



COMPARATIVE CONNECTIONS SUMMARY: **JANUARY 2024 ISSUE**

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

The “Year of Elections” is Upon Us!

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

The major multilateral gatherings of the past year’s final trimester—the East Asia Summit (EAS) and associated ASEAN-arranged summitry in Indonesia in early September, the India-hosted G20 Summit a week later (Sept. 9-10 in Delhi), the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) in Indonesia, and the concurrent Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting in San Francisco on Nov. 16-17—were largely overshadowed by events (very) near and far away. The EAS and G20 Summits were most notable for who wasn’t there. Russian President Vladimir Putin skipped both meetings, sparing the hosts of the challenge (or embarrassment) of honoring (or ignoring) the international arrest warrant issued for him stemming from the Kremlin’s invasion and war against Ukraine. Those hoping for a fence-mending summit between Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden at the EAS or G20 were doubly disappointed; Xi skipped both meetings, while Biden only attended the G20, leaving the EAS to Vice President Kamala Harris.

US-JAPAN RELATIONS

As Good as it Gets?

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN, TAMA UNIVERSITY CRS/PACIFIC FORUM

The US-Japan relationship may well be at its all-time best. Animated by a concordance of vision and interests, the two governments are closely coordinating across a wide range of issues in a variety of venues—bilateral and multilateral, political, economic, and military. Concern about the potential destabilizing effects of regional developments provides considerable motivation for the two to work together. The final reporting period of 2023 provided ample evidence of

their convergence. If that past is prologue, the year ahead should be a good one. Unfortunately, however, the tide could be turning. A political funds scandal has ensnared Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and the approval ratings of the government of Prime Minister Kishida Fumio are plummeting as a result. Even if the prime minister survives the scandal—and most indications are that he will—he will be tarred and distracted as the region and the world face new and mounting challenges.

US-CHINA RELATIONS

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Biden-Xi Woodside Summit and the Slow Rehabilitation of US-PRC Ties

BY SOURABH GUPTA, INSTITUTE FOR CHINAAMERICA STUDIES

The “guardrails” that President Biden and President Xi envisaged in Bali in November 2022 began to be emplaced at their November 2023 summit in Woodside, California. In-person, leader-led communication was deepened, reassurances exchanged, and practical—albeit modest—“deliverables” locked down on several fronts, including restarting mil-mil communications, cracking down on fentanyl precursors, addressing the national security harms of artificial intelligence (AI), and increased people-to-people exchanges. The establishment of numerous bilateral working groups will ensure an almost full plate of across-the-board consultations in 2024 as well as the means to troubleshoot irritants on short notice. As stabilizing as the Woodside summit was, it failed to deflect the US-PRC relationship from its larger overall trajectory of “selective decoupling” across a range of advanced technologies and frontier industries (microelectronics; quantum; AI; biomanufacturing; clean energy). Strategic trade controls and other competitive actions were doubled down upon. With a pivotal US presidential election looming in 2024, questions abound on the longer-term durability of a rehabilitating US-PRC relationship.

US-KOREA RELATIONS

Calm in the Storm

BY MASON RICHEY, HANKUK UNIVERSITY & ROB YORK, PACIFIC FORUM

There are many metaphors about using propitious moments to prepare for an inclement future: make hay while the sun shines, the best time to fix the roof is on a clear day, strike while the iron is hot, etc. These all imply the drudgery of work: a farmer baling hay on a sunny day, a slater shingling high on a roof under a blue sky, a forger hammering inside a sweltering workshop on a breezy afternoon. In a third semester continuation of the rest of a tense, yet stable 2023, there is a sense in which both South Korea and North Korea have been following the lesson of these proverbs as they use relative calm on the Korean Peninsula to build out their respective, opposed security and defense capabilities. Another, similar proverb captures an additional element of this dynamic: if you spend your whole life waiting for the storm, you'll never enjoy the sunshine. Despite the tension on the Korean Peninsula, leaders in both Seoul and Pyongyang appear confident, even buoyant about their security and defense buildups.

US-INDIA RELATIONS

[One Step Forward and Two Steps Back](#)

BY AKHIL RAMESH, PACIFIC FORUM

The Comparative Connections chapter on US-India relations covering the period September to December 2022 highlighted the challenge of getting past Cold-War era differences to fully capitalize on Indo-Pacific synergies. In the months between September and December of 2023, Cold War-era differences took center stage in the bilateral partnership. As a sliver of hope that the partnership would transform into a formal alliance emerged earlier in the year, these differences were spoilers. Differences in outlook brought to light the perennial challenges in the relationship and the need to get past the muscle memory of the Cold War for substantial engagement as defense and security allies. Despite these political and security differences, economic and technological cooperation largely expanded with increased cooperation in critical technologies and supply chain diversification initiatives. US industries broke new ground in expanding their footprint in India, and Indian conglomerates invested in the US, capitalizing on the Biden administration's Inflation Reduction Act and other industrial policies.

