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The implications of Bush's diplomatic debacle in Asia

By Barry Grey
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President Bush returned to Washington November 21 after a week-long, four-nation tour of Asia that underscored the crisis of his administration both at home and abroad. At the same time, Bush's visit highlighted the US government's determination to continue its aggression in Iraq and a diplomatic and military strategy aimed at countering the growing economic and political influence of China—a strategy that leads in the direction of a military confrontation with the rising Asian power.

At every stop on his tour, Bush was dogged by the consequences, both within the US and internationally, of the disastrous US military intervention in Iraq. What was intended to demonstrate the leading role of Washington in mobilizing its regional allies, particularly Japan and South Korea, against North Korea and, more crucially, China, turned into something of a diplomatic debacle. Bush was unable to achieve any of the major short-term US goals of the trip—both in relation to Washington's key partners, Japan and South Korea, and its chief rival in the region, China.

Even worse, it was Bush who appeared isolated and weak, while President Hu Jintao flaunted the growing economic power and political influence of China. The *Financial Times* of London commented in an editorial entitled "The rise and decline of Pacific nations:" "President George Bush's tour of Asia brings with it a palpable sense of declining US influence in the region." The editorial concluded: "Even so, the waning of US influence in Asia should not become China's chance to begin an ethics-free ascent to the status of a great power."

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Bush's visit was bracketed around the weekend summit of the 21-nation Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), held in the South Korean port city of Busan. He preceded his participation in the summit with a stop in Kyoto, Japan, and followed it with face-to-face meetings with Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jinbao in Beijing. On the way back to the US, he made a four-hour stop in Ulan Bator, the capital of Mongolia.

According to the scenario worked out for Bush by his handlers, the president was to establish the ideological and political framework for his Asian visit with a speech in Japan linking once again the "war on terrorism" with America's supposed crusade for democracy and freedom around the world. The idea was to present the US as the international leader of the Asian democracies, headed by Japan—a propaganda construct designed to facilitate diplomatic pressure on both North Korea and China, and justify a series of initiatives launched by Washington to extend its military presence and effectively encircle the Chinese mainland.

Notwithstanding the implicit threats, Bush was advised to tone down his rhetoric, in line with the avid desire of US corporate interests to increase their access to China's immense internal market and its virtually unlimited pool of cheap labor. A host of major American corporations, including retail giants such as Wal-Mart, are heavily dependent on cheap goods from China.

Those who formulate policy for Bush are acutely aware, as well, that China enjoys a massive trade surplus with the US and is, behind Japan, the second largest holder of US Treasury securities. Should Beijing begin to withdraw the \$252 billion it has lent to the US government, the dollar would plummet on world currency markets, US interest rates would skyrocket, and the United States would be thrown into a massive recession, with incalculable consequences for world financial stability.

Bush did, in fact, deliver such a speech, implicitly reproaching China by praising the economic progress and political stability of countries that had established parliamentary democracies, singling out Japan and Taiwan. The latter was an especially provocative dig at China, which has made its sovereignty over the offshore island a foundation of its foreign policy, declaring itself ready to defend this principle against any move toward Taiwanese independence by military means.

Since Hu took over as president of China in 2002, he has overseen a buildup of missile batteries on the coast facing Taiwan—a move that has fueled tensions in the region and strengthened the hand of elements within the US establishment, spearheaded by the Pentagon, that are determined to press

ahead with military preparations for a confrontation with Beijing.

Unfortunately for Bush, the bloody US occupation of Iraq and the accompanying exposures of US torture, secret gulags and the American practice of kidnapping and “disappearing” alleged terrorists have utterly discredited Washington’s pose as a force for democracy and peace. Moreover, his “democratic” ally, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, has inflamed tensions throughout Asia with his insistence on paying homage at the Yasukuni Shrine, which commemorates Japan’s war dead, including high-ranking war criminals from World War II.

Bush’s crisis at home

Bush was further undermined by his mounting political crisis at home. He left for Asia with his poll numbers plummeting to levels not seen for an American president since the high point of Richard Nixon’s Watergate crisis. Every opinion poll shows that a majority of Americans oppose the war in Iraq and favor a rapid withdrawal of US troops, and that most Americans now recognize that Bush and his co-conspirators such as Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the current Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice lied about supposed Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and links to Al Qaeda in order to drag the country into war.

With even the Republican Congress growing restive over the quagmire in Iraq, Bush was obliged to interrupt his diplomatic talks and use his various stops as a forum for denouncing critics of his war policy at home—a spectacle that only underscored his weakened political position. The situation grew palpably worse last Thursday when Democratic Rep. John Murtha of Pennsylvania, a decorated Vietnam War veteran and military hawk with close ties to the US military establishment, called for the US to withdraw its troops within six months.

