

U.S. Imperialism in Asia: Trump Administration Set to Expand South China Sea Conflict

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Triumphalism followed the election of US President Donald Trump, particularly among those opposed to US foreign policy under US President Barack Obama. In particular, hope was rekindled that America would withdraw from the many, provocative conflicts it was cultivating, ranging from the Middle East to East Asia.

However, triumphalism and hope are now dashed, as the new US administration moves clearly and in earnest to not only continue on with these confrontations, but expand them.

For students of history, particularly those following events in Asia Pacific, the prospect of the US moving its confrontation with China forward for control over the region is hardly a surprise.



A Quick History Lesson of US Imperialism in Asia

The United States had occupied the Philippines, declaring it a US territory from 1898-1946. It had also been involved in the military occupation and several armed clashes in China with Chinese forces, including during the Second Opium War and the Boxer Rebellion. Such conflicts saw Chinese fighters attempt to remove by force foreign influence, including supposedly Christian missionaries used to impose US and European sociopolitical control over China.

During this period of overt American colonisation throughout Asia Pacific, the annexation of Taiwan was also considered, as an American analogue of Britain's annexation of Hong Kong.

In Thomas Cox' 1973 book, "[Harbingers of Change: American Merchants and the Formosa \[Taiwan\] Annexation Scheme](#)," published by the University of California Press, Cox wrote:

Since it appeared unlikely that Taiwan would long remain a part of the Chinese empire and there was ample justification for action by the United States, [US Commissioner in China, Peter] Parker argued that the United States should move quickly. "I believe Formosa and the world will be better for the former coming under a civilized power," he wrote.

It should be noted that Parker's advocacy of the US annexation of Taiwan was backed not by political ideology, though it was certainly presented as such publicly, but by US business interests at the time, particularly those of the Nye Brothers, merchants involved heavily in US-Chinese trade, including the movement of opium across the region.

Regional dynamics would change just before, during, and immediately after World War 2, with a resurgence of localised power and independence movements ousting Western colonial powers. This included the ousting of British and French holdings across the region such as in Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia and across Indochina which included Laos, Cambodia and of course Vietnam.

The ousting by force of French administrators from Vietnam brought the United States back into the region more directly and on an unprecedented scale.

And while the United States would claim its reasons for intervening in Southeast Asia were predicated on preventing a “domino effect” of spreading communism, leaked documents known as the “Pentagon Papers” made it abundantly clear that America was simply continuing its hegemonic pursuits vis-a-vis China in an effort to encircle, contain and eventually subdue a rising Beijing.

The US State Department’s own Office of the Historian, in a section titled, “[189. Draft Memorandum From Secretary of Defense McNamara to President Johnson](#),” dated 1965, states explicitly:

The February decision to bomb North Vietnam and the July approval of Phase I deployments make sense only if they are in support of a long-run United States policy to contain Communist China.

The papers openly advocate US global hegemony, stating:

...the role we have inherited and have chosen for ourselves for the future is to extend our influence and power to thwart ideologies that are hostile to these aims and to move the world, as best we can, in the direction we prefer. Our ends cannot be achieved and our leadership role cannot be played if some powerful and virulent nation—whether Germany, Japan, Russia or China—is allowed to organize their part of the world according to a philosophy contrary to ours.

And again, just like during deliberations over the possible annexation of Taiwan during the 19th century, US ambitions in Asia Pacific may be rhetorically presented as pursuit of a particular ideology, but are in reality underpinned by economic interests which seek to move into and subsequently dominate markets globally, displacing anything and everything preexisting, through coercive diplomacy, or through indirect or direct military force.

21st Century American Hegemony

Fast-forward to the 21st century. During the administration of former US President Barack Obama, the US “pivoted” toward Asia in an attempt to reassert itself in a region quickly escaping out from under what remained of over a century of US-European hegemony.

The pivot failed, with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) being categorically resisted and rejected across Asia, and feigned US rapprochement with several of China’s neighbours turned into confrontations across Southeast Asia as Washington attempted to replace governments friendly with Beijing with those that would toe an anti-Beijing line.

In an attempt to conceal what is a decades-long agenda, and the continuation of Obama’s

“pivot,” US President Donald Trump’s counsellor Steven Bannon, as revealed by a Guardian article titled, “[Steve Bannon: ‘We’re going to war in the South China Sea ... no doubt’](#),” would claim that China, along with “Islam,” presented a menace to the “Judeo-Christian” West.

This ideological rhetoric is aimed at distracting the public, convincing them that US policy toward China is now determined by Trump’s ideological, xenophobic tendencies, rather than merely the latest logical iteration of Obama’s “pivot,” and the Vietnam-era’s full-scale military containment strategy.

Also noteworthy in Bannon’s incomplete thought is his omission of so-called Christian missionaries in China and the role they played in the attempted invasion, occupation and subjugation of China during the 19th century by US-European interests.

The Guardian would report:

Bannon’s sentiments and his position in Trump’s inner circle add to fears of a military confrontation with China, after secretary of state Rex Tillerson said that the US would deny China access to the seven artificial islands. Experts warned any blockade would lead to war. Advertisement

Bannon is clearly wary of China’s growing clout in Asia and beyond, framing the relationship as entirely adversarial, predicting a global culture clash in the coming years.

“You have an expansionist Islam and you have an expansionist China. Right? They are motivated. They’re arrogant. They’re on the march. And they think the Judeo-Christian west is on the retreat,” Bannon said during a February 2016 radio show.

And while the Guardian attempts to pose as sounding the alarm over the Trump administration’s seemingly xenophobic and confrontational stance, its own omission of America’s longstanding attempts to encircle, contain and subjugate China regardless of who occupies the White House or what rhetoric accompanies each iteration of US policy toward China, serves as complicity.

For policymakers across Asia, understanding history and the special interests that have and still do drive American foreign policy is key to seeing through inflammatory rhetoric, and essential in analysing and preparing solutions for continued attempts by Washington to reassert itself in a region an ocean away from its own shores, in a modern-day continuation of Western colonialism the nations of Asia Pacific have fought hard to escape and rise above over the past generation.

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