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Pentagon report targets China's "expanding global influence"

The Pentagon's annual report on China's military and security released last Thursday underscores the intense drive by the United States to contain and undermine the country that it regards as the major threat to its global domination. While the report focusses on China's growing military capabilities and international reach, its build-up, which is dwarfed by the US military and its world-wide system of alliances and bases, is in response to Washington's menacing stance.

The US attitude was summed up in January in its National Defence Strategy, which declared that "inter-state strategic competition," not the "war on terror" is "now the primary concern." It prioritised "preparedness for war" against the "revisionist powers" China and Russia. The targeting of China began under the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" involving a massive expansion of the US military in the Indo-Pacific aimed at encircling and preparing for war against China.

Trump has increasingly targeted China as the chief threat to US interests both economically and militarily. Embroiled in allegations about "Russian influence" in the US elections, Trump lashed out with a tweet last weekend, declaring: "All of the fools that are so focussed on looking only at Russia should start also looking in another direction, China." The political infighting in US ruling circles involves bitter divisions over which rival to confront first—Russia or China.

The Pentagon report reflects the preoccupations and calculations of the US intelligence and military establishment about China's rising economic and military capabilities. While

the international media has dwelled largely on a small aspect—drills involving long-range Chinese nuclear bombers—the report’s overriding focus is on China’s ongoing restructuring of its land-based army to modern, integrated air, land, naval and missile forces able to counter threats, not only near China, but in Asia and internationally.

The report pays significant attention to China’s “expanding global influence,” including its strategic and military relations, as part of President Xi Jinping’s “dream of national rejuvenation.” It identifies China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formerly known as “One Belt, One Road”—a huge infrastructure program aimed at linking the Eurasia in particular by land and sea—as a top concern.

The Pentagon states that Beijing will exploit BRI projects to align the interests of recipient countries with China as well to “deter confrontation or criticism of China’s approach to sensitive issues.” It also declares that some BRI investments “could create military advantages for China,” including by allowing the pre-positioning of supplies necessary to sustain naval deployments in distant waters.

China’s development of a blue-water navy and the consolidation of safe maritime corridors is hardly surprising given its heavy dependence on the importation of energy and raw materials. Even the Pentagon notes that “the growth of China’s global economic footprint makes its interests increasingly vulnerable to international and regional turmoil.” Beijing is also well aware that US war plans include the use of naval power to cut off vital supplies, blockade China and thus strangle it economically.

The report highlights the opening of China’s first overseas military base last year in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, adjacent to key shipping routes and that it may seek additional bases elsewhere. It points to the expansion of China’s joint military exercises, including with Russia, Pakistan, Vietnam and various other mainly Asian countries and the growth of its arms exports. None of this remotely compares to the global activities of the US military—not least of which is its involvement of a succession of illegal wars in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The Pentagon reviews key flashpoints in the region, including North Korea, Taiwan and territorial disputes involving China in the South China and East China Seas as well as the border area with India, where a dangerous standoff between Chinese and Indian troops continued for months. Washington, under Obama and now Trump, has deliberately stoked tensions by encouraging allies and partners such as Japan and India to take a more aggressive stance towards Beijing’s claims.

The report also emphasises China's developments in the area of military technology, paralleling the accusations made by the Trump administration that China is "stealing" technological secrets from the United States. "To support this [military] modernisation," it claims, "China uses a variety of methods to acquire foreign military and dual-use technologies, including targeted foreign direct investment, cyber theft and exploitation of private Chinese nationals' access to these technologies."

The Trump administration is exploiting these allegations to justify an escalating barrage of trade war measures against China, not only over its trade surpluses with the US but its "Made in China 2025" program to accelerate Chinese advances in key areas of technology. Earlier this month, Trump signed this year's massive \$716 billion defence bill containing several clauses directed against China, including controls on government contracts with the Chinese companies ZTE and Huawei.

The Chinese foreign ministry declared that it was "strongly dissatisfied" with Trump's signing of the defence bill, which also provocatively includes a call for the US to "strengthen defence and security cooperation with Taiwan"—regarded by Beijing as part of China. The US, it said, should "abandon its cold war mindset and zero-sum philosophy" and warned that the bill could damage Sino-US relations if its negative aspects were implemented.

Likewise, China criticised the Pentagon report released last week declaring that its claims about China's military reform, weapons development and defence capabilities were "pure guesswork." The defence ministry called on the US to view China's military "objectively and rationally" and take "actual steps to promote and protect the stable development of military-to-military relations."

In fact, relations are becoming increasingly unstable as the US seeks to use its military might around the world to shore up its global dominance. Having launched into one disastrous war after another over the past 25 years, the US is now preparing for a conflict with China under conditions in which its military superiority is being eroded. The danger is that Pentagon planners are drawing the conclusion that a confrontation with China should take place sooner rather than later.