

Obama seeks to build anti-China coalition at Bali summit

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The three-day Asian summit that began Thursday on the Indonesian island of Bali was dominated by the visit of US President Barack Obama, and his attempts to assemble Asian countries into an anti-China coalition. Obama met with Indian and Filipino leaders, pressed for greater US influence in the South China Sea, and announced closer US ties with Myanmar, a long-time Chinese ally in the region.

This was the last leg of a ten-day Asia-Pacific tour by Obama, with stops in Hawaii and Australia. In Hawaii, Obama promoted plans for a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a US-centered free-trade zone, now expanded to include Canada, Mexico and possibly Japan. China was not invited to join. In Australia, he announced plans for greater US use of Australian military bases and the development of Darwin—a northern Australian city near key shipping routes between the Indian and Pacific oceans—as a major US staging base.

The *China Daily* cited Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhono as opposing US attempts to focus the summit on military issues, including the South China Sea: “ASEAN [the Association of South East Asian Nations] is not in favor of discussing detailed political and security issues at the summit.” Indonesia, on behalf of ASEAN, hosted the three days of meetings that are due to culminate in the convening of the East Asian Summit today.

China insists that rival claims in the South China Sea should be settled bilaterally and has strongly objected to the US intrusion into the regional issue. The Obama administration is seeking to raise the question of the South China Sea at the summit as a means of driving a wedge between China and its South East Asian neighbours.

Obama met with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to push for greater US investment in India’s nuclear industry. In 2005 the US signed a controversial nuclear pact with India, to assist its nuclear program and build up India as

a regional counterweight to China, with whom India fought a border war in 1962.

US nuclear firms have declined to invest in the Indian nuclear industry, largely because they refuse to be held responsible for accidents at their facilities. GE Hitachi Nuclear Energy and Westinghouse Electric oppose provisions in Indian law making them liable for compensation to nuclear accident victims. New Delhi recently limited foreign suppliers’ liability to \$300 million and imposed time constraints on compensation claims; US officials said they are studying the new laws.

The Indo-US nuclear deal has angered Pakistan, a key assistant of US imperialism’s war in Afghanistan, but which is allied with China and locked in bitter, protracted rivalry with India.

India also is embroiled in a dispute with China over India’s oil drilling in the South China Sea, off China’s southern coast. Singh told Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao that this drilling is “purely a commercial activity,” and that disputes would be resolved “according to international law.”

It was the US, however, that led efforts to pressure China over the South China Sea—an oil and gas-rich body of water containing key shipping lanes connecting the Middle East and the Indian Ocean to East Asia and the Pacific. China claims much of the South China Sea as its territorial waters.

Obama met with Filipino President Benigno Aquino III and publicly backed the Philippines in its stand-off with China over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Obama praised US ties with the Philippines: “We have a 60-year alliance that assures that we are looking out for each other when it comes to security.”

On Thursday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that Washington would give the Philippines a

second Coast Guard cutter to bolster its naval strength.

The US is building military and political ties with Vietnam, another country that has come into conflict with China in the South China Sea. The US and Vietnam held joint naval exercises in July, and a US Navy vessel called at Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay naval base in August—for the first time since US troops fled the country in 1975, at the end of the Vietnam War.

This is part of a broader offensive to deepen US influence in mainland Southeast Asia, notably with a US campaign to woo the military junta in Myanmar (also known as Burma) away from Chinese influence, under a hypocritical cover of promoting “democratic rights.”

This year the junta allowed the National League for Democracy of official opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to run in parliamentary by-elections and released a number of political prisoners. It also cancelled a high-profile Chinese dam project in a move seen as a humiliating blow to Beijing.

Obama phoned Suu Kyi and discussed US-Myanmar ties. He said he saw “flickers of progress” in Myanmar, adding: “If Burma fails to move down the path of reform, it will continue to face sanctions and isolation. But if it seizes this moment, then reconciliation can prevail.”

It was announced that Clinton would visit Myanmar on December 1—the first visit to the country by a US Secretary of State since before the 1962 military coup.

The intensity of the US rivalry with China, despite their close economic interdependence, stems from the impact of the worsening global crisis in both countries. The US is the largest single market for China's export-driven economy; China has grown industrially on the basis of exporting cheap goods to cash-strapped American workers and has loaned trillions of dollars to the US. The outbreak of the 2008 financial crisis, however, reflecting the US's broader economic decline, signalled a fundamental breakdown of these relations.

Washington's response, as Obama's trip has made clear, is to rely on its military superiority to try to whip China into line—threatening it with an alliance of countries stretching all along China's southern border, and including Taiwan and Japan to the east. Obama declared on Thursday: “The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay. ... Reductions in US defense spending will not—I repeat, will not—come at the expense of the Asia Pacific.”

The lie that the US is intervening in Asia to protect “democracy” is exposed not only by the criminality of its

recent imperialist wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, but its long history as the pre-eminent imperialist power and defender of social reaction in Asia itself.

After World War II, Washington backed the South Korean military dictatorship, fighting the Korean War as part of a struggle to halt and contain the 1949 Chinese Revolution against US-backed dictator Chiang Kai Shek. It also backed France and, initially, the Netherlands in colonial wars in Indochina and Indonesia. It then waged its own brutal war in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s and supported Indonesian dictator Suharto's 1965 slaughter of over a half-million Indonesian Communist Party supporters.

The immense resources that have arisen based on the exploitation of cheap Asian labor and the integration of Asia into the world capitalist economy are now the targets of a US drive not for democracy, but for its own imperialist hegemony. As US Pacific Command leader Admiral Robert Willard noted, the \$1.2 trillion in US commerce that passes through the South China Sea gives Washington “a vital interest in the region, a national interest to the United States, [in] an area that carries an immense amount of commerce.”

The US escalation of military tensions with China is utterly reckless and provocative, exacerbating regional tensions throughout Asia—the Indo-Pakistani conflict, the numerous border disputes within Southeast Asia, and rivalries over strategic shipping lanes. At each step, it risks escalating these local conflicts into a confrontation between the US and China that threatens to set all of Asia and the world aflame.



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