Obama administration uses bilateral talks to ramp up pressure on China

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27 June 2015

The Obama administration used high-level bilateral talks with Chinese officials in Washington this week to threaten Beijing over its territorial claims in the South China Sea and unsubstantiated allegations of cyber-hacking, and to demand that the major US corporations be given unfettered access to regulated sections of the Chinese economy.

The annual two-day "US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue" concluded on Wednesday. The talks were attended by US Vice-President Joseph Biden, Secretary of State John Kerry and Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew, along with Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi, and Vice Premier Wang Yang. The talks precede the highly anticipated US visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping in September.

The tone of the talks was set by hysterical reports in the US press regarding alleged hacking of the data of federal employees. An article in CNN on Monday claimed that FBI Director James Comey told closed Senate committee hearings that the number of government employees affected by the hack could total 18 million, a figure some four times higher than when the allegations were first publicly aired at the beginning of June.

The CNN article, which was timed to coincide with the start of the talks, included no evidence for its claims and was based solely on the word of unnamed "US officials." It stated that the number of affected employees was "likely to rise" and uncritically repeated the allegation that the Chinese government was "believed" to be behind the cyber attack.

In his opening remarks to the talks, Lew declared, "We remain deeply concerned about government-sponsored cyber theft from companies and commercial sectors," and warned that governments have "responsibilities to abide by certain standards in cyberspace."

As if to round off the provocation over "cyber-security," James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, declared Thursday that he believed China was responsible for the hack—the first time the Obama administration has explicitly levelled the accusation against Beijing.

The fear-mongering over alleged Chinese hacking is utterly hypocritical. In 2013, National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed that the US spy agency had hacked hundreds of civilian targets in mainland China and Hong Kong dating back to 2009. In 2014, documents leaked by Snowden confirmed that the NSA had conducted a campaign of industrial espionage against the Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei since 2007.

In his opening remarks to the talks, Vice-President Biden reaffirmed the Obama administration's commitment to the "pivot to Asia," a massive military build-up in the Asia-Pacific directed against China.

"We are a Pacific nation," Biden declared. "What happens anywhere in the Pacific affects the United States … more than any other portion of the world. And now we are a Pacific power, and we're going to continue to remain a Pacific power. To respond to the changing world, the administration has set in motion an institutionalized rebalance policy of the Asian Pacific region, not to contain but to expand all of our opportunities."

In recent months, the so-called "rebalance policy" has brought the Asia-Pacific to the brink of war. The US and its regional allies, such as Japan, Australia and the Philippines, are issuing ever-more bellicose statements against China over longstanding disputes in the South China Sea and carrying out provocations that threaten to trigger open conflict.

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Since the beginning of the year, US spy planes have carried out provocative flights near disputed territory in the South China Sea. In May, it was revealed that Washington, or possibly Australia, would deploy military aircraft and warships within the 12-mile exclusive zone surrounding Chinese occupied islands and reefs.

Under these conditions, the White House statement on President Obama's closed door talk with Chinese representatives declared matter-of-factly that the president "raised ongoing US concerns about China's cyber and maritime behavior, and he urged China to take concrete steps to lower tensions."

A key component of Washington's preparations for war against China has been its support for the revival of militarism in Japan, with the Abe government seeking to remove the post-war constraints of that country's pacifist constitution. The Obama administration is also backing the Philippines pursuing an international legal case challenging Chinese assertions of sovereignty in the South China Sea. Philippines' President Benigno Aquino has repeatedly likened China to Nazi Germany and offered the US military bases in the country.

Events during the week demonstrated that the US and its regional allies are intent on heightening tensions in the South China Sea. On Tuesday and Wednesday, a Japanese surveillance plane conducted joint drills with the Philippine military and flew a mission in the vicinity of disputed areas in the South China Sea.

The US has directly encouraged such provocative actions. In January, Admiral Robert Thomas, commander of the US Seventh Fleet, told Reuters that the US would welcome an expansion of Japanese surveillance of China in the South China Sea. Thomas stated: "I think allies, partners and friends in the region will look to the Japanese more and more as a stabilizing function... In the South China Sea, frankly, the Chinese fishing fleet, the Chinese coast guard and the (navy) overmatch their neighbors."

At the same time, thousands of US troops have arrived in Australia for the Talisman Sabre war games. Involving over 30,000 troops from the two countries, along with representatives of the New Zealand and Japanese militaries, the exercise is a rehearsal for conflict with China.

Along with the US-led military campaign against China, Washington is ramping up pressure on China on the economic front. On Wednesday, the US Senate approved a "fast track" bill giving the president the ability to push through trade legislation. The move is aimed at ensuring the speedy passage of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the anti-China pact which is aimed at bringing a host of countries into a trade framework dictated by Washington. On Wednesday, Obama declared, "We should make sure that the United States, and not countries like China, write the rules of our global economy."

On Wednesday, Lew said that he would continue to pressure Beijing to cease currency interventions and claimed to have received an undertaking that the Chinese regime would do so only in "disorderly" market conditions.

Both China and the US affirmed commitment to a bilateral investment treaty—a proposal that has been stalled for seven years. Washington is pressuring Beijing to open up regulated sections of the Chinese economy such as finance and submit to far more comprehensive intellectual property provisions, which will operate to enshrine the dominance of major US corporations.

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