

US-China talks signal worsening confrontation

Peter Symonds

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Talks in Washington last Friday between top-level US and Chinese officials further exposed the rapidly-developing divide between the world's two largest economies as the Trump administration aggressively confronts Beijing across the board. Trump is due to meet Chinese President Xi Jinping at the G20 summit in Argentina at the end of November.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defence Secretary Jim Mattis met their counterparts—China's top diplomat Yang Jiechi and Defence Minister Wei Fenghe—for the second US-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue. The very fact that the meeting was originally scheduled for last month in Beijing and called off highlights the rising tensions between the two powers.

Speaking at a joint media conference, Pompeo claimed that the talks had been “an incredibly productive conversation.” He declared that the US “is not pursuing a Cold War or containment policy with China, rather we want to ensure that China acts responsibly and fairly.”

In reality, for nearly a decade, first under Obama, and now under Trump, the US has been engaged an aggressive effort to undermine China economically, and encircle it militarily in preparation for war. What Pompeo means by acting “responsibly and fairly” is that China should subordinate its interests to Washington and abide by the “international rules-based order” in which the US determines the so-called rules.

The disputes, however, were on public display at the press conference, and were not doubt far more openly and bitterly expressed behind closed doors.

Pompeo told the media that the US had “continuing concerns about China's activities and militarisation in the South China Sea,” adding: “We pressed China to live up to its past commitments in this area.”

Yang responded by declaring that Beijing was committed to “non-confrontation” but that it had the right to build “necessary defence facility” on its territories in the South China Sea. He also urged the US to stop sending warships and military aircraft close to Chinese-controlled islets.

The Obama administration deliberately inflamed long-running territorial disputes in the South China Sea that had previously been largely ignored in Washington. As Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton declared that the US had a “national interest” in ensuring “freedom of navigation” in the disputed waters.

The provocative “freedom of navigation” exercises by US warships close to or within the territorial waters claimed by China have accelerated under Trump along with the menacing rhetoric. Mattis reiterated that the US military continue to use its war planes and warships to challenge Chinese territorial claims.

Just as reckless has been the Trump administration's moves to strengthen ties with Taiwan that Beijing insists is an integral part of China. Washington has beefed up arms sales to Taiwan, sailed warships through the narrow Taiwan Strait between the island and the mainland, and authorised greater political and military contact.

Pompeo told the media that the US had been “forthright” in discussing its “significant differences” with China, including over Taiwan. Chinese Defence Minister Wei declared that Taiwan was “an inalienable part of China.” He warned that “if this territorial integrity is under threat, we will defend it at any cost.” Pompeo fired back that the US opposes “any resort to force or coercion” and Beijing should restore “cross-strait stability.”

China is particularly sensitive to any attempt by Taiwan to declare formal independence as it would

promote separatist movements on the mainland. Under the phony banner of “human rights,” Pompeo again encouraged separatist sentiment in areas such as Tibet and Xinjiang by declaring that Washington was concerned about China’s “repression of religious groups.”

Various US state agencies, including the CIA, have longstanding ties to Tibetan and Uighur organisations that promote greater autonomy or separatist for Tibet and Xinjiang. US imperialism is determined to prevent China undermining American global hegemony and is prepared to use any method to break-up and subordinate it.

Trump administration’s escalating trade war against China was only referred to in passing at Friday’s press conference, but was undoubtedly discussed at length behind closed doors. The US has already imposed tariffs on about \$250 billion worth of Chinese imports and has threatened to both increase the penalties and expand their scope to include all Chinese goods entering the US.

Yang warned that “a trade war, instead of leading to any solution, will only end up hurting both sides and the global economy.” He also expressed opposition to Trump’s decision to pull out of the 2015 UN-sanctioned nuclear deal with Iran, to unilaterally impose crippling sanctions on Iran and to require all countries to do the same under threat of penalties. Yang insisted that the nuclear pact “needs to be continued to be implemented and observed.”

The Trump administration has no intention of making any concessions. In a speech to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies on Friday, Peter Navarro, one of Trump’s top trade advisers and notorious anti-China hawk, launched an extraordinary attack not only on China, but on US corporations that are pushing for Trump to reach a trade deal with Beijing to end the confrontation.

Navarro accused a “self-appointed group of Wall Street Bankers and hedge fund managers” of being part of a Chinese “influence operation” to put a “full court press” on Trump ahead of his meeting with Chinese president Xi in late November. He branded them as “unregistered foreign agents” and declared that any agreement that is struck with China “will be on Trump’s terms, not on Wall Street’s terms.”

The *New York Times* reported that a group of top

Wall Street executives including from Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley and the Blackstone Group met with Chinese officials in Beijing to strengthen US-China financial ties. Navarro declared that Trump did not need the help of Wall Street or Goldman Sachs and that the activities of “these unpaid foreign agents” would “weaken this president and his negotiating position.”

Navarro went on to cast doubt that any deal at all could be reached with China. Referring to trade talks underway with Korea, Japan and the European Union, he said: “We are negotiating with everyone around the world, people can trust there is a deal. But when it comes to China, it’s *sui generis* [unique].” In other words, the lack of trust in China signifies that no deal is possible.

Navarro, along with the US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, are the most aggressive proponents in the Trump administration of trade war against China. Their belligerent stance on trade goes hand-in-hand with Trump’s confrontational approach on the South China Sea, Taiwan and other dangerous flashpoints. These actions are not only leading to trade war, but to military conflict between two nuclear-armed powers.



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