

War clouds overhang Obama's Asian trip

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What is likely to be US President Obama's final trip to Asia, which began today, takes place amid acute geopolitical tensions, especially between the United States and China, for which his "pivot to Asia" aimed at maintaining American hegemony bears direct responsibility. Both forums—the G20 in Hangzhou, China and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summits in Vientiane, Laos—will be overshadowed by the worsening global economic breakdown and the growing danger of war.

The White House has already flagged that Obama intends to use the international gatherings to make "a forceful case" for ratification of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) which is the economic spearhead of US efforts to subordinate China to American interests. The TPP agreed last year between 12 Asia Pacific nations is a comprehensive trade and investment pact to ensure, as Obama has stated, that the US, not China, writes the economic rules of the twenty-first century.

Speaking prior to Obama's trip, deputy national security advisor Ben Rhodes declared: "The TPP is a litmus test for US leadership." If it is not ratified by Congress, the US "would be ceding the [Asia Pacific] region to countries like China, who do not set the same types of high standards for trade agreements."

Both US presidential candidates—Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump—have publicly expressed their opposition to the TPP on the basis of economic nationalist claims that it would destroy American jobs. With strong opposition in Congress, Obama is desperate to find political levers to push ratification through prior to the end of his term.

The TPP, however, is far more than an economic deal. The Obama administration has regarded it as a vital component of the "pivot"—a diplomatic offensive and military build-up throughout Asia against China. US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter last year openly drew the connection between the TPP and the

Pentagon's war plans, declaring that the deal was "as important to me as another aircraft carrier."

Failure to ratify the agreement would be a blow to American efforts to reassert its dominance in Asia and undermine US economic and military ties throughout the region. Speaking in Washington last month, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong urged the US to "stay engaged and maintain its indispensable role in the Asia Pacific." He warned that ratification was a "test for your credibility and seriousness of purpose."

For Obama to use the G20 to push the TPP will only exacerbate tensions with the host country, China, which is effectively excluded from the agreement and thus any discussions surrounding it. During the summit, Obama will meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping in a bid to extract concessions on a range of issues. US Treasury Secretary Jack Lew flagged American demands for cutbacks to excess capacity, particularly in steel, as one of the items on Obama's agenda in talks with Xi.

Amid a deepening global slump and rising trade war tensions, the TPP is not the only agreement that is in doubt. The US-European equivalent—the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)—is under a cloud after Germany's economy minister Sigmar Gabriel declared that negotiations had effectively failed. A bitter dispute has now erupted after Lew accused the EU on Wednesday of "reaching into the US tax base" after it ordered the American mega-corporation Apple to pay \$13 billion in back taxes.

Also in the background to the Xi-Obama talks are the maritime disputes in the South China Sea between China and its South East Asian neighbours. Over the past five years, the US had deliberately exacerbated these disputes including by backing and assisting the Philippines to mount a legal challenge China in the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague. The PAC's politically-driven ruling in July negating all of China's claims has set the stage for the US to further

exploit the issue to isolate Beijing and justify the American military build-up around the South China Sea and the region.

The Hague ruling will likely be a focus of discussion at the ASEAN summits in Laos where Obama next week will become the first US president to visit the country. As is the case throughout the region, Washington has engaged in strenuous diplomatic efforts to press Laos, which has had longstanding ties with China, to tilt its foreign policy more towards the US. A change of government in Vientiane in April has seen an apparent shift away from Beijing—as indicated by the stalling of a major \$7 billion rail project—and towards Vietnam, which has moved closer to the US over the past two years in particular.

Since taking office as Philippine president in July, the fascistic Rodrigo Duterte has attempted to steer a less confrontational course with China than his predecessor Benigno Aquino, raising concerns in Washington as a result. While he has indicated his support for the military basing agreement with the US reached under Aquino, Duterte has suggested that a negotiated solution to territorial disputes with China could be possible.

Obama is due to meet with Duterte in Vientiane. In his comments this week, White House deputy national security advisor Rhodes indicated that Obama intends to raise the issue of “human rights” during the talks. Duterte is notorious for unleashing a wave of extrajudicial killings of alleged drug dealers by police and vigilantes that has resulted in more than 1,800 deaths. The Obama administration, which has promised funds for this anti-drug campaign, intends to use the issue as a threat. If Duterte does not fall into line on the South China Sea, he will confront an increasingly strident, and utterly hypocritical, “human rights” campaign against him.

While Duterte said last week that he does not intend to raise the South China Sea at the ASEAN summits, Philippine Foreign Secretary Perfecto Yasay signalled a harder line against Beijing on Tuesday. “When we start formal negotiations or bilateral engagements with China, we will have to do it within the context of the arbitral decision [in The Hague]. There are no buts or ifs insofar as our policy on this matter is concerned,” he said. The comments put Manila on a collision course with Beijing which has refused to recognise the court or

its ruling.

A comment this week in China’s state-owned *Global Times*, which usually adopts a hawkish stance, suggested that the meeting of the Chinese and American presidents in Hangzhou was “a crucial opportunity to bring bilateral relations back on a steady footing.” What is far more likely is that the Obama’s trip to Asia will only heighten tensions between the two countries including in dangerous flashpoints for conflict such as the South China Sea.



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