

Platitudes at the G20 can't mask a world on the brink of war

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During the 1930s, known as the “disastrous decade,” there were all kinds of twists and turns in relations between the great powers on the diplomatic and international front as well as in the economic and trade spheres.

This frenzied activity, characterised by the making of agreements one day to be broken the next, had an essential objective content. It was the form taken by the manoeuvring of the imperialist powers before the deluge of the world war that erupted in September 1939.

Changing what needs to be changed, there are direct parallels with the present period. The gyrations of the Trump administration on Iran, North Korea and China—threatening war one day, announcing a deal the next, to be followed by more threats the day after—have the same logic. They are an expression of a crisis-riven geopolitical order tending inexorably toward a new outbreak of war.

This was underscored with the passage last Thursday of the massive \$750 billion Pentagon authorization bill that went through the US Senate in an 86-8 bipartisan vote. The aim of the legislation was set out by Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Jim Inhofe.

Describing the world as “more unstable and more dangerous than at any period in my lifetime,” he emphasised that the National Defense Strategy setting out “strategic competition” with Russia and China as well as threats from “rogue countries” such as Iran and North Korea, had “given it to us straight.”

Inhofe’s remarks and the bipartisan support for the massive escalation of military spending underscore the essential position of the US political establishment and its military and intelligence agencies. It regards the rest of the world as an existential threat.

Confronted with the decline in its economic power in the seven decades since it exercised unchallenged

supremacy at the end of World War II, the US is seeking to counter the erosion of its hegemony with the use of military power, threatening to plunge mankind into World War III.

The conflicts and tensions between the major powers—a war of all against all—were on display at the G20 summit meeting held in Osaka, Japan over the weekend. It was conducted little more than a week after Trump had called off an attack on Iran that threatened to set off an uncontrollable military conflict with incalculable consequences.

The G20 summit meetings were initiated after the global financial crisis in 2008 to establish a mechanism to regulate the affairs of the global economy and prevent the eruption of the kind of conflicts that paved the way for World War II, most notably restrictive trade measures and protectionism. The summit meeting demonstrated that these efforts have ended in total failure.

As *Financial Times* economics columnist Martin Wolf noted, the G20, founded to broaden the base for global cooperation, “is a victim of the general disarray.” He continued: “The G20 members are physicians who need to heal themselves. Will they? Not today, is surely the answer.” In fact, not any day.

With the Trump administration hitting out at its economic rivals, not only China, but Japan, the European Union and Germany, and demanding that the world submit to its “America First” agenda, the summit failed to carry out its basic mandate.

As chair of the meeting, Japan’s prime minister Shinzo Abe warned that trade-related tensions were a risk to the global economy, and there were concerns that the post-war free trade system “may be wobbling”—a significant understatement.

But previous commitments to “resist protectionism” were scrapped and the communiqué simply adopted a

series of bland statements on the need for freedom and fairness. As Abe put it: “Rather than playing up the differences between the G20, we strove to find common ground.”

That is, to paper them over as the trade and economic clashes—and behind them the preparations for military conflicts—intensify.

On the crucial issue of the trade war against China, there were direct parallels with Trump’s pull-back on Iran ten days earlier. At a sideline meeting with China’s president Xi Jinping, Trump held off from imposing additional tariffs, possibly as high as 25 percent, on an additional \$300 billion worth of Chinese goods, on top of the \$200 billion already subject to these measures.

But as with the conflict with Iran and North Korea, nothing has been resolved and all measures directed against China remain “cocked and loaded.”

Trump agreed only that the threatened new measures, which would cover virtually all Chinese imports into the US, would be suspended “for the time being,” while official negotiations resume. But there was no movement on the essential questions—above all, the US insistence that it have the right to retain existing tariffs and begin to remove them only once it unilaterally determined that China was complying with any deal, a demand deemed unacceptable by Beijing.

In the lead-up to the meeting, China had insisted that there could be no resumption of discussions unless the US met its demands that restrictions against Chinese telecoms giant Huawei be lifted. Huawei has been placed on the US Commerce Department’s Entity List, meaning that US companies seeking to sell Huawei vital components have to obtain permission from the government. This action was aimed at crippling the company’s global operations and has had a significant impact in the weeks since it was announced.

This threat hanging over Huawei remains. Trump did not reverse the Commerce Department’s decision—saying the Entity List issue would be determined only at the end of negotiations. He merely gave a vague commitment to allow American firms to ship goods to Huawei. What this means is extremely unclear, because, as Trump put it, “We’re talking about equipment where there’s not a great national emergency problem with it.”

But as far as the intelligence and military apparatus is

concerned, as well as its spokesmen in both the Democratic and Republican parties, the very existence of Huawei and what it signifies about China’s push to enhance its industrial and technological development constitute “a great national emergency” that the US is determined to meet by all means necessary.

Trump’s “concession” on Huawei was immediately attacked from both sides of the political aisle. “Huawei is one of the few potent levers we have to make China play fair on trade. If Trump backs off, as it appears he is doing, it will dramatically undercut our ability to change China’s unfair trade practices,” Democratic Senate leader Charles Schumer said.

Prominent Senate Republican and anti-China hawk Marco Rubio went further. “If President Trump has in fact bargained away the recent restrictions on Huawei, then we will have to get those restrictions put back on through legislation. And it will pass with a large veto-proof majority,” he tweeted.

The G20 meeting, the complete instability in international relations, the on-again-off-again agreements coupled with mounting economic conflicts, are sounding a clear warning to the world’s population: the conditions for a new world war are rapidly maturing and it is knocking at the gates.

This clear and present danger can be defeated only through the development of a mass anti-war movement by the world’s working class, based on the fight for an international socialist program to tackle the problem at its source by ending the capitalist profit system and the division of the world into rival nation-states and imperialist powers.

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