



COMPARATIVE CONNECTIONS SUMMARY: [MAY 2024 ISSUE](#)

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

[The “Year of Elections,” Take Two!](#)

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

The “Year of Elections” is upon us and, notwithstanding a ripple or two, there have been no upsets. In Taiwan, the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate won with roughly 40% of the vote, given the divided opposition. Incoming President William Lai Ching-te is expected to extend olive branches Beijing’s way when inaugurated on May 20 but the odds of Beijing being receptive are depressingly low. In Pakistan, candidates associated with former Prime Minister Imran Khan won the most seats but not enough to form a new government (or get Khan out of jail). In Indonesia, defense minister and retired army Gen. Prabowo Subianto won as expected, the only (minor) surprise being his first-round majority, avoiding a June runoff (and giving him lots of time to prepare for his October inauguration). In Russia, to no one’s surprise, Vladimir Putin emerged victorious, having neutered (if not murdered) any credible opposition. In South Korea, President Yoon Suk Yeol’s People Power Party failed to unseat the opposition in National Assembly elections, causing many to refer to him as a lame duck, despite three years remaining in his term. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is also expected to emerge victorious with India’s elections still underway.

US-JAPAN RELATIONS

[Washington Welcomes Prime Minister Kishida](#)

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

2024 began with a full agenda for the US and Japan. All eyes were on the January presidential election in Taiwan, and China’s reaction to it. The choice of William Lai Ching-te, who is currently vice president, cemented the hold of the Democratic Progressive Party

(DPP) on power, with a third term for the party. Lai has close ties with Japan and has made no bones about his expectation that Japan, as well as the US, will figure prominently in his hopes for Taiwan’s future. The invitation to former Kuomintang (KMT) President Ma Ying-jeou to visit Beijing on April 10 [made it clear](#) that Beijing had a different preference than the people of Taiwan. The uptick in Chinese military pressure across the Strait as well as in the South China Sea also concerned the US and Japan. The People’s Liberation Army’s growing demonstration of pressure on Taiwan’s eastern islands continued in the months after Lai’s victory, as Taiwan prepared to inaugurate him as president on May 20. The US and Japan found common cause also in speaking out against China’s growing aggression against Philippine maritime forces at Second Thomas Shoal.

US-CHINA RELATIONS

[Ties Stabilize While Negative Undercurrents Deepen](#)

BY SOURABH GUPTA, INSTITUTE FOR CHINA-AMERICA STUDIES

US-China relations were marked by a paradox during the first trimester of 2024. On the one hand, a distinct stabilization was evident in ties. The two sides made concerted efforts to translate their leaders’ ‘San Francisco Vision’ into reality. Cabinet officials exchanged visits across the Pacific, working groups and dialogue mechanisms met in earnest and produced outcomes, functional cooperation was deepened, sensitive issues such as Taiwan were carefully managed, and effort was devoted to improving the relationship’s political optics. On the other hand, the negative tendencies in ties continued to deepen. Both sides introduced additional selective decoupling as well as cybersecurity measures in key information and communications technology and services sectors, with US actions bearing the signs of desinicization—rather than mere decoupling—of relevant supply chains. The chasm in strategic perception remained as wide as before. In sum, the “new normal” in US-China relations continued to take form, one piece at a time.

US-KOREA RELATIONS**[Right Where We Left It](#)**

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

The first reporting period of 2024 US-Korea relations was busy, both with managing ongoing issues (good and bad) and adapting to genuinely new evolutionary turns in US-Korea affairs. Concerning the former, US-South Korea relations continued on the same trajectory since President Yoon Suk Yeol assumed office in 2022: deepening bilateral alliance interoperability, enriching trilateral cooperation with Japan, increasing economic security policy convergence with the US. And this despite new foreign, defense, finance, and trade ministers in Seoul. Widely viewed as a referendum on Yoon, [April National Assembly elections](#) cast a shadow over much of his foreign and security policy during the reporting period. However, the crushing defeat of Yoon's conservative People Power Party is unlikely to affect his approach to external affairs, where the president retains significant unilateral power. The "management" bucket also contains more threatening scenarios that have been building for months, years, decades. At the top of the list in importance is North Korea's build-out of its nuclear and missile program, which continued apace in the January-April 2024 period, also providing more evidence of the essential hopelessness of international sanctions.

