

Dangerous Crossroads: Trump's Defense Nominee General James "Mad Dog" Mattis Outlines Plans for Global War

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General James "Mad Dog" Mattis, President-elect Donald Trump's nominee for Secretary of Defense, used his confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday to outline an aggressive war policy, designate Russia and China as enemies and call for a dramatic expansion of military spending, including the "modernization" of nuclear weapons and expansion of cyberwarfare.

All of those present—Democrats and Republicans alike—heaped praise on Mattis during the three-and-one-half hour hearing. Not a single senator asked the nominee how he might scale down US wars, which are currently raging in several countries. Instead, senators vied with each other in appealing to Mattis to identify threats to "national security" that will be immediately confronted by the Trump administration.

No senator, including the supposedly "left" Democrat Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, asked the retired Marine General about his record in the occupation of Iraq, where he was implicated in war crimes. Mattis led the savage Marine counteroffensive that retook the Iraqi city of Fallujah in December 2004, and he ordered an air strike that year against a wedding party in which over 40 civilians were killed. Nor was he challenged about a public speech he made in which he stated it was "fun" to kill some people.

Until Thursday, Mattis was not legally eligible to be defense secretary. Federal law prevents selecting any individual who has been out of the military for less than seven years, a rule designed to protect the democratic principle of military subordination to the elected civilian government. Immediately after the hearing, the Armed Services Committee voted 24-3 to waive the law for Mattis, who retired from active command only three years ago, after which he assumed a seat on the corporate board of defense contracting giant General Dynamics. The full Senate quickly followed, voting 81-17 in favor of the waiver.

In a particularly ominous exchange during the hearing, Mattis was asked by the committee chairman, the Republican warmonger John McCain, whether or not he thought the "world order" was under its greatest strain in 70 years. Mattis responded, "I think it's under the biggest attacks since World War II. And that's from Russia, from terrorist groups and with what China is doing in the South China Sea." Later in the hearing, Mattis said, "America has global responsibilities, and it is not to our advantage to leave any of those areas to the world absent from our efforts."

There will be no end to these global wars, the senators' questions and Mattis' answers made clear. The US will "be engaged in global conflict for the foreseeable future," McCain declared. "Believing otherwise is wishful thinking... Hard power matters, having it, threatening it, leveraging for diplomacy and at times using it."

Though he was at pains to stress the importance of US alliances, especially NATO, Mattis, like McCain, embraced military unilateralism. The nominee said that the US has only "two fundamental powers," one of which he called "the power of intimidation." Necessary for this "intimidation" of other nations is for the US military to be "the top in its game in a competition where second place is last place."

Starting with McCain, senators repeatedly invited Mattis to denounce Russia and to separate himself from Trump over the president-elect's less publicly bellicose stance toward Moscow and his open conflict with US intelligence agencies over unsubstantiated allegations of Russian "hacking" of the US election.

Mattis labeled Russia a "strategic competitor" and said that Russian President Vladimir Putin was trying to "break" the NATO alliance, which he hailed as the greatest military alliance in history. "[T]here's a decreasing number of areas where we can cooperate actively and increasing number of areas where we're going to have to confront Russia," Mattis said. He also signaled his deference to US intelligence agencies, saying he has a "very, very high degree of confidence in our intelligence community."

When asked by Democratic Senator Martin Heinrich of New Mexico to identify "key threats" to the US, Mattis began with Russia, but from there developed a list that could include any nation in the world.

"I would consider the principal threat to start with Russia," Mattis responded, "and then it would certainly include any nations that are looking to intimidate nations around the periphery or nations nearby them whether it is with weapons of mass destruction or—I would call it unusual, unorthodox means of intimidating them."

This theme was taken up by Warren, who, alongside Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, is promoted as the "left" face of the Democratic Party.

"Russia wants to promote its security through instability...trying to create a sphere of unstable states along the periphery," Warren said. "As defense secretary, when it comes to the threats posed by Russia, will you advocate for your views frankly and forcefully to the president to speak about these threats and the need to take them seriously?" Mattis affirmed that he would. "We are counting on you," pleaded the liberal senator.

Sometimes taking a more militaristic tone than the nominee, the senators also encouraged Mattis to make bellicose statements against China, Iran and North Korea, and solicited declarations that the United States—which spends more on the military each year than the next eight largest economies in the world combined—is underfunding the Pentagon. Committee members, Warren and Missouri Democrat Claire McCaskill included, used their questioning to call for major new spending on the nuclear arsenal, the National Guard and cyberwarfare.

Mattis did not retreat from statements made by Rex Tillerson, the former Exxon CEO nominated by Trump for secretary of state, that the US should block China from access to

the South China Sea—itself an act of war. Mattis supported the conclusion that China, in its land reclamation projects, is “militarizing” the South China Sea.

Mattis stated his support for increased US aggression in the Middle East, telling the committee that the war on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria needed to be placed on “a more aggressive timeline.”

In a document submitted to the committee prior to the hearing, Mattis identified Iran as the “biggest destabilizing force in the Middle East” and said that the Trump administration should “checkmate Iran’s goal for regional hegemony.” In previous statements, he has insisted that ISIS was nothing more than a stalking horse for Tehran to project its influence. However, invited by senators to disavow the nuclear agreement with Iran concluded by the Obama administration and five other powers, Mattis said he would uphold it.

Also Thursday, the Senate Intelligence Committee held hearings for Trump’s nominee to head the Central Intelligence Agency, Mike Pompeo, a former Tea Party Caucus Congressman from Kansas with close ties to the multibillionaire Koch brothers. It is also expected that the Pompeo nomination will be ratified with little resistance from Democrats.

Pompeo’s testimony was notable for its belligerent posture toward Russia. He upheld the US spy agencies’ report of hacking, though that report contained not a shred of evidence and was previously questioned by Trump.

“With respect to this report in particular, it’s pretty clear about what took place here, about Russian involvement in efforts to hack information and to have an impact on American democracy,” Pompeo said. “This was an aggressive action taken by senior leadership inside of Russia.” Pompeo also accused Russia of “invading and occupying Ukraine, threatening Europe, and doing nothing to aid in the destruction and defeat of ISIS.”

The bitter fight over the allegations of Russian “interference” in the US elections boils down to a dispute over foreign policy—whether or not to settle scores first with Russia, or to focus on a showdown with China. The media hysteria and the intervention of the intelligence apparatus and leading Republicans such as McCain to support these allegations amounts to an attempt to ensure that the Trump administration will intensify the Obama administration’s anti-Russia policy, which would have been the first order of business in a Hillary Clinton White House.

The performance of the Democrats, including its “left” faction led by Warren, demonstrates that there is no peace faction within the American ruling class. Whatever their transient differences over the immediate target, the turn toward war to pursue the interests of the American capitalist oligarchy is the consensus policy of both parties.

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