

Obama cancels entire Asia trip as government shutdown continues

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Late Thursday evening, the White House issued a press release stating that, due to the continuing US government shutdown, President Barack Obama was canceling his planned trip to Asia. He had been scheduled to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Bali, and the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)-US and East Asia Summit in Brunei.

The trip had been planned for months, with stops throughout the region by Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel. On October 1, White House spokesperson Jay Carney responded to a question about the Asia trip by saying that there were no changes to Obama's travels. On October 2, the White House announced that Obama's post-summit stops in Kuala Lumpur and Manila were being called off. On October 3, they cancelled the entire trip.

The cancellation of Obama's visit is a serious setback to the credibility of Washington's so-called "pivot" to Asia—its economic, political, and military drive to assemble a coalition of right-wing regimes in the region to isolate and encircle China. It is also a blow to these regimes—particularly Tokyo, Seoul, and Manila—which rely upon US imperialists' escalating intervention to support their increasingly militaristic policies aimed at China.

The cancellation of Obama's trip does not signify any retreat from Washington's aggressive policy in the region. Kerry will travel to Bali, Brunei, Kuala Lumpur and Manila in Obama's stead and reassure various regimes in the region that political turmoil in the United States will not prevent Washington from supporting its allies against China.

The ruling classes in East and Southeast Asia fear rising opposition in Asia's large industrial proletariat.

To distract attention from glaring social inequality, they have sought to encourage the most noxious forms of chauvinism and militarism. Washington has in particular encouraged its allies to adopt aggressive policies in the East and South China Seas or on North Korea, relying on Washington's armed might to shield them from potential retaliation from China.

The news of Obama's cancellation was therefore met with concern, disappointment and barely concealed anger.

An editorial in the Hong Kong based *South China Morning Post* stated, "America's troubles give a sense to outsiders that its political system is flawed, and standing up regional leaders suggests its foreign policy is broken. Obama's much-vaunted pivot to Asia is said to be about counterbalancing China's rising might. Events this week seem to show China stealing a march."

Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs Marty Natalegawa responded to Obama's absence in Bali, with an attempt at reassurance: "Of course it would be wonderful to have the president of the United States participate ... But at the same time, the nature of U.S. engagement in the region is a continuous, not event-based, fact."

The Sultan of Brunei suffered a public relations blow, as he had constructed an entire new villa in a palace for Obama's stay. His government expressed "disappointment ... for a small country to host the president of the United States is a source of excitement, particularly someone of Obama's celebrity."

Particularly stung by Obama's cancellation was the administration of Philippine President Benigno Aquino, who has played a leading role in escalating tensions with China. Under Aquino, Manila has filed a legal case at the UN, protesting China's claims to the South

China Sea. Manila has stationed troops on the disputed Spratly islands and has had several armed stand-offs with Chinese naval forces in the South China Sea.

Manila's small, dilapidated armed forces are dwarfed by those of Beijing. Aquino's entire strategy depends on securing US backing.

Washington is in ongoing negotiations with the Aquino administration to base US troops in the Philippines. An agreement to that effect was slated for signing during Obama's visit. According to Reuters, the deal included a \$1.6billion development at the former Subic Bay Naval base and the development of a military port in Oyster Bay on the island of Palawan, 60 miles from the disputed South China Sea.

Upon news of Obama's cancellation, the Philippine team called off the final round of basing negotiations, stating that, "the deal needs more work." Philippine Assistant Foreign Secretary Carlos Sorreta said that, "we believe our common interest will survive this current issue [i.e. the shutdown] in the United States."

The partisan wrangling in Washington over the US government shutdown also raises fears that the US government may fail to negotiate a deal to lift the debt ceiling, which could lead to a default on the US government's debt. This would have a severe impact in Asia, where many governments have loaned Washington money.

Washington has pushed hard for the completion and ratification of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal. Several heads of state, particularly Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, have negotiated to join the TPP despite its unpopularity at home. There is now widespread concern that Obama will embarrass them, if he cannot push the TPP through the US Congress.

Beijing has seized upon the opportunity afforded it by Obama's cancellation. Both Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang are traveling throughout the region and meeting with various heads of state. On Thursday, Xi became the first foreign leader to address the Indonesian parliament.

He announced the creation of US\$50 billion Chinese infrastructure development bank. The bank is clearly intended to function as a rival to the Tokyo-led Asian Development Bank and Washington's World Bank.

ASEAN is poised to become China's second-largest trading partner, second to the European Union (EU). Xi stated that he expected China-ASEAN trade to grow to

US\$1 trillion by 2020, calling for the creation of a "Maritime Silk Road."

Meeting with Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak on Friday, Xi concluded an agreement for a comprehensive strategic partnership, including increased trade and bilateral military and strategic cooperation.

Despite the setback entailed by Obama's cancellation, Washington continues to ratchet up pressure on China. Retired U.S. Adm. Dennis Blair, the former head of the U.S. Pacific Command, and former US Defense Undersecretary Walter Slocombe, both in Manila for the final round of basing negotiations, addressed the Philippine press on Friday.

Addressing questions over Obama's absence, Blair stated, "The United States has been here in this region in a major economic, diplomatic, military and influential way ever since 1944 and that situation has not changed."

He provocatively added that the Philippine military needed to "raise their game" as they were not yet prepared to for the "new mission" of "external defense."

Slocombe added, "[T]here is a real danger of an incident blowing up and becoming a source of a much greater conflict." They concluded, "frankly [the Philippine military] has to organize itself in a more effective manner for this new set of responsibilities which it now faces." This would involve expanding "relations with the US required to handling complex maritime issues."



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