



COMPARATIVE CONNECTIONS SUMMARY

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Regional Overview: [The Best/Worst Trip Ever!](#) by Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman

President Donald Trump's inaugural visit to Asia in November was either "the best presidential trip, anywhere, ever" or "an absolute disaster and embarrassment," depending on whose comments you read. The president reaffirmed the US commitment to Japan and South Korea, rallied international support at every stop for his "maximum pressure" campaign against North Korea, stayed on message in China, and reaffirmed support for friends and allies in Southeast Asia. Trump clearly signaled his administration's preference for "fair and reciprocal" bilateral trade agreements, thus opening the door for new trade champions. The administration's *National Security Strategy (NSS)* report reinforced the "free and open Indo-Pacific" themes heard during Trump's trip. The president's unprecedented personal rollout of the report underscored the mixed messages coming from Washington when official policy statements and Trump's personal viewpoints fail to coincide.

US-Japan Relations: [Trump Visits Tokyo Amid North Korea Tensions](#) by Sheila Smith and Charles McClean

The growing threat from North Korea garnered a lot of attention in the US and Japan. In Japan, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō used that threat to win yet one more election. North Korea also dominated discussions during President Donald Trump's visit in November, although a reckoning on trade hovered in the background. Japan also worried about other stops on Trump's extended Asian itinerary, especially his stay in Beijing. The Trump administration's focus on its America First agenda was a significant factor in shaping Japan's foreign policy. Abe seemed up to the challenge as Japan actively pursued its interests globally to ensure support for North Korea sanctions and to build trade agreements that will further Japan's economic and trade interests. The US-Japan alliance remains in good shape, although there are difficulties to manage.

US-China Relations: [State Visit-Plus Summit Buys Time. But Friction Mounts](#) by Bonnie Glaser and Collin Norkiewicz

Donald Trump was hosted in Beijing for a "state visit-plus" summit in early November. In response to North Korea's September nuclear test and December ICBM test, the US and China worked together at the UN to tighten sanctions. Cracks in their cooperation widened, however, as Trump pressed Beijing to cut crude oil supplies to North Korea and Xi called for negotiations. US investigations into alleged Chinese unfair trading practices continued and remarks by the Trump administration suggest a growing possibility of the US imposing harsh trade penalties on China in 2018. Major bilateral dialogues convened included the social and people-to-people dialogue, the cyber security and law enforcement dialogue, the inaugural US-China Consultation on Foreign Nongovernmental Organization Management, and the first talks between the joint staff departments of the US and Chinese militaries. The Trump administration issued its first *National Security Strategy*, which depicted China as a rival and a revisionist power that, along with Russia, is seeking to erode US security and prosperity.

US-Korea Relations: [Tensions, Tests, and Drift](#) by Stephen Noerper

North Korea's sixth nuclear test and its ICBM test launch were unfortunate bookends to increased tension between North Korea and the US in the closing months of 2017. The missile test, which Kim Jong Un hailed as "completing the state nuclear force," potentially placed the entire US within range, leading Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dunford to warn of the likelihood of conflict. There seemed little prospect for a resumption of negotiations, despite senior US officials urging diplomacy and a visit to Pyongyang by UN Under Secretary General for Policy Jeffrey Feltman. President Trump's September UN address and subsequent tweets challenged the DPRK leader personally and directly, renewing a war of words. Trump's November visit to the ROK struck a more restrained tone and saw a positive ROK response. The US conducted several military exercises with its allies. Meanwhile, Seoul-Washington fissures grew over Trump's criticism of the KORUS free trade agreement and President Moon's eagerness to engage the DPRK – a drift that may grow after Kim Jong Un's

New Year's call for talks and possible DPRK participation in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics.

US-Southeast Asia Relations: [Abandoning Leadership](#) by Sheldon Simon

Concerned about what Southeast Asian leaders see as US neo-isolationism under President Trump, the heads of government from Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore all visited Washington. Trump's trip to Asia in November included talks with Vietnam's leaders and Philippine President Duterte. These activities could be termed "shopping diplomacy" as each leader has sought to curry favor with the US and all announced plans to purchase more US goods and invest in US companies to help Washington reduce its balance of payments deficit. They emphasized that their economic infusions would generate thousands of new US jobs. Politically, their combined message was that the US should not leave Southeast Asia to China's tender mercies but that Washington should remain a major actor in the region's security, economic activities, and political organizations.

China-Southeast Asia Relations: [Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang Ease Regional Tensions, Consolidate Gains](#) by Robert Sutter and Chin-Hao Huang

President Xi Jinping's marathon report at the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress in October emphasized a more powerful and rejuvenated China strongly advancing territorial and other interests in regional and global affairs. China's success in constructing artificial islands in the South China Sea was cited as one of Xi's many notable accomplishments. Xi and Premier Li Keqiang adopted a more moderate tone in November in their first foreign visits after the Congress. Xi visited Vietnam and Laos concurrent with his participation at the APEC meeting in Vietnam. Li visited the Philippines in conjunction with his participation in the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN+ 3 Summit, the China-ASEAN Summit, and a meeting of the leaders of 16 nations involved in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Some commentators depicted the moderation as part of a broader trend in China's foreign affairs; however, Beijing has traditionally adopted a softer approach during the annual Asia-Pacific leaders meetings, presumably to avoid unwanted controversy.

