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Regional Overview: Summits Galore, But (Mostly) Business as Usual by Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman

While events refocused the international community's attention on terrorism, it was largely business as usual in Asia, with the normal round of multilateral meetings – the ASEAN-related meetings in Kuala Lumpur, plus the APEC Leaders Meeting in Manila – going largely unnoticed. A few other summits did attract attention, including the first “Plus Three” (Japan-Korea-China) Summit in three years in Seoul and the “non-summit” between Mr. Xi Jinping and Mr. Ma Ying-Jeou who just happen to be the presidents, respectively, of the People's Republic of China and Republic of China, in Singapore. Chinese actions (and US reactions) in the South China Sea continued to dominate the news, while hopes that Kim Jong-Un was on the brink of behaving were quickly dashed as the new year began. All eyes remain on the Chinese economy and the impact the continuing slowdown there may have on global growth, even as the US pushes forward on the finally completed Trans-Pacific Partnership.

US-Japan Relations: Official Cooperation, Domestic Challenges by Sheila Smith and Charles McClean

Washington and Tokyo made significant progress on two new initiatives this fall – Japan's implementation of legislation for the exercise of collective self-defense and the conclusion of negotiations with other participants in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). With Japanese Upper House elections in the summer and US presidential elections in the fall, trade, military strategy, and US-Japan security cooperation will be part of the political discourse in both countries. Along with the ratification process for the TPP trade deal, two challenges for Washington and Tokyo that will continue into the new year are how to respond to Chinese land reclamation in the South China Sea and how to deal with local opposition to Tokyo's plans for building a new airfield to replace the Futenma facility on Okinawa.

US-China Relations: Xi's First State Visit to the US: Pomp and Progress by Bonnie Glaser and Jacqueline Vitello

Despite growing friction between the US and China, Xi Jinping's visit to the US in September was mostly positive and produced important outcomes. Tensions persisted in the South China Sea with China unwilling to stop its construction and militarization of terraformed reefs. The *USS Lassen*, a US Navy guided-missile destroyer, exercised international rights of freedom of navigation by sailing within 12nm of Chinese-occupied Subi Reef. The Obama administration notified Congress of its intent to sell a \$1.83 billion arms package to Taiwan prompting Chinese objections, but no suspension of bilateral military exchanges. Presidents Obama and Xi met on

the margins of the Paris climate change conference in late November. They also conferred by phone, helping to conclude an historic, global agreement to reduce emissions at COP21.

US-Korea Relations: Summitry, Strength, and a Fourth Nuclear Test by Stephen Noerper

Late 2015 saw hedging around South Korea's relationship with China, strong support for the US-ROK alliance in the face of DPRK threats, a US-ROK summit, and heightened concern as North Korea prepared for a fourth nuclear test, which came on Jan. 6. With the US and South Korea watching closely for signs of a provocation, North Korea marked the 70th anniversary of its Workers Party on Oct. 10 without incident. The US-ROK presidential summit appeared solid, with a joint statement against the North Korean nuclear and missile threats and concern over DPRK human rights violations. The US again took up the issue of DPRK human rights violations at the UN Security Council in December as reports of purges in North Korea attracted attention. The US was pleased in late December by an agreement between South Korea and Japan on “comfort women.”

US-Southeast Asia Relations: Commitment Concerns by Sheldon Simon

US relations with Southeast Asia encompassed all three pillars of its rebalance to Asia: military presence, multilateral diplomacy, and economic engagement. Militarily, the freedom of navigation voyage of the *USS Lassen* past China's artificial islands occurred while the Department of Defense announced a military aid program for Southeast Asian states and the White House committed to military support for Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Diplomatic engagements included visits to the region by the president, the secretaries of state and defense, and a number of senior aides to attend multilateral meetings. Commitment to the economic pillar led to the conclusion of negotiations for the TPP trade pact. If ratified by the signatories, the TPP would be the most comprehensive trade and investment arrangement in the world, though a number of obstacles in many of the countries do not portend a quick or easy confirmation.

China-Southeast Asia Relations: Limited Moderation amid Pressure and Complaints by Robert Sutter and Chin-Hao Huang

President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li Keqiang led Chinese government officials in responding in measured and moderate ways to regional challenges and criticisms as Beijing defended South China Sea claims and advanced its regional influence. Moderation after a period of strong assertiveness replicates similar shifts in 2013 and 2014. Those shifts turned out to be tactical, lasting a few months each; possibly timed to avoid negative consequences for Chinese leaders facing public acrimony during the APEC, ASEAN and East Asian Summit

meetings that occur each fall. Developments in 2015 suggest a more lasting period of moderation, though there is no sign of change in the Chinese positions on various disputes.

