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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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18.07.2020

Facing mounting crisis, US lashes out against China

This week marked a major escalation in the US war drive against China. Confronted with deep economic and social crisis at home and his own worsening election prospects, President Trump is aggressively confronting China across the whole range of potentially explosive issues.

In an ominous sign, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, for the first time, formally branded this week virtually all of China's claims in the South China Sea as "illegal," denouncing its alleged "bullying" of smaller powers and flouting of "the international rules-based system."

The hypocrisy involved is staggering. The US has refused to ratify the very law—the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea—that Pompeo has seized upon to condemn China. The so-called rules-based system is one in which Washington sets the rules—for others—while flouting international law at will. The record of US imperialist thuggery, including of illegal invasions, military interventions and coups, stretches back for more than a century.

Pompeo's statement sets the stage for a dramatic escalation of US military might in the South China Sea which Beijing has declared is a "core interest"—that is, one in which there is no room for compromise. Earlier this month, the US Navy staged "high end" war games involving two aircraft carrier strike groups in these strategic waters provocatively near key Chinese military bases in southern China. This week, to underline Pompeo's statement, a US destroyer conducted another so-called "freedom of navigation" operation close to Chinese-controlled islets in the South China Sea.

In a press conference Tuesday, Trump reinforced his administration's bellicose stance towards China by announcing a series of punitive measures towards Hong Kong, including ending preferential trade treatment for the Chinese territory and a ban on the export of sensitive technologies. He has also signed off on the Hong Kong Autonomy Act which paves the way for sanctions on Chinese officials involved in imposing a new national security law on Hong Kong.

The Trump administration has also recently imposed sanctions on Chinese officials involved in alleged human rights abuses of Muslim Uyghurs in the western province of Xinjiang and inside Tibet. While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses police state measures widely, including particularly against the working class, the US has not the slightest concern for the democratic rights of people in Hong Kong, Xinjiang or Tibet. Rather, in what is a well-established modus operandi, Washington is exploiting the issue of "human rights" to further its own predatory interests—in this case the undermining and fragmentation of the rival that it regards as the chief threat to its global hegemony.

At the press conference, Trump launched into a savage attack on China reiterating the litany of unsubstantiated allegations and outright lies that are now his stock in trade. He accused China of "stealing" American technologies, "pillaging our factories" and "ripping off" the American economy. To deflect from his own criminal negligence in handling the COVID-19 pandemic that has cost the lives of nearly 140,000 Americans, Trump once again accused China of "concealing the virus and unleashing it upon the world"—without providing a shred of evidence.

Trump's rambling, and at times incoherent, comments were nominally directed against his presumptive Democrat rival for the presidency, Joe Biden. However, the fact that Trump and Biden are both accusing each other of being "weak" on China only underscores the bipartisan character of the aggressive US targeting of Beijing. Trump continued and accelerated the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" that was aimed at subordinating China to American interests. A *Financial Times* commentator noted this week: "To be in Washington is to sense a nation sliding into open-ended conflict against China with eerily little debate."

Trump is upping the ante against China virtually on a daily basis. The *New York Times* reported this week that the White House is considering an unprecedented travel ban against all 90 million members of the Chinese Communist Party, as well as their families. This extraordinary measure would in effect sanction the entire administrative and political

apparatus of the world's second largest economy. Legislation previously used on a racist basis to ban travel to the US from Muslim countries would be exploited to impose a blatantly political move against China.

The resort to such extreme measures calculated to provoke retaliation by China is a measure of the depth of the crisis in Washington and the desperation not only of the Trump administration but the whole political establishment. Having failed to reassert its domination through a quarter century of brutal military occupations in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, US imperialism is careering blindly towards a war with a nuclear-armed power that would engulf the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated all of the underlying contradictions of capitalism. Amid a resurgence of the class struggle globally, the Trump administration is not the only government being driven to recklessly project mounting social tensions at home outwards against an external enemy.

While worried commentators are warning of a new Cold War, the confrontation between the Washington and Beijing will not be a re-run of the rivalry between the US and the former Soviet Union. Confronted with its historic decline, American imperialism cannot tolerate a "peaceful co-existence" with a rising economic power that, by its very existence, threatens its global dominance.

For its part, Beijing has no progressive answer as the US aggressively seeks to undermine, challenge and confront it on every front—diplomatically, economically and militarily. The fragile CCP regime represents the country's ultra-wealthy capitalist elite and sits on top of its own social time bomb, making futile attempts to appease Washington, while engaging in a dangerous arms race that can only end in disaster for humanity. It is utterly incapable of making any appeal to the one social force capable of halting the drive to war—the international working class.

The accelerating slide towards world war will undoubtedly provoke opposition from workers and young people around the world. That opposition, however, has to be welded into a unified international anti-war movement of the working class based on a socialist program and directed at overturning the capitalist system and abolishing its outmoded division of the world into rival nation states. That is the perspective for which the International Committee of the Fourth International fights.

World Socialist 17.07.2020