification in the first case in October. At ASEAN’s ADMM-Plus in November, ROK Defense Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo called for regional compliance with regulations on unplanned encounters involving military aircraft and vessels, a problem Seoul also faces with Japan and Russia.

Developments since Beijing and Seoul’s 2014 agreement on the return of the remains of Chinese soldiers killed in the Korean War is indicative of progress in other areas. For the first time since 2014, China in September [confirmed](#) the identities of six soldiers using DNA technology developed by a research team of the People’s Liberation Army’s Academy of Military Sciences. A DNA database was launched in October at the Cemetery of Korean War

Martyrs in Shenyang, where the remains of the 599 returned soldiers are buried. China's Ministry of Veteran Affairs, established last year, began an online program in April to find the soldiers' relatives.

China-ROK environmental cooperation is another area of progress, especially since the recent fallout over fine dust pollution. At a Nov. 4 meeting in Seoul, environment ministers Li Ganjie and Cho Myung-rae agreed to implement a joint project on technology and personnel exchange. The PRC Ministry of Ecology and Environment's Director-General for Climate Change Li Gao and ROK Foreign Ministry's Climate Change Ambassador Yoo Yeon-chul also took part in talks in Haikou on Oct. 30-31. South Korean Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon [expressed](#) support for trilateral cooperation with Japan at an environmental forum in November in Seoul, where PRC Environment Minister Li Ganjie outlined China's measures against air pollution. The two environment ministers joined their Japanese counterpart Koizumi Shinjiro for the 21<sup>st</sup> Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting in Kitakyushu on Nov. 23-24, specifying eight focus areas of cooperation over the next five years. The 4<sup>th</sup> China-ROK-Japan Science and Technology Ministerial Meeting took place in Seoul on Dec. 26 after a six-year gap in talks. Supporting the plans for cooperation laid out at the trilateral leaders' summit, science officials Wang Zhigang, Choi Ki-young, and Haguida Koichi agreed to resume joint research on common transnational challenges like pollution, infectious disease, and natural disasters.

While South Korea's National Institute of Environmental Research identifies China as the source of up to 70% of ultrafine dust in the country, a recent trilateral study found that an average of 51% comes from domestic sources and 32% from China. According to the Chinese Research Academy of Environmental Sciences' head scientist on atmospheric environment, such findings suggest an "[exaggeration](#)" in China's environmental impact in the region. In addition to fine dust, regional concerns [emerged](#) over Tokyo's proposals on Dec. 23 for disposing of contaminated water from the Fukushima nuclear plant hit by the 2011 tsunami.

## The China-DPRK Economic and Cultural Partnership

China's share of North Korea's external trade reached 91.8% last year, based on Korea International Trade Association data. In contrast, inter-Korean trade amounted to almost zero in 2017-2018, following the 2016 shutdown of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and tightened international sanctions. Despite ongoing sanctions, North Korea's imports from China increased by almost an annual 20% in October. According to Chinese customs data, China provided more than \$35 million in aid to North Korea in January-August, most of which was spent on fertilizer. That figure was still 38% less than the amount China provided last year. Stalled US-DPRK talks in October underscored Pyongyang's continued quest for sanctions relief and security guarantees in exchange for dismantling its nuclear weapons program. The Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering reported in October that Taiwan's implementation of targeted financial sanctions on North Korea resulted in the freezing of assets worth more than \$3.96 million. On the other hand, the UNSC granted sanctions exemptions worth \$5,442 to support an International Red Cross project on clean water and sanitation in North Korea in October-April. Amid indications of US flexibility, Ambassador Zhang Jun at a December UNSC session on Korea called for adjusting sanctions measures for humanitarian concerns.

China's Foreign Ministry on Dec. 17 [confirmed](#) Beijing and Moscow's draft UN resolution on the Korean Peninsula calling for (1) continued commitment to denuclearization, (2) US-DPRK dialogue and the resumption of six-party talks, and (3) the partial lifting of sanctions. Aimed to promote dialogue amid escalating DPRK threats, the draft resolution is a step toward [breaking](#) the US-DPRK deadlock according to Zhang. *China Daily* [suggested](#) that it prompted Washington to rethink its position of "all take, no give" on the denuclearization issue, as indicated by US Special Representative for DPRK Affairs Stephen Biegun's subsequent visit to Beijing. Biegun met PRC Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui on Dec. 19, a day after a bipartisan group of US senators warned Pyongyang of additional sanctions in the case of further provocations. Regional attention on Beijing's cooperation in implementing sanctions heightened ahead of a UNSC resolution's Dec. 22 deadline for repatriating North Korean workers,

a major source of funding for the Pyongyang regime. While Russia accounted for the biggest share of the reported 23,000 repatriated workers, China did not disclose any corresponding data. South Korean media [claimed](#) that DPRK restaurants continued to operate in China after the repatriation deadline, with many workers using alternative permits.

Da Zhigang of the Heilongjiang Provincial Academy of Social Sciences called provincial-level exchanges are a “[new highlight](#)” in China-DPRK relations advancing economic and cultural cooperation. Liaoning Party Secretary Chen Qiufa’s four-day visit in November promoted such cooperation with the WPK’s North Pyongan provincial committee, especially in agriculture, healthcare, and tourism. Chen also met WPK Vice Chairman Ri Su-yong and Minister of External Economic Relations Kim Yong-jae, and oversaw an agreement between Dandong and Sinuiju on fighting infectious disease. Local scholars like Da Zhigang welcomed the visit for reviving China’s northeast rustbelt, supporting North Korea’s growth, and opening opportunities for cooperation in sectors outside the scope of sanctions. Pyongyang [hosted](#) the China-DPRK Sci-Tech Exhibition in Health and Sports Field on Oct. 28-Nov. 1, engaging more than 70 organizations, according to North Korean state media. Bilateral cultural exchanges point to the comprehensive development of China-DPRK ties. The Confucius Institute [opened](#) North Korea’s first Chinese center at Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies on Sept. 27, with Chinese partners Eastern Liaoning University and University of International Business and Economics in Beijing. According to Northeast China’s local travel operators, the number of Chinese visiting North Korea almost [tripled](#) in April-October.

### **Challenges for South Korean Trade and Investment**

Citing prolonged US-China trade tensions and a weak memory-chip sector, official estimates projected the weakest annual growth in a decade for South Korea in 2019. Exports to China, representing 27% of South Korea’s overall exports last year, declined by an annual 12% in November. Exports to Hong Kong dropped by 33% in January-October, led by a decline in semiconductor exports, which make up more than 70% of ROK exports to there. The Woori Finance Research Institute identifies

South Korea among the countries worst affected by the trade dispute between the US and China, the biggest importers of Korean products. The dispute could slow South Korea’s economic growth by 0.3% according to the Korea Development Institute. At a G20 meeting in Washington in October, Bank of Korea (BOK) chief Lee Ju-yeol [indicated](#) that it may have already lowered growth by up to 0.4%. In a BOK survey in December, 74% of respondents identified the US-China trade war as the biggest risk facing the South Korean economy. On the other hand, the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy [projects](#) that tariff reductions under RCEP will boost South Korea’s growth by up to 0.62% over a 10-year period, translating into \$6.8 billion in benefits to consumers. South Korean finance officials at the end of the year pointed to a preliminary US-China trade deal as a reassuring sign for economic conditions in 2020.

According to China’s Ministry of Commerce, South Korea still [ranked](#) second among China’s top foreign investors in January-October 2019 (behind Singapore), with a total investment of \$5.04 billion, a 20% increase from the same period last year. South Korea continues to promote outward investment in China, where expenditures on chip-making facilities drove a 123% increase in direct investment there in April-June 2019 according to the ROK Ministry of Economy and Finance. Selected Korean companies were promised new tax benefits under an advance pricing deal reached between Chinese and ROK tax authorities in September. The Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) opened two new offices in China’s northeast capital cities that same month, targeting business opportunities in Harbin’s food and renewable energy industries, and Changchun’s auto and healthcare sectors. KOTRA’s expansion supports the Moon administration’s New Northern Policy aimed to deepen economic integration with Northeast Asian neighbors. As head of the Presidential Committee on Northern Economic Cooperation, Kwon Goo-hoon claimed at a December forum in Seoul that multilateral cooperation with Russia, China’s northeast, and Central Asia would “create new growth engines and establish the foundation of unification.” Moon outlined his envisioned Northeast Asian economic community at the 7<sup>th</sup> China-ROK-Japan business summit in Chengdu, where he also secured Chinese support for the East Asia Railway Community Initiative reconnecting

inter-Korean roads and railways as part of Eurasian transport networks.

Beijing's policy support, meanwhile, is focused on facilitating China's industrial shift to central and western regions. As part of an inspection tour in October, Premier Li visited Samsung Semiconductor's Xi'an plant, where he affirmed China's commitment to intellectual property rights protection and nondiscrimination against foreign businesses. At the China-ROK-Japan Business Summit in Chengdu in December, Li similarly reassured his counterparts on China's commitment to creating a favorable business environment for foreign companies. South Korean heavyweights like Samsung, however, still face the major challenge of declining Chinese market share. With rising competition from Chinese rivals like Huawei and Xiaomi, Samsung Electronics ended smartphone production in its remaining Guangdong-based factory in September. Hyundai Motor Co. also closed down its main Beijing plant, and reported a 16% decline in combined China sales with its affiliate Kia Motors Corp. in January-August.

#### **Hong Kong Clashes Undermine Post-THAAD Cultural Exchanges**

Wang's latest visits to Seoul did not offer South Koreans much reassurance on future cultural interactions with Chinese counterparts. Current concerns have shifted to clashes between pro-Hong Kong demonstrators and mainland Chinese students on university campuses in Korea. Student clashes required the foreign ministries to step in as protests spread across major universities from November. The ROK Foreign Ministry expressed concerns over Hong Kong's escalating situation and raised its travel warning that same month. After two Chinese students were caught taking down "liberate Hong Kong" banners at Yonsei University on Nov. 12, the PRC Foreign Ministry insisted such actions were "[reasonable](#)" while also calling for compliance with local laws. According to the PRC Embassy in Seoul, the students were "expressing their opposition to words and actions that harm Chinese sovereignty." As Hong Kong protests quickly spread to other campuses, Chinese students accused their Korean counterparts of interfering in China's affairs. Even on social media, K-pop star Choi Si-won apologized to Chinese fans after "liking" a Hong Kong news post prompted a Chinese fan club to [threaten](#) to close down.

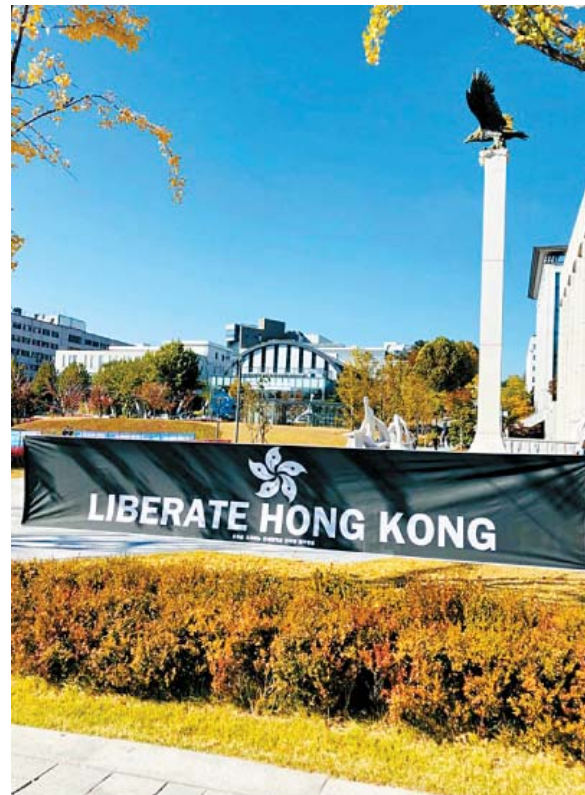


Figure 4 "Liberate Hong Kong banners" hung at Yonsei University, where two Chinese students were caught attempting to take down the banners. Photo: Korea Joonang Daily

The long-term cultural effects of the THAAD dispute remain uncertain. According to the Korea Tourism Organization, the number of Chinese tourists to South Korea increased by 26% to 5.51 million in January-November 2019 from the same period last year. Chinese language study remains popular in South Korea, where the number of Chinese Proficiency Test (*hanyu shuiping kaoshi*) takers last year was the world's highest, [according](#) to a Chinese Embassy official. In addition, almost half the 1.3 million immigrants in South Korea as of May 2019 are Chinese nationals, while 69% of the F-4 multiple-entry visas Seoul issued last year went to ethnic Koreans in China. Chinese-Korean marriages became a major trending topic on Chinese social [media](#) in November after the Korea Broadcast System reported that Chinese grooms were the most favored among foreign grooms in South Korea last year. On the other hand, as *The South China Morning Post* [reported](#) in December, children of Chinese and North Korean parents seeking refuge in the South continue to face significant problems assimilating.

## **Conclusion: China and Korea's Regional Position**

Inspired by a recent lecture by South Korea's former Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan at Peking University, a *Global Times* [article](#) argued that the US-China relationship is most important to the development of a Northeast Asian security architecture. But as the nuclear impasse dragged on, Moon's interactions with Chinese and US counterparts incited criticism from Pyongyang on Seoul's failure to act independently. Regional exchanges continue to draw attention to the repercussions of US-China competition for Seoul. ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha sought to dispel such perceptions during Wang Yi's December visit, making [clear](#) that "our role is to be a force for cooperation rather than competition between the US and China." At Seoul's Strategic Coordination Meeting on Foreign Affairs on Dec. 30, a meeting launched in July amid US-China tensions, Kang [presented](#) a diplomatic strategy of securing "maneuvering space" by strengthening cooperation with all neighbors.

In his yearend [interview](#) with CGTN, Wang attributed current tensions on the peninsula to the failure to implement the US-DPRK Singapore summit's Joint Statement and address Pyongyang's "legitimate concerns." Wang admitted that "the window of opportunity for peace is again shifting, and the chances for dialogue quickly fading," while calling 2019 a "milestone" in China-DPRK relations. Since Pyongyang never sent the "Christmas gift" it promised to Washington at the end of the year, South Korean analysts anticipate that Pyongyang will continue to seek Chinese and Russian support rather than risk escalating military threats in 2020.

*Research assistance and chronology compilation provided by Chenglong Lin.*



# CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

**Sept. 2-4, 2019:** People's Republic of China State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi visits North Korea, where he meets his DPRK counterpart Ri Yong-ho and WPK Vice Chairman Ri Su-yong, and visits a cemetery of the Chinese People's Volunteers.

**Sept. 4, 2019:** South Korea's National Tax Service Commissioner Kim Hyun-jun and PRC counterpart Wang Jun sign a deal in Beijing easing tax audit burdens for select South Korean companies.

**Sept. 5, 2019:** DPRK Ambassador to China Ji Jae-ryong hosts a banquet in Beijing marking the 71<sup>st</sup> anniversary of North Korea's founding.

**Sept. 9, 2019:** President Xi Jinping sends a congratulatory message to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un on North Korea's founding anniversary.

**Sept. 9, 2019:** DPRK Ambassador Ji Jae-ryong addresses "DPRK Day" on the sidelines of the Beijing International Horticultural Exhibition, attended by officials of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

**Sept. 10, 2019:** North Korea launches two short-range projectiles.

**Sept. 11, 2019:** The Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and the China-Korea Friendship Association host a reception in Beijing marking North Korea's founding anniversary, attended by DPRK Ambassador to China Ji Jae Ryong and Chinese officials.

**Sept. 12, 2019:** Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui and special representative for Korean Peninsula peace and security affairs Lee Do-hoon meet in Beijing.

**Sept. 12, 2019:** At a news conference with Malaysian Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah, Wang expresses Chinese support for DPRK efforts to resume talks with Washington.

**Sept. 19, 2019:** China's General Administration of Customs says China will ban pig imports from South Korea given reported cases of African swine fever.

**Sept. 19, 2019:** Choe Sang Gon, president of Kim Il Sung University and minister of Higher Education, leads a university delegation to China to attend Yanbian University's 70th founding anniversary celebrations.

**Sept. 21, 2019:** Chairman of the Architects Union of Korea's Central Committee Sim Yong Hak leads a DPRK delegation to the 10th Weihai international ecological environment festival in China.

**Sept. 24, 2019:** The Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency says it will open two new offices in Harbin and Changchun, capitals of Heilongjiang and Jilin provinces.

**Sept. 25, 2019:** FM Wang and ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha hold talks on the sidelines of the 74th session of the UN General Assembly.

**Sept. 26, 2019:** PRC Ambassador to North Korea Li Jinjun addresses a reception in Pyongyang marking China's 70<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary, attended by Pak Pong-ju, Vice Chairman of North Korea's State Affairs Commission.

**Sept. 27, 2019:** Confucius Institute opens North Korea's first Chinese center at Pyongyang University of Foreign Studies.

**Sept. 29, 2019:** China identifies six Chinese soldiers killed in the Korean War, whose remains were reburied in the cemetery of Korean War martyrs in Shenyang after being returned from South Korea.

**Oct. 1, 2019:** Kim sends a congratulatory message to Xi on the PRC's 70<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary.

**Oct. 2, 2019:** North Korea test-fires a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) which the ROK military calls an intermediate-range ballistic missile.

**Oct. 3, 2019:** PRC Foreign Ministry says China welcomes US-DPRK efforts to resume dialogue.

**Oct. 5, 2019:** South Korean media reports that North Korea sent a group of working-level officials to Dandong, Liaoning province, ahead of planned US-DPRK nuclear talks in Sweden.

**Oct. 5-12, 2019:** Koreans in China and Chinese guests visit North Korea for a meeting of the Kim Il Sung-Kim Jong Il Foundation.

**Oct. 6-27, 2019:** Cultural events in China mark the WPK's 74<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary and the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of China-DPRK diplomatic relations.

**Oct. 6, 2019:** Xi and Kim exchange congratulatory messages on the 70th anniversary of China-DPRK diplomatic ties.

**Oct. 6, 2019:** *Rodong Sinmun* dedicates an article to the 70th anniversary of China-DPRK diplomatic relations.

**Oct. 8, 2019:** China's Foreign Ministry expresses hopes for US-DPRK dialogue.

**Oct. 8, 2019:** DPRK State Stamp Bureau issues a new stamp to commemorate the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations with China.

**Oct. 10, 2019:** ROK Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries reports that it has seized four Chinese boats for illegal fishing in South Korea's EEZ in the Yellow Sea.

**Oct. 11, 2019:** South Korea's Coast Guard seizes two Chinese fishing boats for illegal fishing in its EEZ in the Yellow Sea.