China-Taiwan Relations: [Continuity After 19th Party Congress](#) by David G. Brown and Kevin Scott

Defying some predictions, the outcome of the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party indicates there will be no significant change in Beijing's policy toward Taiwan. Beijing will continue to demand that President Tsai Ing-wen accept the 1992 consensus or pressure on her administration

will be sustained. In Taiwan, Tsai has supported domestic actions that Beijing fears are weakening cross-strait ties and her pro-independence supporters continue to press for steps that risk increasing tensions. Tsai has also urged Beijing to join in finding a new model for their relations. Beijing's pressure on Taiwan is stimulating calls in Washington for policies that are more supportive of Taiwan. These developments in Taiwan and Washington have in turn triggered warnings from Beijing.

North Korea-South Korea Relations: [A Sporting Chance For Detente](#) by Aidan Foster-Carter

Inter-Korean relations were a game of vastly unequal "halves" in late 2017. Despite hopes that the election of a left-leaning president in Seoul would be welcomed in Pyongyang, bilateral relations sustained their downward spiral until late December as North Korea continued to cold-shoulder South Korea. In the space of just a few days, Kim Jong Un's New Year's speech and his Olympic olive branch transformed at least the immediate atmosphere on the peninsula. Following a swift positive response from Seoul, the first high-level inter-Korean talks since Dec. 2015 agreed that North Korea will send a large contingent to the Winter Olympic Games. Working-level meetings and military talks are expected imminently to fine-tune the details.

China-Korea Relations: [Business As Usual](#) by Scott Snyder and See-won Byun

North Korea showcased its sprint toward the capability to launch a nuclear strike on the US in late 2017. Beijing supported sanctions adopted under UN Security Council resolutions, rejected calls for further pressure on the North. China continues calling for suspension of the North's nuclear and missile activities in exchange for the suspension of US-ROK military drills, along with dual-track denuclearization and peace talks. Seoul and Beijing's Oct. 31 agreement to "normalize" ties was a step toward returning the relationship to normalcy and paved the way to two summits. While defense ministers' talks resumed, efforts at reconciliation relied on setting aside core security differences to avoid the economic costs of conflict. Differences persist despite a shared desire to promote dialogue with Pyongyang and address rising tensions and the prospect of military conflict.

Japan-China Relations: [Managing a Fragile Relationship](#) by June Teufel Dreyer

As President Xi Jinping entertained national leaders in Beijing, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō made appearances at the opening of the UN General Assembly and the New York Stock Exchange, and authored an op-ed in *The New York Times*. Abe's common theme was denunciation of North Korea's behavior, adding that China must play a greater role in curbing its activities. Abe also

indicated Japan would consider supporting companies that participated in the Belt and Road Initiative and partner with China in underwriting aid to African countries, while hinting strongly that he would like an invitation for a state visit. China is holding fast to its conditions for a formal meeting: Japan must agree there is a dispute over Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands ownership and show that it has come to terms with its misconduct during World War II. At yearend, Beijing's *Global Times* asserted that ties had broken out of their slump while Japanese leaders indicated the two sides had pushed relations to a new state, enabling them to discuss the future.

Japan-Korea Relations: [Continuation of Dual Track Approach](#) by David Kang and Kyuri Park

South Korea-Japan relations continued on the trajectory they had over the summer – both countries adopted a dual-track approach. While controversy over the comfort women issue and Dokdo/Takeshima continued, Seoul and Tokyo moved forward in developing a “future-oriented relationship” centered on economics and North Korea. While officials on both sides regularly expressed hopes for reviving high-level shuttle diplomacy, the most significant element has been how directly Washington was influenced by, but also influenced, Seoul-Tokyo relations. While an important element in Korea-Japan relations since the end of the Pacific War, recent events have demonstrated the importance of the triangular relationship.

China-Russia Relations: [Between the Past and the Future](#) by Yu Bin

The China-Russia strategic partnership continued to deepen and broaden. President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin met at the BRICS summit in Xiamen and at the APEC forum in Vietnam. In between, the prime ministers exchanged visits. The potential to strengthen economic relations ran against a deteriorating situation on the Korean Peninsula. Security ties and coordination between the two militaries gained considerable traction as the two countries prepared for the worst. In the midst of unfolding danger, both Xi and Putin were readying themselves to lead their respective countries for the next five to six years. It remains to be seen how Xi and Putin will shape their countries in challenging times.

India-East Asia Relations: [Welcomed by Washington. Contested by China. Engaged with East Asia](#) by Satu Limaye

The combination of a strengthened and networked US-India relationship, China-India tensions, and India's incremental advances in regional ties is consolidating India-East Asia relations. The Trump administration welcomed Prime Minister Modi and articulated India's importance to both its South Asia and Indo-Pacific policies, including trilateral and quadrilateral arrangements among the US, Japan, India, and Australia. Mid-

year, India and China engaged in a tense two-month standoff on the Doklam plateau, highlighting yet another element of longstanding territorial and border disputes and adding to the list of accumulated grievances. India's relations with other East Asian countries, however, advanced on the diplomatic and defense fronts. India's own emphases in its East Asia outreach included maritime cooperation, seeking to engage East Asian partners in India's states, building new bilateral mechanisms to harness relations, and participating in regional multilateral groupings to institutionalize regional relationships and engagements.