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American Military Power in Asia and the Trump Factor

By Tom Engelhardt
December 13, 2016

Originally posted at TomDispatch.

"Did China ask us if it was OK to… build a massive military complex in the middle of the South China Sea? I don't think so!" tweeted President-Elect Donald Trump after shattering nearly 40 years of U.S.-China diplomatic protocol by having a telephone conversation with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen.

The call – the first official contact between a U.S. president or president-elect and Taipei since President Jimmy Carter switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in the late 1970s – was prime Trump. So was the tweet, a no-nonsense response to typical Chinese military provocations.

At least, that's one way to look at it.

Of course, if China's president Xi Jinping was a social media blowhard, he could have easily tweeted back: "Did America ask us if it was OK to… maintain a massive military complex of more than 100 bases in nearby Japan? I don't think so!"

Or the Chinese leader could have tweeted: "Did America ask us if it was OK to… rent space at the massive U-Tapao military complex in nearby Thailand? I don't think so!"

Or Xi could have tweeted: "Did America ask us if it was OK to… use portions of the military complexes at Antonio Bautista Air Base, Basa Air Base, Fort Magsaysay, Lumbia Air Base, and Mactan-Benito Ebuen Air Base in the nearby Philippines? I don't think so!"

China's president might have tweeted: "Did America ask us if it was OK to… deploy troops to a military complex near Darwin, Australia? I don't think so!"

Xi could have even tweeted "Did America ask us if it was OK to… maintain four major Army facilities in nearby South Korea at Daegu and Yongsan as well as Camps Red Cloud and Humphreys; not to mention air bases at Osan and Kunsan and a naval facility at Chinhae? I don't think so!"

Had he enough characters to spare, Xi might have mentioned U.S. access to key facilities in Singapore or its other Pacific military strongholds like Hawaii, Guam, and Saipan. He could even have mentioned the "massive" U.S. military presence in Asia – the U.S. Pacific Fleet, U.S. Army Pacific, U.S. Pacific Air Force, U.S. Marine Forces Pacific, U.S. Special Operations Command Pacific, and U.S. Forces Korea as well as the U.S. Eighth Army (also in Korea) – for which there are no Chinese analogs operating in or around the Americas.

Even if Xi Jinping were to counter Trump's twitter storm with gale-force tweets of his own, it's fair to assume that the president-elect wouldn't be swayed. American leaders don't view U.S. power projection through the lens of those on the receiving end. Meanwhile, the American public remains mostly ignorant of the ways in which the U.S. garrisons the globe and rings its rivals with military bases.

Today, Tim Shorrock, a long-time Asia expert, seeks to do his part in obliterating this obliviousness with his inaugural *TomDispatch* article. The author of *Spies for Hire: The Secret World of Intelligence Outsourcing*, he delves into how the election of Donald Trump will affect President Obama's famed "Asian pivot" by teasing apart the tangled history of U.S. foreign policy in that region, and analyzing what it all means for the longstanding U.S. military footprint in Japan and South Korea. ~ *Nick Turse*

Cops of the Pacific?
The US Military's Role in Asia in the Age of Trump
By Tim Shorrock

Despite the attention being given to America's roiling wars and conflicts in the Greater Middle East, crucial decisions about the global role of U.S. military power may be made in a region where, as yet, there are no hot wars: Asia. Donald Trump will arrive in the Oval Office in January at a moment when Pentagon preparations for a future U.S.-Japan-South Korean triangular military alliance, long in the planning stages, may have reached a crucial make-or-break moment. Whether those plans go forward and how the president-elect responds to them could help shape our world in crucial ways into the distant future.

On November 18th, Shinzo Abe, Japan's most conservative prime minister since the Cold War, became the first foreign head of state to meet with Donald Trump after his surprise election

victory. The stakes for Abe were high. His rightist Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has run Japan for much of the last 70 years, has been one of America's most reliable, consistent, and subservient allies. Yet during the campaign, Trump humiliated him, as well as the leaders of nearby South Korea, with bombastic threats to withdraw U.S. forces from both countries if they didn't take further steps to defend themselves.

Even more shocking was Trump's proposal that Japan and South Korea develop their own atomic weapons to counter North Korea's rising power as a nuclear state. That left the governments of both countries bewildered – particularly Japan, which lost tens of thousands of lives when the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were incinerated by American atomic bombs in World War II. (Hundreds of Koreans in Japan died in those attacks as well.) Trump made these statements despite the LDP's ardent support over the decades for American wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, and the Japanese government's payment of around $2 billion annually to maintain a string of U.S. bases, primarily on the island of Okinawa, which host over 48,000 American soldiers.

Abe apparently got what he wanted. During an hour-long meeting at Trump Tower on New York's Fifth Avenue, he and the president-elect agreed that their military alliance was stable and capped their discussions with a friendly exchange of golf equipment. "I am convinced Mr. Trump is a leader in whom I can have great confidence," Abe declared to a gaggle of mostly Japanese reporters. The president-elect, he said, had established the trust "essential for the U.S.-Japanese relationship."

That same day, a high-level delegation representing Park Guen-Hye, South Korea's scandal-ridden president (who, three weeks later, would be impeached by the Korean parliament), was also in New York. She and her right-wing Saenuri Party had been no less disturbed than Abe by the tenor of Trump's campaign. According to a recent analysis by the *Wall Street Journal*, South Korea already pays about $900 million a year, or about 40% of the costs of the network of U.S. bases it hosts. It also has had a special relationship with the U.S. military that has no parallel elsewhere. Under the U.S.-Korean Combined Forces Command, established in 1978, should war ever break out on the peninsula, an American general will be in charge not just of the 28,000 U.S. personnel permanently stationed there, but of more than half a million South Korean troops as well.

Unlike Abe, however, Park's delegation was shunted off to discuss its concerns with Michael Flynn, the retired general who will soon be Trump's national security adviser. A few days earlier, Park had spoken to Trump for 10 minutes by phone. In that conversation, the president-elect reportedly stressed his admiration for Korea's economic prowess. "I've bought a lot of Korean products; they're great," he told Park, according to a Reuters correspondent in Seoul. Flynn would also reassure the Koreans that their alliance with Washington was "vital." So, on the surface at least, with less than six weeks to go until the Trump era officially begins, all is well and seemingly normal when it comes to U.S. relations with its allies in East Asia.

The Earth Shakes in Asia

Despite the apparent post-election softening of Trump's positions, however, his victory continues to cause consternation. In Tokyo, Japanese politicians of every stripe expressed doubts that the alliance with the U.S. could withstand the shock of the new American president. When Trump takes power, Shigeru Ishiba, a former defense minister and powerful figure in the LDP, told foreign reporters, "Japan can't just sit back and do what it's told to do by the United States." On the subject of the ties between the two countries, this rare sort of public dissent was one reason outgoing Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter flew to Tokyo on December 7th to reaffirm the alliance as "unlike any other."

The response in Seoul has been similar. "Koreans must think seriously about their ability to defend themselves when the U.S. they have long regarded as a friend and protector becomes a mere business acquaintance," the conservative newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* editorialized on November 10th. That was the day after the South Korean military held an unexpected emergency meeting to "assess the possible impact" of Trump's presidency and then established a task force to ensure that alliance agreements were kept in the years to come.

While fears of a more nationalistic America coursed through Asia, Trump's campaign rhetoric sent shudders through Washington as well. Decades of carefully laid plans by the Pentagon and the foreign policy establishment for tighter military ties with Japan and South Korea suddenly seemed threatened. In challenging the importance of such alliances, Trump could not help but implicitly question the essence of post-World War II U.S. military dominance in the Pacific, and of the primacy of Japan and South Korea as forward bases for the Pentagon in the "containment" of Asia's rising power, China.

Add one more thing to all of this: Trump's threats to withdraw American forces from the region have undermined President Obama's "Asian pivot" strategy, which has sparked the most significant U.S. military buildup in that region since the end of the Vietnam War. The steady, if slow, shift in military resources toward Asia remains highly dependent on the base structure that's been built up there since World War II and the Korean War and on the nearly 100,000 U.S. personnel now stationed in Japan and Korea. The establishment's fear that all of this might begin to unravel has been palpable in Washington since Trump's election.

