

Greek protests greet Obama's last overseas tour as US president

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Thousands took to the streets of Athens to protest against Barack Obama as he arrived on his last overseas tour as US president, aiming to reassure the European ruling classes that the election of Donald Trump would not undermine relations with Washington.

Obama will wrap up his two-day visit today, just before the 43rd anniversary of the 1973 student uprising in Athens against Greece's military dictatorship. This uprising was brutally suppressed by the US-backed junta of the colonels, which collapsed the following year.

While hundreds of US Secret Service operatives were brought in to protect Obama, the Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government deployed a massive force of 5,000 riot police to assault protesters and seal off much of central Athens, as well as areas around the resort where Obama is staying. Clashes spread around downtown Athens, with riot police firing tear gas as protesters tried to enter the zone Syriza had declared off limits.

Demonstrations also took place in other cities across the country, with protesters burning a US flag in Thessaloniki, Greece's second city.

With tens of thousands of refugees fleeing US-led wars in the Middle East and Africa forced to stay in shelters in Greece, refugees also spoke out to criticize Obama. "We want Obama to come and see us here, how we are living," said Hatzi Naser, an Afghan refugee who fled the US-led NATO occupation of his country. "He is the reason we are here, because of his army's war. We want him to come and see the filth we are living in."

The White House tried to portray the lame-duck president's visit as a crowning moment of a career committed to democracy. US officials told the right-wing daily *Kathimerini* that he would give a speech on

globalization and democracy in Athens today that would be his "legacy speech," before traveling on to Germany and then an Asia-Pacific summit in Peru. Obama apparently cited Pericles, the orator and statesman of Greek antiquity, in his discussions with Greek officials.

The reality is that both American and Greek democracy are on the verge of collapse, undermined by a world capitalist crisis and the unpopular policies of war and austerity pursued both by the Democratic Party in the United States and Syriza and similar parties across Europe.

Obama left the United States as protests erupted against Trump's election, and president-elect Trump named Stephen Bannon, a fascistic white supremacist, as his top political counselor. Obama declined to criticize the decision, saying instead: "It would not be appropriate for me to comment on every appointment that the president-elect starts making if I want to be consistent with the notion that we are going to try to facilitate a smooth transition."

As for Syriza, it has been discredited by its repudiation of multiple votes by the Greek people to end European Union (EU) austerity, to which it responded by imposing wave after wave of pension cuts, privatizations and other austerity measures on impoverished Greek workers.

Obama's remarks were noteworthy, in fact, for the contempt they expressed toward the popular sentiments of the Greek and American people. While offering empty assurances to the European bourgeoisie that Trump would not abandon the NATO military alliance, even though Trump denounced it during the election campaign, Obama went on to praise Syriza for aiding unpopular US wars and spending massively on the Greek army, even as it bleeds the Greek people white.

Before leaving Washington, Obama gave an interview to *Kathimerini*, denouncing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and hailing Syriza's role in providing bases for Washington's Middle East wars, such as the naval base at Souda Bay. He declared, "Americans continue to place enormous importance on our alliance with Greece. Despite facing extraordinary economic hardships, Greece is one of five NATO allies that spend 2 percent of GDP on defense. We thank our Greek allies for our close cooperation at Souda Bay."

He also endorsed Syriza's austerity agenda, pledging to "reaffirm US support for reforms that improve the business climate."

Obama assured European officials that they could simply dismiss Trump's campaign rhetoric denouncing NATO and pledging to withdraw US troops from Europe as irrelevant. In their joint discussions, Obama said Trump "expressed a great interest in maintaining our core strategic relationships, and so one of the messages I will be able to deliver is his commitment to NATO and the trans-Atlantic alliance."

In Athens yesterday, Obama again told Greek President Prokopis Pavlopoulos that NATO is of "utmost importance" for both Democratic and Republican presidents, promising that US policy would see "significant continuity even as we see a transition in government."

At a joint press conference with Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, Obama praised Greece under Syriza for maintaining Greece's very high military spending despite "difficult times."

There were also reports in the Russian media that Obama is preparing to demand that Greece close its ports to all Russian warships, amid escalating military tensions between the United States and Russia in the war in nearby Syria.

Tsipras, for his part, made clear that Syriza would try to work with Trump, blandly predicting that despite Trump's "aggressive manner," the new US president would act differently once in office. Despite fears in Greece about what a Trump presidency would mean, Tsipras said, "We should build bridges, not walls."

The assurances of Obama and Tsipras that US-European relations will avoid a catastrophic collapse are, to be blunt, as worthless as Tsipras' pledges to end austerity in Greece. In fact, it is completely unclear what Trump's policies will be, or what precisely he

hoped to obtain from the European powers by threatening to leave NATO.

What is clear, however, is that Tsipras intends to continue providing aid and assistance to the Pentagon, even as an unpopular, far-right government takes power in Washington.



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