

Biden in South Korea reaffirms “absolute” US commitment to “pivot to Asia”

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In South Korea yesterday, on the final leg of his Asian trip, US Vice President Joe Biden emphatically declared the Obama administration’s commitment to its “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia. Over the past four years, the US has aggressively sought to undermine China’s influence through the consolidation of diplomatic ties and military alliances in Asia, the forging of an exclusive US-centred trade bloc through the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) and a military build-up throughout the region.

The consequences of the “pivot” were evident last week when China reacted by declaring an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, challenging Japan’s control over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. In this volatile situation, the US responded by flying B-52 bombers into the zone and reaffirming its support for Japan in the event of a war with China over the islands.

Speaking at Yonsei University in Seoul yesterday, Biden reaffirmed what he declared in Beijing several years ago: “America is a Pacific power, a resident Pacific power, and we are going nowhere—nowhere.” The statement was designed to quash questioning of the “pivot” in the wake of President Obama’s no-show at recent key Asian summits during the government shutdown in Washington.

Biden emphasised: “President Obama is absolutely committed to rebalance. And to make the point again, no one should underestimate or question our staying power.” To underscore the point and its militarist meaning, he referred to the 60 years since the end of the Korean War—the devastating US-led conflict against North Korean and Chinese forces to shore up the US-installed autocrat Syngman Rhee in South Korea at the cost of millions of lives.

Biden stressed that he had been “very direct” with

Chinese leaders in discussions over the ADIZ in Beijing this week. “I was absolutely clear on behalf of my president: We do not recognise the zone,” he declared. “It will have no effect on American operations. None. Zero. I’ve also made it clear that we expect China not to take action that increases tensions at the risk of escalation. And I was crystal-clear about our commitment to our allies, Korea and Japan.”

While in Seoul, Biden effectively gave the green light for South Korea to extend its own air defence identification zone to include a disputed submerged rock, administered by Seoul, but also claimed by China. Angered by the outcrop’s inclusion in the Chinese ADIZ, South Korea is preparing a counter-move that will further heighten tensions. South Korean President Park Geun-hye reportedly briefed Biden on the planned air zone extension, which is being discussed at the top levels of the South Korean military.

Biden used his discussions with Park to press the South Korean government to collaborate more closely with Japan. Since her installation as president in February, Park has pursued closer relations with China and refused to meet with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, citing his refusal to acknowledge aspects of Japan’s brutal colonial rule over Korea up to 1945. Park is the daughter of former South Korean dictator Park Chung Hee and head of the right-wing Saenuri Party. Like her counterparts in Beijing and Tokyo, she is stoking up Korean nationalism to divert acute social tensions at home.

The tense relations between Japan and South Korea have become an obstacle to the US military plans in Asia. Both countries are strategic American allies that host key US military bases in North East Asia that would be vital in any conflict with China. The Pentagon maintains 38,000 troops in South Korea and,

six decades after the end of the Korean War, retains effective operational control over the South Korean military. However, an intelligence-sharing agreement between South Korea and Japan, which the US regards as vital to its military build-up in Asia, failed to materialise last year amid nationalist opposition in Seoul.

In his discussion with Park, Biden urged her to mend relations with Tokyo. Park reportedly insisted that she expected “sincere action” from Japan to improve bilateral ties, but said closer collaboration between the three countries was needed. In his speech at Yonsei University, Biden declared: “The entire region will be more stable and more secure if the leading democracies—Japan, South Korea and the United States—are able to improve their relations and cooperation with one another.”

“Democracy” and “human rights” is the banner under which the US has repeatedly waged wars of aggression, including in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Biden’s invocation of “democracy” takes places as basic democratic rights are under attack in South Korea, Japan and the US. Park and her government are engaged in a Cold War-style witch-hunt against the opposition United Progressive Party. (See: “South Korean government demands dissolution of opposition party”). The Japanese government is pushing through new secrecy legislation against widespread opposition that would extend the designation of state secrets and impose harsh sentences on whistleblowers. (See: “Japan’s new state secrecy law”). As for the US, revelations continue to emerge of the massive illegal NSA spying operation on millions of people in the US and throughout the globe.

The alliance of Asian “democracies” is the ideological cover for Washington’s accelerating preparations for war against China. The Pentagon is reinforcing and restructuring its forces and bases throughout the Indo-Pacific, including in South Korea, Japan, Guam, Australia and the Philippines. US diplomatic interventions over the past four years have greatly raised tensions throughout the region, encouraging allies such as Japan and the Philippines to take more aggressive stances toward China. To existing flashpoints such as the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Straits, dangerous new ones have been added—territorial disputes in the East China and South

China seas.

Last week’s flare-up of tensions over China’s air defence zone raises the real danger that an accident or miscalculation could lead to conflict. The latest war scare follows a succession of others, including on the Korean peninsula. In March and April this year, the US responded to North Korea’s empty posturing and sabre-rattling by dramatically raising the threat of war. Acting on a pre-arranged “playbook,” the Pentagon dispatched nuclear-capable B-52 bombers followed by B-2 bombers and advanced F-22 Raptor fighters to South Korea to demonstrate its ability to conduct nuclear strikes throughout the region at will.

In Seoul, Biden reaffirmed: “Let there be no doubt—the United States of America is committed to do what it takes to defend our allies and ourselves against North Korean aggression, period.” Today, he will underscore the US willingness to wage war against North Korea by visiting the demilitarised zone between South and North Korea, before flying back to Washington.



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