"The president-elect has said rather curious things about our allies," lamented John Hamre, a former deputy secretary of defense who is now president and CEO of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), which functions as an unofficial Pentagon think tank. Speaking at a November 21st conference on improving cooperation between the U.S. and Korean arms industries, Hamre obliquely criticized Trump for "implying we're not in Korea to help ourselves but just to help Korea." Not so, he insisted. The new president needs to understand that "we feel our strategic interests are at risk in Korea" and that those "require us to stay there. We should be grateful to have such a strong ally in South Korea."

As Hamre's audience well understood, the U.S. bases in the region have long been considered critical to the Pentagon's forward-based military strategy in Asia.

Nailing a Triple Alliance in Place Before Trump Takes Power

In the last few years, the Obama administration and the Pentagon have used China's expanding military might and the never-ending standoff with nuclearizing North Korea to incorporate Japan and South Korea ever more fully into a vision of an American-dominated Pacific. One stumbling block has been the deep animosity between the two countries, given that Japan colonized Korea from 1910 to 1945; later, during the Korean War, which devastated the peninsula, Japan profited handsomely by supplying U.S. forces with vehicles and other military supplies. In addition, Korean anger over Japan's refusal to apologize for its use of Korean sexual slaves ("comfort women") during World War II remains a powerful force to overcome.

Until recently, the U.S. has had the help of a compliant leader, President Park Guen-Hye who, just as the Trumpian moment begins, finds herself scrambling for her political life as the first Korean president to be legally toppled since 1960. (An interim president, Park's conservative Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn, will run the government until the Constitutional Court reviews the legality of her impeachment, a process that could take up to six months.) Despite all these problems, and while never quite publicly stating the obvious, American officials have been focused on putting in place a triangular alliance that would transform the Japanese and South Korean militaries into proxy forces capable of helping extend U.S. power and influence ever further into Asia (and also, potentially, elsewhere in the world).

On the eve of Donald Trump's election, such arrangements were quickly reaching fruition. As 2016 draws to an end, the Pentagon appears to be rushing to make Obama's Asian pivot and the militarization of the region that goes with it permanent before Trump can act or, for that matter, the United States can lose its Korean political allies (which could happen if Park's conservative ruling party is replaced in next year's elections).

Here are some recent steps taken to cement in place a U.S.-Japan-South Korean alliance:

* On November 23rd, Japan and South Korea signed their first military intelligence agreement that, according to the Korean government-owned *Yonhap* news agency, will allow the two countries to "better cope with evolving North Korean missile and nuclear threats despite historical animosities." This pact, the General Security of Military Information Agreement, has long been pushed by the Pentagon as a way to solidify the three-way alliance. When negotiations between Tokyo and Seoul broke down in 2012, American officials led the successful effort to get them back on track. (North Korea, according to its official news agency, views the arrangement as a serious threat "pursuant to the U.S. strategic interests to hold hegemony in Northeast Asia.")

* The construction of a maritime-based Aegis missile defense system aimed at China and North Korea that will link Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul. Not surprisingly, this has provoked deep concerns in Beijing, while sparking a broad, if localized, South Korean movement opposed to the building of a vast naval complex considered critical to Korean participation in the system on Jeju Island. "Missile defense is the core issue of the trilateral alliance," Choi Sung-Hee, a South Korean historian and one of the chief organizers of the protests at the Geongjang naval base, told me last spring when I visited the island.

* A historic 2015 change in Japan's national security law that allows the government to send its "Self-Defense Forces" (SDF) into military operations overseas for the first time since World War

II. In Korea, this is seen as a legal mechanism that paves the way for Japanese forces to someday be deployed on their peninsula in case a war with the North looms. As *Hankyoreh* put it recently, "Landing troops from the Japanese Self-Defense Force in South Korea to rescue Japanese citizens is one of Japan's main goals, and it is a request that Japan has repeatedly made to South Korea." Like the intelligence-sharing pact, it's a change that has long been sought by the United States.