**Oct. 11, 2019:** Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and China-Korea Friendship Association hold a reception in Beijing to mark the 70th anniversary of China-DPRK relations, attended by DPRK Ambassador Ji Jae Ryong.

**Oct. 12, 2019:** A delegation of North Korea's Academy of Social Sciences, led by its President Ri Hye Jong, leaves Pyongyang to visit China.

**Oct. 12, 2019:** A friendship delegation led by Kim Yong Chol, chairman of the South Hwanghae Provincial People's Committee, leaves Pyongyang to visit China.

**Oct. 14, 2019:** The first album of K-pop group SuperM, which includes a Chinese member, tops the US Billboard 200 albums chart for the week of October 19.

**Oct. 14-17, 2019:** Director of China's CMC political affairs department Senior Vice Adm. Miao Hua visits North Korea and meets Kim Sungil, director of the DPRK army's general political bureau.

**Oct. 14-18, 2019:** A 19-member delegation of Chinese regional government officials visit South Korea as part of a Foreign Ministry exchange program launched in 1999.

**Oct. 16, 2019:** During his inspection tour of Xian, PRC Premier Li Keqiang visits Samsung Semiconductor Co.'s chip foundries.

**Oct. 18-21, 2019:** Xinhua News Agency delegation led by Vice President Zhang Sutang arrives in Pyongyang.

**Oct. 20-22, 2019:** ROK Vice Defense Minister Park Jae-min visits Beijing. He meets Lt. Gen. Shao Yuanming, deputy chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department, for the 5<sup>th</sup> China-ROK vice ministerial strategic defense dialogue.

**Oct. 20-22, 2019:** The Xiangshan Forum takes place in Beijing. PRC Defense Minister Wei Fenghe holds separate meetings with ROK and DPRK vice defense ministers Park Jae-min and Kim Hyong-ryong on the sidelines.

**Oct. 21-25, 2019:** Delegation of the China-DPRK Friendship Parliamentary Group led by Chairman Choe Sang Gon, president of Kim Il Sung University and minister of Higher Education, visits China.

**Oct. 24, 2019:** You Ki-jun, director-general of the ROK Foreign Ministry's International Legal Affairs Bureau, and Wang Xiaodu, China's ambassador for Yellow Sea Affairs, meet in Seoul for working-level talks on EEZs.

**Oct. 28-Nov. 1, 2019:** China-DPRK Sci-Tech Exhibition in Health and Sports Field takes place in Pyongyang.

**Oct. 29, 2019:** A PRC military plane enters the Korean Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ) after sending prior notification, according to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

**Oct. 30, 2019:** Korean Central News Agency publishes Xi's reply to Kim's congratulatory message on China's 70<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary.

**Oct. 30-31, 2019:** ROK Ambassador for Climate Change Yoo Yeon-chul and PRC Ministry of Ecology and Environment's director-general for climate change Li Gao lead climate change talks in Haikou.

**Oct. 31, 2019:** North Korea test-fires two short-range projectiles.

**Nov. 3, 2019:** Students hold a rally in Seoul supporting anti-government protests in Hong Kong.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** The 22<sup>nd</sup> ASEAN Plus Three summit takes place in Bangkok.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** PRC and ROK environment ministers Li Ganjie and Cho Myung-rae hold talks in Seoul.

**Nov. 5, 2019:** A delegation of the Education Commission led by Chairman Kim Sung Du leaves Pyongyang to visit China.

**Nov. 7, 2019:** South Korea's Yonhap News Agency and China's Xinhua News Agency sign an agreement to expand media cooperation.

**Nov. 10, 2019:** Liaoning Daily reports a four-day visit to North Korea by a Chinese delegation led by Liaoning provincial party secretary Chen Qiufa, at the invitation of the WPK's North Pyongan provincial committee. The Chinese delegation met Vice Chairman of the WPK Central Committee Ri Su-yong and Minister of External Economic Relations Kim Yong-jae.

**Nov. 11-12, 2019:** Students at Seoul National University and Korea University hold protests supporting the antigovernment protest movement in Hong Kong.

**Nov. 13-21, 2019:** ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus members, including China and South Korea, hold counter-terrorism drills.

**Nov. 14, 2019:** China's Foreign Ministry calls for dialogue on the Korean Peninsula after Pyongyang expresses opposition to US-ROK military drills in mid-November.

**Nov. 14, 2019:** ROK Foreign Ministry expresses concern over intensifying protests in Hong Kong.

**Nov. 14, 2019:** PRC Embassy in Seoul states that the mainland Chinese students who removed "liberate Hong Kong" banners at Yonsei University on Nov. 12 were "expressing their indignation and opposition to words and actions that harm Chinese sovereignty and distort the facts."

**Nov. 15, 2019:** Seoul raises its travel warning level for Hong Kong.

**Nov. 17, 2019:** PRC and ROK defense ministers Wei Fenghe and Jeong Kyeong-doo hold bilateral talks in Bangkok.

**Nov. 18, 2019:** The PRC Foreign Ministry says that overseas Chinese student opposition to separatist activities in Hong Kong are "understandable" but calls for compliance with local laws.

**Nov. 18, 2019:** Students at Yonsei University hold a silent march against the crackdown on Hong Kong protestors. Posters carrying the same message emerge on other campuses including Korea University of Foreign Studies and Pusan National University.

**Nov. 18, 2019:** South Korea's Oceans Ministry reports it has seized three Chinese fishing boats for illegal fishing in its EEZ in the Yellow Sea.

**Nov. 19, 2019:** Students hold rally near the PRC Embassy in Seoul supporting Hong Kong protests.

**Nov. 21, 2019:** South Korea's Foreign Ministry spokesperson state that China and South Korea are communicating on issues concerning student clashes over Hong Kong.

**Nov. 23, 2019:** *Rodong Sinmun* reports on the 66<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conclusion of the China-DPRK agreement on economic and cultural cooperation.

**Nov. 23-24, 2019:** The 21<sup>st</sup> China-ROK-Japan Environment Ministers' Meeting takes place in Kitakyushu.

**Nov. 27, 2019:** A planned China tour by North Korea's Moranbong band is suspended according to ROK media.

**Nov. 27-29, 2019:** The 16<sup>th</sup> round of China-ROK-Japan FTA negotiations take place in Seoul.

**Nov. 28, 2019:** North Korea test-fires two short-range projectiles.

**Nov. 29, 2019:** Duan Jining, director of international cooperation at the Chinese Banking Insurance Regulatory Commission, Sohn Byung-doo, ROK Financial Services Commission Vice Chairman, and Himino Ryoza, vice minister for international affairs at the Japanese Financial Services Agency, hold trilateral talks in Tokyo.

**Nov. 29, 2019:** A PRC military plane violates KADIZ, according to Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff.

**Nov. 30-Dec. 1, 2019:** The symphony orchestra of the State Grand Theatre of China performs in North Korea's Samjiyon Orchestra Theatre.

**Dec. 1-4, 2019:** Shandong Party Secretary Liu Jiayi visits South Korea for events on local government cooperation and meetings with Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon, Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha, and First Vice Foreign Minister Cho Sei-young.

**Dec. 3, 2019:** The 13<sup>th</sup> round of consular consultations takes place in Beijing between PRC Director-General of the Department of Consular Affairs Cui Aimin and DPRK counterpart, who also meets China's Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui.

**Dec. 4, 2019:** The 5<sup>th</sup> ROK-China Peace Diplomacy Forum takes place in Seoul.

**Dec. 4-5, 2019:** FM Wang visits South Korea, where he meets Moon, Kang, ruling Democratic Party leader Lee Hae-chan, and former UN Secretary-General and Boao Forum for Asia Chairman Ban Ki-moon.

**Dec. 5, 2019:** South Korean media reports that DPRK External Economic Affairs Minister Kim Yong-jae arrives in Beijing from Pyongyang.

**Dec. 8, 2019:** South Korean university students hold rally outside the Chinese Embassy in Seoul supporting Hong Kong protests.

**Dec. 9, 2019:** A delegation of the All-China Journalists Association led by Hu Xiaohan, executive secretary and executive vice president of the association, arrives in Pyongyang.

**Dec. 11, 2019:** China's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Zhang Jun presents China's position at a Security Council meeting on the Korean peninsula.

**Dec 12, 2019:** PRC Foreign Ministry's Director-General of the Policy Planning Department Liu Jinsong and ROK Foreign Ministry's Director-General for Strategy Lee Jun-ho meet in Seoul.

**Dec. 12-13, 2019:** Vice Finance ministers and central bank representatives hold ASEAN Plus Three talks in Xiamen.

**Dec. 13, 2019:** China's Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui, ROK Deputy FM Kim Gunn, and Japan's Senior Deputy FM Mori Takeo meet in Chengdu in preparation for the trilateral leaders' summit.

**Dec. 14, 2019:** North Korea confirms it has conducted a "crucial test" at a satellite launch site.

**Dec. 15, 2019:** People's Daily organizes an ASEAN Plus Three media forum in Chengdu.

**Dec. 15, 2019:** China's National Health Commission chief Ma Xiaowei, ROK health minister Park Neung-hoo, and Japan's Minister of Health, Labor and Welfare Kato Katsunobu hold the Tripartite Health Ministers' Meeting in Seoul.

**Dec. 16, 2019:** 2019 China-ROK-Japan Media Dialogue takes place in Chengdu, Sichuan province.

**Dec. 18-24, 2019:** An exhibition celebrating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of China-DPRK diplomatic relations, organized by China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the DPRK Embassy in China, opens at the National Library of China.

**Dec. 19, 2019:** China's Foreign Ministry calls for restraint on the Korean peninsula.

**Dec. 22, 2019:** The 12<sup>th</sup> round of China-ROK-Japan trade talks take place in Beijing.

**Dec. 23-24, 2019:** Moon travels to China, where he meets Xi in Beijing and Premier Li Keqiang in Chengdu before the 8<sup>th</sup> China-ROK-Japan leaders' summit.

**Dec. 26, 2019:** 4<sup>th</sup> China-ROK-Japan Science and Technology Ministerial Meeting takes place in Seoul.



# COMPARATIVE

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C O N N E C T I O N S

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

**JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS**

## SPEAKING SOFTLY BUT PLANNING FOR THE WORST

JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

As Tokyo continued to press unsuccessfully for a date on Xi Jinping's state visit to Japan, frictions continued on matters such as the number of Japanese nationals detained in China, human rights concerns involving Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and Japan's tentative reaction to participation in both the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Belt and its Road Initiative. Trade relations remained strong despite declining economic growth in China and near stagnation in Japan, with both sides continuing to enhance their defense capabilities.

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## Politics

[Responding](#) to Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's warning to African states not to accumulate too much debt, Beijing's *Global Times* accused him of implicit hostility to China, to which China was unlikely to turn a blind eye. The paper characterized Abe's statement that he hoped to cooperate with African states to safeguard the Indo-Pacific as indicative of Japan's desire to play an important part in US strategy, or even to replace US leadership in line with Japan's own national interests, and to contain China. Sino-Japanese rivalry in Africa also played into the issue of United Nations reform, with the votes of the 54 African states crucial to obtaining the necessary two-thirds majority to move the proposals forward. China has consistently opposed the G-4's (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan) plans for reform.

The Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), recently held every three years instead of, as previously, every five, most recently attracted 42 leader-level participants vis-a-vis the 53 that participated in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). *Yomiuri* [quoted](#) an unnamed high-ranking Japanese official as saying China put explicit pressure on African countries not to attend TICAD, with delegates from some countries reportedly even turning back en route. A *Global Times* op-ed [described](#) Japan's aid to Africa as motivated by big-power competition and desire to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. According to the paper, Japan would never win the support of Africans, no matter how large the sums. Chinese aid, by contrast, is aimed at alleviating poverty and creating jobs. Xi's spring visit to Japan will [include](#) a forum on infrastructure in third countries, with both countries providing financial and other support to these projects once terms are set. Zhu Feng, director of Nanjing University's Institute of International Studies, [urged](#) that China do away with a "problem-based perspective" when dealing with Japan and understand that it will take some time to re-establish trust. Opining that it would be unwise for China to expect a sudden spurt in ties, he suggested a "coopetition" model.

In a reminder that the Chinese government had not forgotten the war guilt issue, air raid sirens opened the 25<sup>th</sup> iteration of a ceremony in Shenyang to mark the 1931 Shenyang (Mukden)

incident that began the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. However, China's official press agency Xinhua made no [mention](#) of high-ranking central government officials attending. On the eve of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, observers [described](#) the so-called thaw as the leadership of both sides trying to reap domestic benefits while remaining keenly aware of their broader strategic rivalry. According to a poll [released](#) by the Pew Research Organization at the same time, Japanese views of China had declined to 85% unfavorable, 14% favorable, amid a general drop in China's image internationally. Xi, [speaking](#) with former Japanese Foreign Minister Kawaguchi Yoriko, said that although China needed to do some things to improve its image, the responsibility to undo prejudiced and biased views against China rested with Japan.

An opinion piece in *The Japan Times* [warned](#) Japanese that China had weaponized its tourist industry, the world's largest. It urged Japan, as well as other Asian tourist destinations to welcome, but also diversify away from, Chinese tourists, the largest group visiting Japan in 2018. [Noting](#) that the participants in this year's meeting of the Quad—Japan, India, Australia, and the US, at the United Nations General Assembly—had been raised to foreign ministerial level, a Chinese academic stated that, rather than become alarmed, China must deepen engagement with Japan, India, and Australia.

Minister of Okinawa and Northern Territories Eto Seiichi became the first cabinet member to [visit](#) the Yasukuni Shrine since Sanai Takaichi in April 2017. Eto signed the shrine's register book with his formal title, but emphasized that he had paid for the ritual tamagushiryo with his private funds. Abe sent the sacred masasaki offering, also with his formal title as prime minister, but did not attend. The Chinese Foreign Ministry [responded](#) with a standard stern representation, its spokesperson urging the Japanese side to "faithfully honor its statements and commitments on facing up to and reflecting upon its past aggression...by taking concrete actions." China is reportedly [seeking](#) what it terms a fifth communique during Xi's visit to Tokyo in spring 2020, which Beijing hopes will include Abe's endorsement of China's Belt and Road Initiative.



In September Professor Iwatani Nobu, a specialist in Sino-Japanese relations in the 1930s, was [detained](#) in China on suspicion of espionage. He had previously worked for the National Institute for Defense Studies, a nominally independent think tank associated with the Japanese Ministry of Defense. China [released](#) Iwatani after Japanese officials hinted that the issue should be resolved in order to create “a good environment” for Xi Jinping’s state visit in spring 2020. Xinhua [noted](#) that Xi and Abe had sent congratulatory letters to the first meeting of the China-Japan high-level consultation mechanism on people-to-people and culture exchanges. Although the meeting was held in Tokyo, Japanese papers largely ignored it. In late November, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide [revealed](#) that another Japanese in his 50s had been detained in Hunan since July on undisclosed charges.

Abe and Xi, [meeting](#) in Beijing in late December, pledged to “jointly open a new future for relations,” with Xi saying that they were “facing an important development opportunity.” According to Foreign Ministry spokesman Otaka Masato, Abe did not shy away from sensitive areas, including China’s handling of Hong Kong, the detention of more than a million Muslims in Xinjiang, Japanese who have been detained, and maritime security. *Nikkei* [noted](#) that, in his reply to Xi, Abe did not use Xi’s pet phrase “a community with a shared future for humanity,” that Chinese authorities are trying to insert into a fifth communique. A compromise statement at the meeting was “shared responsibility for peace and stability in Asia and the world.” But the wording of the fifth communique has not been finalized, nor has Xi committed to a date for the visit. Within Japan, there is significant opposition to a state visit by Xi, including from the Japanese Communist Party, whose party platform has condemned Chinese hegemonism as well as its actions in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and the disputed Senkaku Islands.



Figure 1 Abe and Xi meet in Beijing on Dec. 24, 2019. Photo: *Nikkei*

As the year closed, the director of the international strategy division of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences [opined](#) that, since Japan fears China but cannot compete with China on its own and considers itself part of the West, it is attempting to counter the PRC through various means. These include the creation an “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity,” and participation in sundry international organizations while dithering on participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and giving limited support to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

### Economics

International e-commerce support firm Trend Express [reported](#) that hundreds of billions of yen are made annually between Japan and China through “social buyers”—Chinese citizens living in Japan buying Japanese goods in bulk to resell on social media sites to followers in China. Since Japanese-branded products enjoy a reputation for safety and quality, Chinese consumers have been willing to pay the transaction fees. In response to the US-China trade war driving manufacturers out of the country, Chinese regional governments are courting Japanese companies to bring in new investments. *Nikkei* [cited](#) an unnamed source familiar with Sino-Japanese ties as saying that the municipalities are likely doing so on orders from the central government. While some of their bids have been turned down, other Japanese business interests see a window of opportunity for Japanese corporations.

Toyota expanded its cooperation with Chinese partners Guangzhou Automobile Group and FAW to include production of hydrogen fuel-cell cars. Reuters, [citing](#) minutes of internal Toyota meetings, says the plan reflects Toyota management’s desire to “strike a fine balance between China and the United States.” *Nikkei* [reported](#) that Japanese dominance of the Southeast Asian auto market is increasingly challenged by Chinese brands. Japanese automakers, heavily invested in large gas-powered vehicle plants in Thailand, have been slow to respond to government-promoted efforts to increase sales of electric and hybrid powered cars. China’s Sany Heavy Industry also [gained](#) on Japanese giants like Komatsu and Hitachi Heavy Industries. as well as the industry leader, US-based Caterpillar. Sany, whose prices are 20% cheaper than Komatsu’s, will partner

with Huawei to develop autonomous construction machinery.

Huawei chair Liang Hua, [speaking](#) in Tokyo to executives and researchers from Japan's top companies, said that his company expected to spend \$11 billion on procurement in Japan, on par with what it spent with the US, its biggest supplier, and employ more than a thousand people in its facilities in Japan. Japan's strengths in manufacturing, physics, and chemistry could complement Huawei's in mathematics and processing to expand sales. Kyodo [reported](#) that, according to the website of Hikvision Digital Technology, Japanese corporations Sony and Sharp are among its suppliers, despite Hikvision being one of the entities the US has blacklisted for human rights violations. Honda continues its joint research with the blacklisted facial recognition company SenseTime for self-driving technology. The number of Japanese [studying](#) in China has been rising, with an increasing number expressing interest in working for Chinese companies, despite salaries being roughly the same in the two countries.