US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

[Washington Doubles Down on Key Partners](#)

BY CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

US relations with Southeast Asia ended on a down note in 2023 with the last-minute failure to finalize the trade pillar of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). This was not a complete loss for ASEAN states that managed to negotiate bilateral supply chain resilience agreements. However, it underscored the fact that broad regional frameworks, particularly for trade, are off the table with Washington, at least until the United States is past the November 2024 elections. Instead, the administration focused on security over trade and on key partners in the region, with Biden skipping the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Jakarta for a visit to Vietnam and the announcement of the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In this period, US relations with the Philippines continued to strengthen, with Washington issuing three statements calling out China for its reckless maneuvers in the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea. But if some Southeast Asians were miffed by the administration's focus on bilateralism over regionalism, most were reassured by Biden's meeting with Xi Jinping on the margins of the APEC meeting in San Francisco.

CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

[Beijing Moderates Criticisms Selectively](#)

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

Beijing in this reporting period moderated often shrill rhetoric of the past two years criticizing Joseph Biden administration advances and regional governments cooperating with the US. Emphasizing China's positive contributions to regional economic growth, Beijing stressed its flexibility, said to be different from Washington in not pressing regional states to choose between the US and China, even as it demonstrated ambitions to develop a new regional and global order favorable to itself. Nevertheless, glaring exceptions included egregious pressures to compel deference to China's claims in the South China Sea, harsh criticism of the Philippines and Japan cooperating closely with the United States, as well as authoritative foreign policy statements giving regional governments little choice between two paths forward: cooperation with an avowedly beneficial China or America's purported exploitative, divisive, and destructive initiatives.

Regarding the Philippines, an unprecedented show of support by the US for the territorial claims of its treaty ally resulted in an equally unprecedented pushback from Beijing.

CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS **Taiwan Voters Choose Independence**

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

Taiwan's election campaign has concluded. Voters went to the polls on Jan. 13. As has been the case in almost every election, cross-Strait relations with China were the central issue, a secondary issue being President Tsai Ing-wen's management of the economy. The outcome of the election will largely dictate the course of Taiwan-China relations over at least the next four years. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate and President Tsai Ing-wen's chosen successor, William Lai Ching-te, the eventual winner, proclaims that Taiwan is already independent as the Republic of China. It should continue to diversify economic linkages away from China, strengthen military deterrence, and hope that China will eventually offer talks without one-China preconditions. The opposition Kuomintang candidate, Hou Yu-ih, called for expanded cross-Strait economic ties and dialogue with China under the one-China banner to reduce tensions while Taiwan also builds its military deterrence. China has deployed economic sticks, gray-zone military intimidation, and fake news to influence the election.

NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS **Both Koreas Ditch Their Border Accord**

BY AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

The last third of 2023 was eventful in Korea, especially the two final months. Fall found South Koreans preoccupied with events elsewhere, and their implications for the peninsula. In September, Kim Jong Un's Siberian summit with Vladimir Putin prompted worries as to how closer Pyongyang-Moscow military ties might affect the ROK. In October, Hamas' shocking attack on Israel added a new layer of alarm, warranted or otherwise. President Yoon Suk Yeol was among those expressing fear that the DPRK might launch a similar

surprise assault. He soon had less hypothetical concerns. In November, in response to Pyongyang's successful launch (following two earlier failures) of a military reconnaissance satellite, Seoul partially suspended 2018's inter-Korean military accord—whereupon the North predictably scrapped it entirely. Tensions grew as both sides rearmed at the ironically named Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and talked tough — none tougher than Kim Jong Un, who spoke openly of occupying the South. As the year ended, Kim declared a major change in DPRK doctrine. Dropping its longstanding lip service to reunification, the North now regards the peninsular situation as “relations between two belligerent states.” The implications of this shift remain to be seen.

CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS **A Subdued Environment and Missed Opportunities**

BY SCOTT SNYDER, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

Chinese diplomacy toward the Korean Peninsula in late 2023 sputtered forward, driven more by a calendar of bilateral anniversaries with North Korea and multilateral gatherings involving South Korea than any sense of strategic purpose. Both relationships seemed preoccupied with off-stage developments such as the September summit between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin and the momentum of US-Japan-South Korea trilateral relations, rather than any inherent dynamism of their own. Still, regular Sino-North Korean bilateral exchanges ahead of the 75th anniversary of the bilateral relationship and Sino-South Korean bilateral economic dialogues provide opportunities to overcome resistance and sustain progress in the face of deepening major power rivalries. Senior-level dialogues between China and North Korea occurred on North Korea's 75th founding anniversary in September, with the visit of Chinese Vice Premier Liu Guozhong to Pyongyang, a visit that occurred against the backdrop of the second US-South Korea Nuclear Consultative Group meeting, North Korea's first successful indigenous satellite launch, and North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Pak Myong Ho's visit to Beijing.

JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS **The Sparring Continues**

BY JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

Several senior-level contacts failed to narrow the gap between Japan and China. Xi Jinping and Kishida Fumio met at APEC for 65 minutes in November to discuss topics including a buoy placed in what Japan regards as its territorial waters, China's lack of cooperation on North Korea's nuclear program, Beijing's resumption of drilling in a disputed section of the East China Sea, and the detention of Japanese nationals on vaguely worded charges. China complained about Japan's enhanced defense relationship with the US and other countries, its chip alliance with the US aimed at excluding China, the continued release of allegedly contaminated water from the disabled Fukushima plant, as well as Japan's support for Taiwan. There was no resolution of any of these issues. Komeito leader Yamauchi Natsuo visited Beijing with a letter from Kishida; its contents have not been publicly disclosed but it had had no discernible results. Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko's meeting with counterpart Wang Yi at a trilateral meeting of foreign ministers in South Korea, also in November, was similarly unproductive. With Kishida seemingly losing support of his own party and likely to be replaced soon, Japan has little leverage in negotiations...

JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

The Year 2023—Major Turning Point and Blossoming Cooperation

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

The year 2023 was a turning point for Japan-South Korea relations. There was a breakthrough in the issue of compensating forced laborers, which led South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio to meet seven times since their summit in March. Shuttle diplomacy has been fully resumed. By year's end, their cooperation in new areas such as energy, critical and emerging technology, development and humanitarian assistance, space, and cyber is blossoming. Last year will be remembered as the year that began to demonstrate a real potential for Seoul and Tokyo to be like-minded global partners, along with Washington. If the first half of 2023 was a speed chase to get to the finish line—the Camp David trilateral summit meeting—the latter half of 2023 was a coordinated plan to prepare for many more races. As noted in our last issue of Comparative Connections, the Camp David trilateral summit represented a potential harbinger for the future of Japan-Korea relations.

CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

From Geopolitics to Geoeconomics

BY YU BIN, WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY

In the last months of 2023, China and Russia increasingly prioritized economics and geoeconomics in their bilateral interactions. In the post-COVID era and with a virtual standstill in the Russian-Ukraine war, both sides searched for new growth potential in domestic, bilateral, and multilateral domains. In October, Russian President Putin visited Beijing for the 3rd Belt and Road Forum (BRF), which was attended by thousands of participants from 151 countries. It was a convenient occasion for Putin to expand his diplomacy, which had been considerably strained by Western sanctions since early 2022. Putin's lengthy meetings (formal talks, a working lunch, and a "private tea meeting") took almost half a day for the two-day BEF. Ten years after Xi's launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), both sides found it necessary to adjust their policies between the increasingly globalized BRI and Russia's regional grouping, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

INDIA/EAST ASIA RELATIONS

A Year of India Everything Everywhere All at Once

BY SATU LIMAYE, EAST WEST CENTER IN WASHINGTON

In 2023, the Indo-Pacific was something of a backdrop to India's robust global activities, including the presidency of the Group of Twenty (G20), chairing for the first time the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit, participating in the Group of Seven summit, convening for the first time the Voice of Global South summits, and co-chairing with the United States the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor initiatives launched on the sidelines of the September G20 Summit in Delhi. Comparatively, India's Indo-Pacific engagements were less high-profile and leader-led but still numerous and active. India's low-level but wide-ranging defense diplomacy is particularly noteworthy. Prime Minister Modi and External Affairs Minister Jaishankar, while pre-occupied by India's role in global diplomacy, made important visits in the Indo-Pacific, with the PM making four country stops on two regional trips to the region; the first in May to the G7 Summit in Hiroshima, followed by stops in Papua New Guinea and Australia, and another in September to

Jakarta, Indonesia for the annual ASEAN-led summit meetings, including the annual India-ASEAN dialogue.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors