

# US-China Confrontation in the Asia Pacific Region

Unnecessary Fussing: China, the United States and APEC

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*The parents on the global stage of power are bickering and now, such entertainingly distracting forums as APEC (the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum) are left without a unifying message. This should hardly matter, but the absence of a final communiqué of agreement is being treated in some circles as the preliminary perturbations to conflict between Beijing and Washington.*

Often forgotten at the end of such deliberations is their acceptable irrelevance. APEC as a forum was already [deemed](#) by former Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans in 1993 to be “four adjectives in search of a noun.” Charles E Morrison of the East-West Centre in Hawaii [noted](#) another view. “Some wag described it as an international dating service for leaders.” On this occasion, the dates failed to reach a merry accord.

Such gatherings provide distractions and fodder for the global press corps to identify trouble, brewing or actual. They can also supply the converse: that the state of adherence to international norms, whatever they may be, is better because of such meetings. But in Port Moresby, coarseness emerged with tartness. China and the United States were jostling.

US Vice President Mike Pence, who revealed his interest in the summit by basing himself in Australia rather than staying in Port Moresby, threw down what must have been a gauntlet of sorts. At the Hudson Institute in October, he was moodily [accusing](#) Beijing of pilfering military blueprints, “using that stolen technology” to turn “ploughshares into swords on a massive scale”.

A puzzled Pence seemed to be gazing at a mirror, accusing Beijing of “employing a whole-of-government, using political, economic and military tools, as well as propaganda, to advance its influence and benefit its interests in the United States.”

At the APEC gathering itself, Pence made [it clear](#) that there would be no warming of relations with Beijing. Rather amusingly, he insisted that,

“The United States deals openly, fairly. We do not offer a constricting belt or a one-way road.”

China’s Xi Jinping, for his part, was also in a mood to impress.

“Unilateralism and protectionism will not solve problems but add uncertainty to the world economy.”

The forum was filled with more rumours than a village from the middle ages. Chinese officials, went [one](#) well flighted suggestion, supposedly forced their way into the office of Rimbink Pato, PNG's foreign minister, being most insistent on discussing the wording of a section of the proposed communiqué. A [suggested](#) sentence featured in the agitated encounter: "We agreed to fight protectionism, including all unfair trade practices." So worded, it was clear what the intended meaning was: Beijing was being singled out as a possible purveyor of unfair trade practices. These were deemed "malicious rumours" by the Chinese delegation.

At the conclusion of the summit, Papua New Guinea, as host, expressed its concerns through a rattled Prime Minister Peter O'Neill: the "giants" had disagreed; the "entire world" was worried. Other delegates bore witness to the Beijing-Washington tension, and were similarly left disappointed. New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern was tepid in [suggesting](#) that there were "some minor differences in the international trade environment". She claimed, as did others, that

"it was disappointing that we were unable to have a communiqué issued at the conclusion of the APEC meeting... but it shouldn't diminish from the areas of substantive agreement."

Former US Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson is one who is pessimistic about such "minor differences" between the powers, [insisting](#) that nothing less than an "Economic Iron Curtain" risks coming down upon the globe. Given Paulson's stint at that rogue-of-rogue banks Goldman Sachs, such warnings should be treated with due caution, largely because they fly in the face of the ideology of, to use Paulson's own words, the "free flow of investment and trade".

Commentators such as veteran journalist Tony Walker did not spare the drama, [peering](#) into the implications with the keenness of a history student in search of parallels. "Port Moresby may not be Yalta, nor, it might be said, is it Potsdam." (Highly tuned, is Walker's embellishing antennae.) "But for a moment at the weekend the steamy out-of-the-way Papua New Guinea capital found itself at the intersection of great power combustibility." Yet no bullets were fired, nor vessels launched.

The disagreement is merely the consequence of initiatives that are grating on both powers. China is getting bolder with its global investment and infrastructure strategy, wooing states with no-strings financing. It is huffing in the South China Sea. The United States can no longer claim to be the primary occupant of the world's playgrounds, the bully of patronage, sponsorship and cant haloed by that advertising slogan, "the American way of life". Building sand castles is a task that will have to be shared, but bullies tend to eventually let the punches fly.

The result, at the moment, is a trade war of simmering intensity that continues to govern relations between Beijing and Washington. APEC was meant to supply a forum of diffusion but merely affirmed the status quo. (On January, US tariffs on \$250 billion worth of Chinese goods will increase from 10 per cent to 25 per cent.)

Countries keen to back both powers find themselves facing split loyalties, though that point is often exaggerated. China knows where many countries in the South East Asian-Australasia region will turn to if the beads of sweat start to show. Singapore's Prime

Minister Lee Hsien Loong was trying to make the obvious sound simple. "It's easiest not to take sides when everybody else is on the same side. But if you are friends with two countries which are on different sides, then sometimes it is possible to get along with both, sometimes it's more awkward if you try to get along with both."

The next show takes place in Buenos Aires, and that November 30 gathering of the G20 promises another re-run of tensions. On that occasion, President Donald Trump will be bothered to turn up. Again, such a summit is bound to yield to the law of acceptable chaos and modestly bearable tension.

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