

US threats dominate Indo-Pacific summits

Trump's envoys issue ultimatums to China and other Asian countries

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A series of Indo-Pacific summits in Singapore and Papua New Guinea this week has been overshadowed by belligerent accusations and demands issued by the Trump administration's representatives, Vice President Mike Pence and National Security Advisor John Bolton.

US President Donald Trump is himself boycotting the gatherings, instead sending his envoys to effectively veto any agreements struck by the region's governments, particularly economic deals with China or settlements over contested territory in the highly-strategic South China Sea.

Pence and Bolton insisted that China had to bow to far-reaching US economic and military demands, or face a new "Cold War." They said Washington would not tolerate any regional agreements that cut across "US interests" or its escalating military activities. As these threats indicate, a conflict with China would almost certainly involve a military war, not just a "Cold War."

Pence even used his arrival flight, from Japan to Singapore, to provocatively fly over the South China Sea only 80 kilometres or so from the Spratly Islands, where China has erected defence facilities. He told the *Washington Post* journalist on his plane that the flight was a "freedom of navigation" mission.

Over the past year, under the misleading banner of "freedom of navigation," the Trump administration has stepped up naval and air force incursions within territorial zones around Chinese-claimed and occupied islets—confrontational operations that began under the Obama administration.

"We will not be intimidated," Pence said. "We will not stand down." When the reporter asked him what would happen if Beijing did not agree to act in a way that could avoid a "Cold War" with the United States, Pence replied: "Then so be it. We are here to stay."

Pence said Trump was leaving the door open for a deal with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the G20 summit in Argentina on November 30, but only if Beijing made the massive changes that the US was demanding in its economic, military and political activities.

The vice president said this would be China's best, if not last, chance to avoid a showdown with the United States. He said Xi had to "come to Argentina with concrete proposals that address not just the trade deficit that we face."

The US demands go far beyond the punitive tariffs already imposed to slash Chinese exports.

Pence said China must offer concessions on a host of issues. He listed supposed rampant intellectual property theft, forced technology transfer, restricted access to Chinese markets, respect for international rules and norms, efforts to limit freedom of navigation in international waters and Chinese Communist Party interference in the politics of Western countries.

As the US ruling elite is well aware, this list of demands is impossible for the Beijing regime to meet. It would mean terminating China's economic development, especially into high technology fields, accepting US military domination of the seas and vital trade routes off China's shores, and ceasing all diplomatic, aid and investment activity to further the interests of Chinese capitalism.

Before he left Washington for his Asian trip, Pence foreshadowed a bullying speech he plans to deliver at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Port Moresby on the weekend, where he is scheduled to speak just after Xi. His spokeswoman said Pence would accuse China of "authoritarianism, aggression, and the disregard for other nations' sovereignty" and declare that this "would not be tolerated by the United States."

In a *Washington Post* opinion piece published weekend, Pence wrote: “The United States will work with like-minded nations—from India to the Pacific islands—to advance our shared interests. Together, we will stand up to anyone who threatens our interests and our values.”

While Pence claimed that the US sought “collaboration, not control,” these threats underline the drive by US imperialism to reassert its domination over the region, which it achieved through victory in World War II.

Pence essentially demanded the dismantling of China’s government-controlled economy in order to clear the way for unfettered exploitation of the country’s working class, markets and resources by the US capitalist class. “Businesses, not bureaucrats, will drive our efforts, because governments and state-owned enterprises are incapable of building lasting prosperity,” he declared.

Unnamed US officials told reporters that Pence’s speech would “connect” to the bellicose one he delivered in early October, in which he flatly accused China of stealing US intellectual property, suppressing human rights and “meddling” in US elections.

As soon as Bolton touched down in Singapore on Tuesday he said the US would oppose any agreements between China and other claimants to the South China Sea that limited free passage to international shipping. Trump’s national security advisor said the US would continue the faster pace of its “freedom of navigation” missions and increase both military spending and its “level of engagement” with other countries in the region to reinforce its position.

Bolton’s remarks served as a warning to Asian countries, and particularly the Philippines, which is now in talks with Beijing about jointly exploring natural resources in the contested area.

During negotiations to develop a code of conduct for the South China Sea, China has reportedly sought to curtail military exercises in the disputed waters and urged its southern neighbours to develop the sea’s resources only with other countries in the region. The US has tried to block such a code, which has been years in the making, in order to provide a pretext for the intensifying US military operations across the area.

Bolton’s bullying follows an explicit US demand that China remove a missile shield allegedly deployed in the Spratly Islands. At a US-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue in Washington earlier this month, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis issued their Chinese counterparts with a formal ultimatum that “called on China to withdraw its missile

systems from disputed features in the Spratly Islands.”

Leaders of Asian governments, caught on the potentially catastrophic frontline of the collision course between Washington and Beijing, voiced dismay and alarm as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit commenced in Singapore on Tuesday.

Opening the event, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong issued a warning that seemed directed at Trump’s “America First” unilateralism. Major powers were “resorting to unilateral actions and bilateral deals and even explicitly repudiating multilateral approaches and institutions,” he said. As a result, “the international order” could “break up into rival blocs.”

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said the US-China conflict could create a “domino effect” that would provide “a reason for other developed countries to adopt protective measures against developing countries, including the ASEAN countries.”

Despite these pleas, the US will only ramp up its aggression, regardless of the economic damage it will inflict and the danger of war it will stoke. Another indication of that came when the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—a China-backed bid to complete the world’s largest trade deal without the US—was again pushed back, to at least 2019.

The RCEP is a trade pact among ASEAN’s 10 member states and six Asia-Pacific countries with which the group has existing trade agreements: China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. First proposed in 2011, but repeatedly stymied by the Obama administration, the agreement had been expected to be signed during this week’s three days of summits in Singapore.

Underlying Washington’s pursuit of economic warfare and its threat of military confrontation with China is an increasingly frenzied bid by US imperialism to reverse its protracted economic decline from its former position of unchallenged global hegemony, raising the spectre of another world war.



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