

US admiral advocates war footing against China

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The US Congress House Armed Services Committee (HASC) dedicated two days of hearings last Thursday and Friday to “security challenges” and “strategic competition” with China in the “Indo-Asia-Pacific region.” The hearing took place in the wake of the publication by the Pentagon of its new National Defense Strategy, which labelled China and Russia as the primary threats to US security and insisted on the need to “prioritise preparedness for war.”

The sole witness at the February 14 hearing was Admiral Harry Harris, the commander of US Pacific Command (USPACOM), who was nominated just days before by President Donald Trump to fill the vacant post of US ambassador to Australia. Harris and his headquarters submitted a 20,500-word statement to the committee and he fielded questions for over two hours.

The admiral portrayed the US military, with its \$1.4 trillion two-year budget, 1.3 million active personnel, 11 aircraft carrier battlegroups and arsenal of over 4,000 ground, air and sea-launched nuclear weapons, as under-resourced, under-manned and in the danger of being overtaken by military rivals. He complained that it did not have enough forward-deployed munitions and logistics, while bases and infrastructure on the US West Coast were run-down. He bitterly condemned the minor limits on increased military spending that were imposed by Congress via budget sequestration in 2013—which were lifted in the latest budget.

Repeating a line that appears regularly in his speeches, Harris’s statement asserted: “If USPACOM has to fight tonight, I don’t want it to be a fair fight. If it’s a knife fight, I want to bring a gun. If it’s a gun fight, I want to bring in the artillery, and the artillery of all of our allies. I have said during my last two appearances before this Committee, that sequestration could reduce us to wielding a butter knife in this fight. This is unacceptable. We must not let that happen....

“China has developed and fielded capability and capacity to challenge our regional maritime dominance. I need increased lethality, specifically ships and aircraft equipped with faster and more survivable weapons systems. Longer range offensive weapons on every platform are an imperative.”

Harris accused China, as he has before, of seeking to militarise the South China Sea and turn islets and reefs into “forward military posts” against the US Navy. The US, he indicated, should never accept a challenge to its ability to deploy military forces directly off China’s coast.

Harris presented a vision of the world in which US economic and strategic interests are under siege from not only a rising China, but Russia, “rogue states” such as North Korea, international terrorism, transnational crime, and even piracy and natural disasters.

The US military, he asserted, “remains the most powerful in the world, but our relative advantage and ability to counter these threats have declined. For USPACOM to continue to underpin US diplomatic efforts and deter future conflict against peer competitors, rogue states, and transnational threats, the joint force must maintain a clear ability to fight and win when called upon to do so.”

Harris’s witness statement left no doubt that he believes military spending must be ramped up by hundreds of billions of dollars. His wish list for new hardware ranged from missile defense systems, dozens more ships and submarines, more fifth generation fighters, through to more lethal cluster bombs.

The United States, Harris argued to the HASC, needs to go on a war footing, with every aspect of economic and social life subordinated to the armed forces. His perspective would require even more savage cutbacks to social spending. It is incompatible with even the façade of democracy that now exists.

And not only in the US. Harris indicated that all the key US allies in Asia—specifically Japan, South Korea and Australia, as well as the Philippines and Thailand—must likewise boost war preparations. He proposed that the US seek greater military involvement by France and the United Kingdom in operations targeting Chinese influence. He named Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and the Pacific Island states as all potential participants in the US “camp.”

Above all, however, he stressed the burgeoning strategic ties between the US and India. It had the “potential to be the most consequential bilateral relationship of the 21st century,” due to India’s “growing influence and expanding military.”

Questioned about the possibility of war, Harris stated: “At the end of the day the ability to wage war is important, or you become a paper tiger. I’m hopeful that it won’t come to a conflict with China, but we all must be prepared for that if it should come to that.”

In a second hearing on February 15, Aaron Friedberg from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University and Ely Ratner from the Council on Foreign Relations made sweeping accusations of Chinese “interference” in US politics and society so as to demonise Beijing as the US prepares for war.

Friedberg testified: “China is now using a combination of its rapidly growing military, economic and political or information warfare capabilities to try to weaken the US position in Asia with the aim of displacing it as the preponderant regional power.” He called for action against Chinese “political warfare” within the US, including purported efforts to develop relations with universities and academics, politicians, former government officials and Hollywood studios. Chinese students and migrants were accused of being used “to support Beijing’s aims.”

Ratner, in his statement, declared: “Beijing is working overseas—including in the United States—to undermine academic freedom, censor foreign media, restrict the free flow of information, and curb civil society. Beijing is also promoting its own state-led model of development in explicit contrast to liberal democracy.”

The US had to “prioritise defense resources for the China challenge.” To do so, Ratner advocated abandoning costly US operations in Afghanistan and the Middle East, avoiding so-called “wars of choice” with North Korea and Iran, and massively boosting military forces in Asia. He called for concerted action by the US, Japan and other

countries to undermine Chinese investment and development plans in Eurasia as part of its “One Belt, One Road” strategy.

Ratner concluded by calling for action to “root out Chinese Communist Party influence operations in the US.”

Painting a truly bizarre portrait of the US, he alleged: “As a result of various forms of Chinese espionage and coercion, American schools and universities are avoiding topics Beijing deems sensitive, students in the United States are intimidated from speaking freely, US media outlets and scholars are self-censoring, US companies are curbing their speech to placate China, and millions of Americans are subject to veiled Chinese propaganda through Communist Party-run online, television, print, and radio media.”

Such rhetoric, with all its xenophobic overtones, has one motive: to ideologically justify the war preparations advocated by Harris and anti-China hawks throughout the corporate, political military and intelligence establishment.

Campaigns against purported Chinese interference and influence are well under way in Australia and New Zealand. The Australian parliament is currently considering draconian legislation that would criminalise political opposition to the militarist stance of the US and its allies and a range of commercial activities with so-called “overseas organisations.”

While American politics has been largely consumed by the accusations of Russian “meddling” in the 2016 election, the HASC hearings are another sign that efforts are being made to shift the focus onto China.

The author recommends:

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