* An escalation of military and economic pressure on North Korea, including flights of U.S. nuclear-armed stealth B-2 bombers into Korean skies and intensified unilateral economic sanctions against dictator Kim Jong-Un and many of his top military aides. (The U.N. Security Council, with China's support, recently endorsed some sanctions as well.) In addition, stepped-up military exercises with South Korea have included practicing both preemptive strikes on the North's nuclear sites and the "decapitation" of that country's leaders. In other words, to use a phrase that previously hadn't made it out of the Greater Middle East and North Africa: regime change. Both Abe and Park have been solidly behind such developments, and Park's government has actually been encouraging the Pentagon to do more.

* A decision by the Pentagon to permanently station a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system designed to counter incoming North Korean ballistic missiles in South Korea over the strong objections of many Korean citizens and politicians who dispute its value as a deterrent against the North. Despite its defensive nature, THAAD has also been denounced by China as a provocation. In November, Beijing made clear that it would regard the ultimate decision about installing THAAD as a "political weather vane" in its evaluation of the Trump administration. In recent days, Japanese defense officials said that they are studying the idea of deploying U.S. THAAD batteries in Japan as well. Such a move, the *Japan Times* pointed out, "would enable effective THAAD operations and information-sharing to be conducted among the three allies."

It goes without saying that such developments will greatly benefit the U.S. military industrial complex. Missile defense is a major boon for American military contractors and in particular a potential bonanza for Lockheed Martin in particular, which makes both the Aegis vessels and the THAAD system. These industrial projects would also deepen the developing trilateral alliance.

After signing a $490 million contract with South Korea and Japan to expand their Aegis missile defense fleets, Lockheed Martin noted, for instance, that the deal "comes on the heels of a successful joint-missile defense exercise… in which Aegis destroyers from the three nations shared data while detecting and tracking a simulated missile threat." As the military newspaper *Stars & Stripes* noted, that exercise, which took place last June, was "aimed as much at fostering cooperation between the two Asian neighbors as preparing for a possible North Korean attack."

Of course, none of this was discussed during the presidential campaign. But one reason Hillary Clinton received such solid support from Republican foreign policy establishment hawks like former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage was her staunch support for the Asian pivot and the Pentagon's stepped-up presence in the region. Clinton was a sure bet to extend the buildup in Asia, deepen the trilateral alliance, and continue the current hostile policy toward China and North Korea. Now, the Pentagon and U.S. military planners can only hope that

Donald Trump, already in a contretemps with China over receiving phone congratulations for his election from the president of Taiwan, does the same.

In the meantime, there are two other potential holes in this strategy that will undoubtedly also come into play next year: a years-old, intense, and still growing popular opposition to the U.S. Marines' base in Futenma**,** Okinawa, the Japanese island that is home to 70% of U.S. bases in that country, and the massive political protests in South Korea that have now toppled President Park and could bring an end to her pro-corporate, pro-U.S. government.

Global Cops and Robbers

When the Cold War ended in 1991, the rationale for all the American troops then based in Asia – namely, the communist threat – suddenly became less clear. U.S. officials, grimly determined not to see them go just because their raison d'être may have disappeared, began promoting the idea that a permanent presence in Asia was inevitable for the purposes of "stability." As historian Chalmers Johnson chronicled in his 2000 masterpiece, *Blowback: The Cost and Consequences of American Empire*, the chief ideologists for this view were Harvard professor Joseph Nye, who had been an assistant secretary of defense during the Carter administration, and Armitage, who had held a similar position at the Pentagon in the Reagan administration. American forces in Asia, Nye wrote in 1995, ensured "the stability – the oxygen – that has helped provide for East Asian economic growth."

More than two decades later, that vague but all-encompassing code word for American domination of the Pacific region remains the primary justification for the Asian pivot. As Pentagon chief Carter typically put it in a recent *Foreign Affairs* article*:* "Every port call, flight hour, exercise, and operation [in the pivot] has added a stitch to the fabric of the Asia-Pacific's stability." In other words, we're to remain the cops of the Pacific and the world.

But as global and Pacific cops, we need help. From the early post-Cold War years until today, American officials have pressured Japan to loosen its peace constitution (imposed during the post-World War II U.S. occupation) and allow its forces to be used abroad in conjunction with the U.S. military. That campaign finally bore fruit in 2015, when Abe managed to pass the new security law.

The precipitating event: the U.S. and Japanese response to the devastating earthquake and nuclear catastrophe at Fukushima in March 2011. American military forces in Japan played an instrumental role in the subsequent rescue operations, dubbed "Operation Tomodachi [friend]." Abe then drove home lessons from this collaboration to convince the Japanese Diet of the necessity of passing a new security law that allows Japan to exercise the right of "collective self-defense" and, for the first time since World War II, allows Japan's Self-Defense Forces to provide logistical and other support globally to U.S. and allied foreign forces. Previously, such support was limited only to areas near Japan.

As a result of this law, which went into effect in 2016, U.S. and Japanese military forces have commenced their first joint military drills and, in September, signed a new logistics agreement

that allows Japan's SDF to supply the U.S. military with fuel and ammunition anywhere in the world. These steps will further enhance U.S.-Japanese military cooperation.

As usual, in the run-up to the new legislation, Abe received a political boost from Nye and Armitage. They got the collaboration ball rolling with a 2012 study for CSIS, "The US-Japan Alliance: Anchoring Stability in Asia." Citing the 2011 earthquake and "Operation Tomodachi," they suggested that Japan's "prohibition of collective self-defense" was "an impediment to the bilateral military alliance."

The 2011 earthquake, they argued, "demonstrated how our two forces can maximize our capabilities when necessary." As a result, a change in the law opening the way to collective self-defense "would allow our forces to respond in full cooperation throughout the security spectrum of peacetime, tension, crisis, and war." The first step, they added, would be for Japan to expand its legal system to encourage the protection of "other international peacekeepers, with force, if necessary" – the exact point of Abe's 2015 law.

Lo and behold! On November 21st, three days after Abe's meeting with Trump, the first contingent of Japan's Self Defense Forces "authorized to use their weapons against enemy combatants while engaged in protection and rescue operations overseas" left Japan for South Sudan. There, they will take part in a U.N. peacekeeping mission. Despite the opposition of a majority of the Japanese public to the move, the dream of an American-led collective global defense, long held by Nye and Armitage, is now in place.

Abe's LDP has also been instrumental in protecting another pillar of Washington's strategy in the Pacific: retaining the island of Okinawa as a major forward base for the U.S. Marines. In the 1990s, following national protests against the rape and murder of an Okinawan schoolgirl by a Marine, Washington agreed to scale down its primary base in Futenma and shift the Marines there to Guam. But after protracted negotiations – and intense pressure exerted by the Bush and then Obama administrations – the drawdown agreement was linked to the right of the Marines to build a new base at Henoko Bay in the northern part of Okinawa. Almost the entire island and its elected officials, from the governor on down, fiercely oppose this idea.

Over the past year, Abe's national police have been engaged in daily combat with citizens fighting such an expansion project, a situation that could well become critical in the early months of a Trump presidency. But so could the political situation in South Korea.

Tensions Rise

While Japan is home to 45,000 American airmen, soldiers, and sailors, South Korea is critical to Washington because it houses the only American ground forces on the Asian mainland. While the primary justification for them is the hostility of North Korea and its ominous nuclear weapons program, the U.S. military also considers its forces in Korea important for "global force projection" elsewhere in Asia.

A recent paper by the Center for a New American Security, a military think-tank founded in 2007, explained the view from the Pentagon's perspective:

"South Korea is the only place on the Asian continent with a U.S. military foothold. The military presence on the peninsula makes South Korea an essential geopolitical 'beachhead' for the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. Second, the U.S.-ROK [Republic of Korea] alliance provides physical territory from which to manage the North Korea problem… The main purpose of the alliance is to deter North Korea, but the U.S.-South Korea alliance is a vital tool for both Seoul and Washington to shape Asia's developing regional order and their respective roles within it."

The catalyst for all such planning has, of course, been North Korea, which is now seen by many military analysts as the toughest problem facing Washington in the foreign sphere. In these years, the Obama administration has refused to engage in any kind of negotiations with that country and its leader, Kim Jong-Un, unless the North Koreans agreed in advance to dismantle the nuclear program that they now see as essential to their national survival.

