

Obama's Tour to Reinforce "Pivot to Asia"

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Global Research, April 22, 2014

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Amid the on-going confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, President Barack Obama arrives in Japan tomorrow on the first leg of a tour of Asia that will also take in South Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines. Obama's overriding aim is to signal his intention to press ahead with the "pivot to Asia," which seeks to ensure US hegemony throughout the region.

Last October, Obama cancelled his trip to Asia, including his attendance at two key Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summits, citing the government shutdown in Washington. His decision to proceed with the current tour, despite the escalating Ukraine crisis, is intended to reassure American allies that the US remains committed to its diplomatic offensive and military build-up in Asia against China.

Obama's trip follows those by Vice President Joe Biden in December, Secretary of State John Kerry in February and Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel earlier this month, all of which deliberately intensified regional tensions with China. Biden's trip coincided with Washington's provocative response to Beijing's declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea—the Pentagon dispatched nuclear capable B-52 bombers unannounced into the zone.

During Hagel's trip to Japan then China, the defence secretary drew a direct parallel between Russia's annexation of the Crimea, in response to the fascist-led coup in Kiev engineered by the US, and China's territorial disputes in the South China and East China Seas with its neighbours, including Japan and the Philippines. While the US claims to be neutral in these maritime disputes, Hagel nevertheless accused Beijing of attempting to "violate territorial integrity" by force. Standing next to his Chinese counterpart, Hagel reaffirmed that the US was "fully committed" to its military alliances with Japan and the Philippines—in other words, would wage war against China should fighting break out.

Obama will land in Tokyo for the first full state reception for a US president since that of Clinton more than a decade ago. During the course of three days, Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will undoubtedly declare their complete commitment to the post-war security treaty between the two countries. The Obama administration has since 2009 pushed Japan to take a more aggressive stance in its dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, boost its military and ease constitutional and legal restrictions on the operations of its armed forces.

As the US seeks to reassert its dominant position in the Indo-Pacific, especially over China, tensions have begun to emerge in the alliance with Japan. Both countries are mired in a worsening economic crisis and are seeking to extricate themselves at the expense of their rivals. At this stage, the right-wing Abe government remains supportive of the US "pivot"

but is exploiting the opportunity to remilitarise and mount its own diplomatic offensive in South East Asia, to prosecute Japanese strategic and economic interests, which do not always coincide with the US agenda.

Since taking office in December 2012, Abe has increased the Japanese military budget for the first time in a decade, established a US-style national security council, re-oriented military strategy to the country's southern island chain opposite the Chinese mainland, and begun to revive the reactionary traditions of Japanese militarism. In just over a year, Abe has personally visited all 10 ASEAN members, and boosted security relations with them, particularly the Philippines.

The *Financial Times* yesterday commented: "It has been a rocky year for the US-Japan relationship, the bedrock of Asia's security and the region's half-century-long economic rise. Irritants range from stalled trade talks to the habit of senior Japanese leaders of dredging up wartime history."

Obama is expected to put the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) high on the agenda for talks with Abe. An agreement on the TPP, which Washington regards as the means for reasserting American economic supremacy in Asia, was meant to be finalised by the end of last year but became bogged down, especially by disagreements between the US and Japan over agriculture and the auto industry.

A *Washington Post* opinion piece by former US national security adviser Tom Donilon highlighted the TPP's central role as "the most important trade deal under negotiation today." It would enforce US demands across the board, from trade and investment to intellectual property rights and corporate law. "A deal would solidify US leadership in Asia and, together with the negotiations over a free trade pact in Europe, put the United States at the centre of a great project: writing the rules that will govern the global economy for the next century," Donilon stated.

On the eve of Obama's visit, Abe again aggravated regional tensions over historical issues, by sending a religious offering on Monday to the Yasukuni Shrine to Japan's war dead. Today, senior cabinet minister Yoshitaka Shindo further fueled the debate by heading a group of 147 lawmakers to visit the same notorious shrine. In December, Abe provoked protests from China and South Korea by making a personal visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, which is a symbol of Japanese militarism. His visit gave the green light for a growing campaign in the media, by figures like Naoki Hyakuta, appointed by Abe to the board of the NHK public broadcaster, to whitewash the atrocities carried out by the Japanese military such as the Nanjing massacre.

The US State Department cautiously expressed its "disappointment" with Abe's visit to Yasukuni Shrine. In part, the Obama administration is concerned that relations between its two allies in North East Asia—Japan and South Korea—have effectively broken down. South Korean President Park Geun-hye, installed in February last year, has refused to meet with Abe, citing suggestions that Japan would revise its apology for the treatment of "comfort women," including many South Koreans, who were forced to work in military brothels in the 1930s and 1940s. Obama was forced to act as mediator last month, bringing Abe and Park together for the first time, on the sidelines of a nuclear security summit in The Hague.

More fundamentally, however, the tensions between the US and Japan reflect a widening gap between the interests of the two imperialist powers. The *Financial Times* commented:

“Underlying these frictions is the question of how committed the two nations are to a partnership that looks like the remnant of a bygone era, forged when the US was the unchallenged regional power after the Pacific war.”

While Abe is not about to make a break with Washington, he has described his agenda as “escaping the post-war regime”—that is, a post-war order in which Japan relied on the US militarily in Asia and was prepared to play the role of loyal subordinate. The “post-war regime” was only established after a full-scale war, in which millions died, between the US and Japan over who was to dominate Asia, particularly China.

Obama’s aim in Tokyo will be to ensure continued US hegemony in every area—from the TPP’s economic agenda to the marshalling of Japanese rearmament to the interests of US imperialism in Asia.

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