

Amid Government Shutdown, US Officials Push “Pivot to Asia”

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As US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel wraps up a visit to South Korea today, the first part of a diplomatic offensive to boost military alliances across the Asia-Pacific, Washington officials are responding to the crisis caused by the US government shutdown by pushing harder for their provocative “pivot to Asia” strategy aimed at militarily isolating China.

This is the Obama administration’s next major foreign policy initiative after opening up talks with Iran and Syria, following the postponement of the US war drive against Syria. After Hagel leaves South Korea, he will join US Secretary of State John Kerry in Tokyo for talks with their Japanese counterparts.

The centerpiece of the diplomatic push is to be a meticulously scripted eight-day tour of South East Asia by President Barack Obama. In visits to Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines, he is to discuss trade deals, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) regional agreement; sign military basing deals, including in the Philippines, a former US colony; and attend regional summits—the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and the East Asia Summit (EAS).

Now, however, there is speculation that Obama may decide he cannot leave the United States while the government is mired in a shutdown, with hundreds of thousands of federal workers furloughed. An extended shutdown might force Obama to cancel his Asian visits. Senior Obama advisor Dan Pfeiffer told Bloomberg News: “There are logistical questions.”

The shutdown, especially if it were prolonged, could trigger a renewed economic slowdown in the United States, threatening to undermine economic activity and the availability of credit in the Asia-Pacific, which depends on the United States as an export market.

The shutdown has intensified questions about the long-term ability of the US to exercise military hegemony in Asia. Already, rising popular opposition to war inside the United States, together with Russian and Iranian threats to intervene, has led to a pause in the US-led drive to war with Syria.

Numerous right-wing regimes across the Asia-Pacific have developed highly aggressive policies, often with US encouragement, directed against China or North Korea—a state under Chinese protection. They now form a constituency demanding increased US imperialist penetration of the Asia-Pacific, in order to counterbalance the threat of Chinese retaliation for their own provocative policies.

These regimes include Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s government in Japan, which is working

with US officials to develop a doctrine for offensive Japanese military action in locations like the East China Sea, where Japan is embroiled in a bitter dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The South Korean regime is preparing a doctrine of “pre-emptive strikes” in response to perceived threats of nuclear missile attacks from the North.

As for the Philippines, it is preparing to sign a basing agreement with Washington after engaging in repeated clashes with Chinese vessels in the South China Sea.

US officials are reacting by using the threat of the shutdown to insist that Washington has to step up its intervention in Asia to reassure these allies across the region.

Former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said: “I can’t imagine the president going abroad with a government that’s shut down.” He denounced Congressional Republicans, adding: “It’s a political game that’s doing damage to national security. The biggest threat to our national security right now is our failure to govern, [as other nations] will view that as a weakness.”

Charles Kupchan, a senior fellow at the US Council on Foreign Relations, said: “It’s particularly important in East Asia, where countries are uncertain about the long-term geopolitical trends and are trying to decide whether to tilt towards the United States or towards China. And as a consequence it’s an important time for Obama to show that Washington has its lights on.”

From South Korea, Defense Secretary Hagel attacked the shutdown as “an astoundingly irresponsible way to govern ... I think it’s very, very important that we continue to assure our allies in this region of the world that we are committed to these alliances.”

Though the US deployment of 28,500 troops is unpopular in South Korea, Hagel stressed Monday that Washington would not reduce the number in the country or the region. “There’s never been any consideration of changing our force protection or force presence here in Korea or anywhere else in the area,” Hagel said. “We’ll continue to do what we’ve got to do to manage [spending] reductions and at the same time assure our partners ... specifically here in the Asia-Pacific that our commitments still stand.”

US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey met with his South Korean counterpart, General Jeong Seung-jo, to discuss military coordination between the two armies.

Dempsey said budgetary issues did not come up in the meeting and downplayed the impact the government shutdown would have on US military policy. “The assumption is—and it’s a valid assumption—that where our greatest national interests lie, we will find a way to find the resources to make the kind of commitments we need to make,” he said.

This simply demonstrates that the hundreds of thousands of federal workers in the United States are not being furloughed because there is no money, but because Wall Street and the US military-intelligence apparatus views them as dispensable. The American ruling elite is, however, committed to spending massive sums to support unpopular and provocative military deployments across the Asia-Pacific region.

US and South Korean officials postponed a decision over when to transfer operational control of joint US and South Korean forces in the Korean peninsula from US to South Korean officers.

Yesterday, Hagel visited South Korea's largest military parade in a decade, together with President Park Geun-hye, the daughter of late military dictator General Park Chung-hee. The parade unveiled domestically-made, long-range cruise missiles capable of hitting targets up to 500 or 1,000 kilometres away.

This would allow South Korea to strike targets in North Korea at will, and underlines the dangers posed by the South Korean military doctrine allowing for "pre-emptive" strikes.

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