

Obama's aggressive turn to Asia

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Obama's tour through Asia last week marked a turning point in geopolitics. On every front—diplomatic, economic and strategic—the US president set course for a confrontation with China as he sought to reassert untrammelled American dominance in the fastest growing region of the globe.

At the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Honolulu, Obama launched the Trans Pacific Partnership—a pact designed to ensure regional trade is conducted on Washington's terms. In Canberra, he announced the basing of US Marines in northern Australia, along with greater use of Australian air and naval bases—the first American military expansion into Asia since the end of the Vietnam War. At the East Asia Summit in Bali, despite China's opposition, Obama marshalled the support of South East Asian countries to force a discussion on the South China Sea—territorially-disputed waters of vital strategic and economic interest to China.

In his keynote speech to the Australian parliament, Obama made explicit his foreign policy shift to Asia. After a decade of fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, he explained, “the United States is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region.” Obama announced he had made “a deliberate and strategic decision—as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future.”

The turn to Asia is not a recent policy decision by Obama but stems from profound shifts in the global economy that were reflected in deep dissatisfaction in American ruling circles with the strategic orientation of the George W. Bush administration. Under the guise of a “war on terror,” Bush had plunged the US into two disastrous wars that had sapped the American military, undermined US diplomacy and generated immense opposition at home.

Bipartisan backing for the wars reflected broad support in Washington for the underlying strategy—to secure US hegemony in the Middle East and Central Asia over the world's largest energy reserves so as to be able to hold Washington's Asian and European rivals to ransom. What had been touted as easy victories, however, turned into quagmires. Criticism mounted, especially of Bush's failure to stem China's growing influence in Asia.

China's economic expansion over the past decade has been bound up with a major restructuring of manufacturing processes following the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. Increasingly the East Asian and South East Asian economies became integrated into supply chains centred on production in China. Between 2000 and 2010, annual Chinese trade with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) jumped from \$39.4 billion to \$292.8 billion. These economic processes found their reflection in regional free trade deals and in China's growing clout in regional forums such as ASEAN, ASEAN+3 and the East Asian Summit—gatherings either to which the US did not belong or which it did not attend.

The installation of Obama as president was backed by powerful sections of the American foreign policy establishment as the means of extricating the US from Iraq and Afghanistan and mounting an aggressive drive into the economically-dynamic Asian Pacific region. Amid the 2008-09 global financial crisis, Obama initially had to placate China—with top US officials travelling to Beijing to urge “America's banker” to buy more US bonds.

That phase quickly passed, however. The Obama administration signed ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation—something Bush refused to countenance—and gained admittance to the ASEAN-based forums. In July 2009, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared at the ASEAN summit that the US was “back in South East

Asia.” At an ASEAN gathering a year later, she asserted that the US had a “national interest” in the regional disputes in the South China Sea, prompting China’s foreign minister Yang Jiechi to declare her remarks to be “virtually an attack on China.” US diplomatic efforts have been directed not just toward established allies, but to prising countries like Burma from China’s sphere of influence.

As in the Middle East, the Obama administration’s overwhelming focus in Asia has been on strengthening the US military posture. Over the past two years, it has upgraded strategic and military ties throughout the region, particularly with Japan, India and Australia. The US has provided warships to the Philippines, held unprecedented joint exercises with Vietnam, based a new generation of littoral combat ships in Singapore, announced a huge new weapons sale to Taiwan and lifted the ban on US collaboration with Indonesia’s notorious Kopassus special forces. Last year, the Obama administration backed Japan in its tense standoff with China over the arrest of a Chinese fishing boat captain in disputed waters, provocatively declaring that the US would be obliged under treaty arrangements to support Japan in any conflict.

The Pentagon’s strategy remains centred on controlling energy supplies. However, rather than seeking to bring the Middle East completely under its political sway, the US is counting on its military muscle to dominate China’s vital shipping routes for energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa through key choke points—above all the Malacca Strait—to the South China Sea. These plans recall the way in which the US exploited its naval power to impose an oil blockade on Japan in 1941, triggering a chain of events that led to the Pacific War.

The intensity of the US drive into Asia is underscored by two significant political casualties. For all Obama’s talks of “democracy,” his administration has brooked no opposition, even from close US allies. The White House had a hand in the resignation of Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama in June 2010 and one month later in the Labor Party coup that ousted Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Hatoyama’s “crime” was to oppose the retention of a key US base on Okinawa. Rudd’s was to offer to facilitate an easing of tensions between the US and China. Both were replaced by staunchly pro-US figures.

The driving force behind this dangerous confrontation is the relative economic decline of US imperialism and the rise of China. The US is recklessly wielding its military power to compensate for its economic weakness as it seeks to retain global dominance. Despite the staggering indices of its economic growth, China is wracked by economic and social contradictions—above all, the explosive development of the Chinese working class. Beijing can no more afford to make concessions to Washington, than the US can cede an Asian sphere of influence to China. These tensions have been magnified by the worsening global economic crisis, as each power seeks to shore up its position at the other’s expense.

Some astute bourgeois commentators are already drawing the historical parallels. In an article last Friday, *Financial Times* editor Lionel Barber explained: “Throughout the ages, the failure to accommodate rising powers—or rather the failure of rising powers to accommodate the existing state system—had been the source of conflict.” After pointing to the world wars sparked by the rise of Germany and Japan, he warned of the “risks of mutual miscalculation” by the US and China. Barber appealed for a modern day Klemens von Metternich to adjust relations between the Pacific powers, as the Austrian prince did in Europe following the Napoleonic wars.

The nineteenth century, however, was a different historic period. The epoch of imperialism that erupted in August 1914 has been marked by two world wars and now the threat of an even more devastating catastrophe. The only means for averting war is to abolish its root cause—the profit system and the division of the world into rival capitalist nation states. The International Committee of the Fourth International is the only political force that seeks to unify, educate and mobilise the international working class for that historic task.

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