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United States warned Israel over deals with China, top Pentagon official tells Haaretz

Amos Harel

The U.S. administration has warned Israel of security risks involved in introducing Chinese 5G cellular network technology, a senior Pentagon official told Haaretz.

John Rood, the U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, claimed Tuesday the Chinese leadership has chosen to challenge the existing world order that has emerged since World War II in a way that threatens the national security of the United States.

One of the most senior officials in the Defense Department, which has been operating since the beginning of the year without a permanent secretary since James Mattis resigned, Rood is visiting Israel to participate in the Herzliya Conference at the Interdisciplinary Center.

Rood met on Monday with senior Israeli officials, including National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat. As in similar meetings with senior defense and policy officials over the past year, it seems that this time, too,

American reservations about technology deals between Israel and China took center stage. In an interview with Haaretz, Rood also spoke about the crisis between the United States and Iran in the Persian Gulf and its possible implications for Israel.

Relations between the United States and China are "competitive," said Rood. "We're going to compete economically, but we're not destined to be adversaries."

"The biggest issue we see is that China and its leaders have chosen to challenge the

global order. Their ambition is to be the world's leading power. The issue there is not so much China's ambition to grow. We don't fear that. What we do get concerned by is that while the U.S. and Israel share the same set of values and outlook of the world, the kind of respect for human freedom, free commerce, free movement of ideas, respect for others' sovereignty, intellectual property, innovation – what we see in China's case is China's leaders choosing to

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challenge the international order that benefits all of that," said Rood.

"We've watched the rise of China's military capabilities with some concern. We see China trying to impose control over areas in the ocean, to bully their neighbors. We don't fear a peaceful rise of China. It's going beyond that contains a threat. We see this is the largest long term threat to our national security and our way of life that we see today," he said.

"We're not asking Israel to avoid all dealings with China. In Israel's case, as a growing economy, we certainly expect that there's going to be trade. There's an incredibly close bond between Israel and the U.S. Our main concerns is that we've seen China engage in predatory economics elsewhere in the world, in behaviors that are not purely commercial, where China's security services make use of economic deal-

ings. There's a pretty close relationship between the state and the so-called private sector. We've told our friends in Israel about some of the experiences other states have had. It led with commercial dealings in ports and tele-communications and it was closely followed with security service involvement. We've seen China make infrastructure investments elsewhere. It hasn't been a happy story for many of these countries, in a number of cases," said Rood.

Rood made mention of the links between the Chinese government and the Huawei telecom giant, which the United States has marked as a particular risk – and has even asked a number of close allies to avoid buying fifth generation cellular technology from the Chinese company.

"China and Huawei have stolen technology from countries like T-mobile. This is a substantial concern because of the risk to our close friend and ally Israel in terms of usage of that type of technology. The Israeli government has tremendous expertise

in this area, so they're not unfamiliar with these concerns. We're having these conversations with many allies, like the U.K. and it's something that we're grappling with at home. It's a different kind of situation than we faced in the cold war. When trade involves things that can put national security at risk – that's the area of concern," he added.

Rood declined to provide details of what was decided in his meetings with his Israeli hosts: "We have discussed these specific items. I would say there's a strong understanding from our partners. I'll leave it to the Israeli government to make any announcements about what it intends to do. I will say that we've had a very sympathetic hearing of our concerns. It's not a one-way dialogue."

Iran 'a valid point of concern'

Rood reiterated direct American accusations against Iran on its responsibility for the series of recent attacks on oil tankers and petroleum-related sites in the Gulf region, saying



John Rood, the U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, at the Herzliya Conference on Tuesday. Gilad Kavalchik

"this is the type of behavior that concerns us a great deal."

"I understand the concerns of Israel and why they need to be on guard here. Israel continues to face the threat of Iranian-supported groups like Hezbollah. The growth of the [military] capabilities that we've seen certainly makes it a valid point of concern," he added.

The United States has taken certain military steps in response to the Iranian attacks, including deploying a naval force led by the aircraft carrier USS Abraham

Lincoln to the region along with B-52 bombers and fighter aircraft, said Rood. "We want to send a signal that we're fully prepared to respond if we're challenged or if the Iranians would be so foolish to engage in more than just provocations." As U.S. President Donald Trump has said, "any harm to our soldiers would be met with a very firm response."

Still, Rood said: "The road to negotiations is wide open. President Trump has been very clear that he seeks negotiations with Iran and he's prepared to sit down and talk without pre-conditions. You can't be any more clear than that. He desires those talks, he's fully committed to them. The invitation has been extended many times for Iran to come to the table. But unfortunately, we were close to military action."

"The maximum pressure campaign" the United States has been conducting against Iran has begun to have a major impact on the Iranian economy. Rood noted that Iranian oil sales have dropped from about 2.5 million barrels of oil a day before the sanctions to less than 500,000 barrels a day because of the renewed sanctions. The Iranian economy shrank last year by 3.7 percent and this year the recession is expected to shrink it by another 6 percent. "The impact on the [Iranian] economy is very substantial," he said.