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زبانهای اروپایی

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31.01.2022

Don't Call It a "Fence": Washington Tightens The Bond Around China

Sources: TomDispatch - A l'encontre

The word encirclement does not appear in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 2022, ratified by President Joe Biden on Dec. 27, or in other recent statements by the administration about its foreign and military policy. Nor is there that classic cold war term that was containment.

However, the top leaders of the United States have agreed on a strategy aimed at encircling and containing the new great power, China, based on hostile military alliances, in order to prevent it from ascending to the status of full superpower.

The voluminous defense law of 2022 — passed with overwhelming bipartisan support — contains a detailed outline of encircling China through a potentially suffocating network of U.S. military bases and troops and increasingly militarized allied countries. The purpose is to empower Washington to lock the Chinese military within its own territory and possibly cripple its economy in a hypothetical future crisis. For the Chinese leadership, who certainly cannot tolerate the country being surrounded in this way, this is an open invitation to... well, there's no reason to take the tip off the expression... to break the confinement anyway.

Like all previous defense laws, the 2022 NDAA, which sets an expenditure of \$768 billion, is replete with extremely generous gifts to military suppliers in the form of orders for the Pentagon's weapons of choice. These would include F-35 fighters, Virginia-class submarines, Arleigh Burke-class destroyers, and a wide assortment of guided missiles. As the Senate Military Affairs Committee notes in a summary of the law, it also incorporates a number of concrete items and policy initiatives aimed at encircling, containing, and potentially subjugating China. These include an extra \$7.1 billion for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, or PDI, a program started last year to boost U.S. and allied forces in the Pacific.

Nor are these isolated items in this 2,186-page law. The authorization law includes a measure of "cooperative sense" focused on weaving "alliances and defense collaborations in the Indo-Pacific region" that provides a conceptual program for this strategy of encirclement. According to this law, the Minister of Defense must "strengthen alliances and collaborations with the United States in the Indo-Pacific region in order to strengthen the comparative advantage of the United States in strategic competition with the People's Republic of China" (PRC).

The fact that the 2022 NDAA passed with little opposition in Congress and the Senate indicates that support for these measures and others like them is strong in both parties. Some progressive Democrats tried to reduce the amount of military spending, but their colleagues on the military affairs committee in both chambers voted, instead, to increase this year's already overwhelming Pentagon allocation by another \$24 billion, particularly to better contain (or combat) China. Most of those taxpayer dollars that have been added will go toward building hypersonic missiles and other advanced weapons that will target the PRC, conducting more military maneuvers, and strengthening security cooperation with U.S. allies in the region.

For The Chinese rulers there can be no doubt about the meaning of all this: whatever Washington says about peaceful competition, the Biden administration, like that of Trump under the previous presidency, has no intention of allowing the PRC to reach parity with the US on the world stage. In fact, he is willing to use any means, including military force, to prevent this from happening. Thus, Beijing has only one alternative: either give in to American pressure and agree to be a second-rate country in global affairs, or challenge

Washington's containment strategy. It is hard to imagine that the country's current leadership would accept the first option, while the second, if approved, would surely lead, sooner or later, to armed conflict.

La sempiterna tentación del cerco

De hecho, la idea de rodear a China mediante una cadena de potencias hostiles se postuló por primera vez como política oficial durante los primeros meses de la presidencia de George W. Bush. En aquel entonces, el vicepresidente Dick Cheney y la consejera de seguridad nacional Condoleezza Rice decidieron establecer un sistema de alianzas antichinas en Asia, siguiendo las directrices expuestas por Rice en un artículo publicado en enero de 2000 en la revista Foreign Affairs. En el mismo, la autora lanzó una advertencia frente a los esfuerzos de Pekín por “alterar el equilibrio de fuerzas en Asia a su favor”, una dinámica a la que EE UU debía responder profundizando “la cooperación con Japón y Corea del Sur” y manteniendo “su compromiso con una presencia militar robusta en la región”. Además, señaló que había que “prestar más atención al papel de India en el equilibrio regional”.

Esta noción ha seguido formando parte desde entonces del guion de los sucesivos gobiernos de EE UU, aunque en el caso del gabinete de Bush su aplicación quedó aparcada abruptamente el 11 de septiembre de 2001, cuando combatientes islámicos atentaron contra las torres gemelas de Nueva York y la sede del Pentágono en Washington, D.C. y el gobierno declaró la “guerra global contra el terrorismo”.

Pasó una década hasta que en 2011 la política oficial de Washington recuperó la estrategia de Rice-Cheney de rodear a China y cercenar o suprimir su creciente poder. En noviembre de aquel año, en un discurso ante el parlamento australiano, el presidente Barack Obama anunció el “giro a Asia” de EE UU: una iniciativa encaminada a restablecer el predominio de Washington en la región induciendo a sus aliados de allí a intensificar los esfuerzos por contener a China. “Como presidente, he... tomado una decisión deliberada y estratégica”, declaró Obama en Canberra. “Como nación ribereña del Pacífico, EE UU desempeñará un papel más activo y a largo plazo en la configuración de esta región y de su futuro... He ordenado a mi equipo de seguridad nacional que a medida que concluyamos las guerras

actuales [en Oriente Medio], dé prioridad a nuestra presencia y nuestra misión en la parte asiática del Pacífico”.

However, like the Bush team before, the Obama presidency was absorbed by events in the Middle East, namely the conquest in 2014 of important parts of Iraq and Syria by the Islamic State, being forced to put its turn to the Pacific on hold. Only in the last years of Donald Trump's presidency did the idea of surrounding China in American strategic thinking regain prominence.

Led by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Trump's effort turned out to be much more substantial, involving the expansion of U.S. forces stationed in the Pacific, the intensification of cooperation with Australia, Japan and South Korea in the military field and greater attention to India. Pompeo also added several new elements to the panoply: a quadrilateral alliance of Australia, India, Japan and the US (called the Quad); closer diplomatic ties with Taiwan; and the explicit demonization of China as an enemy of Western values.

In a July 2020 speech at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Pompeo laid out the new policy regarding China. To prevent the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from ending the "rules-based order that our societies have worked so hard to build," he declared, "we must draw common lines in the sand that cannot be erased by the CCP's dealings or flattery." This required not only increasing U.S. forces in Asia, but also creating a NATO-like alliance system to curb China's further growth.

Pompeo also launched two crucial initiatives directed against China: the institutionalization of the Quad and the expansion of diplomatic and military relations with Taiwan. The Quad, whose formal name is Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, had initially been formed in 2007 by decision of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (with the support of Vice President Dick Cheney and the leaders of Australia and India), but was put on hold for years. It was revived in 2017, when Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull met with Abe, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Trump in the spirit of pushing for a greater effort to contain China.

Regarding Taiwan, Pompeo upped the ante by approving sending diplomatic missions to its capital, Taipei, made up of senior government officials, such as Health Secretary Alex Azar and Deputy Secretary of State Keith Krach, the highest-ranking members of the U.S. government who had visited the island since 1979, when Washington broke off formal relations with the Taiwanese government. Both visits were roundly criticized by the Chinese authorities, who described them as serious violations of Washington's commitments to Beijing under the agreement establishing relations with the PRC.

Biden adopts the strategy of encirclement

Upon entering the White House, President Biden promised to reverse many of his predecessor's unpopular policies, but these did not include strategy regarding China. Indeed, his administration has willingly embraced Pompeo's encirclement strategy. As a result, preparations for a possible war with China are now, unfortunately, the Pentagon's top priority, as in the case of the State Department is Beijing's diplomatic isolation.

In line with this perspective, the Defense Department's 2022 budget requirement states that "China constitutes the top long-term challenge for the U.S." and that therefore "the department will prioritize China as our number one challenge and develop appropriate concepts, resources, and operational plans to bolster deterrence capability and maintain our competitive advantage."

Meanwhile, as a key instrument to strengthen ties with its allies in the Asia-Pacific region, the Biden administration has embraced the Trump-led Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI). Proposed spending for the PDI increased 132 percent in the Pentagon's 2022 budget requirement, from \$2.2 billion in 2021 to \$5.1 billion this year. And if you want to gauge the current climate with respect to China, take note of the following: even this increase was insufficient for the majority of Democratic and Republican congressmen, who have added another 2,000 million dollars to the allocation to the PDI in 2022.

To make Washington's commitment to an anti-China alliance in Asia even clearer, the first two foreign heads of state or government invited to the White House to meet with President Biden were Japanese Prime Minister Yoshi Suga and South Korean President Moon Jae-in. In their respective interviews, Biden stressed the importance of joining

forces vis-à-vis Beijing. Following his meeting with Suga, for example, Biden publicly insisted that his administration is "committed to cooperating to address the challenges posed by China... in order to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific space."

On Sept. 24, Quad leaders first met with Biden at a summit at the White House. Although the U.S. government highlighted non-military initiatives in its official report on the outcome of the meeting, the main item on the agenda was undoubtedly the strengthening of military cooperation in the region. In this sense, it is revealing that Biden took the opportunity to bring out an agreement he had just signed with the Prime Minister of Australia, Scott Morrison, in order to provide this country with propulsion technology for a new fleet of nuclear-powered submarines, an initiative that evidently targets China. It should also be noted that a few days before the summit, the US formed a new alliance with the UK and Australia, called AUKUS, which also targets China.

Finally, Biden has continued to increase diplomatic and military contacts with Taiwan, even on his first day in office, when Hsiao Bi-jim, Taipei's de facto ambassador to Washington, attended his inauguration. "President Biden will stand with friends and allies to advance our shared prosperity, our security and our common values in the Asia-Pacific region, and this includes Taiwan," a spokesman for the presidency said at the time. Other high-level contacts with Taiwanese authorities, including military personnel, soon followed.

An overall containment strategy

What all these initiatives have so far lacked is a comprehensive plan to curb China's rise, thereby ensuring permanent U.S. supremacy in the Indo-Pacific region. The authors of this year's NDAA have paid special attention to this deficiency and several provisions of the law contemplate the elaboration of precisely this general plan. It is a series of measures aimed at incorporating Taiwan into the US defense system around China and the demand to develop a comprehensive strategy for the containment of this country on all fronts.

An informal measure provided for in this law gives general coherence to these disjointed initiatives, stipulating the creation of an uninterrupted chain of US-armed sentinel states stretching from Japan and South Korea in the north of the Pacific to Australia, the

Philippines, Thailand and Singapore in the south, with India on the southwestern flank of China, in order to surround and contain the PRC. Taiwan is also included in the planned anti-China network.

The future role envisaged for this island in the planned strategic plan is reflected in a provision entitled "Non-binding proposal on defence relations with Taiwan". Essentially, this measure insists that the promise made by Washington in 1978 to end its military ties with Taipei and the subsequent treaty between the US and China, signed in 1982, in which the former undertakes to reduce the quality and quantity of its arms supplies to Taiwan, have ceased to have validity due to China's "increasingly coercive and aggressive behavior" towards the island. Thus, the proposal advocates strengthening military coordination between the two countries and the sale to Taiwan of more sophisticated weapons systems, along with the technology for their manufacture.

Adding all this together we have the new reality of the Biden presidency: the disputed island of Taiwan, a stone's throw from mainland China and considered a province by the PRC, now becomes a de facto military ally of the United States. The principle that sooner or later the island must accept peaceful integration with the mainland or face military action.

In addition to acknowledging that the policy outlined in the 2022 NDAA poses a fundamental threat to China's security and its desire to play a greater role in the international arena, Congress also directed the president to present a "comprehensive strategy" regarding U.S. relations with China over the next nine months. Such a document should include an assessment of the country's overall objectives and an inventory of its economic, diplomatic and military resources required by the United States to curb its rise. On the other hand, it urges the Biden administration to examine "the assumptions and the outcome or the final results of the U.S. strategy on a global scale and in the Indo-Pacific region with respect to the PRC." The meaning of the expression "the final result or results" is not explained, but it is easy to imagine that the authors of this proposal were thinking about the possible collapse of the Chinese communist government or some form of war between the two countries.

How will the Chinese rulers respond to all this? No one knows yet, but President Xi Jinping gave at least a hint as to what the response might be in a July 1 speech, delivered on the occasion of the CCP's centennial. "We will never allow a foreign force to harass, oppress or subjugate us," he declared as China's newest armored vehicles, missiles and rockets paraded. "Whoever tries will be on a collision course with a great steel wall forged by more than 1.4 billion Chinese people."

Welcome to the cold war of the twenty-first century on a planet that desperately needs something else. (Article published on 13-1-2022 in: <https://tomdispatch.com/none-dare-call-it-encirclement/>)

Rebellion 28.01.2022