

Geopolitics: North Korea is just the start of potentially deadly tensions between the US and China

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US-China relations have taken on a disturbing new dimension under Donald Trump, writes Dorothy Guerrero.

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In 2016, US exports to China totalled \$116 billion, while its imports reached \$463 billion. The \$347 billion deficit accounts for almost 70 per cent of America's total trade deficit. Donald Trump's most influential senior advisers, Peter Navarro, who heads the National Trade Council, and US secretary of commerce Wilbur Ross, call China 'the biggest trade cheater in the world'.

They blamed Beijing's non-compliance with trade rules as the main reason for the US trade deficit and said that China was responsible for huge job losses in the US. This and other trade losses drive Trump's aggressive unilateralism, which means levelling the balance of trade with other states and prying open their markets to benefit the US.

That is not new. The balance of power, however, especially in south-east Asia, has changed a lot in the past few years. Dr Charles Santiago, a former NGO trade campaigner turned MP of the opposition Democratic Action Party in Malaysia, says that China is now the dominant superpower in the region: 'It is successfully influencing foreign and military policy of south-east Asian countries through underwriting infrastructure developments like construction of highways, sea and airports in the region.'

Although the US is still by far the largest economy in the world and will be for some time, its withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) will directly impact its trade competitiveness in Asia and will benefit the rival Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) that includes China.

The RCEP, however, is not an alternative that promotes just trade. Joseph Purugganan, Philippine director of Focus on the Global South, says that, 'Just like TPP, RCEP is a corporate trade deal that will do nothing to address inequality and wealth concentration, the destruction of the environment, and the erosion of people's fundamental human rights in Asia.'

Threat of war

The threat of war is increasing in the Korean peninsula as military tensions escalate over North

Korea's nuclear weapons and missile tests. The US, South Korea and Japan want Beijing to pressure Pyongyang to abandon its weapons programmes and crack down on the supposedly 'communist' country's hereditary regime. China opposes any attempt by the US to overthrow the North Korean government as any crackdown or regime collapse there could lead to reunification of the two Koreas, which would in turn mean a unified pro-US Korean peninsula on its doorstep.

The US has already dropped dummy bombs and threatened North Korea with nuclear weapons many times in the past. In his visit to the demilitarised zone that separates the two Koreas, US vice president Mike Pence confirmed that a military solution is on the agenda.

The US is also building a missile defence system in South Korea that is aimed at China. It is not surprising that China perceives this as a threat.

The possibility of President Trump launching a catastrophic war against North Korea is especially worrying as any conflict would be between nuclear powers. Without UN approval it would be a violation of the UN charter, the war powers clause of the US constitution and other US laws.

In addition to escalating tension over North Korea, the South China Sea territorial dispute is also getting out of control. China's massive land reclamation in the disputed reefs and waterway, which is altering the ecosystem in the area, as well as its installation of weapons systems there despite a 2002 agreement with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to exercise 'self-restraint' and avoid activities that could escalate tensions in the region, is heightening its dispute with other claimant countries: Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei and Malaysia.

Both North Korea and the South China Sea problem, if not peacefully resolved, could bring the world to another, deadlier war. Barack Obama committed to shift 60 per cent of US naval assets to the Asia-Pacific region by 2020 under his 'Pivot to Asia' policy. Trump's election promise was to upgrade the US military's hardware and manpower, including the construction of 80 advanced warships.

This escalation of tension, carried out by both sides, is also affecting the contours of international relations in the Asia Pacific region and globally. It poses clear and present challenges to the social movements that are trying to promote social and economic justice, civil liberty, human rights, democracy and ecological equilibrium in their respective countries and across the region.

In the light of these sources of increasing insecurity, social movements are also facing a growing culture of autocracy - Duterte in the Philippines, military rule in Thailand, for example - that is being fostered by this geopolitical instability.

Emboldening autocracy

The Philippines, the US's traditional ally in the region, was supported by an arbitral court ruling of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 2015, which rejected China's claims to more than 80 per cent of the disputed reefs.

As the current chair of the ASEAN, the Philippines could have taken the opportunity to lead the regional bloc behind a common stand on this maritime dispute. However, the current Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte decided not to raise the arbitral court's ruling at this year's ASEAN summit. Duterte expressed contempt for the US in several key speeches and a preference for closer ties with China and Russia due to American interventions in Philippine affairs and the imbalance of US-Philippine relations.

He is increasingly criticised by local and international human rights groups in relation to his militaristic drug policy that has now killed more than 7,000 people since he rose to power in June 2016. The extra-judicial killing of suspected drug users and pushers is part of a worrying trend of growing human rights violations and far-right populist rule in Asia. Most countries in ASEAN are now suffering from this democratic deficit.

Duterte's anti-US posturing failed to convince the opposition Magdalo Party that he is pursuing an independent foreign policy, however. It has recently filed an impeachment complaint against him in the Philippine Congress for betrayal of public trust, culpable violations of the constitution, bribery and other crimes over his alleged secret deals with China and other aspects of his foreign policy.

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P.S.

* Red Pepper, July 11, 2017:

<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/north-korea-is-just-the-start-of-potentially-deadly-tensions-between-the-us-and-china/>

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