[China-Taiwan Relations: A Meeting and a Campaign](#) by David G. Brown and Kevin Scott

Xi Jinping and Ma Ying-jeou held the historic first Cross-Strait Leaders Meeting in Singapore, capping seven years of collaborative work to build stable and constructive cross-strait relations. On Taiwan, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has conducted a well-run campaign, likely leading on Jan. 16 to Tsai Ing-wen winning a strong majority mandate in the presidential election and the KMT and its allies losing control of the Legislative Yuan (LY) for the first time. After the election, Tsai and Xi will share responsibility for avoiding a confrontation that is in neither of their interests.

[North Korea-South Korea Relations: Pyongyang's Bang Explodes Hope](#) by Aidan Foster-Carter

2016 in Korea began with a bang. Though unlikely to be the hydrogen bomb it claims, North Korea's fourth nuclear test on Jan. 6 makes certain that inter-Korean ties will not get better any time soon. The last four months of 2015 saw disappointingly little progress on the six-point accord reached in late August to improve relations. The sole substantial outcome was a fresh round of reunions of separated families. However, no further reunions have been arranged or even discussed. Civilian exchanges did pick up to a degree, but this remained fairly light traffic, and wholly one-way; no North Koreans were reported as visiting the South. Even though the August accord specified holding high-level talks "at an early date," such talks did not take place until December, and then only between vice ministers.

[China-Korea Relations: A Complex China-ROK Partnership](#) by Scott Snyder and See-won Byun

The September China-ROK summit in Beijing catalyzed the resumption of trilateral talks with Japan in October and the launch of the China-ROK Free Trade Agreement in December. Beijing's Korean engagement also included a visit to North Korea in October by Politburo Standing Committee member Liu Yunshan for 70th anniversary celebrations of the founding of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). The visit was credited with preventing a rocket launch by Pyongyang that had reportedly been planned to mark the anniversary. Meanwhile, Pyongyang's reached out to Beijing with a "friendship tour" to China led by Choe Hwi. Despite new initiatives to expand economic cooperation, Pyongyang's apparent defiance of Chinese efforts on denuclearization suggests further difficulties in Sino-DPRK relations.

[Japan-China Relations: Moving in the Right Direction](#) by James Przystup

Senior political and diplomatic contacts expanded in late 2015. Prime Minister Abe met Premier Li in October and President Xi briefly in November. Meanwhile, maritime issues dominated the policy agenda: China's natural gas exploration in the East China Sea, incursions into Japan's territorial waters near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and China's land reclamation projects in the South China Sea.

History issues also punctuated the period – the September victory parade in Beijing, at UNESCO, and the anniversary of the Nanjing Massacre in December. Nevertheless, there was a general sense that relations were moving in the right direction.

[Japan-Korea Relations: A Litigious Time of the Year](#) by David Kang and Jiun Bang

The overarching theme for the end of the year was litigation. The trial of Kato Tatsuya (former Seoul bureau chief for *Sankei Shimbun*) led to his acquittal for criminal libel. The trial of Park Yu-ha, a professor at Sejong University charged with defamation, began in December. The General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (*Chongryon*) and its affiliates faced three separate lawsuits in Japan and South Korea. A Korean was arrested and later indicted for his role in placing a bomb at Yasukuni Shrine. There were also competing interpretations of the international status of North Korean refugees in the case of contingencies. The much-awaited November Park-Abe summit was quickly tested by incidents that could easily strain relations. To the credit of Seoul and Tokyo, neither government let a single issue damage the relationship. In fact, the two ended up reaching an accord on "comfort women/sex slaves" at yearend. Despite immediate praise from the US, there was considerable frustration from both publics over the agreement.

[China-Russia Relations: Into the Syrian Storm: Between Alliance and Alignment](#) by Yu Bin

In the final months of 2015, China-Russia interaction started with President Putin's state visit to China and ended with the 20th annual prime ministerial meeting in Beijing. While Putin's visit was full of historical and geopolitical symbolism, the prime ministers meeting was geared for substance, aiming to energize bilateral economic relations against the backdrop of Western sanctions against Russia and China's economic slowdown. In between, Chinese and Russian leaders met at multilateral forums, and a \$2 billion sale of 24 Russian *Sukhoi-35* fighter-bombers to China after eight years of negotiations was finalized. Meanwhile, the world witnessed Russia's intervention into the Syrian civil war, the European refugee crisis, the Paris massacre, and the rise of anti-establishment forces across the West. The apparent warming of Sino-Russian relations led to another round of questions: were they moving toward an anti-West alliance?

[India-East Asia Relations: A Full Year of "Acting East"](#) by Satu Limaye

India-East Asia relations during 2015 offered a perspective on the first full year of India "Acting East." India took important steps to shore up ties with several Asia-Pacific countries while also creating new relationships. While India-East Asia relations saw no ground-breaking developments, Prime Minister Modi continues to emphasize the political and strategic dimensions of India's East Asia outreach – particularly in the maritime domain. An official review of India's foreign relations released in late December provided a perspective on the priority that the Modi administration has been giving to East Asia.