

ANALYSIS

Donald Trump's visit to Asia: Rolling out the red carpet for U.S. empire?

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Khury Petersen-Smith analyzes the outcome of Donald Trump's visit to Asia.

TOWARD THE end of his 11-day tour of Asia and the Pacific, Donald Trump took to Twitter to insult North Korean premier Kim Jong-Un [1]. Aside from that moment, one could almost hear the sighs of relief—among planners of the trip in the White House and in the five foreign countries he visited—that it went mostly without incident.

Between Trump's inability to be appropriate even in the country he presides over, let alone foreign ones, and his administration's increasingly apocalyptic threats regarding the Korean Peninsula in the months before the trip, U.S. empire, its allies and its supporters in the U.S. media and elsewhere had reason to be concerned about this diplomatic tour staying, well, diplomatic.

No doubt the choice by planners to forego a visit by Trump to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea was part of this effort. Such a visit would have been an opportunity for Trump to directly threaten North Korea, as Vice President Mike Pence did when he went to the DMZ in April [2] and declared that “the era of strategic patience is over” and signaled a more aggressive posture toward the regime.

But Trump's successful photo ops in Tokyo, Seoul, Beijing, Hanoi and Manila are meant to obscure the fact that the U.S. and its allies in the region have been maneuvering in ways that are already having violent consequences—and set the stage for more.

The fact that leaders in Asia figuratively and literally rolled out the red carpet despite Trump's ongoing belittling of Kim as “Little Rocket Man”—not to mention the president, his defense secretary and the U.S. ambassador to the UN openly discussing the “total destruction” and “total annihilation” of North Korea—is telling in itself.

So it is worth taking stock of what the U.S. and other powers in the region have been saying and doing—and the state of the resistance.

BEYOND TRUMP'S belligerent rhetoric about North Korea, the U.S. has made a series of steps to turn up the temperature [3].

For starters, the U.S. Air Force is preparing to put nuclear-armed bombers back on 24-hour alert [4]. Washington has also engineered harsher UN sanctions against North Korea, carried out the usual joint exercises with South Korean forces simulating attacks on the North and ordered bombers to fly over the Korean Peninsula—all in the wake of Kim Jong-un's regime carrying out intermittent missile and nuclear tests [5].

The U.S. and South Korea moved ahead with installing components of the Terminal High Altitude Delivery Defense (THAAD) missile system in Seongju this September, even though liberal President Moon Jae-in was critical of the system before taking office—and despite a temporary suspension of the deployment won by protest over the summer.

Meanwhile, Japanese elections last month resulted in a victory for conservative incumbent Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Abe will use the win to try to push through revision of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which would allow Japan to pursue a more offensive military.

Happy to celebrate with his ally during his time in Tokyo, Trump said, referring to Abe and North Korea's missiles, "He will shoot them out of the sky when he completes the purchase of a lot of military equipment from the United States." Abe responded by noting that Japan already buys a lot of weapons from the U.S.

Whereas formal relations soured between the U.S. and the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte while Barack Obama was in office—with Duterte threatening to change the country's geopolitical orientation away from the U.S. and toward its rival China—Trump enjoyed a warm reception in Manila.

Indeed, whatever friction existed between Obama and Duterte, the militaries of the U.S. and the Philippines, along with Australia, have continued to collaborate in joint trainings and operations [6]—most notably on the island of Mindanao [7], which Duterte has placed under martial law.

During his visit, Trump reaffirmed support for Duterte, who is also slaughtering thousands through police violence on the pretext of a "war on drugs." Of that campaign, a leaked transcript published by the *Washington Post* reveals that Trump told Duterte earlier this year that he is doing an "unbelievable job." [8]

If Trump is pleased about the U.S. military presence in the Pacific and the fact that Asian allies are pursuing more militarization in collaboration with the U.S., he can thank the efforts of the Obama administration before him.

Launching what it called the "pivot to Asia," the Obama administration attempted to reorient U.S. military and political power attention away from the Middle East and Central Asia and toward the Pacific [9]. Hillary Clinton, as Obama's Secretary of State, declared this "America's Pacific Century."

In addition to the U.S. shifting more air and naval power to the Pacific and expanding its already large number of military bases in the region, Clinton oversaw what she called "forward-deployed diplomacy" to strengthen U.S. political and economic ties as a complement to military cooperation.

WHILE ATTENDING the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings in Vietnam, Trump reiterated the "America First" rhetoric of his campaign. "We are not going to let the United States be taken advantage of anymore," he blustered

While Trump was uttering this bizarre view—as if the U.S. is an economic underdog, bullied by multilateral trade agreements—ministers from other countries in attendance went forward in pursuit of a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) without the U.S. [10], as numerous media outlets described it.

