

Trump's Asia tour leaves region on brink of trade war and military conflict

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The 12-day tour through Asia by President Donald Trump has underscored the reality that American imperialism—a declining power wracked by external challenges and internal crises—is the most volatile and destabilising factor in world politics. Trump generated even greater trepidation about his administration's policies than existed before the tour began.

The immediate issue is if, or when, Trump will act on his threats to “totally destroy” North Korea if the Pyongyang regime does not capitulate to the US demand for “complete and verifiable denuclearization.” North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has, thus far, rejected that demand.

Despite numerous hints of behind-the-scenes negotiations to try to reach some form of compromise, Trump's bellicose and categorical rhetoric on the floor of the South Korean parliament last week has left his administration with little room to manoeuvre. He vowed that he would “not allow” the North Korean regime to possess intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that could reach the United States. His stance was unconditionally endorsed by Japan, Australia and South Korea.

For the White House to back down and accept North Korea possessing nuclear-armed ICBMs would be a debacle for Trump, under conditions in which his presidency is already under siege from his domestic political rivals. There would be savage recriminations within his administration, the military-intelligence establishment and the American ruling class as a whole.

The question posed by the WSWS in its September 6 perspective still looms over the world: “Will Washington go to war to make good on its war rhetoric? Have the threats themselves—and the determination to prove they are not mere bluffs—become a driving force in the march to a

potential nuclear war?”

A similar question can be posed concerning the administration's trade policies. In speech after speech, Trump denounced the World Trade Organisation and the multilateral trade and investment arrangements that the US itself established following World War II to regulate conflicts among economic competitors. He categorically vowed to pursue an uncompromising “America First” agenda that would require every country to substantially reduce its trade surpluses with the US.

Trump levelled this demand not only on “strategic competitors” such as China. He also threatened Japan and South Korea, among the closest US allies in the region, as well as the countries that the US is seeking to bring under its strategic umbrella, such as Vietnam and India.

The Chinese regime's response has been to push ahead with its efforts to develop new regional and international trade and investment arrangements that exclude the US and lessen its reliance on the American market.

At the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Vietnam, countries were wooed by Beijing with the prospect of lucrative involvement in its ambitious “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) strategy. The Chinese regime's aim is to develop transport and energy networks across the Eurasian landmass, and forge close links between the major world production centres and markets of East Asia and Western Europe.

Pakistan, the under-developed Central Asian states, Russia, and the East European states stand to potentially benefit from multi-billion dollar land-based projects. The maritime links involve plans for large-scale Chinese investment in ports and infrastructure in South Asia, East Africa, the Middle East and the

Mediterranean.

At the East Asia Summit (EAS) in the Philippines, China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and the 10 member-states of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) held a further round of talks toward the formation of Beijing's proposed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

While two US allies, Japan and Australia, succeeded in delaying any final agreement until next year, the momentum toward its establishment was obvious. The bloc, which excludes the US, would forge closer links within a group of countries that is already significantly integrated by global production networks. Combined, they generate some 40 percent of the world's gross domestic product and include half its population.

The logical extension of the RCEP—through the OBOR scheme—would be the incorporation of Russia, Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

The Obama administration's alternative was the US-dominated "Trans Pacific Partnership" that would exclude China until it deregulated protected sectors of its domestic economy. Trump repudiated the TPP, however, on his first day as president, on the protectionist grounds that it gave member-countries greater access to American markets.

The Japanese ruling class, which is just as opposed to a Chinese-centred bloc as Washington, is still pushing for the TPP to be established without US participation. Even if the bloc is ultimately formed, it would be dwarfed in size, scope and ambition by the RCEP.

Throughout his Asian tour, Trump caused eyes to roll with his bluster that the rise and rise of the US stock market demonstrated the "strength" of the American economy. Both in the US and internationally, every serious economic analyst is warning that Wall Street is a speculative house of cards, propped up by the continuous injections of funds from the Federal Reserve Bank and rising levels of high-risk debt.

After decades of relative decline in comparison to its imperialist rivals in Europe and Japan, as well as newly-emerged economic centres such as China, American imperialism is in a decrepit state. While a tiny layer of billionaire oligarchs control almost incomprehensible amounts of wealth, the vast mass of American workers face declining living standards, decaying infrastructure and ever more naked police-state repression.

Trump personifies the degeneration and desperation of the American ruling class. Across Asia, he could do little more than demand that countries purchase more American goods, or face sanctions. At times, the US president came across as a standover man for the American military-industrial complex, insisting that governments buy "billions" more of US-manufactured aircraft, warships and missiles.

To the extent that Trump did seriously propose that Asian-based corporations shift production to the US, it was on the unstated premise that American wages and conditions are being driven so low that they are "competitive" with those in what were once labelled the "cheap labour" countries.

The only success of Trump's tour, if it can be called that, was that Japan, Australia and India—countries whose ruling elites are as crisis-stricken as their American counterparts—indicated their support for a "Quadrilateral" alliance to militarily confront China and seek to shatter its growing regional and international influence.

Trump's tour of Asia marks a new nadir in the strategic position of the United States. The tremendous danger that faces the international working class, however, is that the American ruling class still possesses a vast war machine and has demonstrated, time and again, its preparedness to use that weaponry to retain its global dominance.

The author recommends:

Socialism and the Fight Against War

Build an International Movement of the Working Class and Youth Against Imperialism!

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