

US vice president beats war drums in Asia

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US Vice President Mike Pence used Asian summit meetings over the past week to set out an ultimatum to China that accelerates the drive to war. Either China bows to the demands of American imperialism and accepts a subservient, semi-colonial status, or it will confront the full force of US diplomatic, economic and ultimately military weight.

Speaking at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, Pence accused China of taking “advantage of the United States for many, many years” and declared “those days are over.” He bluntly warned that “the US will not change course until China changes its ways” and warned that the US could “more than double” the existing massive tariffs on Chinese goods.

Pence effectively ruled out any deal between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the G20 summit in Argentina later this month. He told the *Washington Post* en route to Singapore that Xi had to come to the summit with “concrete proposals” not just on the US trade deficit with China, but across a broad range of issues—political and military as well as economic.

Pence insisted that China had to “change its ways” on alleged “intellectual property theft, forced technology transfer, restricted access to Chinese markets, disrespect 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.”

The vice president’s comments reprise the belligerent anti-China speech that he delivered in October that has set the tone of the Trump administration’s intensifying confrontation with China. In effect, Washington is insisting that Beijing abandon plans to develop hi-tech industries to compete with US companies, further open up China to American corporate exploitation, bow to the “international rules-based system” determined by the US, and halt any efforts to counter increasingly

aggressive anti-Chinese propaganda.

Pence also threw down the challenge to China’s Belt and Road Initiative—a massive infrastructure strategy aimed at integrating China more closely across the Eurasian landmass in a bid to prevent encirclement by the US and its allies. In a hypocritical attack on China, Pence told the APEC meeting: “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 effectively sabotaged the APEC summit, which for the first time in its 29 years did not issue a final communiqué, after the US insisted on wording that implied changes to the World Trade Organisation that would undermine China.

The most sinister aspect of Pence’s remarks concerns US military actions focused on the South China Sea where the Trump administration has stepped up so-called “freedom of navigation” operations by provocatively sending warships and nuclear-capable bombers to intrude in waters and airspace claimed by China.

Pence insisted that such military provocations would continue despite the danger that an incident could lead to open conflict. A near collision occurred in late September between a US destroyer and a Chinese vessel, which Washington has blamed on the Chinese navy. In reality, it is the reckless US actions in waters thousands of kilometres from American territory, but close to sensitive Chinese military bases, that are responsible.

Speaking to the media, Pence declared: “We will not be intimidated. We will not stand down.” Asked what would happen if Beijing did not agree to act in a way that could avoid a “Cold War” with the US, Pence replied: “Then so be it. We are here to stay.”

In reality, what is brewing is not a new version of the

Cold War between the US and the former Soviet Union, but a return to the 1930s when trade war, military provocations and clashes led rapidly to the eruption of a world war that cost the lives of tens of millions. Unlike in the 1950s and 1960s, when the United States was economically predominant globally and the Soviet Union posed no economic challenge, US imperialism is in historic decline and regards China, now the world's second largest economy, as a major threat to its world hegemony.

Washington's strategy is not "Cold War" containment, but the "roll-back" policy, which, before it was abandoned, brought the US to the brink of all-out conflict with China and the Soviet Union during the Korean War. Beginning under the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" and accelerated under Trump, the Pentagon is engaged in a massive military build-up and a strengthening of alliances and strategic partnerships throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

It is no accident that Pence announced US support for Australia and Papua New Guinea (PNG) establishing a major new joint military base on PNG's Manus Island. The strategically-located island was used by American military forces during the Pacific war against Japan. The new Manus facility is part of the Pentagon's extensive restructuring of US bases in Asia, supplemented by new basing agreements, that encircle China from Japan, South Korea and Guam, to northern Australia and Singapore and then to India.

Earlier this year, before becoming chief of US Pacific Command, Admiral Philip Davidson told a Senate committee that he would "recalibrate" PACOM's 375,000 military and civilian personnel, 200 warships and nearly 1,100 aircraft, in line with the Pentagon's new national defense strategy. Unveiled in January, the strategy document made great power rivalry, not terrorism, the chief focus and specifically branded China, along with Russia, as "revisionist powers" that had to be combated.

Outlining his plans for PACOM, Davidson declared: "This effort entails ensuring the continued combat readiness of assigned forces in the western Pacific; developing an updated footprint that accounts for China's rapid modernization, and pursuing agreements with host nations that allow the United States to project power when necessary." He pointed to new weaponry including "hypersonic and directed energy weapons,

resilient space, cyber and network-capabilities" being developed in preparation for war with China.

The most ominous US move is the recent decision to withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty with the former Soviet Union, which frees the Pentagon to build up a new arsenal of short and medium-range nuclear missiles that will be targeted primarily at China. The Pentagon's previous AirSea Battle strategy for war with China, involving a massive conventional air and missile attack on the Chinese mainland from nearby bases, is now being supplemented or replaced by plans for a devastating nuclear attack.

The Trump administration is setting course for a catastrophic war with China that will inevitably involve the deaths of many millions, if not billions, of people. In founding the Fourth International in 1938, on the eve of World War II, Leon Trotsky warned that humanity faced only two alternatives: either socialism or barbarism. A new revolutionary International, opposed to the treacherous Social Democratic and Stalinist leaderships, was needed to mobilise and unite workers around the world to abolish capitalism and its outmoded division of the world into rival nation states.

That is the challenge confronting the international working class today—to join and build the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections, which are the only parties fighting for the perspective of socialist internationalism.



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