

## Bringing out the big guns

# The Pentagon changes its focus to Russia and China

*After 18 years of IEDs in the Middle East, America's armed forces are planning for high-tech warfare*



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PATRICK SHANAHAN draws his finger down a list of his priorities for the Pentagon: hypersonics, directed energy, space, cyber, quantum science and autonomy. It could not be further from the dusty battlegrounds of the past 18 years. “When we talk about space, this is not designed for counter-terrorism,” he says. Mr Shanahan, a former Boeing executive, was propelled into the job of secretary of defence in January, having served as understudy to James Mattis for less than 18 months. He has taken the helm of an organisation that is in the throes of change, as it prepares for life after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In January 2018 the Trump administration published its National Defence Strategy (NDS). Officials lamented that nearly two decades of whack-a-mole against insurgents and jihadists had eroded the country's military edge, resulting in exhausted and under-trained units armed for the wrong enemy. So the NDS decreed that America would henceforth focus on "long-term, strategic competition between nations"—namely, China and Russia. Mr Shanahan was charged with implementing the vision while Mr Mattis travelled around the world calming ruffled allies.

"This is the first time since the Reagan era where the United States has been motivated to modernise its war-fighting architecture, its technologies," says Michael Griffin, the Pentagon's technology chief. "The first time we've been forced to think about how we fight war."

One priority is to re-tool the armed forces with the weapons they need. Mr Griffin paints a picture of each service wielding its own ultra-fast and long-range hypersonic missiles, fed information from a vast satellite network girdling the skies, all of it supported by a procurement process that can spit out high-tech weapons in years rather than decades.

David Norquist, Mr Shanahan's acting deputy and the Pentagon's finance chief, points to rising investments in firepower-heavy platforms, like the Virginia-class submarine and new B21 bomber. But he also acknowledges that big planes and ships may not survive for long under a hailstorm of Chinese or Russian missiles. So money is also going to larger numbers of smaller, cheaper and dispersible platforms—like an unmanned boat.

The second priority is ensuring that the armed forces not only have the arms they need, but also the training and readiness to use them in the sort of fighting they would face in eastern Europe and the western Pacific. Disaster relief is nice, says one general, but "this is a warfighting operation." Ryan McCarthy, undersecretary of the army, says that half his brigade combat teams—freed from what was an intense pace of deployments—are now at the highest level of readiness, up from a small fraction of that two years ago. Basic training is being increased from 14 to 22 weeks.

Training and exercise scenarios are adapting, too. They increasingly reflect "large force-on-force conflict against very high-end adversaries," says John Rood, the Pentagon's policy chief. Soldiers who once practised dealing with terrorists' roadside bombs now drill in dodging enemy air strikes or chemical weapons. The army is raising new battalion-sized forces, one apiece for Russia and China, which integrate cyber,

electronic warfare and space capabilities—skills that were lost or neglected in the counter-insurgency years.

A third focus is changing what the Pentagon actually does with its troops, planes and ships. “The basic concept”, says Mr Rood, “is that we’re going to give priority to the Indo-Pacific.” He points out that 2018 saw the longest absence of an aircraft carrier from the Persian Gulf since 2001; two carriers were instead sent to the Pacific.

A working group at the joint staff has been poring through 150-odd “global execution orders” (directives to commanders around the world) that have accumulated over the years, weeding out those which do not fit with the NDS’s focus on great power competition. Seven out of eight advise-and-assist missions in Africa Command have already been cut. Central Command, which covers everything from Egypt to Pakistan, will have more fat shaved off.

But rebalancing is only part of the story. The most significant element of the NDS, says Mr Shanahan, is “dynamic force employment” (DFE in mil-speak). That refers to moving forces around the world quickly and unpredictably to bamboozle adversaries. Last year, for instance, the *USS Harry S. Truman*, an aircraft-carrier that usually hangs around the Middle East, was abruptly called home midway through her deployment cycle and then suddenly sailed into the Arctic Circle—the first carrier to do so in 27 years—to join massive NATO exercises. For a carrier, whose movements are planned years ahead, that is warp-speed. Similar surprise deployments of bombers, fighter aircraft and surface-to-air missiles are being planned under DFE.

Despite all this, insiders grumble that civilians have not forced services to change spending patterns drastically enough. Rear-Admiral Mark Montgomery, former policy director for the Senate Armed Services Committee, is concerned that the army is still buying too many vehicles initially designed for low-end war, such as light tanks. Chris Brose, the committee’s former staff director, says the Pentagon is not doing anywhere near enough to develop, build and test the huge numbers of autonomous, unmanned systems it needs.

Mr Shanahan urges sceptics to wait for the 2020 budget, which he has called “a masterpiece”. “What you’ll see in these budgets is a sizeable investment in these critical technologies and programmes, whether it’s autonomy, artificial intelligence, hypersonics, cyber. The critics haven’t had exposure to those plans yet.” He adds, coyly, that “there’s a good portion of the budget you won’t ever see”, implying that more radical efforts may be buried in classified spending. And he is confident that he can remould a 700,000-strong bureaucracy. “People like myself, we spend our whole

life implementing. We know how to move large organisations. We know where to place our bets.”

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