This prompted Bush to interrupt his paeans to democracy with a statement approvingly citing an extraordinary public pronouncement by an American officer in Iraq, who denounced those in the US calling for an early withdrawal of US forces. Bush embraced this open breach of the principle of military subordination to civilian authority and declared that his government would be guided by the judgment of military officials on the ground—in effect, renouncing an axiom of democratic governance and implicitly encouraging elements within the US military inclined toward military dictatorship.

In the end, Bush failed to obtain from Koizumi a pledge to end Japan’s ban

on the importation of US beef, one of the aims set out for Bush in his dealings with Asian leaders.

In South Korea, things got even worse. Bush's presence at the APEC summit was met with tens of thousands who demonstrated in the streets of Busan to demand that the US get out of Iraq. South Korean authorities countered with water cannon, recalling the mass and sometimes violent protests that dogged Bush earlier this month when he visited Argentina and other South American nations.

Shortly after Bush praised South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun for his steadfast support for the US venture in Iraq, the South Korean Defense Ministry announced that it was recommending a reduction by a third of the 3,200 South Korean troops in Iraq—a humiliating turn of events that brought to ten the number of countries that have either withdrawn or reduced their troop levels in Iraq in recent months.

The South Koreans' blindsiding of Bush on Iraq was calculated to drive home their differences with Washington on a range of issues. The US' tacit encouragement of a more aggressive foreign posture by Japan, including Koizumi's appeals to nationalism and militarism, has angered Seoul and heightened its concerns over a resurgence of Japanese imperialism. As a result, South Korea has drawn closer to China. On November 16, South Korean President Ro and Chinese President Hu declared they were united in their views of the region's history against those of "a neighboring country"—a clear reference to Japan.

The South Koreans and Chinese are also united in their approach to North Korea's nuclear weapons program, and opposed to demands from the US and Japan for a more belligerent posture. According to a report in the November 17 *New York Times*: "The United States is expected to present a detailed proposal for North Korea to declare all of its nuclear programs, then allow extensive inspections. This would include allowing inspectors into secret sites that North Korea has never opened.

"Some administration officials talks of a 'Plan B,' if North Korea refuses to allow those inspections."

The article goes on to quote a former Clinton official involved in formulating that administration's approach to North Korea, who describes such plans as "economic, political and then a family of military options."

At the APEC summit itself, Bush failed to obtain a declaration singling out

the European Union by name for failing to slash farm subsidies. And, as the *Financial Times* noted in its editorial, the summit's condemnation of terrorism "was hedged with demands that the war on terror 'comply with all relevant obligations under international law, in particular international human rights, refugee and humanitarian law'—hardly a ringing endorsement of the Bush administration's use of detention without trial and opposition to legislation making it illegal for any US official to use torture."

The *Financial Times* continued: "In contrast, President Hu Jintao of China... was given a standing ovation in the South Korean National Assembly and feted by business leaders after assuring them blandly of China's desire for peace and prosperity."

Finally, Bush was unsuccessful in lobbying the Asian leaders to include the US in next month's East Asian Summit, to be held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Japan led the lobbying effort, while South Korea kept silent on the matter.

Diplomatic snubs in China

In China, Bush failed to secure any firm commitments from President Hu on Washington's key economic demands. These included a further upward valuation of the yuan, to make Chinese exports to the US more expensive and American goods more competitive, thereby reducing the US' bilateral trade deficit, expected to top \$200 billion this year. Another major demand was for the Chinese to take serious measures against the illicit copying of US films, CDs, software and other forms of intellectual property.

The only bright spot for the US was the announcement of an agreement by the Chinese to buy 70 Boeing aircraft, with an estimated value of \$3-\$4 billion. This, however, is only a drop in the bucket in relation to the massive and growing US trade deficit with China.

The Chinese delivered Bush a diplomatic snub on the issue of human rights. It is customary in US-Chinese summitry for Beijing to smooth the way for such meetings by meeting American demands, at least partially, for the release of high-profile political prisoners. When Bush met with Hu in September at the United Nations in New York, the US president gave his Chinese counterpart a list of detained dissidents Washington wanted to be set free. Not only were these individuals not released prior to Bush's visit, the regime arrested other political and religious dissidents. This is in keeping with a more brutal crackdown on intellectuals and the media instituted by Hu since he came to power.

The state-run Chinese media provided only the most perfunctory coverage of Bush's visit, refusing to televise his press conferences or his attendance Sunday at a state-sanctioned Protestant church. That event was aimed primarily at Bush's core political base at home—the Christian right, which equates atheistic China with the devil. Speaking unabashedly as the spokesman for Christians, Bush said outside the church, “My hope is that the government of China will not fear Christians who gather to worship openly.”

Only in the arid and daunting land of Genghis Khan, the final stop on the tour, did the authorities treat Bush with unadulterated adulation. This impoverished country on the Asian steppe, wedged between Russia and China, was among the first to break with the Soviet Union, declaring its independence and its support for capitalism in 1990.

Ruling over a country with the lowest population density of any nation in the world, and a poverty rate of 40 percent of its 2.7 million people, the Mongolian elite has thrown in its lot with US imperialism. This is symbolized by the presence of some 150 Mongolian troops in Iraq.

