As G20 summit opens, US political establishment brays for trade war and military escalation

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US President Donald Trump's trip to the G20 summit in Buenos Aires, Argentina has been accompanied by an outpouring of jingoism throughout the US political establishment, targeting not just Russia, but with ever-greater belligerence, China.

The summit takes place after Russian forces fired upon and captured three Ukrainian Navy ships that had entered waters claimed by Russia in a deliberate provocation likely to have been coordinated with Washington. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has begun massing troops on the Ukrainian border and has declared martial law in substantial sections of the country.

At the beginning of the week, the US press was filled with denunciations of Russia, whose response to the Ukrainian incursion was condemned as a violation of international law. This media campaign, combined with the aptly-timed release of supposedly damaging information about Trump's personal ties to Russia, led the president to backtrack on his plans to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin. This was a partial concession to dominant factions within the American state that have demanded he take a more aggressive anti-Russian stance.

After Trump's announcement on Thursday, the US media turned to demanding that Trump continue and intensify his hardline stance against China.

Summing up the growth of anti-Chinese sentiment throughout the entire US political establishment, the *Washington Post* wrote in an editorial published Friday, "Where there was once a bipartisan consensus in favor of broad engagement with China, now there is almost equally widely shared disappointment with China's failure to reciprocate as expected."

While the *Post* calls for a "temporary truce," underlying the newspaper's belligerence is the fact that China has emerged as a competitor to the United States in the fields of high-value manufacturing, directly competing for a shrinking pool of global profits with American companies.

The *Post* continues, "Mr. Trump's bluntly hostile approach to China represents only an extreme manifestation" of "emerging national sentiment."

"Risky as it is," the newspaper declares, Trump's policy "at least puts China fully on notice that U.S. tolerance for its mercantilist policies… has run out."

As recently as several months ago, prominent commentators had declared Trump's trade war an aberration. In July, Martin Wolf, analyzing Trump's "tariffs trade war," declared, "The leader of the world's most powerful country is a dangerous ignoramus … It is so difficult to negotiate with him because nobody knows what he and his team want. This is just not normal."

But Trump's trade war with China is now lauded by even his most bitter factional opponents as not merely "normal," but rational and even democratic. As the *Post* writes, "Chinese policymakers must understand that he won the presidency in large part because of American dismay—especially in the industrial heartland—with the results of China's behavior, and what the public perceived as a failure of U.S. leadership to check it."

These words are a confirmation, from one of the house organs of the Democratic Party, that Trump's trade war measures are not the ravings of a madman but represent the efforts of the American ruling class to secure US global hegemony through military threats and trade war.

Such views are not confined to the "centrist" wing of the Democratic Party embodied by the *Post*, but extend to its "progressive" wing as well. In an article published the day before the *Post's* editorial, Senator Elizabeth Warren made essentially the same nationalist argument. Writing

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in *Foreign Affairs*, Warren pilloried policymakers who "advocated China's accession to the World Trade Organization despite its unfair trading practices."

She adds, "And what has this brought us? Policymakers promised that open markets would lead to open societies. Instead, efforts to bring capitalism to the global stage unwittingly helped create the conditions for competitors to rise up and lash out. Russia became belligerent and resurgent. China weaponized its economy without ever loosening its domestic political constraints. Other countries' faith in both capitalism and democracy eroded."

Warren is, in other words, openly turning her back on the "free market" policies of the preceding period, and, without mentioning the word "protectionism," advocating the right-wing, nationalist ideas exemplified by Donald Trump. In fact, her only real criticism of Trump's China policy is that he is not doing enough to stop "Chinese economic malfeasance."

The day after *Foreign Affairs* published Warren's article, *New York Times* columnist David Leonhardt made an even more direct call for the Democrats to embrace Trump's anti-China demagogy.

"I think the Democrats' political message has suffered from the lack of a clear antagonist," he writes. "China is such an antagonist. No, Americans should not demonize China in some sort of Cold War or xenophobic way. But China has become this country's biggest rival."

Leonhardt's insistence that a new nationalist campaign to demonize China would not be "xenophobic" is as dishonest as it is stupid. Xenophobia always accompanies nationalism, and anti-Chinese racism has a long and deep history in America.

Trump's anti-China campaign has already led to draconian restrictions on visas to Chinese students, while FBI Director Christopher Wray has branded Chinese "professors, scientists, [and] students" as "nontraditional collectors," i.e., spies.

Ultimately, such nationalist demagogy and trade war can only lead to military conflict. And this, too, is ever more openly discussed. In an op-ed in the *Washington Post* headlined "Why America needs low-yield nuclear warheads now," Michael Morell, the former head of the Central Intelligence Agency, argued for the creation of a new class of nuclear weapons that are more likely to be used in combat.

Amid "great power competition with Russia and China," the United States "must close the credibility gap," he declares. "We must let the Russians know that there will be unacceptable consequences if they ever use" nuclear weapons. He adds, "The Russians believe we are not likely to risk a global thermonuclear war in response to a 'tactical' nuclear attack by them." It is necessary, first and foremost, to demonstrate that the United States is willing to use nuclear weapons.

This, he writes, is necessary to ensure America's "survival."

Against this backdrop, certain members of the White House have floated a tactical retreat on US trade war against China at the G20. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Ely Ratner, a former deputy national security adviser to US Vice President Joe Biden, made clear that any such agreement would just be a pause to regroup in anticipation of a much bigger fight.

"Any agreement in Argentina will be a tactical pause at best, providing short-term relief to jittery stock markets and beleaguered US farmers, but having no material or long-lasting effect on the slide toward a high-stakes geopolitical competition between the United States and China. The days when the world's two largest economies could meet each other halfway have gone."

Perhaps even more than against Russia, the United States is on a collision course with China. The demands spelled out last month by Vice President Mike Pence—that China effectively cease its economic development—are impossible for China to agree to. The conflict over global economic dominance that has erupted in a furious trade war can only intensify.

Moreover, the growth of popular opposition to the entirety of the political establishment, particularly in the form of anti-capitalist sentiment and the growing struggles of the working class, make the creation of an external "antagonist" through the promotion of nationalism and war ever more necessary for the American ruling class.

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