US-INDIA RELATIONS**[Weathering the Crisis](#)**

BY AKHIL RAMESH, PACIFIC FORUM & MICHAEL RUBIN, AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

For the US-India bilateral relationship, the first four months of 2024 were a repeat of the last three years: the differences in attitudes toward Cold-War era partnerships resurfaced and made difficult maintaining the calm in bilateral relations. There were significant strides in the economic and trade front. The security relationship, however, was marred by the dispute over the killing of Khalistan separatist, designated as a terrorist by India. Washington diplomatically backed India vis-a-vis China's belligerent actions such as [renaming Indian towns](#) by publicly speaking out against it and top military brass made visits to India in a show of support for the growing security cooperation

between the two democracies. The election hysteria in India, the heated rhetoric, and polemical statements in the election campaigns of major India political parties provided fodder for the Western press to raise concerns about the supposed "values-based" partnership with India. While not as hyperbolic in nature, US election campaigning dragged India into the mud, with President Biden lumping Japan and India in with Russia and China in a reference to nations that were "xenophobic" and restrictive to immigrants.

US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS**[Small but Telling Shifts](#)**

BY CATHARIN DALPINO, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Despite the current calm in broader US-China relations, and likely because of it, Chinese offensive actions around Second Thomas Shoal have kept security in the South China Sea as the organizing principle for Washington's relations with the maritime Southeast Asian states, most notably the Philippines. In April President Biden hosted the first-ever trilateral summit with Japan, the Philippines, and the United States, on the margins of a major agreement to expand the US-Japan alliance that will reverberate in Southeast Asia. In Myanmar, the United States moved cautiously toward the provision of non-lethal aid to resistance forces as they made headway against the military. This aid will be limited, but it could put Washington in competition with China and Russia, both of which provide arms to the junta. Although Southeast Asian leaders continue to worry about US distraction in the face of wars in other regions and the November elections, Washington continued to act as a fulcrum in major multilateral exercises in the region. In Thailand, [Cobra Gold](#) was expanded to include cooperation in space, while the [Balikatan](#) exercises in the Philippines expanded to include new participants, most notably the French Navy.

CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS**[China's New Foreign Policy Moderation—Mixed Regional Implications](#)**

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

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CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

[Taiwan and China—Steady as She Goes](#)

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

As 2024 dawned, Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterated in his New Year Address that Taiwan must unify with China. In her New Year Address, Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen, with the election of her successor only 14 days away, repeated her offer to meet China on the basis of equality, mutual respect, and without preconditions, echoing themes dating back to her first inaugural address in 2016. On Jan. 14, Tsai's chosen successor, Vice President Lai Ching-te, won an unprecedented third successive term for the Democratic Progressive Party, promising to uphold the independence of the Republic of China, but the party lost its majority in the legislature. A month later, two Chinese fishermen operating illegally near Kinmen Island died when their boat capsized as they were pursued by the Taiwan Coast Guard. Five days later, a Chinese Coast Guard vessel boarded and inspected a Taiwanese tour boat near Kinmen. Tensions grew but they did not boil over.

NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

[Mortal Menace, or Mere Mind Games?](#)

BY AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS

UNIVERSITY, UK

Kim Jong Un elaborated his radical new line on South Korea to the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) in January. It sounded just as nasty as when he first expounded it in December, but no more coherent. Though obscure, this is clearly very important. Hence most of this article is devoted to a detailed reading of what Kim said, in a bid to tease out what this means in practice for South Korea's security. While awaiting further specification in a promised Constitutional amendment, our provisional assessment is that this is more bark than bite. Buttressing that view, close analysis of the two Koreas' artillery shelling near the Northern Limit Line (NLL) in early January, and the barbs they also traded, highlights an element of performativity—especially from Pyongyang—that is somewhat reassuring. Despite much fiery rhetoric, and while vigilance and deterrence remain crucial, this does not look like a peninsula on the brink of war.

CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

[New Chapters, Old Dilemmas](#)

BY SEE-WON BYUN, SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY

China-ROK relations reached critical junctures across political, security, and economic fields. China-ROK relations had a bad start in 2024 with discord over regional security priorities. The inaugural US-Japan-ROK Indo-Pacific Dialogue in Washington on Jan. 5, a deputy foreign minister-level initiative emerging from the August 2023 Camp David summit, reignited frictions with Beijing. The resulting tensions constrained anticipation about their own trilateral summit with Tokyo. The shifting China-ROK trade structure and Chinese e-commerce practices emerged as central points of economic debate.

JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

[Sullen Stasis](#)

BY JUNE TEUFEL DREYER, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

There were no high-level visits this reporting period with each side continuing to reiterate its stance on key issues—China's dissatisfaction with Japan's discharge of allegedly radioactive water into the Pacific, disagreements over the sovereignty of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, Tokyo's concern with

nationals detained in China on vague spying charges, resentment over China's ban of marine exports from Japan, and concerns with Chinese cyber hacking. Japanese leaders increased their willingness to acknowledge that China is the principal threat not only to Japan but to the world. Beijing continued to denounce Japan, sometimes as a pawn in US plans to thwart China's rise, sometimes as motivated by a desire to re-create the militant expansionist empire that led to World War II. Japan became increasingly active in international diplomacy and, while declaring fealty to the one-China policy, moved closer to Taiwan. Public opinion in both countries remained hostile toward the other.

JAPAN-KOREA RELATIONS

Business As Planned Amid Domestic Challenges

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

Following major turning points and breakthroughs of 2023, the start of 2024 has been steady, coordinated, and ordinary. In contrast to the highs and lows of the past five years, the rhythm of the relationship between Korea and Japan has settled to a welcome tone of "business as usual," and business as planned. Both Prime Minister Kishida Fumio and President Yoon Suk Yeol faced serious challenges to their leadership with record low approval ratings and the conservative People Power Party's defeat in Korea's parliamentary elections. But for now, Japan-Korea relations are thriving as they follow through on commitments made at the Camp David summit. Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo continued to tick off their laundry list of promised deliverables from that summit. While they might no longer be meeting at the breathtaking pace of a trilateral meeting every 3.5 days, the three partners continued to meet almost bi-weekly at all levels, including the Cabinet level.

CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

"March Madness" in Moscow and Beyond...

BY YU BIN, WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY

The concert hall massacre near Moscow on March 22 was a source of shock and awe for Russia and the world. The incident, which resulted in the deaths of [144 people](#) and [551 wounded](#), was the largest since the [2003 Beslan school siege](#) (where more than 330 hostages died). Its

timing cast a long shadow over major developments in the first few months of 2024, particularly the fifth term of President Vladimir Putin, who won [87.28%](#) of the vote just five days prior. It also made any effort to end the two-year Ukraine war more difficult, if not impossible. As a result, much of China's mediation 2.0 (March 2-12) was in parking mode. The Sino-Russian strategic partnership, too, was tested by two different priorities: Moscow's need for more security coordination on one hand and China's interest in stability in the bilateral, regional, and global domains on the other. Whatever the outcome, the stage was set for more dynamic interactions between the two large powers in the months ahead.

JAPAN – SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

Strategic Dynamism: 50th Anniversary of Relations and New Security Ties

BY KEI KOGA, NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

Japan-Southeast Asia relations marked two milestones in 2023-24. The first was the 50th anniversary of Japan-ASEAN Relations, during which Japan and ASEAN emphasized an equal partnership by adopting the keyword "co-creation" to promote economic prosperity and security stability in Southeast Asia and beyond. The second is strengthening Japan-Philippines bilateral strategic ties, not only bilaterally, but also trilaterally with the United States and quadrilaterally with Australia. Japan continuously engages with other Southeast Asian states and strengthens ties with ASEAN to reinforce ASEAN Centrality and unity, yet a challenge remains: how Japan can design a regional architecture in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific by clarifying the roles and division of labor among those institutions.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors