

US defence secretary takes aim at China

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In his statement last week to the Senate Armed Services Committee, acting US Defence Secretary Patrick Shanahan identified China as the country's top threat and urged support for a massive \$718 billion military budget for the coming year.

Shortly after replacing James Mattis as defence secretary in January, Shanahan used his first full day in office to emphasise the dangers of "Great Power competition" and to stress to Pentagon staff, "Remember: China, China, China."

In his Senate testimony, Shanahan again lashed out at China, declaring it was "aggressively modernising its military," "systematically stealing science and technology," "undermining the rules-based international order," and "building an international network of coercion."

What lies behind such tirades is the determination of US imperialism to maintain and extend its global hegemony. Having become the world's second largest economy, China threatens to undercut the "rules-based international order," that is the post-World War II order in which the US dominated and set the rules in order to advance its own economic and strategic interests.

Shanahan's focus on China as the chief threat is part and parcel of the Trump administration's trade war measures against China, which are aimed at ensuring the continued economic dominance of American capitalism. Trump's targeting of China is a continuation of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" that sought to undermine China diplomatically, economically and militarily.

Shanahan's statement is riddled with hypocrisy. While accusing China of expanding its military, he argued for a military budget that is more than four times that of China and, in fact, is larger than the defence budgets of the next nine countries combined.

While pointing to the "threat" posed by China's nuclear arsenal, which is tiny by comparison to that of

the US, Shanahan called for another \$14 billion to upgrade the Pentagon's nuclear missiles and nuclear capable warplanes and submarines. An additional \$13.6 billion will be spent on anti-ballistic missile systems that are integral to the military's plans for fighting a nuclear war.

The budget also calls for huge spending to expand and upgrade US military capacities across space and cyber warfare as well as more traditional areas of the air force, army and navy. More than \$7 billion will be spent on military research focused on "the high-end fight"—that is, wars against large countries such as China and Russia. The stated aim is to ensure that the US has "the most lethal military in the world."

Shanahan's accusation that China is "systematically stealing US and allied technology" parallels the demands being made by the Trump administration as part of a trade deal with China. Unsubstantiated allegations of spying and theft, in which all countries including the US are engaged, are simply the pretext for the US to insist that China dismantle programs, such as "Made in China 2025," that threaten to challenge US technological dominance.

As for building an "international network of coercion," the US has been continuously engaged in wars for the past quarter century to prosecute its interests using its long-established alliances and military partnerships. Accusations that Beijing is using loans and economic incentives to extend its military reach pale into insignificance in comparison to Washington's worldwide network of military bases.

Moreover, under Obama and now Trump, the US has been systematically strengthening alliances throughout Asia to effectively encircle China in preparation for war. "Starting in the Indo-Pacific, our priority theater," Shanahan declared, "we continue to pursue many belts and many roads by keeping our decades-old alliances strong and fostering growing partnerships." He boasted

that the US took “historic strides” in 2018 in relation to Vietnam with a first US aircraft carrier visit, and India with inaugural top-level strategic talks.

The strengthening of alliances has gone hand in hand with a US military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific region. By next year, the Pentagon plans to have 60 percent of its air and naval assets positioned in Asia. Large existing military bases in Japan, South Korea and Guam have been supplemented by various basing agreements throughout the region, including in Australia, the Philippines, India and Singapore.

The US also has stepped up its provocative “freedom of navigation” operations in the South China Sea to directly challenge Chinese maritime claims in the strategic waters. Earlier this month, Admiral Philip Davidson, commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, declared the US resolve to remain an “enduring Pacific power” in the face of expanding Chinese military activity in the South China Sea. He alleged that this constituted a hazard to trade flows and commercial activity in the region.

In fact, the Obama administration transformed the South China Sea into a dangerous flashpoint. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the US had a “national interest” in what had been low-key regional territorial disputes. Since then, the US has boosted its military activity in the South China Sea and conducted naval and air operations that directly intrude into waters and airspace claimed by China.

The US military build-up and activities in the South China Sea pose a direct military threat to China, which depends on its shipping lanes for its huge imports of energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa. The sea’s waters are directly adjacent to major military bases in southern China, in particular naval bases on Hainan Island.

Just last week, the US Air Force flew two B-52H strategic bombers over the South China Sea, only 10 days after another “routine training mission” involving two B-52s off the Chinese mainland. An Air Force spokesperson refused to confirm or deny whether the nuclear-capable bombers carried nuclear payloads.

If China conducted a similar “training exercise” in international airspace off the Californian coast close to sensitive US military bases, the response in Washington would be furious denunciations and threats of retaliation.

There is nothing benign about the American military build-up and provocations in Asia against China. The US, which is already waging trade war against China, is actively preparing for a “high-end” war against a nuclear-armed power in order to stem its historic decline and shore up its global dominance.



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