Since Obama took office in 2009, the North has, in fact, steadily improved its military capabilities. It has tested four nuclear weapons and worked to develop various kinds of missiles. In response, the Pentagon has steadily ratcheted up its military preparedness, in part by conducting massive annual joint exercises with the South Korean military, while from time to time flying nuclear-capable warplanes in Korean skies.

These steps have only heightened tensions with the North and neighboring China, while stirring powerful opposition movements in South Korea. If the intelligence pact with Japan, long sought by the Pentagon, was indeed the next logical step in the confrontation with the North, it has been bitterly opposed by some South Korean opposition lawmakers and much of the public, some of whom have also taken a strong stand against the THAAD anti-missile system. Now, with Park's government teetering, the Pentagon is suddenly concerned that its favored policies will be derailed – or worse, that new presidents in both Seoul, where elections are scheduled for December 2017, and Washington this January could throw the evolving strategic triangular alliance into chaos.

Those were undoubtedly the fears that lurked behind John Hamre's remarks in late October at the Heritage Foundation, when he cautioned against moves that could spark further controversy in South Korea. "We have to do something [so] we don't become an issue in [Korea's] next election," he said. "There's a strong strain in the left parties [there] that America is the problem." (Ironically, Armitage may have added to that concern on December 6th, when he told a CSIS conference on the U.S.-South Korean alliance that he now favored a U.S. policy of regime change in North Korea – something that's anathema not only to South Korean leftists but to many centrists as well.)

As December began, as if to underscore Hamre's point, *USA Today* reported that the growing protests against President Park could shift the country's priorities. "The pro-U.S. foreign policy of South Korean President Park Geun Hye is at risk now that she appears to be on her way out over a growing corruption scandal." CNBC similarly pointed out that the opposition parties pushing for Park's removal were firmly against the emplacement of THAAD and suggested that "South Korea's promise to host advanced American missile defense technology on its soil may fall apart" following Park's political demise.

Aware of the rising tide of criticism, the Pentagon has doubled down on its insistence on THAAD. When a reporter from *Yonhap* asked U.S. defense officials if Park's impeachment or resignation could affect the deployment of the THAAD system, he was told that the plans "remain ongoing, and the alliance continues to move forward with that plan."

So much for respecting Korean democracy.

Alternatives in Asia?

How Donald Trump will deal with these issues is, of course, an open question. During the campaign, he raised the possibility of talking directly to Kim Jong-Un as a way of defusing the nuclear standoff with North Korea – an idea embraced by many Korea specialists and U.S. officials who have, in the past, dealt with that country. Since winning the election, however, he and his aides have been silent on the subject. Based on what the president-elect and his national security chief have reportedly said to the Japanese and South Korean governments, it's possible that his administration may not make any drastic moves soon to upset the three-way military alliance or undermine U.S. security policies in the region. In the unpredictable atmosphere of a Trump Tower presidency, however, there is simply no way yet to know.

Certainly, Trump's recent appointments of Flynn as national security adviser and retired Marine General James Mattis as secretary of defense suggest that his love for the Pentagon and for tough-guy generals may override any desire to upset the military apple cart in Asia and reverse policy developments of the last three decades hurriedly being nailed in place at this very moment. At the same time, he's being warned in no uncertain terms by the Obama administration and former Pentagon officials that North Korea could present his administration with an "explosive" situation that might, in fact, require a military response.

Donald Trump is certainly an unpredictable figure, but at the moment it looks like the only genuine opponents of the status quo may be the democratic opposition movement in South Korea, the anti-base movement in Okinawa, and what remains of the peace movement in the United States. Unfortunately, while the Pentagon has been focused on the military situation in Asia, the American antiwar movement has largely left Asia behind in the decades since the Vietnam War ended.

As we adjust to life under Trump, it might be wise to start looking again for alternatives to our militaristic policies in Asia, for more equitable ties with Japan and South Korea, and for a shift away from confrontation with North Korea and China. Perhaps the massive demonstrations and candlelight vigils that have brought millions of people into the streets of Seoul and other Korean cities, despite the volatile security situation in East Asia, could show us the way.