

US “pivot to Asia” in disarray

Peter Symonds
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With the US presidential campaign entering its final days, there is mounting commentary in the American and international media arguing that the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” aimed at containing and subordinating China, is failing. Far from making any retreat from the region, Washington’s response will be to escalate its diplomatic intrigues and provocative military build-up in the Asia Pacific.

The abrupt turn towards China by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, exemplified by his state visit to Beijing last week, is undoubtedly a blow to US strategy in Asia. *Financial Times* foreign affairs columnist Gideon Rachman highlighted Duterte’s announcement in Beijing of a “separation” from the United States and a new special relationship with China, characterising the shift as “a significant strategic reverse.”

Since assuming office in June, Duterte has lashed out at President Obama as “the son of a whore,” called for the removal of US special forces from the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, ended joint US-Philippine exercises in the South China Sea, and proposed a review of the country’s military basing agreement with the US. His decision to play down the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in favour of Manila and against Beijing’s territorial claims has disrupted US plans to exploit the decision to ramp up pressure on China in the South China Sea.

Rachman noted that the US was facing other reversals, with Thailand, an American ally, turning to China to purchase submarines, and Malaysia turning towards Beijing for support as Prime Minister Najib Razak attempts to fend off corruption allegations pushed in the West.

Writing in Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian* yesterday, foreign editor Greg Sheridan claimed that “Duterte’s dramatic pivot to China is the most serious setback to

the US’s position in Southeast Asia since the fall of Saigon.” He declared that the shift gravely weakened the US alliance system in Asia, and he branded Obama’s foreign policy “a near total failure,” saying it had allowed China, Russia and Iran to “dangerously extend” their spheres of influence.

The Obama administration’s “pivot” is a comprehensive diplomatic, economic and military strategy aimed at ensuring American supremacy in Asia. US allies and partners throughout the region, however, have increasingly questioned Washington’s commitment to Asia, not least because its central economic initiative—the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)—is now in doubt in the face of opposition from the two US presidential contenders, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, and legislators from both the Republican and Democratic parties.

The centrality of the TPP to the “pivot” was underscored last year by US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter, who drew the connection between the economic pact and the Pentagon’s war planning, declaring that the deal was “as important to me as another aircraft carrier.” In August, Singapore’s prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, urged the US to stay engaged in Asia and warned that the TPP’s ratification was “a test for your credibility and seriousness of purpose.”

Concerns among the ruling elites in the Asia Pacific have only been compounded by the mounting signs of a profound political crisis in the United States, exemplified by the tawdry and debased spectacle of the US presidential election, and the lack of clarity surrounding the foreign policy of the next administration. As secretary of state, Clinton was the chief architect of the “pivot” and the proponent of a more militarist strategy against China. Among her speeches to Wall Street released by WikiLeaks was one in 2013 in which she declared: “We’re going to ring China with missile defence. We’re going to put more

of our fleet in the area.”

Trump’s policy towards Asia is far from clear, but his “Make America Great” sloganeering suggests an even more aggressive stance towards China. Moreover, it is one in which Washington would insist that allies such as Japan and South Korea bear a heavier burden.

The uncertainties generated by the US election along with heightened geo-political tensions and a worsening global economic outlook are encouraging the ruling classes of the Asia Pacific to hedge their bets. The two central pillars of the US “pivot”—Japan and Australia—are both pursuing policies that are at odds with the US.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has just announced plans for settling Japan’s post-World War II dispute with Russia over the Kurile Islands in a bid to forge ties with a country increasingly branded in Washington as an “outlaw state.” Despite insistent pressure from the US, the Australian government has not agreed to mount a “freedom of navigation” operation to challenge Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea, reflecting an ongoing debate within the Australian ruling elite over the risks of confronting the country’s largest trading partner.

Washington’s foreign policy disarray in Asia flows from the insanity of its underlying aim—the impossible task of achieving global hegemony. Unable to dictate to the world economically, as demonstrated by the crisis surrounding the TPP, US imperialism is compelled to resort to increasingly reckless military provocations and interventions that threaten to plunge the globe into a conflict between nuclear-armed powers.

Even as Duterte was in China last week, the US navy sent a guided-missile destroyer to carry out a fourth “freedom of navigation” operation to provocatively challenge Chinese territorial claims in the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. The operation not only demonstrated Washington’s willingness to risk a naval clash with China, but signalled the entry of the US navy’s Third Fleet—with its 100 warships and four aircraft carriers—into the military build-up in the Western Pacific against China.

The response underscores the dangerous dynamic driving towards war: the more Washington confronts resistance and obstacles to its global ambitions, the more reckless and militaristic its actions. In the US election campaign, only the Socialist Equality Party

and its presidential and vice presidential candidates—Jerry White and Niles Niemuth—are warning of the dangers of war. The November 5 conference, “Socialism vs Capitalism & War,” being held in Detroit by the SEP and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Socialist Equality, will discuss the political basis for building an international movement against war based on the working class and the fight for socialism. All those opposed to imperialist war and seeking a way to fight it should register to attend.



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