

US vice president steps up confrontation with China at APEC summit

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US Vice President Mike Pence effectively sabotaged the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) summit in Papua New Guinea (PNG) last weekend with an aggressive attack on China across a broad range of issues from trade, to the South China Sea, to Beijing's signature infrastructure project—the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

For the first time in APEC's 29-year history, the summit did not issue a final communique after the United States and China failed to agree on its wording. According to PNG Prime Minister Peter O'Neill, talks broke down over the language concerning the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which the Trump administration has condemned for treating China as a market economy. "There were two big giants in the room, what can I say," O'Neill declared, in announcing the failure to reach agreement.

In his speech on Saturday, Chinese President Xi Jinping warned of the catastrophic consequences of rapidly sharpening tensions with the US and the dangers of war. "Mankind has once again reached a crossroads," he said. "Which direction should we choose? Cooperation or confrontation? Openness or closing doors?"

Referring to conflict between the US and Japan, Xi declared that the bloody battles of the Pacific War in the 1940s "plunged mankind into calamity not far from where we are." To avoid a repetition of that tragedy, he said, the international community needed to support globalisation and "reject arrogance and prejudice"—a thinly veiled reference to the United States.

"Unilateralism and protectionism will not solve problems but add uncertainty to the world economy," Xi said. "History has shown that confrontation, whether in the form of a cold war, a hot war or a trade war, produces no winners."

US Vice President Pence, however, ignored Xi's appeal and launched a frontal assault on China and its growing influence in the Asia-Pacific. Pence foreshadowed the

determination of the Trump administration to ratchet up the US confrontation with China in a bellicose speech last month, in which he accused Beijing of military provocations in the South China Sea, stealing US intellectual property and interfering politically in the US mid-term elections.

Speaking last weekend, Pence accused China of taking "advantage of the United States for many, many years," and bluntly declared that, "those days are over." Referring to the Trump administration's mounting trade war measures against China, he insisted that "the US will not change course until China changes its ways" and warned that the US could "more than double" the tariffs it had placed on \$250 billion in Chinese goods.

Pence's comments cast a further pall over talks due to take place between President Trump and his Chinese counterpart Xi at the G20 summit due to take place in Argentina at the end of the month. Although China has recently offered a list of economic concessions to the US, Trump has declared the offer "not acceptable."

Chief among US demands is an end to Beijing's "Made in China 2025"—a program aimed at hi-tech development that would challenge American technological dominance in a range of key economic and strategic areas. Washington's unsubstantiated accusations of Chinese "theft" of intellectual property are to justify tightening restrictions on Chinese investment, trade and research cooperation. For China to "change its ways" would mean accepting economic subservience to the US.

Pence also openly challenged China's Belt and Road Initiative which has been the subject of intensifying criticism in the US and international press for setting "debt traps" for country's that accept Chinese infrastructure loans. While not directly naming China, Pence declared: "The terms of those loans are often vague at best, projects they support are often unsustainable ... too often they come with strings attached."

Pence then touted the Trump administration's infrastructure plans for the Asia Pacific, saying pointedly: "Know that the US offers a better option. We don't drown our partners in a sea of debt, we don't coerce, or compromise your independence ... We don't offer a constricting belt or a one-way road."

Pence's comments are absurd. For decades, the US and its allies have exploited various forms of economic assistance either directly through its own agencies, or indirectly through bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, to bribe and bully countries into accepting US economic and strategic demands. What concerns the US about China's capacity to provide aid and low interest loans is that it undercuts Washington's ability to impose its demands.

To underscore Washington's determination to counter Beijing, the US, Japan, Australia and New Zealand signed an agreement on Sunday with PNG to connect power and internet services to 70 percent of the country's population by 2030. PNG, which was left impoverished and underdeveloped after decades of Australian colonial rule, currently has only about 13 percent of its population connected to reliable electricity. The agreement is aimed at blocking an internet offer by a Chinese company.

In his speech, Xi defended the Belt and Road Initiative, declaring that it was not "designed to serve any hidden political agendas nor to target anyone," nor was it "for geopolitical purposes." In reality, China's BRI and the US counterplan are both bound up with intensifying geopolitical rivalry as both sides prepare for potential war.

The massive BRI project is aimed at consolidating Chinese ties throughout the vast Eurasian landmass and, in particular, to secure access to supplies of energy and raw materials in the Middle East and Africa in the event of a US military blockade. The US on the other hand is determined to prevent Eurasia from slipping into the domination of China or any other rival power, and its infrastructure plans are aimed at undermining the Belt and Road Initiative.

In a menacing threat to China, Pence hailed military cooperation between the US and its allies in Asia and warned that the Pentagon would continue its provocative "freedom of navigation" operations in the South China Sea that challenge Chinese territorial claims. Since coming to office, Trump has accelerated the intrusion of US warships close to Chinese-controlled islets in the contested areas. Pence also urged South East Asian countries negotiating a code of conduct with China in the disputed waters not to compromise "the rights of all

nations"—that is, especially the US—to "freedom of navigation."

The US military's growing presence in the South China Sea, adjacent to vital Chinese naval bases on Hainan Island, is part and parcel of a massive US build-up and war preparations throughout the Indo-Pacific that began with President Obama's "pivot to Asia" and has accelerated under Trump. The US has committed 60 percent of its air and naval forces to the region by 2020, strengthened alliances and military partnerships throughout Asia, and restructured and extended its basing arrangements.

The recent decision by the Trump administration to withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty with the former Soviet Union was directed not just at Russia, but also at China. Tearing up the treaty opens the door for the US to develop a range of nuclear weapons to be placed on bases close to the Chinese mainland that threaten to destroy China's relatively small nuclear arsenal.

Over the weekend, Pence announced a further US military commitment to the Pacific. It will participate in an Australian-PNG plan to develop a joint naval base on Manus Island off the north coast of Papua New Guinea. The island was a major US military base during World War II with a 3,000 metre airstrip and naval facilities.

Pence's deliberately provocative and confrontational stance at the APEC summit is a further warning that Washington is determined to prevent any challenge by China, or any other power, to its global economic and strategic ambitions by any means—including through a disastrous war between nuclear-armed powers.



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