

Amid government shutdown, Obama cancels trip to Malaysia, Philippines

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The White House announced Wednesday that President Obama had cancelled his planned stops in Malaysia and the Philippines, part of his travel in Southeast Asia scheduled for next week, because of the US government shutdown. Secretary of State John Kerry will travel to both Kuala Lumpur and Manila in Obama's stead.

Obama is still scheduled to attend the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Bali, and the ASEAN-US and East Asia Summit in Brunei. However, the White House has not confirmed his travel arrangements since the shutdown. There is speculation in US foreign policy circles, as well as in the Asia-Pacific media, that Obama may cancel his trip entirely.

National Security Council spokesperson Caitlin Hayden told the press on Wednesday there were "no updates" on Obama's attendance at the APEC and EAS summits. "We will continue to evaluate those trips based on how events develop throughout the course of the week. For the sake of our national security and economic prosperity, we urge Congress to reopen the government."

The Obama trip to Southeast Asia has been long planned and its every detail carefully scripted. The coordinated agenda of Obama, Kerry and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel was designed to push forward the drive of US imperialism in the Asia-Pacific region, carrying out the next steps in implementing a so-called pivot to Asia.

These steps include deepening military ties with Japan, which has, under the right-wing administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, been pushing to scrap the so-called pacifist clause of the Japanese constitution; driving toward the ratification of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, a trade deal designed to compel China to enter the global market on

terms dictated by US imperialism; and making the final preparations for the basing of US forces in the Philippines.

Obama's cancellation does not change the aggressive agenda of US imperialism an iota. It does, however, present Washington with a crisis of credibility.

Washington's war drive in East and Southeast Asia has provided fertile ground for the rapid growth of nationalism and militarism. US allies have taken the opportunity to ratchet up tensions with China, with tacit US approval, both to press their strategic interests and divert explosive class tensions at home being fuelled by the global economic crisis.

The increasingly provocative moves against China by the regimes of Abe in Tokyo, Park Geun-hye in Seoul, and Benigno Aquino in Manila, rest upon their confidence in the presence of US imperialism to back them against China.

After seeing Washington halt its drive to war against Syria in the face of massive popular opposition, various US allies in the Asia-Pacific are seeking assurances that in taking a more aggressive stance toward China, they can still rely on US support.

Obama's inability to carry out his long-planned visits to Malaysia and the Philippines has thrown these concerns into sharp relief.

Carlisle Thayer, a defense analyst specializing in the Southeast Asian region, was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* as saying: "If the president does make it to the APEC and East Asia summit meetings, people will still know he's damaged goods in that he'll be severely distracted. If he doesn't show up, well, the implications are terrific. The current situation in the United States has created a disaster for US foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region. And you can be sure that China will be there, making hay."

While Obama has cancelled two legs of his trip, Chinese President Xi Jinping is proceeding with his visit. He is currently in Indonesia, where he met with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and is expected to become the first foreign leader to address the country's parliament. The two leaders signed a \$16 billion currency swap deal that will assist in propping up the rupiah. Xi will attend the APEC summit in Bali and visit Malaysia.

Obama's decision to cancel is blow to Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, who stood to gain a great deal from Obama's visit. Najib retained his position as prime minister in a fiercely contested election earlier in the year. He lost the popular vote, but managed to hold onto office in a ballot marked by gerrymandering and widespread allegations of cheating.

Obama's meeting with Najib would have clearly demonstrated Washington's support for the prime minister.

Manila had been looking for Obama, during his visit, to make an explicit statement that the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) automatically compelled US military intervention in defense of the Philippines in the event of a conflict with China. The Aquino government has forged closer military ties with the US and has been escalating its territorial dispute with Beijing in the South China Sea.

Both Najib and Philippine President Aquino expressed their "understanding" at Obama's "inability to attend," but will be looking for reassurances that the US remains committed to the region. Kerry and Obama—if he does not cancel his trip entirely—will be working not only to establish the credibility of Washington's presence in the region, but to reinforce it.



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