Even here, however, Bush was not entirely insulated from the mass international opposition to his war crimes. Four protesters standing by the road held up signs as the presidential convoy made its way to the official festivities in Ulan Bator. Bush shook hands with men dressed in the armor of Genghis Khan's Golden Horde, sipped fermented mare's milk, and called his hosts “brothers in the cause of freedom.”

Behind the ludicrous pomp and circumstance there was, however, a more serious and ominous content. Mongolia figures prominently in the Pentagon's strategy for encircling both China and Russia with US military alliances and installations.

The weakened position of the US in evidence throughout Bush's Asian tour is not simply a matter of the crisis of a single administration. More fundamentally, Bush's diplomatic problems reflect the objective decline in the world economic position of American capitalism.

The US' staggering trade and payments deficits with China, and its dependence on continued Chinese funneling of its dollar holdings into US government securities, is one powerful expression of the relative economic decline of the United States. And this dependence has very real political implications. As the *New York Times* wrote ruefully in a November 23 editorial: “Beijing's leaders are in no mood to listen to lectures from an

American government that depends on Chinese surpluses and savings to finance its supersized budget deficits.”

On the basis of political repression, the brutal exploitation of a massive labor force, a vast internal market—China, the world’s most populous country, is rapidly becoming the industrial work shop of the world, leaving the US far behind. The Chinese economy is still only a seventh the size of the American, but the gap is steadily narrowing.

To cite one statistic: In 1979 China manufactured 13,000 cars; last year the number exceeded 5 million. The significance of this figure is underscored by the fact that while Bush was in Asia, General Motors announced another round of plant closures and job cuts, amid continuing predictions that the former symbol of American industrial might is heading for bankruptcy.

China is using its economic clout to broaden and strengthen its influence, both economic and political, around the world, and to build up its military. It is even intruding in American imperialism’s traditional “back yard” of Latin America. It has growing investments in Brazil and other South American nations. During the APEC summit, China and Chile signed a trade agreement, the first between China and a Latin American country.

China is also the fastest growing investor in Africa.

US military “diplomacy”

The response of American imperialism to its economic decline has been an eruption of militarism. The US ruling elite has increasingly sought to use its vast military superiority to offset its loss of global industrial and financial hegemony. Is there any reason to believe that China will prove an exception? Can US imperialism peacefully accept the rise of a competing superpower in Asia?

The answer is indicated by a *Wall Street Journal* article on November 17 that focuses on Washington’s two-track policy of economic engagement with China and military preparations against it. The author, Jay Solomon, cites the catchword for US policy toward China that is current within the Bush administration: “contagement, standing for a combination of engagement and containment.

He writes: “It’s a sometimes-awkward attempt to blend the contradictory impulses of American economic and military leaders, and has quickly taken hold this year, particularly in the Defense Department. The idea is to continue

close ties with China economically while the Pentagon builds a circle of new military partnerships in Asia—from India to Mongolia to Japan—as a kind of insurance policy against any Chinese military adventure.”

The article is accompanied by a map showing China encircled by India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan and Mongolia and listing the recent US moves to heighten its military activities and presence in each of these countries. Solomon states that the centerpiece of the Bush administration’s response to China’s rise has been a focus on military and diplomatic relations with India. He notes that Bush announced earlier this year that the US will share civilian nuclear and space technology with India—a nuclear power that is not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Washington also this year removed restrictions on the sale of major military hardware to India, enabling US defense contractors such as Lockheed-Martin and Boeing to bid on selling fighter jets to India. The two countries are also discussing cooperating in the development of missile-defense systems.

Solomon continues: “The Pentagon has also made overtures in recent months to Vietnam and Indonesia. In June, the Hanoi government said it would enroll Vietnamese troops in a US military training program called IMET. The US has also restored IMET training for Indonesian troops...”

On Japan: “Mr. Rumsfeld last month announced a new security agreement with Tokyo, allowing the US to base a nuclear-powered air-craft carrier and Patriot anti-ballistic missile batteries in Japan, and calling for closer intelligence and technology sharing between the two nations.”

The article notes that Mongolia is “another Chinese neighbor that the Bush administration is cultivating.” The Pentagon is working to make the two countries’ militaries interoperable.

Solomon writes that the administration’s emerging China policy is the work of “the same network of neoconservative thinkers who have played a leading role in developing US policy toward Iraq.” He continues: “Two of the seven authors of the 1999 Rand Corp. report that first discussed the application of the term ‘conengagement’ to China are now officials in the Bush administration. They are Abram Shulsky, the Pentagon’s special coordinator for the fight against terrorism, and Zalmay Khalizad, the US ambassador to Iraq.

“In urging the US to develop a new network of military partners in Asia, ‘the underlying, but unstated, rationale of this activity would be to emphasize to

China the cost of, and thereby deter, any Chinese attempts at seeking regional hegemony,' the report said.”

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