The TPP—which aimed to draw together Pacific countries in an economic bloc that excluded China [11], based on clandestine and oppressive provisions negotiated behind closed doors—was supposed to be the signature trade deal of the Obama era, but Trump sealed its fate by officially

backing out of it earlier this year.

With great fanfare, negotiators meeting in Vietnam announced an agreement on fundamental parts of the TPP-minus-the-U.S., only to state later that talks had failed because of the hesitancy of Canada to move forward.

Both the other countries' willingness to try pursuing the TPP without the U.S., and their inability to do so at the moment, shed light on the complicated picture in the region. Ironically, it was Xi Jinping, president of China, who championed multilateral trade agreements in Asia at APEC.

In China, though Trump called on Xi to pressure North Korea to end its nuclear program, the two leaders enjoyed a mostly warm visit in Beijing. At a celebration of \$250 billion in trade deals between the two countries, Trump declared that their trade imbalance isn't sustainable, but that he doesn't "blame China."

Xi, emerging from last month's congress of the Chinese Communist Party heralding a new era in Chinese power, is moving forward with the One Belt, One Road initiative, which involves a whole set of economic negotiations in and beyond the region.

ON THE whole, the path of greater militarization—which the U.S. and its allies have been pursuing for years—will continue after the Trump trip. The same can be said for China's rising economic and political power, which will continue to present challenges to the U.S. and Japan.

There is, however, more to the picture. One important factor looming in the background as Trump reassured U.S. allies of military support is the actual capability of the military.

For example, the Navy's Seventh Fleet, based in Yokosuka, Japan, and whose area of responsibility is in the Pacific—has had a series of ship collisions this year, two of which were fatal.

While fleet commander Vice Admiral Joseph Aucoin was removed from his post in August following the incidents, it appears that the crashes are an expression of a fleet where whose personnel are stretched thin as the Navy pursues more activity in the region [12].

The resulting sentiment of low morale and feeling overwhelmed also came to the surface on the U.S.S. Shiloh [13], where Capt. Adam M. Aycock was relieved of command at the end of August. This came after a series of climate surveys—in which sailors responded to questions anonymously—revealing repressive conditions and widespread despair and suicidal feelings.

One sailor described the Shiloh—which Aycock apparently ran as a tyrant and sent sailors to the brig for minor infractions—as a "floating prison." While a lack of rights for enlisted personnel is part of the nature of military life, the U.S.' focus on and belligerence in the Pacific, is adding more pressure.

There are also, however, hopeful signs of resistance.

Protesters challenged Trump throughout his visit, beginning with the first leg of the trip in Hawai'i, and continuing through the end of the tour in the Philippines. Thousands mobilized against Trump in South Korea, defying measures by the state to prevent protests, including denial of rally permits and restrictions on where activists could gather. These protests built on those that confronted the installation of THAAD earlier this year. And when Japan's Abe first attempted to change the constitution, he sparked a massive outpouring of protest in response.

With the signs pointing to more militarization in the region—via both Washington and Asia's capitals—the challenge of building international solidarity and resistance remains urgent.

P.S.

* November 13, 2017:

<https://socialistworker.org/2017/11/13/rolling-out-the-red-carpet-for-us-empire>

Footnotes

[1] <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/929511061954297857>

[2] <https://socialistworker.org/2017/05/03/trump-turns-up-the-terror>

[3] <https://socialistworker.org/2017/09/27/whos-pushing-korea-to-the-brink-of-war>

[4] <http://cdn.defenseone.com/a/defenseone/interstitial.html?v=7.12.0&rf=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.defenseone.com%2Fthreats%2F2017%2F10%2Fexclusive-us-preparing-put-nuclear-bombers-back-24-hour-alert%2F141957%2F>

[5] <https://socialistworker.org/2017/07/31/north-korea-faces-the-fury-of-us-empire>

[6] <http://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1188009/balikatan-2017-comes-to-closure-with-ceremony/>

[7] <https://socialistworker.org/2017/11/07/the-us-backs-dutertes-crimes-in-mindanao>

[8] <https://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/documents/politics/transcript-of-call-between-president-trump-and-philippine-president-duterte/2446/>

[9] ESSF (article 42457), [US imperialism's pivot to Asia - Obama and an asymmetric, multipolar world order](#).

[10] <https://www.vox.com/2017/11/11/16637826/trump-trans-pacific-partnership>

[11] <https://socialistworker.org/2014/04/23/trans-pacific-power-play>

[12] <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2017/0823/Trouble-in-the-Seventh-Fleet-what-may-be-behind-Navy-collisions>

[13] <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2017/10/09/i-now-hate-my-ship-surveys-reveal-disastrous-morale-on-cruiser-shiloh/>