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<http://thediplotmat.com/2015/12/7-events-of-geopolitical-consequence-to-anticipate-in-asia-in-early-2016/>

## 7 Events of Geopolitical Consequence to Anticipate in Asia in Early 2016

2016 will kick off with a bang. Here's what you need to keep an eye on early in the new year.

By Ankit Panda  
December 31, 2015

2016 is just around the corner and there's a lot to keep an eye on in Asia in the first month of the year. In January 2016, we'll see elections in Taiwan, the formal operational launch of China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the possible resumption of peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the first steps toward renewed comprehensive talks between India and China, and the possible disintegration of a recently concluded controversial deal between the Japanese and South Korean governments on comfort women. Here's your guide to starting off the new year with an eye to some early developments of geopolitical significance in the Asia-Pacific:

**Elections in Taiwan:** Taiwanese citizens will head to the polls on January 16 to vote in their latest general elections. Preliminary opinion polling suggests that a victory for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), led by its presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen, is likely. The ruling Kuomintang party may find its rule at an end in Taiwan. Should Tsai prevail in the elections, Taiwan will see its first female president and possibly some changes to its foreign policy and positioning vis-a-vis the mainland. The Kuomintang government's most recent term has seen a controversial period of rapprochement with the mainland. Though the DPP and Tsai have said

that they will largely avoid rocking the boat with China if they win, Beijing remains wary. In any case, the outcome of Taiwan's election next month will be worth watching early in 2016.

**The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank goes live:** As I recently discussed in greater detail, the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) took a major step toward becoming operational last week, when 17 of its founding members ratified the bank's Articles of Agreement. In January, the inaugural meeting of the bank's Board of Governors will take place, which will also signal the commencement of the bank's operations. The AIIB is significant as an example of China's growing ambitions as a multilateral leader, offering an alternative vision of global governance and development than those of Western-backed institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In 2016, we'll see this new institution take off.

**A major party congress in Vietnam:** In early January, the Vietnamese Communist Party will convene to select a new generation of leadership for the country and the party. Vietnam will elect a new general secretary for the party, a new Politburo, and a new central commission. (See here for background on the domestic dynamics involved.) Vietnam is an increasingly important actor in Southeast Asia and is a claimant in the South China Sea where tensions with China remain high. Hanoi is additionally being courted by the United States and Japan to balance against Beijing's growing assertiveness in the region. The outcome of the party congress may not necessarily mean major changes to the country's foreign policy or direction, but this will be an event to watch early in 2016.

**An uncomfortable deal between Japan and South Korea:** One of the unexpected bits of good news late in 2015 was the announcement of a historic deal between Japan and South Korea on the "comfort women" issue on December 28. The issue has long divided Seoul and Tokyo, two important U.S. allies in Northeast Asia. However, even though the two countries' foreign ministers declared the issue "resolved finally and irreversibly," a number of complications have already come up that suggest implementation of this agreement will not be easy. First, the South Korean survivors of sexual slavery at the hands of the Imperial Japanese Army—the "comfort women" themselves—have rejected the deal. Secondly, Tokyo is reportedly linking the disbursement of funds under the agreement to the dismantling of a statue depicting the plight of former "comfort women" near the Japanese embassy in South Korea. This issue appears far from resolved. Expect the first month of 2016 to be heavily dominated by continuing turbulence over the landmark agreement.

**Comprehensive peace talks between India and Pakistan:** Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's surprise Christmas stopover in Lahore, Pakistan, where he embraced and promenaded with his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif, sent an unmistakable message that the prospect of comprehensive peace talks between India and Pakistan in 2016 is real and carries momentum. Most of 2015 saw the two nuclear-armed rivals call off planned diplomatic talks, but the final weeks of the year have seen a convergence. Following the display of camaraderie between the two prime ministers, New Delhi and Islamabad are planning foreign secretary-level talks in mid-January to get the ball rolling toward a serious resumption of comprehensive peace talks. The outcome of those talks could set the tone for engagement between the two South Asian giants in 2016.

**Peace talks with the Taliban:** Afghanistan and Pakistan have seen a cautious rapprochement in the final weeks of 2015 as well. With Islamabad's imprimatur, peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban could be back on early in 2016. The success or failure of those talks will be indicative of just what to expect in Afghanistan's ongoing struggle against the militants, who have seized more territory than at any time since the U.S. invasion back in 2001.

**Birth of the ASEAN Community.** This one's really an honorable mention of sorts, since there isn't quite an "event" to anticipate, but ASEAN will usher the new year in by formally launching the ASEAN Community, which comprises the ASEAN Economic Community, the ASEAN Political-Security Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. In sum, these initiatives strive to bring more interconnectivity, prosperity, trade, and stability to the ten member states of ASEAN and their 600 million residents. If the ASEAN Community experiment sees early successes, 2016 may be the year we see the emergence of a unified southeast Asian economic bloc—a development that should surely transform how observers think about the economic landscape of the Asia-Pacific.