The government of Pakistan's Sindh region has [sought](#) \$2.6 billion in Japanese funds to complete a railway envisioned as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Analysts hypothesized that the economic burden to Pakistan, coupled with concerns over loss of sovereign control, have created buyer's remorse over the project. Loans from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) also carry a lower interest rate. In the Philippines, the Chinese-Japanese railway rivalry appears to [favor](#) Japan: the research conducted by JICA placed Japan closer to the country's economic center of gravity and its projects are proceeding faster. Despite Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's friendship with Beijing and poor relations with Western states, Tokyo-Manila ties are strong. To ensure its influence in the Philippines does not fall behind Japan's, Beijing should look beyond the country's rail sector to capital projects and trade arrangements. The Japanese government prevented a Chinese corporation from obtaining operating rights at a port in El Salvador by warning that it would withdraw \$102 million in Official Development Assistance if the El Salvador government agreed to the Chinese tender.

Japanese generic drug manufacturers, having become [dependent](#) on China for less expensive

precursors, found themselves in difficulties after a leading supplier shut down due to insufficient treatment of waste water. A report jointly sponsored by several Japanese medical associations had previously urged supporting domestic production despite greater costs, since the supply of such drugs was a national security issue. Japanese authorities [searched](#) the home of a Diet member and former minister in charge of integrated resorts issues with regard to the illegal transfer of millions of yen from a Chinese investor who wished to build a resort complex in Hokkaido. After years of lobbying by Tokyo, boneless beef from Japan aged 30 months or less will be [allowed](#) into China for the first time since September 2001. High-end wagyu beef has become a favorite of the PRC's new rich, with Japanese planners hoping to double production by 2035. Amid concerns that Chinese were buying up land for reasons not necessarily strictly economic, Liberal Democratic Party lawmaker Akimoto Tsukasa was [arrested](#) and charged with accepting bribes from Chinese company 500.com to push through legislation for construction of an integrated resort facility. Since these combine gambling, accommodations, food, drink, entertainment, and meeting facilities, opponents fear the potential for gambling addiction, corruption, prostitution, and espionage.

## Defense

*Nikkei*, Japan's leading economic daily, [complained](#) about the increasing intrusions of Chinese research vessels into Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) without prior permission, as required by Article 246 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. China does not recognize the validity of the median line between the two countries' EEZs. NHK [reported](#) that Japan is to establish a new police unit covering the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. Its members will be responsible for dealing with unauthorized landings in the uninhabited islands of the East China Sea. Additional funding has been [requested](#) for the new unit, with up to 159 officers and equipment, the avowed intent being to signal to China that there will be increased costs if it attempts to advance its gray zone tactics in the area. Self-Defense Forces' pay will be [increased](#) more than 5% during the next fiscal year, with recruitment standards requiring higher levels of competence to deal with cyberspace and outer space threats from unnamed sources. At present, the SDFs

have been able to meet only about 70% of recruitment targets.

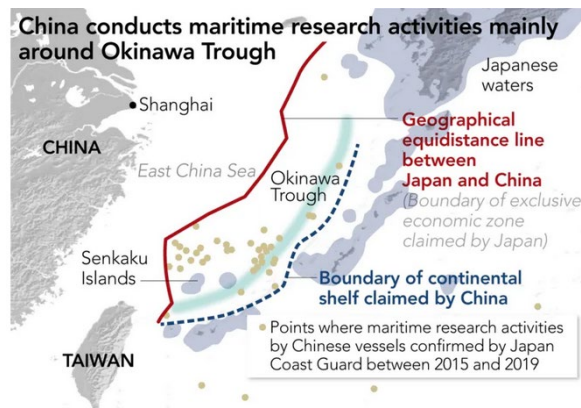


Figure 2 China maritime research activities around Okinawa Trough. Photo: Nikkei

US and Japanese ground forces [staged](#) a simulated attack against an enemy ship in an exercise that plainly had China in mind. This was the first such exercise in Japan, although a drill also involving land-to-ship missiles was held in the US last year. Typhoon Hagibis necessitated [cancellation](#) of a seven-nation fleet review which for the first time would have included China. In another first, the Ministry of Defense's [Defense of Japan 2019](#) raised China above North Korea as the major threat to Japanese security. Shortly thereafter, Japan's National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), affiliated with the Ministry of Defense, published the [2020 iteration](#) of its annual China Security Report. Subtitled "China Goes to Eurasia," the text predicted that any initiatives going beyond the language of consent and support with counterpart countries could imperil any achievements to date. Contrary to its practice after the release of previous editions of the NIDS reports, the Chinese press did not immediately react.

Satellite images [released](#) by the Washington-based Center for International and Strategic Studies showed what a Singaporean expert termed a factory for aircraft carriers and other very large vessels. London-based analysis suggested that Chinese naval capability development might be entering a new phase. A US coast guard officer, [speaking](#) on condition of anonymity, stressed the need for discussion between the Japanese government and public about the Chinese threat. The PRC continues to build a weapons inventory threatening Japan and other regional states: Japan's constitutional

avoidance of offensive weaponry is "no longer acceptable and should be another topic of discussion with the public." In light of recent maritime advances by China, the Japanese government has [purchased](#) Mageshima, a heretofore privately held uninhabited southwestern island, for the use of the US military and the SDF.

A 10-person team was [established](#) within Japan's National Security Council in response to alleged intellectual property violations and technology theft by China, as well as cyberattacks by North Korea. [Concerned](#) about leaks in sensitive technology due to the large increase in foreign students—up 12% from 2018 and 140% over 2008—the Japanese government is struggling to find regulations that do not elicit criticism that their real target is the 38% of foreign students, the largest group, who are from the PRC.

In November, Japan [held](#) its first ever full-fledged arms show, hoping to create a forum that will help it tap technology to counter threats posed by China and North Korea, with demonstrators gathering in front of the convention center to protest a perceived affront to the nation's constitution. Japanese and US government sources revealed in November that, in discussions in August, Chinese officials [warned](#) Japan and South Korea against allowing the United States to base intermediate-range missiles on their soil. Due to concerns about information security, the Japanese Coast Guard will stop [procuring](#) and using the several dozen Chinese-made drones it currently uses. Nine of the Japanese Coast Guard's 12 new large patrol vessels will be [deployed](#) around the disputed Senkaku Islands where, despite improved Sino-Japanese relations, Chinese vessels sailed for 264 days in 2019, exceeding the record 243 in 2014. Intrusions into Japanese territorial waters also increased to 29 from 19, and is expected to exceed 30 for the first time in three years. An unnamed official, acknowledging improved relations, states that "the Senkakus issue is another matter. We must remain vigilant." In light of these and the detention of Japanese nationals under unclear circumstances, a group of nationalist Diet members formally [stated](#) to the prime minister's office their opposition to Xi's anticipated visit.

Two days before he was to leave for Beijing and a day before the official [launch](#) of China's first indigenously built aircraft carrier, Japanese

Defense Minister Kono Taro [lashed out](#) against the PRC's military buildup, saying that countries cannot be allowed to expand their spheres of influence by force and "aggressors must be forced to pay the cost." The remarks took on added significance, as Kono is regarded as a potential successor to Abe. Kono and his Chinese counterpart, General Wei Fenghe [met](#) in Beijing, agreeing to set up a defense hotline and work together to denuclearize the Korean peninsula. Kono stressed "unresolved issues" and expressed "strong concern" about Chinese government ships' activities in the vicinity of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Wei's response was not disclosed. Kono, [addressing](#) the crew of the helicopter destroyer Izumo, described the security environment as severe since, due to Chinese government ships' repeated intrusions into Japanese territorial waters in the East China Sea and North Korean missile launches, their duty had become significantly more important. The Japanese [defense](#) budget for fiscal year 2020 will be 5.313 trillion yen (\$48.5 billion), the bulk of which will go toward enhancing capabilities in outer space and cyberspace, purchasing F-35B stealth fighters, and developing a next generation fighter to replace the ASDF's F-2s.

## Culture

On the same day as it castigated Japanese aid to Africa as selfishly motivated, another *Global Times* article [stated](#) that warmer Sino-Japanese ties meant an increase in the number of Japanese young people studying in China. Although their impressions were positive, their parents had concerns about air pollution and other environmental problems and stereotypes still exist.

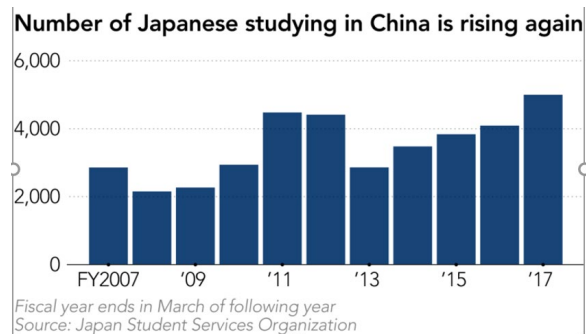


Figure 3 Chart of Japanese studying in China. Photo: Nikkei

## Taiwan

Japan and Sweden [co-sponsored](#) a conference in Taipei on disinformation, reflecting the Taiwan government's concern that China is seeking to influence its upcoming elections. *Yomiuri* [expressed](#) alarm at the Solomon Islands and Kiribati breaking relations with Taiwan in favor of China, stating that caution regarding Chinese moves into the South Pacific was "indispensable." *Asahi*, generally friendly to China, ran a lengthy [obituary](#) on Taiwan activist Su Beng, who passed away in Tokyo aged 100, noting that he "remained committed to Taiwan's independence until the final moments of his life." Meeting Japan's new de facto ambassador to Taiwan, President Tsai Ing-wen [said](#) that the timing was right for the two countries to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), in which Japan plays a leading role. According to Kyodo, Japan is Taiwan's third largest trading partner and Taiwan is Japan's third largest trading partner, with 2018 bilateral trade increasing 7% over the previous year and 59% of Taiwanese saying they felt more affinity with Japan than any other country.

Partnerships between Taiwanese and Japanese tech companies have been [increasing](#) since 2016, the year Tsai Ing-wen's anti-unification party took power. Most recently, Panasonic sold its chip business to Nuvoton; United Microelectronics acquired a Fujitsu plant, and Advantech purchased a subsidiary of Omron. The aim is to counter China's supply chain.

A meeting between Japanese and Chinese politicians, at first postponed after Beijing demanded that over 40 Diet members take part in a meeting in Gansu, to compensate for the 17 who attended a meeting in Taiwan, was [cancelled](#).

## Conclusion: A Breakthrough Ahead?

Repeated references to the thaw in China-Japan relations occurred alongside actions that indicated ongoing tensions. Proclamations on the advantages of cooperation for mutual benefit notwithstanding, China and Japan continued to compete in infrastructure projects such as railroad construction in the Philippines and Pakistan and in international fora including China's Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) vs Japan's Tokyo International

Conference on African Development (TICAD). Chinese sources expressed dissatisfaction with Japan's reluctance to commit itself to either the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership or its Belt and Road Initiative. Both sides continue to increase their military capabilities, even as bilateral trade remained strong despite economic woes in both countries. Difficulties have arisen in drafting a so-called fifth communique that is to be signed during Xi's long-delayed state visit to Tokyo, for which a date has yet to be announced. Even should the visit take place, it remains to be seen whether substantive breakthroughs can be achieved in such perennial frictions as the territorial status of the islands disputed between them, Japanese nationals detained in China, human rights concerns involving Xinjiang and Hong Kong, trade issues, and war guilt.

# CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

**Sept. 1, 2019:** [Responding](#) to Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's warning to African states not to accumulate too much debt, a *Global Times* accuses him of implicit hostility to China, to which China was unlikely to turn a blind eye.

**Sept. 1, 2019:** *Nikkei*, Japan's leading economic daily, [complains](#) of the increasing intrusions of Chinese research vessels into Japan's EEZ without permission, as required by Article 246 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. China does not recognize the validity of the median line between the two countries' EEZs.

**Sept. 2, 2019:** NHK [reports](#) that Japan is to establish a new police unit covering the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. Its members will be responsible for dealing with unauthorized landings in Okinawa Prefecture and will be armed with submachine guns.

**Sept. 3, 2019:** A *Global Times* article [states](#) that warmer Sino-Japanese ties mean an increase in the number of Japanese young people studying in China.

**Sept. 3, 2019:** A *Global Times* op-ed [describes](#) Japan's aid to Africa as motivated by big-power competition and its desire to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, while claiming Chinese aid is aimed at alleviating poverty and creating jobs.

**Sept. 6, 2019:** Japan's National Police Agency is reported to have [requested](#) funding for a new unit dedicated to protecting the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Up to 159 officers could be assigned to Okinawa along with additional helicopters and weapons for patrolling the uninhabited islands of the East China Sea, signaling to China that there will be increased costs if it attempts to advance its gray zone tactics in the area.

**Sept. 9, 2019:** An opinion piece in *The Japan Times* [warns](#) Japanese that China has weaponized its tourist industry, and urges Japan and other Asian destinations to welcome but also diversify away from Chinese tourists.

**Sept. 11, 2019:** Japan and Sweden [co-sponsor](#) a conference in Taipei on disinformation, reflecting the Taiwan government's concern that China is seeking to influence its elections.

**Sept. 16, 2019:** Chinese President Xi Jinping's spring visit to Japan is reported to [include](#) a forum on infrastructure in third countries, with both countries providing financial and other support to such projects once terms are set.

**Sept. 18, 2019:** *Asahi* [reports](#) that US and Japanese ground forces stage a simulated attack against an enemy ship, with China plainly in mind. This is the first such exercise in Japan.

**Sept. 18, 2019:** Xinhua [reports](#) on the 25<sup>th</sup> iteration of a ceremony to commemorate the 88<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Shenyang (Mukden) incident that began the Japanese invasion of Manchuria.

**Sept. 19, 2019:** International e-commerce support firm Trend Express [reports](#) that hundreds of billions of yen are made annually between Japan and China through "social buyers"—Chinese citizens living in Japan buying Japanese goods in bulk to resell on social media sites to followers in China.

**Sept. 19, 2019:** *Nikkei* [cites](#) an unnamed source familiar with Sino-Japanese ties as saying that Chinese municipalities are rolling out the red carpet for Japanese companies, likely on orders from the central government. While some bids have been turned down, other Japanese business interests see a window of opportunity for Japanese corporations.

**Sept. 21, 2019:** *Yomiuri* [quotes](#) an unnamed high-ranking Japanese official as saying that China put explicit pressure on African countries not to attend the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), with delegates from some countries reportedly even turning back en route. Whereas 42 leader-level African countries were represented at TICAD, 53 participated in Beijing's Forum on China-Africa cooperation.

**Sept. 24, 2019:** A *Yomiuri* editorial [expresses](#) alarm at the Solomon Islands and Kiribati breaking relations with Taiwan in exchange for economic assistance and advocates caution regarding Chinese moves into the South Pacific.

**Sept. 26, 2019:** Reuters [reports](#) that Toyota's management, in order "to strike a fine balance between China and the United States," will expand its cooperation with Chinese partners Guangzhou Automobile Group and FAW to include production of hydrogen fuel-cell cars.

**Sept. 27, 2019:** For the first time, the Japanese Ministry of Defense's [Defense of Japan 2019](#) raises China above North Korea as the major threat to Japanese security.

**Sept. 29, 2019:** A Chinese scholar, [noting](#) that the participants in this year's meeting of the Quad had been raised to foreign ministerial level, states that China must deepen engagement with Japan, India, and Australia.

**Sept. 30, 2019:** On the eve of Beijing's massive celebration of the founding of the PRC, *The Japan Times* [finds](#) few signs of substance behind the alleged warming of Sino-Japanese relations. As China paraded an impressive array of new weapons, Japan sought countermeasures.

**Sept. 30, 2019:** The Pew Research organization [reports](#) that, amid a general drop in China's image, Japanese views of China have declined to 85% unfavorable, 14% favorable.

**Oct. 13, 2019:** It is announced that Self-Defense Forces' pay will be [increased](#) more than 5% during the next fiscal year, with recruitment standards requiring higher levels of competence to deal with cyberspace of outer space threats from unnamed sources.

**Oct. 14, 2019:** Typhoon Hagibis necessitates the [cancellation](#) of a seven-nation fleet review which would have included China.

**Oct. 17, 2019:** Minister of Okinawa and Northern Territories Eto Seiichi [visits](#) the Yasukuni Shrine. Eto signs the shrine's register book with his formal title, though emphasizing that he had paid for the ritual tamagushiryō with his private funds. Abe sends the sacred masasaki offering, also with his formal title as prime minister, but did not attend. The Chinese Foreign Ministry [responds](#) sternly.

**Oct. 17, 2019:** Satellite images [released](#) by the Washington-based Center for International and Strategic Studies show what a Singaporean expert termed a factory for aircraft carriers and other very large vessels outside Shanghai.

**Oct. 19, 2019:** A Japanese historian (later confirmed to be Iwatani Nobu of Hokkaido University) specializing in Sino-Japanese relations in the 1930s is confirmed to have been [detained](#) in China on suspicion of espionage. He had previously worked for the National Institute for Defense Studies, a nominally independent think tank associated with the Japanese Ministry of Defense.

**Oct. 19, 2019:** The government of Pakistan's Sindh region reportedly [seeks](#) \$2.6 billion in Japanese funds to complete a railway that was envisioned as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Analysts hypothesize that the economic burden, coupled with concerns over loss of sovereign control, have created buyer's remorse.

**Oct. 21, 2019:** A US coast guard officer, [speaking](#) on condition of anonymity, stresses the need for discussions between the Japanese government and public about the Chinese threat, as the PRC continues to build a weapons inventory threatening Japan and other regional states.

**Oct. 30, 2019:** According to a Singapore-based analyst, the Chinese-Japanese railway rivalry in the Philippines appears to [favor](#) Japan. Research conducted by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) places Japan closer to the country's economic center of gravity and its projects are proceeding faster than China's.

**Oct. 31, 2019:** *Asahi*, generally friendly to China, publishes a lengthy [obituary](#) on Taiwan activist Su Beng, who passed away in Tokyo aged 100, noting that he "remained committed to Taiwan's independence until the final moments of this life."

**Nov. 1, 2019:** China reportedly [seeks](#) what it terms a fifth communique during Xi's visit to Tokyo in spring 2020, which Beijing hopes will include Abe's endorsement of China's Belt and Road initiative.

**Nov. 3, 2019:** A 10-person team was [established](#) within Japan's National Security Council in response to alleged intellectual property violations and technology theft by China as well as cyberattacks by North Korea.

**Nov. 5, 2019:** Japanese generic drug manufacturers, having become [dependent](#) on China for less expensive precursors, found themselves in difficulties after a leading supplier was shut down due to insufficient treatment of waste water. A report jointly sponsored by several Japanese medical associations previously urged supporting domestic production despite greater costs, since the supply of such drugs was a national security issue.

**Nov. 9, 2019:** Japan's National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), affiliated with the Ministry of Defense, publishes the [2020 iteration](#) of its annual China Security Report, subtitled "China Goes to Eurasia."

**Nov. 13, 2019:** Zhu Feng, director of Nanjing University's Institute of International Studies, [urges](#) that China do away with a "problem-based perspective" when dealing with Japan and understand that it will take some time to re-establish trust.

**Nov. 14, 2019:** Kyodo [reports](#) that, on meeting Japan's new de facto ambassador to Taiwan, President Tsai Ing-wen [said](#) that the timing was right for the two countries to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for a Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), in which Japan plays a leading role.

**Nov. 15, 2019:** China [releases](#) Iwatani after Japanese officials hinted that the issue should be resolved in order to create "a good environment" for Xi's state visit in spring 2020. Iwatani had previously worked for NIDS.

**Nov. 17, 2019:** Japan [hosts](#) its first ever full-fledged arms show, hoping to create a forum that will help it tap technology to counter threats posed by China and North Korea, with demonstrators gathering in front of the convention center to protest a perceived affront to the nation's constitution.

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**Nov. 22, 2019:** Xi, [speaking](#) with former Japanese Foreign Minister Kawaguchi Yoriko, said that although China must do some things to improve its image, the responsibility to undo prejudiced and biased views against China rests with Japan.

**Nov. 25, 2019:** *Nikkei* [reports](#) that Japanese dominance of the Southeast Asian auto market is increasingly challenged by Chinese brands. Japanese automakers, heavily invested in large gas-powered vehicle plants in Thailand, have been slow to respond to government-promoted efforts to increase sales of electric and hybrid powered cars.

**Nov. 25, 2019:** Kyodo [reports](#) that Japanese corporations Sony and Sharp are among the suppliers to Hikvision Digital Technology, one of the entities the US has blacklisted for human rights violations, while Honda continues joint research with the blacklisted facial recognition company SenseTime.

**Nov. 25, 2019:** Xinhua [notes](#) that Xi and Abe have sent congratulatory letters to the first meeting of the China-Japan high-level consultation mechanism on people to people and culture exchanges.

**Nov. 26, 2019:** Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide [reveals](#) that a Japanese in his 50s had been detained in Hunan since July on undisclosed charges.



**Nov. 28, 2019:** Nikkei [describes](#) the acquisition of Panasonic's chip business by Taiwan corporation Nuvoton as the latest example of a budding cross-border tech alliance.

**Nov. 30, 2019:** The number of Japanese [studying](#) in China is reported to be rising, with an increasing number expressing interest in working for Chinese companies.

**Nov. 30, 2019:** In light of recent maritime advances by China, the Japanese government reportedly [purchases](#) Mageshima, a privately owned uninhabited southwestern island, for the US military and the Self-Defense Forces to use.

**Dec. 9, 2019:** The Japanese Coast Guard says it will stop [procuring](#) and using several dozen Chinese-made drones due to concerns about information security.

**Dec. 10, 2019:** Nine of the Japanese Coast Guard's 12 new large patrol vessels will be [deployed](#) around the disputed Senkaku Islands where, despite improved Sino-Japanese relations, Chinese vessels sailed for a record 264 days this year.

**Dec. 13, 2019:** A group of nationalist Diet members formally [state](#) to the Prime Minister's Office of Japan their opposition to Xi's anticipated visit.

**Dec. 15, 2019:** A meeting between Japanese and Chinese politicians, at first postponed after Beijing demanded that over 40 Diet members take part in a meeting in Gansu, to compensate for the 17 who attended a meeting in Taiwan, is [cancelled](#).

**Dec. 16, 2019:** Two days before he was to leave for Beijing and a day before the official [launch](#) of China's first indigenously built aircraft carrier, Japanese Defense Minister Kono Taro [lashes out](#) against the PRC's military buildup, saying that countries cannot expand their spheres of influence by force.

**Dec. 17, 2019:** Reportedly [concerned](#) about leaks in sensitive technology due to the large increase in foreign students, the Japanese government struggles to find regulations that do not elicit criticism that their real target is foreign students from the PRC.

**Dec. 17, 2019:** Japanese authorities [search](#) the home of a Diet member and former minister in charge of integrated resorts issues with regard to the illegal transfer of millions of yen from a Chinese investor who wished to build a resort complex in Hokkaido.

**Dec. 19, 2019:** Kono and his Chinese counterpart, General Wei Fenghe, [meet](#) in Beijing, agreeing to set up a defense hotline and work together to denuclearize the Korean peninsula.

**Dec. 20, 2019:** The Japanese [defense](#) budget for fiscal year 2020 is revealed to be 5.13 trillion yen (\$43.66 billion), the bulk of which will go toward enhancing capabilities in outer space and cyberspace, purchase F-35B stealth fighters, and developing a fighter to replace the ASDF's F-2s.

**Dec. 23, 2019:** Kono, [addressing](#) the crew of the helicopter destroyer Izumo, describes the security environment as severe due to Chinese government ships' repeated intrusions into Japanese territorial waters in the East China Sea and North Korean missile launches.

**Dec. 24, 2019:** After years of lobbying by Tokyo, boneless beef from Japan aged 30 months or less is [allowed](#) into China for the first time since Sept. 2001.

**Dec. 24, 2019:** Abe and Xi, [meeting](#) in Beijing, pledge to "jointly open a new future for relations," with Xi saying that they were "facing an important development opportunity." According to Foreign Ministry spokesman Otaka Masato, Abe did not shy away from sensitive areas, including Hong Kong, Xinjiang, detained Japanese, and maritime security.

**Dec. 26, 2019:** *Nikkei* [notes](#) that, in his reply to Xi, Abe did not use Xi's pet phrase "a community with a shared future for humanity," that Chinese authorities are trying to insert into a fifth communique. A compromise statement at the meeting was "shared responsibility for peace and stability in Asia and the world."

**Dec. 26, 2019:** LDP lawmaker Akimoto Tsukasa is [arrested](#) and charged with accepting bribes from Chinese company 500.com to push through legislation enabling the construction of an integrated resort facility.

**Dec. 30, 2019:** Xue Li, director of the international strategy division of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences [opines](#) that Japan is attempting to counter China through a variety of means, such as participation in assorted international organizations and dithering on participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

**Dec. 30, 2019:** Kyodo [reports](#) that the Japanese government prevented a Chinese corporation from obtaining operating rights at a port in El Salvador by warning that it would withdraw \$102 million in Official Development Assistance if the El Salvador government agreed to the Chinese tender.

PACIFIC FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

## THAWS AND TREMORS

JI-YOUNG LEE, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY  
MINTARO OBA, WEST WING WRITERS

If relations between Japan and South Korea were defined by “[cold economics, cold politics](#)” through the summer of 2019 (as we described it in the September issue of *Comparative Connections*), South Korea-Japan ties at the end of 2019 had begun a tentative thaw. Tensions between the two countries have fallen in the waning months of 2019 from their peak in the summer, when Japan imposed export restrictions on South Korea and Seoul Korea indicated its intent to withdraw from the General Security of Military Information Sharing Agreement (GSOMIA). Following a comparatively quiet but tense period in September and October, both countries took de-escalatory steps starting in November—most notably South Korea’s conditional decision not to withdraw from GSOMIA after all—that improved the atmosphere and created space for diplomacy.

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Importantly, this progress came in a different strategic context from previous months, raising the possibility that both countries were influenced by a desire to maintain bilateral stability and predictability amid other challenges. Notably, the Trump administration's demand that the two allies [pay more](#) for US troops in South Korea and Japan introduced new destabilizing tremors for Seoul and Tokyo. In the meanwhile, amid stalled US-North Korea denuclearization talks, Pyongyang gave both Tokyo and Seoul the cold shoulder, while the whole region was bracing for North Korea's "Christmas gift" of missile threats.

The future remains uncertain. The steps that Japan and South Korea took at the end of 2019 did not resolve key substantive disagreements that had raised tensions in the first place. Japan-South Korea relations in the year 2020 will not be smooth sailing, as long as neither side budes in the ongoing dispute over the Korean forced labor compensation rulings.

### **Tremors in the Region—Cost-Sharing and North Korea**

The regional environment surrounding Japan and South Korea—and the major constraints they faced—changed in the last months of 2019, especially from the perspective of their alliance management vis-à-vis the United States. For the most part, these shifts represented sources of greater uncertainty and heightened instability for both countries.

The first shift was the increasing volatility of both countries' military cost-sharing discussions with the United States, which have the potential to shake the foundations of the US alliance system in East Asia. South Korea is in the midst of negotiations with the US, and Japan will have to negotiate with Washington on an agreement expiring in 2021. As Secretary of Defense Mark Esper visited in Seoul in November, media reports suggested US negotiators were seeking almost \$5 billion per year more in Korean contributions. Esper [declared](#) that South Korea "is a wealthy country and could and should pay more to help offset the cost of defense." Around the same time, reports also circulated indicating Washington was requesting around five times more per year from Japan for the cost of US forces in Japan. The uncertainty was heightened by a continuing high-profile focus on the issue from US President Donald Trump, who [publicly claimed](#)

that the United States had been "the sucker country for years and years" and told a rally audience that he had asked Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, "how did you get away with it for so long?"

Judging from South Korea's approach to the 2018 renegotiations of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA), the Moon Jae-in administration's desire for resuming momentum in dialogue between the United States and North Korea will likely incentivize South Korea to actively seek a viable solution for Trump's cost-sharing demands. However, if the mood of the US-North Korea dialogue becomes one that has no prospect of mending, the cost-sharing issue will put real strain on the US-ROK alliance.

While both countries were dealing with similar uncertainties in their alliance relationships with the United States, they also faced an increasingly challenging situation with North Korea. In September, Abe reiterated [his interest](#) in meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un without preconditions. Abe's conciliatory gestures to Pyongyang included a visit by a Japanese [physicians group](#) to Pyongyang with a possibility of future medical aid, and a 60-person [Japanese delegation](#) led by Kanemaru Shingo, the second son of Kanemaru Shin, the late political heavyweight who endeavored to normalize Japan's diplomatic relations with North Korea in the 1990s. Kanemaru met with Song Il-ho, North Korean ambassador for negotiations to normalize relations with Tokyo, who said that Japan-North Korea relations had gotten worse.



*Figure 1 A Japanese physicians lobby visits North Korea with a possibility of future medical aid. Photo: Kyodo*

As North Korea imposed the end-of-year deadline for the US to make concessions on sanctions, its rhetoric grew more hostile. According to Kyodo News, Tokyo's concern

about North Korean missile threat was heightened by Japan's [failure to track](#) the trajectory of some of Pyongyang's new short-range missiles. That Japan-South Korea relations were experiencing tensions and disunity over GSOMIA at those moments did not help, either; North Korea appeared ready to heighten tensions itself, complicating an already difficult and unstable regional picture.

It is impossible to say whether these tremors shaped Korean and Japanese calculations about their bilateral relationship. But the fact that the thaw in Korea-Japan relations at the end of 2019 occurred in a regional environment more uncertain than the one in which bilateral tensions arose earlier in the year may be noteworthy for future analyses. That is, a sense of continued unpredictability and vulnerability vis-à-vis North Korea and the United States may make them act more prudently toward each other.

### **A Quiet Thaw**

Although the furor over South Korea's August announcement that it would withdraw from GSOMIA had started to die down by September, the atmosphere between the two countries remained tense throughout the fall. In a Sept. 20 meeting of the Japanese and South Korean Foreign Ministry directors general for the Asian region, the Korean side [called](#) Japan's export restrictions "inappropriate" and "retaliatory." Quiet, pragmatic interactions between South Korea and Japan continued; South Korea's First Vice Foreign Minister Lee Tae-ho attended the Korea-Japan Festival in Seoul on Sept. 1 and met with a delegation from the Japan-Korea Cultural Foundation Sept. 17, and the Korean and Japanese special representatives for North Korea met bilaterally and trilaterally with US Special Representative Steven Biegun Sept. 24. The annual UN General Assembly consumed the later part of September, with Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa and Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu meeting on the sidelines to reaffirm their countries' existing stances.

Through mid-November, diplomatic interactions between the two countries continued quietly. On Nov. 4, Japanese Prime Minister Abe and South Korean President Moon met briefly on the margins of the East Asia Summit. On Nov. 6, Korean Foreign Minister Kang's met with US Assistant Secretary of State

for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell and Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Keith Krach, and "explained the efforts of the [Republic of Korea] government to draw reasonable solutions through dialogue" in Seoul's relations with Tokyo, according to a Korean Foreign Ministry [press statement](#). Another meeting of the Korean and Japanese directors general unfolded Nov. 15, with little indication of progress but a professed commitment to continued dialogue.

Fall 2019, then, marked the first steps toward a quiet thaw; tensions persisted between Japan and South Korea, but both countries largely kept tensions more controlled in their public expression than in the summer and contained within diplomatic channels.

### **South Korea Stays In GSOMIA**

In late November, the early fall's thaw would become bigger and more durable due to South Korea's decision to remain in GSOMIA.

Two separate streams of diplomacy in this period may have been influential in this decision and the subsequent warming of bilateral relations: first, US diplomatic efforts with South Korea and Japan following the August GSOMIA withdrawal announcement; and second, preparation for the China-Japan-Korea trilateral summit in December that both created an opportunity for Abe and Moon to meet bilaterally and increased the pressure for Japan and South Korea to make progress so that the three countries would be able to present positive optics of unity at the summit.

The United States engaged at high levels to press South Korea to stay in GSOMIA. Secretary of Defense Esper, visiting Seoul Nov. 15 as part of a dialogue with his Korean counterpart, [told reporters](#) that "the only ones who benefit from the expiration of GSOMIA and continued friction between Seoul and Tokyo are Pyongyang and Beijing." In a [background briefing](#) for press the same day, a senior State Department official indicated that he had stressed to Japanese counterparts that "recent [Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North Korean] missile launches have highlighted the critical value of the ROK-Japan security cooperation and information sharing" and that "when tensions arise between Japan and ROK, the only winners are Pyongyang, Moscow, and Beijing." To

Korean counterparts, the official “stressed the importance of the GSOMIA to our collective security and urged ROK not to terminate this important information-sharing agreement” and that while the United States “will not mediate between our two key allies, I made clear that we will remain engaged and continue to urge the ROK and Japan to de-escalate tensions and find creative solutions to their differences.”

Whereas Washington views the GSOMIA between Seoul and Tokyo from the perspective of its Asia strategy—as a step toward tighter tripartite Seoul-Tokyo-Washington security cooperation—Seoul remains indecisive about taking such a step, approaching the issue through the lens of South Korea’s relations with Japan. Korean officials doubled down publicly. On Nov. 15, South Korean Minister of National Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo [stated](#) Seoul would withdraw from GSOMIA unless Japan abandoned its export restrictions on South Korea. “Our decision to terminate GSOMIA was inevitable,” a Moon spokesperson said.

On Nov. 21, the day before the deadline to extend GSOMIA, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called Kang in a conversation which, according to the Korean statement, included an exchange of views on GSOMIA. Hours before the deadline the next day, South Korea announced it would “conditionally” suspend withdrawal from GSOMIA. The two countries also agreed to regular senior-level talks on Japan’s export restrictions and South Korea suspended its complaint against Japan in the World Trade Organization. Abe called the GSOMIA extension a “[strategic decision](#),” while a US Department of State [spokesperson](#) said the decision “sends a positive message that like-minded allies can work through bilateral disputes.”

Still, both countries quickly demonstrated that the substance of their positions had not changed and that the GSOMIA decision was not a resolution of the underlying issues. South Korean officials [emphasized](#) that GSOMIA could still “be terminated at any time.” “The current biggest and most fundamental issues is that concerning former laborers from the Korean Peninsula,” Motegi said, underscoring [the point](#) by saying that “We’d like to keep demanding that South Korea eliminate the situation that violates international law as soon as possible.” Public disagreements also persisted in the immediate aftermath of the GSOMIA decision, with the two countries butting heads over the

timing and content of statements characterizing their agreement.

### The Big Thaw

In late November and early December, the atmosphere between Japan and South Korea started to improve more significantly. Meeting on the margins of the G-20 foreign ministers meeting in Nagoya Nov. 23, the countries’ foreign ministers [agreed](#) on a bilateral summit between Moon and Abe on the occasion of the China-Korea-Japan trilateral summit planned for late December. Preparations for that trilateral summit continued apace, with senior officials from the three countries meeting on Dec. 13. The foreign ministers had a brief “[pull-aside](#)” meeting on the sidelines of the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in which foreign ministers Kang and Motegi “welcomed the export control policy dialogue” between the two countries and agreed to “continue to make coordinated efforts” toward a summit with Prime Minister Abe and President Moon. The first of the high-level meetings on Japan’s export restrictions began Dec. 16 in Tokyo, and on Dec. 20 Japan granted a permit allowing for the export of a key chemical to South Korea over the next three years—a move that fell short of South Korea’s demand for full lifting of export restrictions but appeared to represent a first positive gesture as the dialogue moved forward.



*Figure 2 President Moon Jae-in and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe meet on the sidelines of the 8th Korea-Japan-China Summit in Chengdu. Photo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Korea*

These steps created the space for the trilateral summit in Chengdu, China Dec. 24 and a bilateral summit between Abe and Moon, which helped signal the shift to a more positive atmosphere. The foreign ministers also met on that occasion. Although the two sides continued to assert their existing positions and put the

onus on the other to resolve the major issues in contention, both emphasized the importance of dialogue and maintained a largely constructive tone.

### **Economic Ties That Bind**

Although Japan-South Korea relations went downhill in 2019, to a point where the two countries used economic interdependence as political leverage against the other, it is arguable that the thaw of the last months of the year was made possible by the degree to which their economies are intertwined.

South Korean tech companies such as Samsung Electronics rely on Japan's exports of three key restricted industrial materials—photoresists, hydrogen fluoride, and fluorinated polyimide. With Japan's removal of South Korea from its white list, Japan's approval for Korean exports of important materials in 1,735 categories could take 15 days, as opposed to 5 days previously. South Korea, in return, removed Japan from its list of preferential trade partners, while taking the dispute to the World Trade Organization (WTO).

According to *The Japan Times*, South Korean consumers' boycotts of Japanese goods have significantly reduced Japanese companies' sales. For example, exports of Japanese beer to South Korea [fell to zero](#) in October, compared to last October's \$7.3 million, making South Korea the Japanese beer industry's biggest overseas market in 2018. In November, Japan's automotive exports fell 88.5% to 1.56 billion yen, while the number of [Korean tourists](#) to Japan experienced a 65% drop to 205,000 compared to last November.

Businesses from the two countries called for the improvement of relations. About 300 representatives from Japan and South Korea—including Samsung, Sumitomo, Posco, Toyota, and Korean Air—held their annual conference in Seoul, calling for the restoration of diplomatic and economic relations. Sasaki Mikio, the Japan-Korea Economic Association Chair, [argued](#) that Korean consumers' informal boycott of Japanese products hurt not just Japanese but Korean companies and their employees. Kim Yoon, the Korea-Japan Economic Association chairman, said, "businesses does not look into the past but to the future, and reality over ideology."

### **An Uncertain Road Ahead**

As South Korea and Japan started the new year, then, a relationship that had reached one of its lowest points ever in 2019 had begun to de-escalate tensions and recommit to diplomacy. The momentum for change came from the two countries' agreement to extend GSOMIA and start talks on easing exports, nudged along by US diplomacy and the need to create the right atmosphere for the December trilateral summit. The external tremors of North Korea and alliance cost-sharing negotiations provided added incentives for stability in Japan-Korea relations.

These factors were powerful enough to yield a thaw, but much remains uncertain. The GSOMIA extension provided a temporary and conditional fig leaf for the much more intractable issues of Japan's export restrictions and South Korea's forced labor compensation claims against Japan. Even as both sides sought to de-escalate tensions, they remained committed to diametrically opposed positions, with no clear path to resolution. While the coming months may provide incentives to keep the Korea-Japan relationship stable and opportunities for positive interaction, a return to major tensions remained a possibility.

For now, though, the thaw in Japan-Korea relations persists—opening up enough space for longstanding practical cooperation and progress between the two countries in areas like North Korea, economics, and culture.

# CHRONOLOGY OF JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

**Sept. 1, 2019:** South Korean Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Lee Tae-ho attends Korea-Japan Festival.

**Sept. 11, 2019:** In a cabinet reshuffle, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo replaces key personnel dealing with the abduction issue.

**Sept. 16, 2019:** Abe says that he remains committed to meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

**Sept. 17, 2019:** South Korea's Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy announced that Japan would no longer remain on its list of preferential trade partners. Vice Foreign Minister Lee meets with Japan-Korea Cultural Foundation.

**Sept. 19, 2019:** North Korea's ambassador for negotiations to normalize relations with Japan Song Il-ho tells a visiting delegation led by Kanemaru Shingo that Japan-North Korea relations had worsened.

**Sept. 20, 2019:** South Korea's Director-General for Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Jung-han Kim and Japan's Director-General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Takizaki Shigeki meet in Tokyo and discuss issues including forced labor.

**Sept. 24, 2019:** Takizaki, South Korea's Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Lee Do-hoon, and US Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun hold a trilateral consultation on the North Korean nuclear issue.

**Sept. 26, 2019:** Japan's Minister for Foreign Affairs Motegi Toshimitsu and South Korea's Minister of Foreign Affairs Kang Kyung-wha hold a bilateral meeting.

**Sept. 29, 2019:** A group of Japanese physicians arrives in North Korea to investigate North Korea's need for medical aid.

**Sept. 27, 2019:** Japan's annual defense white paper released. South Korea protests Japan's claim on Dokdo/Takeshima in the paper.

**Oct. 3, 2019:** North Korea says it successfully test-fired a new submarine-launched ballistic missile the day before.

**Oct. 7, 2019:** Japan protests to North Korea over a North Korean fishing boat's collision with a Japanese patrol vessel.

**Oct. 9, 2019:** Japan's Air Self-Defense Force conducts a deployment drill for its PAC-3.

**Oct. 27, 2019:** Former North Korean nuclear negotiator criticizes Washington for using "delaying tactics."

**Oct. 31, 2019:** North Korea launches two projectiles into the East Sea/Sea of Japan.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Prime Minister Abe meet briefly at ASEAN meeting in Bangkok.

**Nov. 7, 2019:** North Korea calls Abe an "idiot" and "villain" for his remarks on North Korea's firing of missiles.

**Nov. 15, 2019:** Japan's Director-General of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Takizaki and his South Korean counterpart Kim meet and discuss bilateral issues, including the South Korean Supreme Court ruling on forced labor.

**Nov. 15, 2019:** US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper visits Seoul to urged South Korea to remain in GSOMIA.

**Nov. 21, 2019:** South Korea's Foreign Minister Kang and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo hold a telephone conversation and discuss the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and other issues.



**Nov. 22, 2019:** Hours before the deadline, South Korea announces it will remain in GSOMIA conditionally.

**Nov. 23, 2019:** Kang and Motegi meet on the sidelines of the G20 Foreign Ministers' meeting in Japan.

**Dec. 13, 2019:** Trilateral senior officials of Japan, South Korea, and China meet.

**Dec. 14, 2019:** North Korea announce that it conducted "another crucial test" at Sohae long-range rocket site.

**Dec. 16, 2019:** Seoul and Tokyo hold talks in search for a breakthrough in the export restrictions.

**Dec. 18, 2019:** The US and South Korea fail to reach a deal on how to share costs for the US military presence in South Korea.



# COMPARATIVE

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## C O N N E C T I O N S

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

**CHINA- RUSSIA RELATIONS**

## THE ART AND AGONY OF AVOIDING AN ALLIANCE

YU BIN, WITTENBURG UNIVERSITY

In the last four months of 2019, Beijing and Moscow continued to broaden and deepen their strategic partnership across political, economic, diplomatic, and security areas with some visible outcomes: the 3,000-km, 38-bcm “Power of Siberia” gas line went into operation and the cross-border rail and road bridges were finally completed after decades of endless negotiations and delays. While Chinese and Russian top leaders jointly steered the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS through challenging times, it was in military relations that breakthroughs were made.

This included Russia’s assistance in the construction of a missile attack early-warning system for China, China’s participation in Russia’s *Center-2019* large-scale exercises, and the first joint naval exercises with Iran in the last few days of 2019. These developments took place amid continuous discussion on both sides about the nature, scope, and degree of an “alliance” relationship, formal or not, in an increasingly fluid and challenging world. With the rapidly deteriorating Iran-US relations at the onset of the new decade, it remains to be seen how Moscow and Beijing can keep their “best ever” relationship short of moving to a formal alliance, a state of affairs they have been trying to avoid for years.

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## 24<sup>th</sup> Prime Ministerial Meeting in St Petersburg

All high-level interactions between Chinese and Russian leaders in the last few months of 2019 were annual regular meetings either in bilateral or multilateral formats (the SCO and BRICS). On Sept. 16-19, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang traveled to Russia for the 24<sup>th</sup> Prime Ministers' Regular Meeting with his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev in St. Petersburg. The meeting covered a [wide range](#) of issues, from trade, investment, market access, and settlement of payment in local currencies, to anti-trust, intellectual property rights, the agricultural/food industry, cross-border transportation, manufacture cooperation, regional development, digital commerce, custom service, environment and sustainable development, science, and humanitarian exchanges. In Medvedev's words, the two prime ministers covered "practically all areas."

They also agreed to cooperate in multilateral forums such as the UN, WTO, APEC, G20, SCO, BRICS, and the regional projects of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union), which were very important "in the current uncertain political and economic global situation, with many factors of instability," Li said.

Twenty-four documents were [signed](#) at the end of the meeting, including a five-year trade plan, cooperation in agriculture, energy, border inspection, and several investment projects in Russia's Far East, the Arctic, joint ventures, etc.

Medvedev [thanked](#) the Chinese for their "constructive work and friendly attitude" during the meeting. He particularly noted progress in research and space cooperation. Li echoed his Russian host, saying that the two sides were "willing" and "ready" to strengthen cooperation in basic and applied research. Several agreements were signed during the meeting, including a joint data center for the exploration of the moon and deep space, joint construction and operation of a fast neutron reactor in China, a \$1 billion joint research and technology innovation fund, compatibility and interoperability of BeiDou (北斗) and GLONASS (ГЛОНАСС) global satellite navigation systems, and IT and AI development. The two sides will [launch](#) the "Scientific and Innovation Cooperation Years," in 2020-21. "The two countries need to take this opportunity to

upgrade their scientific and technological innovation cooperation," [Li told reporters](#).

Following the St. Petersburg meeting, Li traveled to Moscow on Sept. 18 and met Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin. Referring to the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Russia-Chin diplomatic relations, Putin noted that "[a very long distance](#) has been covered in the history of bilateral cooperation over the past decades. Today, we really are strategic partners in the full sense of the word, and are implementing a comprehensive partnership that remains Russia's unconditional foreign policy priority." Li responded by saying "[I]ndeed, we have come a long way – we have been holding regular meetings without fail for 20 years, and the agenda is continuously being filled with new content."

### Bridges Too Far?

The "long-distance" may be a convenient phrase to capture the twists and turns of the 70 years of Sino-Russian relations. In bilateral economic ties, however, the "long distance" fits well. At the end of 2019, both Putin and Li indeed had reasons to breathe easy as several marathon-like joint projects were completed after years, and even decades, of hibernation.

On Nov. 29, the first vehicle bridge across the Amur River between Russia and China was finally [finished](#), 24 years after the two countries signed an agreement in 1995. Construction, however, did not start until the end of 2016. Still, people and their cars in the Russian city Blagoveshchensk (Благовещенск) and Chinese city Heihe (黑河) will have to wait until mid-2021 for the bridge to open for traffic.



Figure 1 Blagoveshchensk, Russia. Photo: Google Maps

Located 450 km downstream from the Amur to the southeast, the first Russia-China rail bridge took just 12 years, or half of the time, of the

Blagoveshchensk–Heihe road bridge. First proposed by Russia in 2007, the 2,200-meter rail bridge between Russia’s Nizhneleninskoye (Нижнеленинское) and Chinese city Tongjiang (同江), did not complete its structural link until March 2019. Putin’s visit to China in May 2014 led to an [agreement](#) for construction to start later that year. The Chinese completed their side of the work in [July 2016](#) while the Russian side had just started at that time. It looks like construction of both bridges received fresh impetus after the 2014 Ukraine–Crimea crises, when Russia was sanctioned by the West.

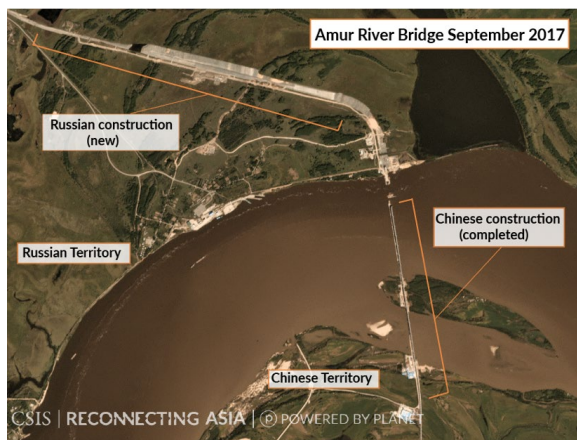


Figure 2 Amur River Bridge. Photo: CSIS Reconnecting Asia

The same was true for the 8,000-km “Power of Siberia” (Сила Сибири) gas line, also known as “China–Russia East-Route Natural Gas Pipeline,” which [started to deliver gas](#) on Dec. 2, 2019. Its construction started in September 2014, or 20 years after the two sides signed a memo in [1994](#). For its historic inauguration, Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin presided over the [opening ceremony](#) on Dec. 2 by video. The \$400 billion pipeline, with an annual capacity of 380 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas to China for 30 years, will considerably alleviate China’s thirst for clean energy. In 2017 and 2018, China became the [world’s largest importer](#) of oil (440 million tons) and gas (125.4 bcm), respectively.



Figure 3 Russian pipeline routes and the proposed link between them. Photo: Wikipedia

### SCO in Tashkent: The Unity of Differences?

The SCO held its 18<sup>th</sup> Prime Ministerial Meeting in Tashkent, Uzbekistan on Nov. 2. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and Russian Prime Minister Medvedev joined the meeting of the SCO heads of the government. They also met prior to the SCO formal meeting. From Tashkent, Li and Medvedev also traveled to Bangkok on Nov. 4 for the [14<sup>th</sup> East Asian Summit](#).

There was a keen awareness in Tashkent of the changing and challenging external environment for the regional organization: be it protectionism, trade wars or sanctions. “This certainly does not make our work easier,” said [Medvedev](#). “Complex and deep changes are taking place in the world with visibly increased elements of instability and uncertainty,” echoed [Li](#). Given these external challenges, the prime ministers focused on institutional development, primarily in economics and humanitarian cooperation. All participants believed the SCO should prioritize improving living standards, to be achieved through sustainable development and cooperation in the areas of infrastructure, trade, finance, digitalization, energy, environment, and humanitarian exchanges. [Fourteen documents](#) were inked in Tashkent, including a 15-year outline for multilateral economic cooperation, a railroad coordination memo, and cooperation agreements for rural digitalization, agriculture and food, the environment, etc.

Additionally, heads of the government proposed to create in the near future more expert working groups (EWG) for industry, energy, and regional development. Currently, EWGs have been

established only for certain “high politics” issue areas such as defense and information security. Some of the most discussed issues were in the social (youth and women), cultural, educational, tourism, and sports. The Chinese premier offered a list of specific [events](#), including hosting an SCO craftsmen workshop, a vocational skills contest and SCO forum on traditional medicine in China, organizing training programs for poverty eradication, and providing 1,000 free cataract surgeries for SCO members and observers over the next three years through the Lifeline Express International Sight Saving Mission.

The Tashkent meeting was overshadowed by the Indian-Pakistani border [conflicts](#) that started in February when a suicide attack in India-held Kashmir led to both ground and air operations by the two sides. In August, India revoked the special status granted to Jammu and Kashmir on Aug. 5, leading to further tension in the region. The renewed India-Pakistan conflict was the first between SCO member states, whose predecessor, the Shanghai Five, started in post-Soviet times as a mechanism to handle border issues. Successful resolution of border issues between members helped give rise to the SCO in 2001. Since then, the SCO has focused on consensus building and avoided becoming a platform for conflict resolution between any of its members. This operational principle of the SCO worked this time as the heads of state in Tashkent focused on issues concerning the group rather than the largely unresolvable India-Pakistan conflict.

### **BRICS’ 11<sup>th</sup> Summit**

If the SCO remains a regional enterprise for Russia and China, BRICS adds a global dimension (Brazil and South Africa). At almost all times, Chinese and Russian leaders seized opportunities for a mini-summit on its sidelines. During the 11<sup>th</sup> BRICS summit on Nov. 14 in Brasilia, the Chinese and Russian presidents met on the sidelines prior to the summit. Xi [emphasized](#) the importance of the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties and the elevation of the bilateral ties to a historic new height (“China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era”); and he was looking forward to the coming “China-Russia year of scientific and technological innovation from 2020 to 2021.”

Putin defined Russia-China relations as “profound friendship and mutual trust” that is “unaffected by any external factors.” In addition to “close political coordination, mutually beneficial economic cooperation and close coordination on international stage,” Putin [added](#) that “a lot of work is being done in terms of our military-technical cooperation and military interaction in general. This is truly a comprehensive partnership.”

For Russia and China, BRICS was to be sustained, and even expanded for a variety of reasons, particularly in the midst of the fragmentation of existing multilateral platforms such as the WTO, as well as those designed to address climate change, arms control, etc. Russia is chairing BRICS from January 1, 2020 with a more expansive [theme](#): “Partnership for Global Stability, Shared Security and Innovative Growth.” In Brasilia, Putin revealed that Russia would seek more coordination between BRICS members in several key areas: more coordination in foreign policy, primarily at the UN for peacekeeping and anti-terrorism; a joint statement for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II; updating BRICS’ “Strategy for BRICS Partnership in Trade and Investment” for the next five years. Some 150 events would be held under the Russian chairmanship, which would culminate in the next summit in St Petersburg, where EAEU states and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) members would [join](#) the BRICS summit.

While Putin planned to maximize the future of the BRICS at the Russian helm, Xi focused on the present: mending fences with the South American giant and stimulating BRICS’ investment projects. A few months into the Brazilian presidency in 2019, the far-right former army captain Bolsonaro became more [conciliatory](#) regarding economic relations with China, Brazil’s largest trading partner. In official talks prior to the BRICS summit, the Chinese and Brazilian presidents further [committed](#) their two countries to mutual market liberalization and cooperation in trade, energy, minerals, science and technology, and investment, following Bolsonaro’s successful visit to China in [late October](#). Already, two-way trade volume between China and Brazil (more than [\\$112 billion](#) in 2018) had surpassed that of Sino-Russian trade, and Brazil exported twice as much to China as to the US. A successful

BRICS summit would not be possible without a reasonably solid foundation with the host.

For Xi, the existence and continuity of BRICS itself was a useful counterforce to the international anti-globalization trend, such as “rising protectionism and unilateralism; greater deficit of governance, development and trust; and growing uncertainties and destabilizing factors in the world economy,” Xi said in his [official remarks](#) at the summit. Xi’s concerns were set against the backdrop of a trade war with the US since early 2018. At the heart of the China-US trade disputes was science and technology. BRICS’ response was to launch its “Partnership on New Industrial Revolution ([PartNIR](#))” in its Johannesburg summit in July 2018. The goal was to cooperate and coordinate in “digitalization, industrialization, innovation, inclusiveness and investment.”

For Xi, BRICS served as an integral part of China’s effort to build “[a community](#) with a shared future for mankind” (人类命运共同体). In comparison, Russia’s strategy regarding BRICS seemed to use the platform to integrate those multilateral forums led by Russia, such as EAEU, CIS, etc. Both, however, required a sustainable and growing BRICS in the midst of an increasingly fragmented world.

### Deepening Military-to-Military Ties

The last four months of 2019 witnessed much active mil-mil interaction between China and Russia. Four joint exercises were held, including a conventional large-scale land-based drill (*Center-2019* in September), an anti-terror drill (*Cooperation 2019* in October) and two naval drills (with South Africa in November and with Iran at the year-end).

From Sept. 16-21, 2019, the Russian military conducted its [Center-2019](#) (Центр-2019) military exercises in [eight](#) training areas in the Orenburg, Astrakhan, Chelyabinsk, Kurgan, Altai, and Kemerovo Regions for almost 130,000 soldiers, 20,000 pieces of equipment, 600 aircraft, and 15 warships. It was a considerably larger drill than *Center-2015* when 95,000 troops and 7,000 pieces of hardware were involved. *Center-2019* was defined as an antiterrorist drill. The scale, duration and scenario, however, were typical of [conventional warfare](#), such as active defense, massive

bombing, as well as offensive and consolidation operations.

[China](#) sent 1,600 troops, 300 pieces of equipment, and 30 aircraft, together with [750](#) men from Pakistan, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. This was the second time China had joined Russia’s large-scale exercises following Russia’s “*East-2018*” (Восток 2018) exercises.

Until 2018, exercises by Russian military districts only invited some CIS members such as Belarus and Kazakhstan. China’s participation in large maneuvers inside Russia indicated a major upgrading of mil-mil relations with Russia. Although the number of Chinese military personnel involved was less than half of that for the *East-2018* maneuvers (3,500), the momentum seemed to point to a more regular participation in those maneuvers rotating between Russia’s four military districts. It remains to be seen if the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) will join Russia’s scheduled drills of the Western and Southern Military Districts in the next two years.



Figure 4 Russia's military districts. Photo: Google

The increased frequency of China-Russia joint exercises was accompanied by a more expanded scope of these drills. For the first time, the Russian and Chinese navies joined the third parties: South Africa and Iran. While the former is a member of the BRICS, the latter is an SCO observer state (along with Afghanistan, Belarus, and Mongolia), a status below formal membership but above “dialogue partner” (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Turkey).

In September, Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran [announced](#) that a joint naval exercise would be held in the last four days of 2019 in the northern part of the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman.

Between Dec. 27 and 30, three Russian vessels and one Chinese guided missile destroyer (Xining, 西宁) joined the Iranian naval forces for anti-piracy, communication, and night navigation [exercises](#). The trilateral maneuvers occurred at a sensitive time and place, with rising tension in the region after the Trump administration pulled out of the Iranian nuclear deal in May 2018. The decision was made in the aftermath of US-initiated “International Maritime Security Construct” ([IMSC](#), which includes the UK, Australia, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain) to patrol the Gulf of Oman, the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz waterway, a transit point for a fifth of the world's oil exports.

Prior to this first-ever naval maneuver between the three navies, Iran had had separate bilateral exercises with Russia and China. Unlike the US and Russia, China’s footprint in the Middle East has been quite insignificant despite its growing economic clout in the region. As the world’s largest oil importer, [43%](#) of China’s oil imports goes through the Strait of Hormuz. For the sake of its own energy security, China is perhaps the only major power that has been “aloof” in the highly sensitive region while managing to maintain good working relations with virtually all regional players (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, etc.), including American allies. This may explain the relatively low visibility of the drill in China’s media. Shortly before the exercises, Chinese Defense Ministry defined the drills as [normal](#) military exchange activities that had no connection with regional tension (与地区形势没有必然联系).

More coordinated efforts were also made at the multilateral level. Twice in the last four months of 2019, the Expert Working Group (EWG) affiliated with the Meeting of Defense Ministers of the SCO met first in Moscow (the 7th meeting) on Oct. 31–Nov. 1, and then in Beijing (the 8th meeting) on Dec. 9. In addition to discussing normal SCO issues such as antiterrorism, [Moscow](#) intended to combine the next SCO defense chiefs meeting with those of the CIS and the CSTO, scheduled for June 2020 in Moscow.

One of the highlights of close Sino-Russian mil-mil ties was the first presence of Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu at the 9th [Beijing Xiangshan Forum](#) (香山论坛) on Oct. 20–22. Since its inception in 2006 as a track-2 platform

for Asia-Pacific security dialogue by the China Association of Military Science (CAMS) and the China Institute for International Strategic Studies, the forum has become an important platform for dialogue and cooperation on defense and security issues, at both the regional and global levels.

Shoigu’s presence was a highlight of the Chinese security forum as his speech was prominently featured right after the speech by Chinese Defense Minister [Wei Fenghe](#). One of the key points of Wei’s [keynote speech](#) was China’s commitment to building a new type of security partnership. Wei cited China’s military relations with Russia as a model and such a relationship enjoyed “the highest level of mutual trust, strategic coordination and practical cooperation, and maintains a vigorous momentum of development. It is a model of security cooperation and an important cornerstone underpinning world peace.”

[Shoigu](#) echoed this by saying that the China-Russia “military cooperation has played an important role in the mutually beneficial ties of China and Russia.” Meanwhile, his speech criticized three major aspects of US foreign and security policies. First, he warned that “Chaos and the collapse of statehood are becoming the norm,” and “it is enough to recall Yugoslavia, Iraq and Libya, against which military force was used under contrived pretexts and bypassing the decisions of the UN Security Council. Today we are witnessing an attempt at a violent change of power in Venezuela.”

Regarding the INF treaty, Shoigu criticized US withdrawal in that “the real reason that prompted Washington to unilaterally withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) is the deterrence of the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation,” he added.





Figure 5 Russian Defence Minister General of the Army Sergei Shoigu speaks at the 9th Beijing Xiangshan Forum. Photo: Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation

He concluded by questioning the US Indo-Pacific strategy, which did not have a clear geographic explanation and does not include all countries in the region. “We believe that the artificial expansion of the sphere of cooperation to the so-called Indo-Pacific region is aimed at creating dividing lines, clashing the Asia-Pacific countries and, ultimately, at restraining regional development,” stated Shoigu.

### Putin’s “Big Secret”

Efforts to enhance mil-mil ties also came from the highest level of Russian leadership. In his speech to the 16<sup>th</sup> Valdai Forum in Sochi of Russia on Oct. 3, [Putin](#) surprised the audience by revealing “a big secret,” that Russia is helping China create a missile attack early-warning system (система предупреждения о ракетном нападении). “This is very important and will drastically increase China’s defense capability. Only the United States and Russia have such a system now,” he added. The Russian president did not offer any further details regarding the location, specifications, and funding of an early-warning system for China.

Responding to a Japanese reporter’s question at his annual year-end press conference on Dec. 19, [Putin](#) said that he believed that China was capable of creating a missile early warning system on its own, but “there are certain projects that take up a great deal of time to implement,” and “with our help, it will do this faster,” said Putin. He further emphasized the defensive nature of the early warning system: “This is a missile early warning radar system, which means the system works when you are being attacked...I would like to repeat that this

system does not encourage aggression and is intended to protect one’s own territory,” insisted Putin. An early warning system allows China to adopt a launch-on-warning posture instead of waiting for enemy missiles to explode on its territory. China’s small nuclear arsenal, therefore, would become more survivable, hence a more credible deterrent against potential adversaries.

There was no solid information about the origin and process of this joint early warning system. Media sources argued that Russia took the initial step in [May 2015](#) by suggesting that Russia was “willing” to build a ballistic missile defense system for China. In the next two years, Russia and China conducted two missile defense computer simulations code-named “Aerospace Security” in [May 2016](#) and [December 2017](#). Since April 2019, the two sides have been preparing for the third simulation. Russia’s early warning system apparently impressed the Chinese side during those simulations.

In late 2018 and early 2019 when Russia and China were preparing for the [third](#) simulation, global strategic stability was in disarray, as the US was readying itself to withdraw from the INF Treaty, which became official on Aug. 2, 2019. The end of the INF meant more deployment of US short and intermedium-range missiles around China’s periphery. The combined effect of these developments in both bilateral and trilateral levels presumably made China reach out to Russia, according to [Dmitry Trenin](#), director of the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Putin justified the disclosure of the early-warning system for China because “it will transpire sooner or later anyway.” It also reflected a pattern in the Sino-Russian reciprocity in which Moscow became more eager for closer mil-mil ties with Beijing, particularly after the 2014 Ukraine crisis. In 2017, Russia initiated a three-year road map for mil-mil cooperation with China, which apparently included “the full-fledged expansion of cooperation to cover strategic arms,” according to [Vasily Kashin](#), a Moscow-based expert on military-strategic affairs.

Even so, China’s reaction to Putin’s revelation was somewhat reserved. In mid-October 2019, China’s Ambassador to Moscow [Zhang Hanhui](#) stressed the “defensive nature” of such a system. Meanwhile, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang described the system

as part of the “normal” exchange and cooperation, and did not target any third party. Assessment of Putin’s revelation was quite different, reflecting the asymmetrical capability of the two sides in the area of missile defense. Military experts in Beijing accredited Russia’s claim with its long operational experience in early-warning system dating back to the Cold War, according to [Yang Yucai](#), professor of the PLA’s National Defense University. Russia even “enjoys ideal geographical conditions to develop an anti-missile system,” added Yang. He went as far as to say that Russia may even assist China in developing a missile defense (MD) system, in addition to an early-warning system.

The timing of Putin’s remarks “reflected the fact that Beijing and Moscow have been deepening political trust and cooperation,” said [Yang](#). This was also because “the possibility that the US launches a new round of strategic operations to infringe on core national interests of China and Russia cannot be ruled out. Therefore, it is more urgent than before for Beijing and Moscow to be prepared. They need to establish reliable strategic deterrence capability and prevent the breakout of war.”

For Russia, however, such a Chinese missile launch detection system would be constructed primarily for early warning purposes against non-Russian approaching missiles. In the event of a fallout with China, according to [Kashin](#), Russia would lose “virtually nothing in terms of security, while making life difficult for the United States, strengthening its relationship with a key partner, and gaining a significant economic advantage.”

[Trenin](#) shared Kashin’s confidence that Russia’s assistance to China in this highly sensitive area would not jeopardize Russia’s strategic interests should the Sino-Russian relationship turns sour. He also saw some positive impact on China’s relations with the US and other Western powers. “A China equipped with a reliable early warning system should feel more confident in relation to the other nuclear powers. These other powers, in turn, would feel more confident that the Chinese system is reliable. In principle, this mutual confidence should be a steadying force for global strategic stability,” reasoned Trenin. It is unclear if Putin shared this logic. For him, the disclosure of the project would make sure that China is on the side of Russia in the post-INF world.

## Russia and China: Transcending Alliance?

In the same speech at Sochi to the Valdai audience in early October, Putin dropped a second “shoe” by claiming that the Russia-China ties were “*an allied relationship in the full sense [emphasis added] of a multifaceted strategic partnership,*” and “we enjoy an unprecedentedly high level of trust and cooperation.” Until this point, Putin had said several times that Russia and China had no plans for a military union. His choice of phrase in Sochi seemed to have stretched the outer limits of the current “partners-but-not-allies” (结伴不结盟) status with Beijing.

For years, particularly after the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Russia had been exploring a closer relationship, if not an alliance, with China. For its part, China had been hesitant, given its much larger stake in the stability of the existing international order. Instead, the two sides settled on phrases such as “the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era between China and Russia,” officially unveiled in the June Moscow summit of 2019.



*Figure 6 Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin sign statements on elevating bilateral ties to the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era and on strengthening contemporary global strategic stability, and witness the signing of a number of cooperation documents, after their talks in Moscow, Russia on June 5. Photo: Xinhua*

The alliance issue, however, continued to stretch the imagination of many, friends and foes. In his annual yearend news conference on Dec. 19, [Putin walked back](#) a bit by clarifying that Russia did not have a military alliance with China and “we do not plan to create one.” To fine-tune Russia’s China policy Sergei Lavrov, the foreign minister, publicly said three days later that Russia and China were allies only in the areas of political relations and diplomatic coordination. “We are allies when it comes to

politics, the protection of international law and polycentric international relations,” he told [Channel One Russia](#) on Dec. 22.

Lavrov’s clarification was part of his extensive discussion of his recent meeting with President US Donald Trump in the White House on Dec. 10 and his meeting with Henry Kissinger in September. In both meetings, US–Russia–China triangular relations was discussed, with the assumption of taking Russia away from China. He recalled Kissinger’s preference that “it would be ideal for the United States if its relations with Russia and China are better than relations between Russia and China.” That, however, was “unrealistic,” recalled Lavrov, who said, “We will not undermine our relations with China to please the Americans,” given US sanctions and ultimatums. In contrast, “China behaved completely differently on the international stage. It is not trying to humiliate anyone with ultimatums.” As reassurance, Lavrov told his Chinese counterpart four days before his meeting with Trump that “nobody, no forces would be able to weaken the strategic trust between Russia and China ([任何人、任何势力都无法挑拨俄中之间的战略互信](#)).

Chinese analysts were busy searching for innovative concepts around and beyond the conventional notion of alliance. Chinese [Defense Ministry](#) continued to stress the “three nos” formula (non-allied, non-confrontational, and not targeting a third party, 不结盟、不对抗、不针对第三国) as the basis for the “new type” of international relations based on principles of mutual respect, equality and justice, cooperation and win-win.

The nature, scope, and degree of a China–Russia alliance, however, remained a heated topic in China’s foreign and security policy community. Gen. [Wang Haiyun](#) (王海运), former military attaché to Russia, advocated for a quasi-allied (准同盟) relationship with Russia in the context of China–Russia–US triangular realpolitik. It was unrealistic for Beijing and Moscow to form a military alliance, which may lead to a dangerously asymmetrical bipolar structure. In facing a common strategic rival (the US), China and Russia cannot afford to go it alone (单打独斗), but ought to support each other with more effective and realistic strategic coordination to constrain (抑制) US hegemony. Wang argued that this quasi-alliance matches Xi’s

“community of common destiny” (命运共同体) for common responsibility and interests, as well as Putin’s “special partnership relationship.”

Within this strategic triangle, Wang argued that China’s relationship with its strategic partner (Russia) should not be outweighed by that of its strategic rival (the US), though China–US ties remain paramount (重中之重). Instead, the “Russian factor” (俄罗斯因素) should be tapped. Although it is no longer a superpower, Russia plays an important role in balancing US power within the strategic triangle with its skillful diplomacy and intimidating military power. For the US, Wang advocates that China should have strategic confidence (战略自信) and tactical caution (战术谨慎) to prevent isolated conflicts from becoming full-scale ones.

The preference for a quasi-alliance formula was shared by many inside China’s foreign policy community, including Prof. [Qiao Liang](#) (乔良) of China’s National Defense University. For him, alliance with binding responsibility may lead to a situation in which one has to support the blunders of an ally. An informal type of relationship—particularly the “back-to-back” (背靠背), not “hand-in-hand” (手拉手) type—with Russia may be more convenient.

For some, the issue of alliance is not necessarily “to be or not to-be.” [Shang Wei](#) (尚伟) of China’s Academy of Social Sciences, for example, argued for “transcending” (超越) the practice of conventional military alliance for a simple reason: alliances are enemy oriented, particularly in wartime and during the Cold War. Shang believed that the “three nos” posture of the current Sino–Russian strategic partnership transcended the conventional military alliance. For him, alliance structure does not fit peace time.

Interestingly, Shang’s “transcending” conceptualization of the bilateral ties was echoed by Andrey Denisov (Андрей Денисов), Russia’s ambassador to Beijing. His response to the alliance speculation was that “in some areas, we have transcended an alliance relationship, while not being constrained by responsibilities derived from alliance.” It appeared that as long as there were no official confirmation, there is a great deal of flexibility at the functional and operational level of the bilateral interaction.

By the end of 2019, Moscow and Beijing continued to stay with non-alliance status, at least paying lip service to such a principle. At the operational level, however, the two sides seemed to be taking specific steps toward an eventuality in which security and political situations drastically deteriorate at both regional and global levels. Should this occur, Russia and China would have the choice of taking joint actions.

In the last few months of 2019, signs of such a scenario appeared on the horizon. On Aug. 2, the Trump administration officially [terminated](#) the 1987 INF Treaty with Russia, which was seen as the beginning of the end of the arms control mechanism that regulated nuclear weapons since the Cold War. Both [Russia](#) and China were alarmed by US unilateral withdrawal. [Ji Zhiye](#) (季志业), senior advisor of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, described the mechanism for global nuclear and strategic stability as “on the verge of collapsing” as a result of the US exit. Indeed, the post-INF world is seen as far more unpredictable and more dangerous than the Cold War in which rules of the games were sought and created by both sides.

The direst forecast came from Russian scholar Sergei Karaganov (Сергей Караганов), Honorary Chairman of the Russian Council on Foreign and Defense Policy in Moscow. “The threat of war is now extremely high (Угроза войны сейчас чрезвычайно высока),” said Karaganov when interviewed by the influential Russian journal [Sight](#) (Взгля) on Dec. 3. For him, the coming disaster was shaped by at least three factors: military technology including automated platforms (drones with both nuclear and conventional capabilities) and cyber warfare; a lost generation as a result of the long peace; and the decay of political elites (and the rise of the “iPhone generation”) around the world. The combined effects of these trends would make coming conflicts more explosive (гораздо более взрывоопасную) than that of the Cold War.

### **Iran: The Beginning of the End?**

The last month of 2019 was unfolding along Karaganov’s script as the fragile post-INF world system was being shaken by heightened tension between Iran and the Trump administration. On the same day Karaganov gave his *Sight* interview

[Li Shaoxian](#) (李绍先), one of the most prominent experts of the Middle East, warned of coming danger for Iran in 2020. In his interview with Channel One on Dec. 22, [Lavrov](#), too, warned that “Iran cannot be treated the way Washington is trying to do it. Not only do Americans grossly violate the UN Charter by refusing to comply with the UN Security Council’s binding resolution but they also rather rudely address the demands to the Islamic Republic of Iran, a country with a one-thousand-year-old civilization, traditions, and an immense sense of dignity.”

The Iran–Russia–China naval drill in the last days of 2019 was widely seen as a needed [balancing act](#) to offset the US and some of its allies in the region. The balancing effect, however, was soon outpaced by a situation on the ground. On Jan. 2, 2020, three days after the Iran–China–Russia naval drills, Iranian Gen. Qasem Soleimani was killed by US drones in Bagdad’s international airport. The killing triggered worldwide protests against the US action, and both Iran and the US threatened to retaliate and escalate.

Even without the Iran–US conflict, the 2020 US presidential election will be challenging for Moscow and Beijing. In Washington, both the Russia and China factors will be significant features of the highly charged and increasingly divisive political climate. It remains to be seen to what extent realism in US foreign policy making will be able to retain influence in the midst of the highly politicized election politics, not to mention the impeachment against the president who is seeking reelection.

The year 2019 supposed to be one of multiple anniversaries and celebrations for China and Russia: 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary for normalization of relations (1989–2019); the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sino-Soviet/Russia diplomatic ties; the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vladimir Lenin’s declaration to abolish all of the Czarist unequal treaties with China, thus winning the hearts and minds of the Chinese; and the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first official contact (first Russian mission to Beijing in 1619). At the onset of the new decade, however, the mounting tensions, uncertainties, and hostilities at both global and regional levels—which made 2019 the [most challenging](#) year for Moscow and Beijing in recent times—may turn out to have been relatively minor irritants compared to those of coming years.

# CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

**Sept. 5, 2019:** Russian President Vladimir Putin meets Chinese Vice Premier Hu Chunhua (胡春华) at the 5<sup>th</sup> Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok.

**Sept. 16–18, 2019:** Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visits Russia at the invitation of counterpart Dmitry Medvedev. The two heads of government co-chaired the 24<sup>th</sup> Sino-Russian prime-ministerial meeting in St. Petersburg. Li then traveled to Moscow to meet [Putin](#).

