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Trump's coming confrontation with China

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US President-elect Donald Trump is preparing to dramatically intensify Washington's confrontation with Beijing across the board—diplomatically, economically and militarily—through reckless measures that risk trade war and war. His bellicose economic threats against China during the election campaign have been followed by a series of provocative tweets that have exacerbated tensions with Beijing over some of the world's most dangerous flashpoints—Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea.

Trump's belligerent anti-China stance is bound up with the intense conflict within the US state apparatus and political establishment over the future direction of foreign and military policy. After suffering debacles in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, the question raging in ruling circles is how to use America's residual military might to ensure its global hegemony, and against which of its major rivals—Russia or China?

One faction is exploiting unsubstantiated allegations that Russian hacking influenced the outcome of the presidential election in Trump's favour to greatly inflate the threat posed by Moscow and undermine the president-elect. Trump, however, speaks for a layer of the corporate, political and military elites who regard China's rise to the world's second largest economy as a greater danger to US interests.

As he prepared to meet with top US intelligence officials yesterday, Trump once again played down allegations of Russian hacking and instead shifted the focus to China. “China, relatively recently, hacked 20 million government names,” he told the *New York Times*, referring to the alleged breach of the US Office of Personnel Management computers two year ago. “How come nobody even talks about that? This is a political witchhunt.”

Despite the intensity of the infighting, the divisions are tactical. Trump’s “America First” jingoism makes clear that his administration will tolerate no challenge to US power from any rivals, including Russia.

Trump has already signaled his intention, on his first day in office, to end US involvement in the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP)—the principal economic weapon of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” aimed at subordinating China to US interests. The purpose of tearing up the TPP, however, is to make way for far more aggressive trade measures. Trump has threatened to brand China as a currency manipulator and to impose tariffs of up to 45 percent on Chinese goods.

Trump has appointed a gang of anti-China hawks and economic nationalists to implement trade policy, including Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, Robert Lighthizer as US Trade Secretary and Peter Navarro to head a new National Trade Council in the White House. Current US Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker told the *Financial Times* yesterday that senior Chinese officials have told her that Beijing would retaliate against US tariffs. She warned there was “a fine line between being tough and a trade war.”

Trump’s trade war threats are a desperate attempt to reverse America’s economic decline. Ideologues like Ross, Navarro and Lighthizer accuse China of trading unfairly and stealing US jobs. China’s share of global goods exports has increased three-fold since it joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, while the US share has declined by 30 percent. This dramatic shift, however, is driven by China’s emergence as the world’s largest manufacturing hub, above all for global transnationals, including many of America’s largest corporations.

While accusing Beijing of breaking trade rules, Trump is prepared to initiate punitive action against China, whether it conforms with the WTO framework or not. The eruption of trade war between the US and China would reverberate throughout the global economy, drawing in other countries with a stake in China and impacting severely on world trade. No longer having the economic muscle to lay down the international trade rules, the US has already begun a dramatic military build-up in Asia to assert its dominance, even if that leads to war with China.

Trump and his advisors have not criticised the objective of Obama’s “pivot” but rather its ineffectiveness. They advocate more aggressive methods. Trump has pledged to expand the US army by 90,000 personnel and the navy by 40 ships to 350. The naval expansion is above all aimed against China, with Trump advisor Rudy Giuliani boasting in November: “At 350, China can’t match us in the Pacific.”

Trump has already made clear that North Korea will be at the top of the foreign policy agenda. Earlier this week, he responded to an announcement by North Korea that it was preparing to test an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching continental America by flatly declaring:

“It won’t happen.” He followed it with a second tweet criticising China for its failure to “help with North Korea”—in other words, to economically bully Pyongyang to meet US demands to dismantle its nuclear arsenal. By threatening unspecified action against North Korea, Trump is also putting Pyongyang’s only ally, China, on notice.

More fundamentally, Trump has threatened to tear up the entire basis for US-Chinese relations since 1979—the One China policy under which Washington recognised Beijing as the sole, legitimate ruler of all China, including Taiwan. He incensed the Chinese regime when he took a phone call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen last month—the first direct contact between US and Taiwanese leaders for nearly four decades.

As he declared that he would not feel bound by the One China policy, Trump lashed out at Beijing not only over trade and North Korea, but also for “building a massive fortress in the middle of the South China Sea, which they shouldn’t be doing.” His remark signals that he will confront China more aggressively in the South China Sea, where the Obama administration has already risked naval clashes by sending US warships into territorial waters claimed by China on so-called freedom of navigation operations.

If there were any doubt that he is preparing for war, Trump’s tweet prior to Christmas that the US must “greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear [weapons] capacity” is a chilling warning of his reckless and militarist intentions. The logic of the trade war that Trump and his advisors advocate is the inexorable slide toward war between nuclear-armed powers. The only social force capable of halting the drive to war is the international working class, unified on the basis of a socialist perspective to put an end to the social order that gives rise to war—capitalism and its outmoded division of the world into rival nation states.