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## *Pompeo visit heightens US-China rift*

The Chinese regime took the opportunity of a visit to Beijing by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Monday to condemn the Trump administration for ratcheting up economic and military tensions between the two countries.

Pompeo's visit followed the bellicose anti-China stance spelt out by Vice President Mike Pence last Thursday. Pence accused China of interfering in the US congressional elections, seeking to bring down Trump's presidency and working to "erode America's military advantages." The vice president openly threatened Beijing that the US would seek to maintain its global dominance by "modernising our nuclear arsenal." Pence denounced Beijing's persecution of Christians, democratic activists, and ethnic Uighur and Tibetans, signalling that Washington intends to exploit human rights issues to demonise and seek to undermine the Chinese regime.

Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* on Monday, commentator Walter Russell Mead described Pence's speech as marking the "biggest shift in US-China relations since Henry Kissinger's 1971 visit to Beijing," after which the US established diplomatic ties with the Peoples Republic. Also writing in the *Journal*, Gerald F. Seib described the speech as the "product of extensive behind-the-scenes work, and may come to be seen as an inflection point in the complex trajectory of relations between Washington and Beijing."

In the wake of Pence's diatribe, Chinese president Xi Jinping refused to meet with Pompeo, instead delegating foreign minister Wang Yi to speak with him.

Testifying to the fraught state of relations, Wang publicly lambasted the United States for "constantly interfering in China's internal and external affairs." He denounced the sweeping US tariffs on Chinese goods, Washington's latest arms sale to Taiwan and its naval incursions into Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea. He declared: "US actions have damaged China's rights and interests, undermined China-US mutual trust and cast a shadow over China-US relations."

Pompeo responded with the blunt assertion that the US had "fundamental disagreement" with China on the range of economic and strategic issues canvassed by Wang.

The *Financial Times* reported this week that Trump does not intend to even discuss trade issues with Xi Jinping during the G20 summit in Argentina next month, unless China offers sweeping concessions. The US is above all demanding that China end its subsidies to key high tech industries that compete with American corporations.

Ahead of the G20, reports suggest that the US military is preparing a major provocation in the South China Sea some time over the coming weeks, in purported retaliation for a Chinese warship coming within 41 metres of an American destroyer on September 30.

Japan, Australia and other countries in the region have been drawn into the calculated preparations by the US for a military confrontation with China.

Australia's defence minister announced last month that the French and Australian navies are planning a joint "freedom of navigation" challenge to Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.

This week, American, Japanese and Filipino troops carried out a joint exercise in the Philippines, rehearsing amphibious landings on small islands. According to the Japanese defence forces, the exercise was the first time that Japanese armoured vehicles had been used on foreign soil since the end of World War II.

As well as the South China Sea, the Korean peninsula is also looming as a source of bitter conflict.

Pompeo travelled to Beijing following a summit in Pyongyang on Sunday with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. As it provokes tensions with China, the Trump administration is continuing its efforts to draw North Korea, through a combination of threats and overtures, into the US strategic orbit.

Trump cancelled a planned visit by Pompeo to North Korea in August, alleging that Pyongyang had not honoured commitments that Kim Jong-un made to the US president during their face-to-face summit in Singapore in June.

Talks between Kim Jong-un and South Korean president Moon Jae-in last month revived the diplomatic process. They led to a series of tentative agreements to develop economic ties and undertakings by the North that it would comply with US dictates that it dismantle its small nuclear weapons program.

At the summit with Pompeo on Sunday, Kim Jong-un sought to satisfy the US demand for the “complete” and “verifiable” dismantling of the North’s nuclear weapons by agreeing that international inspectors could visit its main test site at Pungghye-ri. North Korea claims that it has destroyed the facility.

The North Korean news agency lauded the talks with Pompeo as “productive and wonderful.” Trump responded by announcing on Tuesday that he will hold a second summit with Kim Jong-un in the near future. The US is encouraging South Korea to push ahead with various initiatives aimed at preparing the conditions for the opening up of transport links and significant investment into North Korea.

Discussion is continuing on the prospect of the US and South Korea signing a peace treaty with the North to formally end the 1950–53 Korean War, which technically is only in a state of cease fire. Pyongyang, well aware that the US organised the overthrow of the Iraqi and Libyan regimes after they agreed to dismantle their weapons programs, wants a guarantee of its security from Washington.

China is observing the diplomatic moves on the Korean Peninsula with barely concealed concern.

Shi Yinhong of Renmin University in Beijing told the *New York Times* this week that, in response to the US ambitions toward North Korea, “China cannot and is not willing to help it in any substantial extent, even putting aside the rottenness of bilateral relations.”

Zhao Tong from the Carnegie-Tsinghua Centre for Global Policy in Beijing told the *South China Morning Post* on Monday: “It would be unacceptable for Beijing for an end of war declaration to be announced by the two Koreas and the US only, without China ... What China cares about the most is the formality rather than the substance itself. It does not want to appear to be only superpower being left out in the process,” he said.

According to South Korean president Moon Jae-in, Xi Jinping intends to conduct his first presidential visit to Pyongyang “soon”. In defiance of Washington, China has also relaxed some of the economic sanctions that it agreed to impose as part of the US-led effort to compel North Korea to enter into talks.

Amid escalating economic and strategic conflicts with the US, Beijing will do everything it can to prevent the isolated North Korean state from being transformed into a virtual American client state on China’s border.