**Sept. 16–21, 2019:** The Russian military conducted the [Center-2019](#) (Центр-2019) military exercise with 130,000 soldiers, 20,000 pieces of equipment, 600 aircraft, and 15 warships. The PLA sent 1,600 troops, 300 pieces of equipment and 30 aircraft, and 750 personnel attended from Pakistan, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

**Sept. 17, 2019:** The Shanghai Cooperation Organization holds a meeting of its [Council of National Coordinators](#) in Beijing. They discuss foreign policy coordination for countering greater security, political and economic risks. They also work on the upcoming annual Prime Ministerial Meeting in Tashkent.

**Sept. 19, 2019:** SCO holds its [2<sup>nd</sup> meeting of railway administration heads](#) in Nur-Sultan, capital of Kazakhstan. The SCO decided to start this new mechanism at its Qingdao summit in June 2018 and held its first meeting Sept. 9, 2018 in Tashkent.

**Sept. 24, 2019:** SCO holds its [7<sup>th</sup> meeting](#) of heads of territorial authorities for border area emergencies of SCO member states in Chelyabinsk in the South Urals.

**Sept. 25, 2019:** Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov join a six-nation foreign ministerial meeting on the [Iran](#) nuclear issue at UN headquarters in NYC. Participants also include foreign ministers of Iran, France, Germany, and UK.

**Sept. 26, 2019:** The SCO holds its [18<sup>th</sup>](#) meeting of ministers of foreign trade in Tashkent.

**Sept. 27, 2019:** Wang and Lavrov meet on the sidelines of the [UN](#) General Assembly session.

**Sept. 27, 2019:** SCO holds its [first](#) meeting of ministers of environmental protection in Moscow.

**Oct. 1, 2019:** The [17<sup>th</sup>](#) Meeting of the Prosecutors General of the SCO Member States is held in Bishkek. They focus on cooperation against illegal drug trafficking.

**Oct. 2, 2019:** Chinese and Russian [presidents, prime ministers](#) and foreign ministers exchange congratulatory telegraph [messages](#) for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sino-Russian diplomatic relations.

**Oct. 3, 2019:** In his speech to the 16<sup>th</sup> Valdai Forum in Sochi of Russia, [Putin](#) reveals that Russia is helping China with a missile attack early-warning system.

**Oct. 9, 2019:** Reception in Beijing for the [70<sup>th</sup> anniversary](#) of Sino-Russian/Soviet diplomatic relations. Li Zhanshu, member of the standing committee of the CCP Politburo and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Chinese People's Congress, and Russian Ambassador to Beijing Andrey Denisov (Андре́й Дени́сов) join.

**Oct. 9, 2019:** Director-General of the Information Department of the Foreign Ministry Hua Chunying (华春莹) meets in Beijing [at request](#) of visiting Maria Zakharova (Мария Захарова), spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia. They exchange views on the international situation, and press and media cooperation between the two Foreign Ministries.

**Oct. 11-18, 2019:** Russia and China stage “[Cooperation-2019](#)” antiterror drills in Russia’s Novosibirsk Region, the 5<sup>th</sup> joint exercise between law-enforcement units of the two countries since 2007.

**Oct. 20-22, 2019:** Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu joins [9<sup>th</sup>](#) Beijing Xiangshan Forum (香山论坛), a defense issue conference hosted by the China Association of Military Science (CAMS). Shoigu was the first Russian defense minister to join the forum, together with 600 participants from 76 countries, including 23 defense ministers and 6 chiefs of general staff.

**Oct. 31-Nov. 1, 2019:** Expert Working Group ([EWG](#)) affiliated with the Meeting of Defense Ministers of the SCO holds its 7<sup>th</sup> meeting in Moscow. The Russian side suggested that SCO defense chiefs be invited to a joint meeting with counterparts of the CIS and the CSTO in June 2020 in Moscow. They also discuss the SCO’s “*Peace Mission-2020*” to be held in Russia.

**Nov. 2-3, 2019:** SCO holds its 18<sup>th</sup> Prime Ministerial Meeting in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. [Li](#) and Medvedev hold [talks](#) on the evening of Nov. 1.

**Nov. 6-7, 2019:** Tashkent hosts the 7<sup>th</sup> scientific and practical conference of the SCO’s Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure ([RATS](#)). Representatives of the UN, CIS, CSTO, OSCE, and CICA join.

**Nov. 8, 2019:** New Delhi hosts the [10<sup>th</sup>](#) SCO Meeting of Heads of Emergency Prevention and Relief Agencies, chaired by India’s Minister of Home Affairs Amit Shah. India also hosted a SCO Joint [Exercise](#) on Urban Earthquake Search and Rescue on Sept. 4 at Ambedkar International Centre in Janpath, New Delhi.

**Nov. 12, 2019:** SCO Expert Group on [International Information Security](#) holds a regular meeting in Moscow. They draft a joint statement for cooperation in international information security to be issued at the 2020 SCO summit in Russia.

**Nov. 13-14, 2019:** BRICS holds its [11<sup>th</sup> summit](#) in Brasilia,. Chinese and Russian presidents [meet](#) on the sidelines of the summit on Nov. 13.

**Nov. 21, 2019:** Moscow hosts SCO’s [5<sup>th</sup>](#) Meeting of Heads of Science and Technology Ministries. First Deputy Minister of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation Grigory Trubnikov is chair.

**Nov. 23, 2019:** Wang meets Lavrov in [Osaka](#) on the sidelines of the G20 foreign ministerial meeting.

**Nov. 25, 2019:** China, Russia, and South Africa conduct [joint naval exercises](#) in Cape Town,. Three Russian ships, two South African ships, and one Chinese ship join the drills.

**Nov. 25, 2019:** Chinese and Russian parliamentarians hold [dialogue](#) in Beijing on how to offset foreign interference in domestic affairs.

**Nov. 25, 2019:** Chinese President [Xi](#) Jinping meets a delegation of Russia’s United Russia party led by Chairman of the United Russia’s Supreme Council Boris Gryzlov in Beijing. The Russian group visited Beijing for the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the dialogue mechanism between the ruling parties of China and Russia.

**Nov. 27, 2019:** Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Mao Zhaoxu (马朝旭) and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov (Сергей Рябков) and Russia hold their first [consultation](#) on intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Beijing.

**Dec. 2, 2019:** Xi and Putin conduct [video conference](#) while presiding over the opening of the eastern section of the Power of Siberia gas line. The 3,000-km gas line, contracted in 2014, will eventually provide China with 38 billion cbm per year, or 30% of China’s annual gas import.

**Dec. 4, 2019:** [15<sup>th</sup>](#) Sino-Russian consultation on strategic and security issues is held in Shanghai, co-chaired by Yang Jiechi (杨洁篪), director of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Communist Party, and Nikolai Patrushev (Николай Патрушев), secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#) met Patrushev Dec. 2 in Beijing.

**Dec. 5, 2019:** [12<sup>th</sup>](#) Sino-Russian Commission of Friendship, Peace and Development is held in Beijing. Vice President [Wang Qishan](#) met with members of the commission.

**Dec. 9, 2019:** Beijing hosts a meeting of divisional heads of SCO member state defense ministries for international military cooperation, and the [8<sup>th</sup>](#) meeting of the Expert Working Group for the SCO Defense Ministers (SCO EWG).

**Dec. 16, 2019:** China and Russia jointly propose to the UN Security Council a [political resolution](#) for the Korean issue, including lifting a ban on North Korean exporting statues, seafood and textiles; promoting bilateral (US-North Korea) and multilateral (such as six-party) dialogues, etc.

**Dec. 19, 2019:** Wang takes part in [telephone talks](#) with Lavrov. The two exchange views on the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue, international situation of common concern and other topics.

**Dec. 22, 2019:** [Lavrov](#) tells Russian media that Russia is not going to worsen relations with Beijing to make the United States happy.

**Dec. 27-30, 2019:** China, Russia, and Iran conduct a four-day [naval exercise](#) in the northern part of the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman, the first trilateral exercise between the three armed forces since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. China dispatched the [Xining](#), a guided missile destroyer, to the drills.

**Dec. 31, 2019:** Russian and Chinese presidents and prime ministers exchange New Year greetings.





PACIFIC FORUM

# COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

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

**INDIA-EAST ASIA RELATIONS**

## **DOMESTIC DISTRACTIONS DISRUPT, BUT DO NOT DERAIL, INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT**

SATU LIMAYE, EAST-WEST CENTER

India's 2019 interactions with the Indo-Pacific were active if measured by diplomatic outreach and defense engagements, but ended with two "whimpers" rather than "bangs." The first was the decision to drop out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), announced at the ASEAN-convened summits in Bangkok in November. Until the announcement, India seemed ready to join the agreement. The second was the postponement of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's scheduled trip to Assam and Manipur states in northeast India for an annual exchange of prime ministerial visits. The postponement was reportedly decided after discussions between the two governments in the wake of violence against the Indian government's controversial citizenship bill. The two unrelated developments did speak to two common themes: the first being the limits of India's East Asia relations, and the second the occasional interruption, by domestic drivers, of India's continued upward (if not steep) trajectory in relations with the Indo-Pacific region.

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India's fitful interactions with the region have been a [recurrent theme of these analyses](#). 2019 provided many distractions for India, including a national election year that returned Prime Minister Narendra Modi to power in May with a historic victory at the polls and his government's emboldened focus on fulfilling key domestic agenda issues around the ideology of a "Hindu-first" India, including a new citizenship bill, which imperiled plans for Modi and Abe to meet. Earlier, in February, a terrorist attack on a convoy of Indian security personnel in Kashmir, followed by a pre-emptive attack in Pakistan and a subsequent change in the constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir state, led to Indian concern for stability in the state. This impacted broader India-Pakistan relations, including at the United Nations and in bilateral settings. Meanwhile, India's economic slowdown continued throughout the year, pre-occupying the newly elected government; and partially explaining [India's decision not to move forward on RCEP](#).

While these domestic developments did not derail fairly active diplomatic and defense engagement with the region, they likely did preclude any new major initiatives and important advances, such as signing RCEP. India used presidential and vice presidential visits to the region, in addition to diplomatic and defense engagements at the ministerial and working levels. Modi himself made only one "dedicated" bilateral visit to the region – to Korea in February. His June visit to Japan was to attend the G20 Summit and his November trip to Thailand was to the annual summits convened by ASEAN. He did, however, meet separately with other Indo-Pacific leaders on the sidelines on both occasions.

In keeping with the theme of domestic drivers shaping India's Indo-Pacific relations, Indian officials, especially the president and vice president, paid particular attention to historical, cultural, and diasporic dimensions of relations on each of their visits. This underscored the nationalist and populist elements of India's approach while also seeking to highlight longstanding ties to the region. For example, during Vice President M. Venkaiah Naidu's visit to Vietnam in May, he stated "This is an important year for us as we celebrate the 90th Anniversary of the celebrated visit of the Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore to Saigon in 1929. That visit started the intense re-engagement of India with Asia in the modern era and raised the

profile of each country in the public consciousness of the other." And President Ram Nath Kovind [told](#) the Indian community at a Manila ceremony, "In each of the 26 countries that I have visited as President of India so far, I have met with the Indian community and shared my thoughts with them." And during a ceremony with the Indian community in Tokyo, Kovind [stated](#) that "India's external engagement has seen a sea change in the last few years. In this approach, we have brought the [Indian] Diaspora to the center of our action and engagement."

Even as India's domestic priorities' impact on its Indo-Pacific relations are considered, an overall update and assessment of India's "vision" of the Indo-Pacific and its interests and roles are important. This complements [last year's approach](#), which assessed India's involvement and integration with East Asia in terms of diplomacy, defense, trade/investment, and multilateralism.

### India's Indo-Pacific visions

Modi [laid out](#) his country's Indo-Pacific policies at the June 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue. This remains the key official statement of India's approach to the region even as it jostles with subsequent statements (e.g., "Act East" and SAGAR or "Security and Growth for All in the Region"), new ideas articulated in 2019 (e.g., [Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative announced by Modi at the East Asia Summit](#)), and ongoing initiatives that regularly engage Indo-Pacific countries (e.g., the Delhi Dialogue with ASEAN member countries, the Indian Ocean Dialogue, and the quite new [Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue](#)). The prime minister's 2018 statement can be seen as India's official response to the United States' "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and other regional pronouncements relating to the Indo-Pacific from ASEAN, Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and others. It is significant that India has issued such a comprehensive and clear conception of its interests and approach to the region; an articulated synergy, but not identity, with the US and its allies.

The key facets of India's Indo-Pacific vision are:

- [A "big" Indo-Pacific](#): India's geographic approach naturally begins with a focus on the Indian Ocean to the contiguous east coast of Africa and

extends across the Pacific to all the Americas, not just the United States. While Southeast Asia is acknowledged as the Indo-Pacific's center, by including "all nations in this geography as also others beyond who have a stake in it," the net effect of India's "big Indo-Pacific" conception is to highlight the focus on the Indian Ocean, which encompasses India's core interests and realistic capabilities, diplomatically acknowledge ASEAN centrality, and frame geography so broadly as to make a strategic element inchoate.

- A vision, not a strategy: Modi directly stated that "India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy," elaborating that an "Asia of rivalry will hold us all back." In making the distinction in favor of a "vision" rather than a "strategy," India's approach is more in line with Japan and ASEAN than with the US.
- Inclusive Indo-Pacific, not a club: Modi states that India "stands for a free, open, inclusive region" and "does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a...club of limited members." Such a statement tracks with India's geographic conception but also seeks to mitigate the focus on the simultaneous engagement with US-based trilaterals and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, and thus reassure Southeast Asia while calibrating relations with China and the US. The net effect is to buttress strategic autonomy while pursuing more robust relations with the US, as well as its allies and partners in the region.
- Call for revised rules, norms and institutions: While calling for a "common rules-based order for the region..." Modi also stated that "rules and norms should be based on the *consent of all*, not on the *power of the few* [emphasis added]"—directly appealing for a revision of the Permanent Five (P5) members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). And Modi took the chance to foot-stomp India's autonomy saying it would be "on the side of principles, not behind one power or the other..."
- Connectivity and infrastructure: India has begun cooperating with Japan and other countries on infrastructure and its attitude toward China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) remains unchanged due to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. Modi said "we must not only build infrastructure, we must also build bridges of trust" and that "initiatives must be based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, consultation, good governance, transparency, viability and sustainability. They must empower nations, not place them under impossible debt burden. They must promote trade, not strategic competition." In rejecting the CPEC while remaining vice president of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and calling for a set of best practices and principles, India's formulation on Indo-Pacific connectivity and infrastructure is quite consistent with that of the US (and Japan and Australia), but includes a pragmatic basis for opposing CPEC as well. The challenge for India is connectivity in its own neighborhood, not to mention across the Indo-Pacific, where its relative resources are limited.
- Mixed multilateralism, ASEAN centrality acknowledged: Regarding the Indo-Pacific's regional security architecture, India acknowledges ASEAN centrality while pursuing a set of memberships that include non-ASEAN convened groupings such as the Quad, trilaterals, and groupings that do not include the US such as the RICs (Russia, India, China) and the BRICs. Modi explained that "[w]e will work with them, individually or in formats of three or more, for a stable and peaceful region. But, our *friendships are not alliances of containment* [emphasis added]."
- Sticky trade. While there had been some hopes and hints that India might make a push to join RCEP, ultimately it did not do so. This was in some sense predictable given Modi's clear message that India seeks a "level playing field for all" and that, specifically for RCEP, India wants "balance among trade,

investment and services [for which also read mobility of labor].” Nevertheless, in visits throughout the year, Indian officials emphasized bilateral progress in trade and investment while highlighting the need to further improve commercial ties.

Based on these features of India’s Indo-Pacific conception, one can assess that India very much now has an Indo-Pacific policy that has replaced the “Act East” bumper sticker with something more substantive and delineated. That there are differences with the US is not surprising, but it is symptomatic of the strengthened US-India and India-Indo-Pacific relationship that Modi made the effort to lay out his country’s Indo-Pacific vision, which has more synergies than differences with Washington and its allies in the region, and certainly more practical efforts at cooperation.

### India and East Asia’s big three (China, Japan and South Korea)

#### India-China

India’s engagement with China began in 2019 began with then-External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj’s February visit there for the 16<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Russia, India and China (RIC). This was the [first such gathering](#) following the attack on a convoy of Indian security forces in the Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir on Feb. 11, 2019 and India’s subsequent attack in Pakistan. Throughout the year, Indian officials pounded the counterterrorism theme. And India’s External Affairs Ministry [issued a statement](#) expressing disappointment with China’s refusal to identify Massood Azhar as a terrorist, even after the terrorist group he leads claimed responsibility for the February attacks. China, for its part, insisted on bringing the Kashmir issue to the Security Council for deliberations, although this was [delayed in December](#).

Even as differences over Pakistan, Kashmir, and terrorism persisted, India’s diplomatic engagement with China continued. Speaking during his August visit to China, the first after being named external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar [said in a speech](#) that “The future of the India-China relationship will obviously depend on mutual sensitivity to each other’s core concerns. It is natural, both as neighbors and large developing economies that there

would be issues in our ties. Properly managing differences is therefore vital. As our leaders agreed in Astana, differences should not become disputes. That is how India-China relations can remain a factor of stability in an uncertain world. The positive direction of ties after the Wuhan Summit has opened up a world of new convergences.”

The main India-China event of the year was the October visit of President Xi Jinping visit to Chennai for the [Second Informal Summit](#) with Modi. Despite calls for deepening the so-called India-China Closer Development Partnership, they made no progress on the longstanding boundary question, simply reiterating continued efforts based on agreements reached in 2005. There was, however, a call for deepening exchanges at all levels, including militaries.



Figure 1 Chairman Xi Jinping meets Prime Minister Modi in Chennai. Photo: SCMP

2020 marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India-China diplomatic relations, but any breakthroughs on diplomatic and security relations appear highly unlikely.

#### India-Japan

India and Japan had many high-level interactions during 2019, even though Abe’s planned December visit of to India was postponed. The two prime ministers met at the June G20 Summit in Osaka (and also in a trilateral with US President Donald Trump) and then again at the September Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok. According to a readout of the G20 sidelines bilateral by India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Abe insisted on the “importance of preparing for the [Annual Bilateral] Summit properly, including through various Ministerial Meetings...” The [readout](#)

also said “the two leaders sought to ensure that we were able to deliver both [the Mumbai-Ahmedabad high speed railway and Varanasi Convention Center] on time.” Both statements appeared to speak to well-known frustrations on the Japanese side with India’s follow-through on joint projects and agreements; though surely India has its own frustrations with Japan’s consensus-based approach to decision making. On the positive side, the two prime ministers welcomed plans to hold the first-ever 2+2 ministerial meeting. At the September meeting the two prime ministers discussed the negotiations on an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and reiterated commitment to the 2+2 and defense cooperation.

In defense cooperation, India’s Defense Minister Rajnath Singh went to Japan to co-chair the annual defense ministerial dialogue in early September. The [joint statement](#) highlighted six focus areas for further cooperation: exchanges between the Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces (JGSDF) and the Indian Army; exchanges between the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces (JMSDF) and the Indian Navy; exchanges between the Japan Air Self-Defense Forces (JASDF) and the Indian Air Force; education and research exchanges between defense institutions; cooperation on third countries (“shared the view to explore cooperation”); and cooperation in defense equipment and technology. Singh had an additional meeting with his Japanese counterpart, Kono Taro, on the sidelines of the mid-November ASEAN Defense Ministers Plus (ADMM+) meeting in Bangkok.

Overall foreign and defense cooperation discussions were taken further in the first ministerial-level 2+2 held in Delhi. The [joint statement](#) highlighted numerous accomplishments and ongoing efforts at cooperation, including the start of bilateral exercises between all three components of their defense forces and “significant progress” on an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). The two countries agreed to focus on capacity building in maritime security and maritime domain awareness, including through cooperation with other countries, and India looked forward to a Japanese liaison officer being assigned to the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in the near term. Commencement of “exchange of information” under the Implementing

Arrangement for Deeper Cooperation between the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and the Indian Navy was pending and both sides agreed to “further strengthen” defense equipment and technology cooperation.”

An important element of India-Japan relations during the year was the trilateral element including the United States. As noted, Modi and Abe joined Trump for the first-ever heads of government US-Japan-India trilateral on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Osaka and the three countries’ foreign ministers followed up with another trilateral in September on the sidelines of the UNGA. On that occasion, the three ministers expressed satisfaction with trilateral cooperation represented by the *MALABAR 2019* held off the coast of Japan in September-October, a mine-countermeasures exercise (*MINEX*) held in Japan in July 2019, and *Cope India 2018*, in which Japan participated as an observer in December 2018.

#### *India-Korea*

As already noted, Modi’s only bilateral outgoing visit to the Indo-Pacific in 2019 was to South Korea in February to strengthen the special strategic partnership. On that occasion, [six agreements](#) were signed ranging from the release of a commemorative historical postage stamp to an agreement between India’s Ministry of Home Affairs and Korea’s National Police on transnational crime cooperation.



Figure 2 Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets President Moon Jae-in. Photo: Tehelka

In early September, the defense minister [traveled to Seoul](#) to meet his counterpart. They agreed to further defense educational exchanges and extend mutual logistical support to the respective navies. They also “discussed the

ongoing co-operation at the Service-to-Service level and prospects for enhanced co-operation between defense industries of India and Korea.” Singh also invited South Korean defense manufacturing companies to invest in India and assured them of all necessary assistance to facilitate investment and joint ventures. They reportedly also [formulated](#) a “roadmap” to take bilateral defense industry cooperation forward. So far, it appears that actual defense cooperation is limited. One [example](#) of joint coproduction cited by Indian officials is a joint venture between Larsen & Toubro and a Korean company to produce 100 artillery guns.

### India–Southeast Asia

India’s momentum in developing ties with Southeast Asia grew in 2019 following the January 2018 joint visit of all ASEAN leaders to India and the November 2018 first-ever India-ASEAN Informal Summit. However, the year did not produce any major new initiatives and established targets for relations remain a stretch. For example, Kovind [said in a Manila speech](#) that “ASEAN-India trade has jumped significantly in the past few years. Last year alone, the trade increased by 19 per cent to reach [\$96.79 billion]. However, we still have a long distance to cover to reach the target of [\$200 billion] by 2022.” And a \$1 billion credit line extended by India to the region [has so far been underused](#).

During Modi’s three-paragraph [address](#) at the November 2019 India-ASEAN Summit (his seventh such summit) he highlighted the “mutual coordination of the Indo-Pacific Outlook between India and ASEAN.” He went on to say that “India’s Act East Policy is an important part of our Indo-Pacific vision. ASEAN is and always will be the heart of our Act East Policy. Integrated, organized and economically developing ASEAN is in India’s basic interest.”

On security ties, Modi said “We also want to strengthen our partnership in the areas of maritime security...” During the November 2019 Bangkok ASEAN Summit, an MEA official took pains to [point out](#) that of the “total three bilateral meetings [Thailand, Indonesia and Myanmar] and it would be noted that *all the three are maritime neighbors of India* [emphasis added].” Overall, with ASEAN, India appears no longer to be on the defensive regarding the

Quad; both by re-emphasizing the centrality India accords ASEAN in its “Act East” policy and Indo-Pacific vision. In reply to a press query, an Indian MEA spokesperson noted that “ASEAN countries appreciated India’s growing role and that India’s growing role is a factor of peace and stability in the region.”

There were active relations with several ASEAN member states as well.

### India-Philippines



Figure 3 President Kovind meets President Duterte in Manila. Photo: News 18

In October, Kovind [made a state visit](#) to the Philippines to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of bilateral relations. He noted a 17% increase of trade and Indian investments of about \$600 million. On the defense side, officials noted the “exchange of visits of delegations, visits by naval ships and also training cooperation...[with] 30-40 slots every year for the Philippines armed forces to be trained for various courses in India. And...an MoU on defense, industry and logistics that was signed in 2017 and that has given the opportunity for the two countries to look at new areas of cooperation in defense, trade and cooperation.” On the South China Sea, “President [Rodrigo] Duterte referred to India’s commitment to the rule of law when it had accepted the arbiter award in its maritime dispute with Bangladesh. So this issue of adherence to rule of law was emphasized.” Officials noted that “[t]here was also discussion between the two sides on terrorism because both the countries have seen terrorism and been victims of terrorism and there was agreement that we need to continue to talk to each other, exchange experiences.” And “it was agreed that we would work bilaterally under the joint working group and also that we would continue to exchange

information and capacity building whether it is in terms of cyber security or it is in terms of even drugs or in terms of urban terrorism.” Finally, four MoUs were concluded on white shipping exchange of information, science and technology, a cultural exchange program and on tourism cooperation.”

#### *India-Vietnam*

In May 2019, India’s vice president [visited Vietnam](#) for largely cultural reasons with a brief reference to the doubling of bilateral trade. The only other high-level interaction was a bilateral meeting between Modi and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc on the sidelines of the ASEAN-convened summits in November. A [media statement](#) issued on the exchange highlighted, without details, “enhanced engagement in defense and security fields,” agreement to enhance cooperation in maritime domain, and agreement to work together against the threat of extremism and terrorism.

#### *India-Thailand*

Several India-Thailand exchanges occurred during 2019, a year in which Thailand served as country coordinator for the India-ASEAN strategic partnership.

In August, Jaishankar [visited Thailand](#) to attend the ASEAN-India Ministerial Meeting, the 9th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, the 26th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the 10th Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Ministerial Meeting. In October, Thailand’s Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai [visited New Delhi](#) for a senior officials meeting and the 8<sup>th</sup> India-Thailand Joint Commission Meeting, which emphasized the complementarity of India’s “Act East” and Thailand’s “Look West” policies.

The main India-Thailand bilateral event of the year was the meeting between Modi and Prayut Chan-o-cha in Bangkok [in early November](#). An Indian External Affairs Ministry official noted “enhanced engagement in defense and security fields, [and] agree[ment] to explore opportunities for cooperation in defense industries sector.” Earlier in September, India and Thailand held their 28<sup>th</sup> edition of the coordinated patrol between the two navies, including maritime patrol aircraft. In the same month they also held the joint military exercise *MAITREE-2019*, focusing on counterterrorism in

jungle and urban environments. India and Thailand, along with Singapore, held the first-ever *SITMEX-19* (Singapore-India-Thailand Maritime Exercise) at Port Blair in the Andaman Sea in mid-September. The ships and long-range maritime patrol aircraft engaged in “gunnery, force protection measures, air defense and communication exercises to enhance maritime interoperability between the participating navies.” The two countries also welcomed 20% growth in bilateral trade. Finally, the two leaders discussed sub-regional cooperation such as the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and highlighted “...India’s recent joining as a development partner of the ACMECS initiative which is the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy. So [India is] amongst the first development partners of ACEMECS.”

#### *India-Indonesia*

In September, Jaishankar [visited Indonesia](#), the first by a Union Cabinet member since the re-election of President Joko Widodo. The visit was said to reflect the high priority India attaches to its bilateral relationship with Indonesia, including a comprehensive strategic partnership and a Shared Vision on Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

In June, Modi and Widodo met on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Osaka just after national elections were completed in both countries. An MEA official noted that with elections over “it was time for both countries to move towards strengthening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership...” Discussions [focused on four areas](#) including sharing of perspective on the Indo-Pacific, how to deepen the maritime cooperation, taking the defense relationship forward, and how to reach the bilateral trade target of \$50 billion by 2025.

In November, Modi had [another bilateral meeting with Jokowi](#), marking the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of bilateral relations. There was some sense of dissatisfaction with commercial relations in the MEA statement that “Prime Minister Modi had a forward-looking discussion on enhancing bilateral trade and highlighted the need for greater market access for Indian commodities including, pharmaceutical, automotive and agricultural products. While noting that Indian companies have made substantial investment in Indonesia, Modi invited Indonesian companies to use the

opportunities presented in India for investment.”

## India–Oceania relations

### *India–Australia*

Kovind’s October [visit to Australia](#) focused primarily on commercial relations, engaging the Indian community including students, and the unveiling of a Mahatma Gandhi statue. Kovind noted that while trade in goods and services has doubled between 2013 and 2018 from about \$10 billion to just over \$20 billion, “investment relations, however, comparative to our respective economy size and prospects, are yet to take-off.”

One issue that arose during the visit related to a question about “roadblocks” to Indian imports of uranium for civil nuclear reactors use. Joint Secretary (South) Manish explained that Australia has supported India’s entry into key technology control regimes such as the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Wassenaar Arrangement, the Australia Group and the Nuclear Suppliers Group; the two countries have signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement that entered into force in November 2015; and Australia’s Parliament passed a Civil Nuclear Transfer to India Bill in 2016, which provides a “mechanism under which Australians are supplying uranium to India.” However, when pressed if the supply of uranium had started, the Indian official was less clear, [saying](#) “I think there is a G2G track on this and there are no roadblocks to our cooperation in the civil nuclear sector.”

The main bilateral engagement of the year was the November meeting between Modi and Prime Minister Scott Morrison in Bangkok. They welcomed the “enhanced engagement in defense and security fields and agreed to further enhance cooperation in the maritime domain.” One defense exchange during the year involved the visit of India’s Chief of Naval Staff Adm. Karambur Singh visit to Australia (and New Zealand) in early September. He was reportedly briefed on the *MH-60R* helicopter and flew on the *MH-90* helicopter. However, the official report of the meeting between the two prime ministers left unclear just how much mutual commitment there was given that Modi had to “[reiterate](#)” his invitation to his Australian counterpart to visit India in January 2020 to deliver a keynote address at the Raisina

Dialogue, Morrison’s apparent lack of commitment to accept, and the fact that “[b]oth leaders underlined the need to have thorough preparation to ensure a successful outcome from the visit.” A subsequent [3<sup>rd</sup> Edition](#) of the India–Australian Foreign and Defense Secretaries Dialogue or 2+2 also shed few details on ties.

Meanwhile, the Quad meetings continued with declining high-level engagement as the year wore on. In September, the foreign ministers of the US, Japan, Australia, and India met on the sidelines of the UNGA in New York, and later in the year [senior officials from the three countries met](#) on the sidelines of the ASEAN–convened summits in Bangkok.

### *India–Pacific Islands*

One new development was Modi’s Sept. 24, 2019 inauguration of the India–Pacific Islands Developing States (PSIDS) meeting on the sidelines of the UNGA in New York. The meeting was attended by the heads of delegation of Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Modi announced a \$12 million grant (\$1 million to each PSIDS) for implementation of a high impact developmental project in the area of their choice. A concessional \$150 million line of credit for undertaking solar, renewable energy, and climate related projects based on each country’s requirement was also announced. Modi also [invited](#) leaders of PSIDS to join the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) and announced that the next meeting of the Forum for India–Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC) would be held in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea in the first half of 2020.

## Conclusion

In a year of major Indian domestic distractions including national elections, a terrorist attack and a retaliatory preemptive strike, major constitutional changes to the disputed territory of Kashmir, and a slowing economy India kept up robust diplomatic and defense interactions in the Indo–Pacific even if there were no major innovations or advances (perhaps excepting the meeting with Pacific Islands leaders). The big take-away of the year was India’s decision to not join RCEP and more fleetingly the postponement of Abe’s summit with Modi.



The enduring picture is likely to be continued modest Indian commitment to expanding ties with the countries of the Indo-Pacific. For the evolving Indo-Pacific policies of the US, India will remain a key element but expectations of collaboration and coordination will have to be reasonable about pace, scope, and depth.

# CHRONOLOGY OF INDIA-EAST ASIA RELATIONS

## JANUARY – DECEMBER 2019

**Jan. 7-11, 2019:** Mongolian Foreign Minister Damdin Tsogtbaatar visits India for consultations with counterpart External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj.

**Feb. 21-22, 2019:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi makes a [state visit](#) to the Republic of Korea to strengthen the special strategic partnership. Six MoUs are signed ranging from the release of commemorative postage stamp to an agreement between India's Ministry of Home Affairs and Korea's National Police on transnational crime cooperation.

**Feb. 27, 2019:** Swaraj travels to China for the [16<sup>th</sup> meeting](#) of the foreign ministers of Russia, India and China.

**May 9-12, 2019:** Vice President M. Venkaiah Naidu visits Vietnam to give a keynote address at the 16th United Nations Day of Vesak Celebration (Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death).

**June 27, 2019:** Modi meets Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo on the sidelines of G20 Summit in Osaka.

**June 28, 2019:** Modi [meets](#) President Donald Trump and Abe in a trilateral format called the Japan-India-America Trilateral Summit Meeting (JIA) in Osaka.

**June 28, 2019:** Modi [meets](#) Trump separately following the JIA Summit.

**June 28-29, 2019:** Modi [attends](#) 14<sup>th</sup> G20 Summit in Osaka. India identifies only one security issue in its press release: "countering terrorism."

**June 30, 2019:** Modi meets Indonesian President Joko Widodo on sidelines of G20 Summit.

**June 30, 2019:** Modi has [brief "pull aside"](#) meeting with Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on sidelines of G20 Summit.

**Aug. 1-2, 2019:** Jaishankar [travels to Thailand](#) to attend ASEAN-India Ministerial Meeting, the 9th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting (EAS FMM), 26th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and 10th Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Ministerial Meeting.

**Aug. 11-13, 2019:** Jaishankar visits China to co-chair, with State Counselor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the [second meeting](#) of the India-China High Level Mechanism on Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges.

**Sept. 2-3, 2019:** Defense Minister Rajnath Singh visits Japan to co-chair the annual defense ministerial dialogue. [Joint statement](#) highlights six focus areas for further cooperation.

**Sept. 3-4, 2019:** Singh meets counterpart in South Korea. They agree to further defense educational exchanges and extend logistical support to each other's navies and [discuss](#) "the ongoing co-operation at Service-to-Service level and prospects for enhanced co-operation between defense industries of India and Korea." Singh [invites](#) South Korean defense manufacturing companies to invest in India.

**Sept. 4-6, 2019:** Jaishankar visits Indonesia to discuss the two countries' Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and a Shared Vision on Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

**Sept. 5, 2019:** Modi and Abe [meet](#) at the Vladivostok Eastern Economic Forum.

**Sept. 6-10, 2019:** Jaishankar [visits Singapore](#) to co-chair 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC) with counterpart Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan.

**Sept. 19-21, 2019:** Mongolian President Khaltmaagiin Battulga makes a state visit to India.

**Sept. 24, 2019:** Modi [inaugurates](#) the India-Pacific Islands Developing States (PSIDS) meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York. Modi also invites PSIDS leaders to join Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI).

**Sept. 26, 2019:** Foreign ministers of the US, Japan, Australia, and India [meet on sidelines](#) of the UNGA in New York. They discuss collective efforts to advance a free, open, prosperous, and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

**Sept. 26, 2019:** Modi [meets](#) New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern on the sidelines of the UNGA in New York.

**Oct. 11-12, 2019:** Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping [visits Chennai](#) and meets Modi for the Second Informal Summit to “exchange views on deepening India-China Closer Development Partnership.”

**Oct. 17-21, 2019:** President Ram Nath Kovind [makes a state visit](#) to the Philippines on 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations—the first Indian presidential visit since 2006.

**Oct. 21-23, 2019:** Kovind [makes a state visit](#) to Japan for the enthronement ceremony of Japan’s new emperor.

**Nov. 2-4, 2019:** Modi visits Thailand for 14th East Asia Summit (EAS), 16th India-ASEAN Summit, and third RCEP Summit.

**Nov. 3, 2019:** Modi [meets](#) Thai Prime Minister M Prayut Chan-o-Cha on the sidelines of the ASEAN-related meetings in Bangkok.

**Nov. 3, 2019:** Modi [meets](#) Myanmar State Counselor Aung San Su Kyi on the sidelines of the ASEAN-related meetings in Bangkok.

**Nov. 3, 2019:** Modi [meets](#) Indonesia’s Widodo on the sidelines of the ASEAN-related meeting in Bangkok.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** Modi [meets](#) Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc on the sidelines of the ASEAN-related meetings in Bangkok.

**Nov. 4, 2019:** Modi [meets](#) Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison in Bangkok.

**Nov. 17, 2019:** Singh visits Bangkok to attend the 6<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting-Plus (ADMM+). On the sidelines, he meets US Secretary of Defense Dr Mark T Esper, Thai Deputy Prime Minister Gen. Prawit Wongsuwan, Japanese Defense Minister Kono Taro, Australian Defense Minister Linda Reynolds, and New Zealand’s Defense Minister Ron Mark.

**Nov. 20, 2019:** Singh and Singapore’s Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen co-chair the fourth Singapore-India Defense Ministers’ Dialogue in Singapore.

**Nov. 22-23, 2019:** Jaishankar visits Japan to attend the G20 Foreign Ministers meeting.

**Nov. 30, 2019:** Japan’s foreign and defense ministers, Motegi Toshimitsu and Kono Taro, visit India for the first India-Japan 2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting with counterparts Jaishankar and Singh. A [joint statement](#) is issued.

**Dec. 9, 2019:** India and Australia hold a 2 + 2 Dialogue of their respective foreign and defense secretaries in New Delhi.

**Dec. 13, 2019:** Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi visits Delhi for a [combined session](#) of the Delhi Dialogue XI and the Indian Ocean Dialogue VI as well as the [sixth meeting](#) of the India-Indonesia Joint Commission.



# ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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