



COMPARATIVE CONNECTIONS SUMMARY- [SEPTEMBER 2020 ISSUE](#)

## REGIONAL OVERVIEW

### [AN “ALLIANCE OF DEMOCRACIES”: IS THERE ANY THERE THERE?](#)

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

The “cold peace” between Washington and Beijing continued to heat up, with implications throughout and beyond the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. US pronouncements during the last four months should dispel any doubt that the US Asia strategy is aimed first and foremost at China, and more specifically at the Chinese Communist Party. Not only does the “Quad”—the US, Australia, India, and Japan—show signs of coordinated backbone, it seems to be forming the basis for a new “Quad-Plus” that includes other “like-minded states.” Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to hammer regional economies and the recovery is likely to be long and uneven. It looks like there may be a new model that describes its impact, and it doesn’t augur well for those countries.

## US-JAPAN RELATIONS

### [UNEXPECTED TURBULENCE FOR THE ALLIANCE](#)

BY SHEILA A. SMITH, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS & CHARLES MCCLEAN, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Several unexpected events during the summer of 2020 confounded US-Japan ties. The COVID-19 pandemic continued to challenge governments in Tokyo and Washington, as the number of infected grew. The scale of the pandemic’s impact was far greater in the United

States, but Japan’s metropolitan centers faced an uptick in cases, as did less populated regions. The Japanese and US governments marked the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, yet difficulties in defense cooperation rattled relations. A bigger surprise to the US-Japan relationship came on Aug. 28 when Prime Minister Abe Shinzo announced he would resign. Abe’s exit raises the question of whether his successor can manage the US-Japan relationship with the same skill.

## US-CHINA RELATIONS

### [US-CHINA RELATIONS IN FREE FALL](#)

BY BONNIE GLASER, CSIS & KELLY FLAHERTY, CSIS

President Trump blamed China for the spread of the coronavirus, which opened the door to tougher US policies on a range of issues from Hong Kong to Xinjiang. The Phase One trade deal remained intact, although Chinese purchases of US goods lagged targets in the agreement. Senior Trump administration officials delivered a series of speeches that condemned Chinese policies and suggested that the CCP poses an unacceptable threat to the United States and other democracies. Charging that the Chinese consulate in Houston was engaged in espionage, the US demanded it be closed. Beijing retaliated by shutting down the US Consulate in Chengdu. The US aligned its South China Sea policy more closely with the July 2016 tribunal ruling and declared China’s “nine-dash line” claim and actions based on it to be illegal. Tensions increased over Taiwan as the US took several steps to strengthen ties with Taipei and deter Chinese coercion.

**US-KOREA RELATIONS****SHADOWS STILL REMAIN,  
AND WAITING FOR A COLD  
NOVEMBER RAIN****BY MASON RICHEY, HANKUK  
UNIVERSITY & ROB YORK, PACIFIC  
FORUM**

US relations with South Korea and North Korea settled into a holding pattern commingling frustration, disappointment, occasional bared teeth, and frequently forced smiles. Washington and Seoul failed to reach agreement on troop burden-sharing, an issue weighing down the US-South Korea alliance. Meanwhile US-South Korea joint military exercises remain scaled-down, and the administrations of Donald Trump and Moon Jae-in continue to try to mask obvious differences in prioritization of engagement for reconciliation and pressure for denuclearization. Ties between Washington and Pyongyang have stalled such that even talking about talking makes news. And in the background of these diplomatic doldrums Kim Jong Un's regime continues to build out and improve its nuclear weapons program and missile arsenal.

**US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS****DIPLOMATIC DOLDRUMS:  
ASEAN LOSES MOMENTUM IN  
THE PANDEMIC AS SECURITY  
TENSIONS RISE****BY CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN  
UNIVERSITY**

As Southeast Asia struggles to gain traction in the COVID-19 pandemic and address its economic damage, leaders are hobbled by conditions that make forging a regional approach to the virus more difficult. Although most states have launched partial and cautious reopening strategies, most intergovernmental business is still conducted online. This will remain the case for the rest of 2020, given widespread fears of a second surge of the coronavirus. In the meantime, several leaders face political challenges as their domestic populations struggle under the worst recession in years. Diplomatic traffic is ordinarily busy in

the summer in Southeast Asia, but this year the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore was cancelled, the ASEAN Summit forced to go online, and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) pushed into the early fall, also to be conducted by video. Yet, security tensions were not held in abeyance by COVID, and may have been exacerbated by it.

**CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS****CHINA FACES STRONGER US  
OPPOSITION IN SOUTH CHINA  
SEA****BY ROBERT SUTTER, GEORGE  
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY & CHIN-  
HAO HUANG, YALE-NUS COLLEGE**

in the South China Sea. Officials from Xi Jinping on down reached out to Southeast Asian countries with emphasis on growing economic relations and cooperation in countering COVID-19. Top-level officials generally eschewed public criticism of the United States on South China Sea issues, while government ministries and official and unofficial media used sometimes tough language in criticizing Washington. Overall, Beijing registered satisfaction that ASEAN adopted a neutral stance and most other states showed little sign of leaning toward the US against China.

**CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS****TAIWAN NAVIGATES US-  
CHINA TENSIONS AS IT  
MANAGES THE EFFECTS OF  
COVID-19****BY DAVID KEEGAN, JOHNS HOPKINS  
SCHOOL OF ADVANCED  
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CHURCHMAN, JOHNS HOPKINS  
UNIVERSITY**

The beginning of President Tsai Ing-wen's second term was defined by Taiwan's success in overcoming the health and economic impacts of COVID-19. Taiwan failed to win a seat at the World Health Assembly, but won unusually broad support from Washington and others. Taiwan offered assistance to victims of the

Beijing's National Security Law for Hong Kong, prompting Beijing to warn of Taiwan's "black hand." Taiwan's ties with the US were showcased by the August visit of Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar to Taipei. Elsewhere, the Nationalist Party's recent presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu was recalled as Kaohsiung mayor. Meanwhile, the new KMT leadership's initiative to sever ties to the "1992 Consensus" provoked generational dissension and a sharp warning from Beijing. Lee Teng-hui was mourned at his death as a democratic hero.

## NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

### A TEMPESTUOUS SUMMER

BY AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

Claiming to be suddenly furious about defector activists sending propaganda via balloon across the Demilitarized Zone, North Korea issued ever more violent threats against the South, culminating in the symbolic but extreme act of blowing up the joint liaison office in Kaesong in June. Moon Jae-in's government deplored that and other aggressive Northern acts, yet its tone was more pained than sharp, and Moon remained oddly emollient toward Pyongyang overall. In July he named a new minister of unification who had allegedly been pro-North in his student days, as well as reshuffling three other top security posts. Although the new appointees were all even more strongly pro-engagement than their predecessors, North Korea showed little sign of being impressed.

## CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

### US-CHINA RIVALRY DIVIDES THE TWO KOREAS

SCOTT SNYDER, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS & SEE-WON BYUN, SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY

The Korean Peninsula appears divided in what some analysts call a "new cold war" as US-China tensions escalate over issues ranging from COVID-19 to Hong Kong. Washington's new China strategy prompted Pyongyang to

voice its alignment with China while heightening Seoul's dilemma of choosing sides. As the North Korean economy suffered the combined effects of ongoing sanctions, the global pandemic, and severe weather, a leaked UN report in August sharpened international criticism of China's sanctions enforcement. The region's current domestic political priorities reinforce Beijing, Seoul, and Washington's trilemma over alternative approaches to DPRK denuclearization.

## JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

### THE VELVET GLOVES FRAY...SLIGHTLY

BY JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

Major concern in this period centered around the future of Sino-Japanese relations in the post-Abe era, with most analysts predicting that there would be little change. China's impressive, though credit-fueled, rebound from the coronavirus pandemic as Japan's economy sharply contracted indicates that Tokyo will seek to maximize trade with the PRC. Xi Jinping's long-awaited state visit to Japan is on indefinite hold, with concern for the pandemic a convenient explanation for underlying multiparty opposition due to Beijing's assertive actions in contested areas and its repressive measures in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Differences of opinion remain on the wording of a so-called 4<sup>th</sup> Sino-Japanese Communique that is much desired by Beijing.

## JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

### HISTORY, TRADE, AND DISTRUST

JI-YOUNG LEE, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Twin decisions—South Korea's Supreme Court ruling on forced labor during Japan's occupation of the Korean Peninsula and Japan's export restrictions on key materials used for South Korea's electronics industry—planted the seeds of discord and deterioration of bilateral ties during the summer months of 2020. In June, the Daegu District Court released a public notice to

Nippon Steel to seize and liquidate the local assets of the company. In response to Japan's imposition of export controls in 2019, South Korea filed a complaint with the World Trade Organization. This downward spiral will likely continue for the remainder of the year unless South Korea and Japan take decisive action to address these disputes. On the North Korea front, Japan's newly published *Defense of Japan 2020* assessed North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities as posing greater threats to Japanese national security than previous years.

trade retaliation has followed. Even before the pandemic hit, Australia talked of a "new normal" with China of "enduring differences." Whatever the US election result, the phrase "new normal" is also being applied to changes wrought by President Trump. The US alliance is hugged anew as Canberra abandons a central strategic tenet it has held for 50 years—the idea that Australia would have 10 years warning of any direct military threat.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Click [here](#) to request a PacNet subscription.*

## CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

### AGE OF TRIANGULAR POLITICKING

BY YU BIN, WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY

China and Russia found themselves entangled in two separate triangular dynamics with the US and India. Russia, however, found itself in a curiously pivotal position within the two geopolitical triangles: an "innocent" bystander in the Beijing-New Delhi-Moscow trio and a useful, delicate balancer in the Washington-Beijing duel. Between its strategic partner (China) and persistent yet unrequited courter (the Trump administration), Russia carefully played its cards from a position of strategic weakness. By end of summer, the US-China-Russia triangle made its way into the US 2020 presidential elections as presidential candidates played the "Russia" and "China" cards. No matter who wins the 2020 US election, the stakes are high for China and Russia.

## AUSTRALIA-US/EAST ASIA

### CORONAVIRUS, CHINA AND THE US NEW NORMAL

BY GRAEME DOBELL, AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC POLICY INSTITUTE

Challenged by COVID-19 and China, Australia confronts deteriorating strategic prospects and its first economic recession in nearly 30 years. The pandemic has worsened strained relations between Australia and China. Canberra's call for an inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 was attacked by Beijing as a betrayal and Chinese