

Top US admiral warns war with China over Taiwan “much closer than most think”

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The US Pacific Fleet commander, Adm. John Aquilino, testified this week that he regarded a Chinese attack on Taiwan as the most threatening flashpoint for war in the Indo-Pacific region and advocated a further build-up of US military force in the western Pacific to counter China. His remarks underscore the mounting bipartisan clamour in Washington against Beijing and the accelerating danger of the Biden administration, not China, provoking a war.

Aquilino was testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee at his confirmation hearing to replace Admiral Phil Davidson as head of the US Indo-Pacific Command—the largest US military command. He told the committee that “the dangerous concern is that of a military force against Taiwan.” He referred to the previous testimony of Davidson, who last week warned of a supposed Chinese takeover within six years, then added, “[M]y opinion is this problem is much closer to us than most think.”

Significantly, Aquilino agreed with the assessment of Trump’s former national security adviser H.R. McMaster, who told the Senate committee this month that Taiwan was “the most significant flashpoint now that could lead to a large-scale war.” In his bellicose anti-China remarks, McMaster argued that “China has a fleeting opportunity that is closing,” and the months between next year’s Winter Olympic Games in Beijing and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) congress later in the year presented the “greatest danger.”

These declarations stand reality on its head. It is not Chinese “aggression” that threatens a devastating nuclear war between China and the US, but rather the relentless US military build-up throughout Asia. Combined with naval provocations in the South and East China Seas and trade war measures against China, this has dramatically escalated geopolitical tensions.

Aquilino, Davidson and McMaster all used the alleged threat posed to Taiwan to justify their demands for a further major expansion of armaments and military spending for the US Indo-Pacific Command.

The deliberate US ramping up of confrontation with China began under the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” which called for the deployment of 60 percent of the Pentagon’s naval and air assets to the region by 2020. The Trump administration then launched what amounted to economic warfare against China, directed in particular at preventing its development of rival hi-tech products. This was combined with accelerated provocative “freedom of navigation” operations in Chinese-claimed territorial waters in the South China Sea.

Within weeks of being installed, President Biden has accelerated the war drive against China. In his press conference on Thursday, Biden declared there would be “steep, steep competition” with China. He said his administration would nearly treble research and development funding to ensure US supremacy in hi-tech areas, and again insisted that China had to abide by the “international rules”—that is, those set by Washington.

In the last fortnight, Biden has convened the first leaders’ summit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, involving the US, Japan, Australia and India—a quasi-military alliance directed against China—and dispatched Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin to Japan and South Korea to consolidate alliances against China. Blinken went on to Alaska, where he and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan opened a two-day meeting with their Chinese counterparts with a provocative attack on China across a broad array of issues.

The new focus in US military and strategic circles on

Taiwan, underscored by a slew of commentary, including by the prestigious Council on Foreign Relations, is particularly dangerous. Following the 1949 Chinese Revolution, it was only the intervention of the US Navy that prevented Taiwan's incorporation into the newly-established People's Republic of China. For two decades, the US maintained the fiction that the Kuomintang dictatorship on Taiwan headed by Chiang Kai-shek was the legitimate ruler of all China, enabling it to sit in the UN Security Council.

That abruptly changed in 1972 after the US, under President Nixon, reached a rapprochement with China, aimed at jointly confronting the Soviet Union. Taiwan became the greatest obstacle to the establishment of formal diplomatic relations, which were finalised only in 1979, when Washington conceded that Beijing, not Taipei, was the legitimate government of all of China, including Taiwan. Congress, however, passed the Taiwan Act in 1979, committing the US to arming Taiwan and defending it against alleged Chinese aggression.

This highly contradictory stance, known in Washington as "strategic ambiguity," has been able to persist only because the US cut formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan, severely limited contact between US and Taiwanese officials, and restricted arms sales. Tensions in the narrow Taiwan Strait between the Chinese mainland and Taiwan, which repeatedly flared in the past, were defused.

Over the past decade, however, US actions, particularly under the Trump administration, have destabilised the inherently unstable and highly charged issues surrounding Taiwan's status. Trump threatened to tear up the "One China" policy if China did not make economic concessions. He greatly boosted arms sales to Taiwan and increased the number of US warships passing through the Taiwan Straits.

In the final days of the Trump administration, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo ended all restrictions on contact between US and Taiwanese officials—military as well as civilian. In a significant symbolic step, the de facto Taiwanese ambassador to the US was, for the first time, invited to Biden's inauguration, signaling that the new administration would not reverse the policy.

Not surprisingly, China has responded with protests. It has repeated statements that Taiwan is part of China

and conducted military exercises near Taiwan. This "aggression" is now being seized on by US imperialism as the pretext to justify a further military expansion along the so-called "first island chain," which includes Taiwan, immediately adjacent to the Chinese mainland, as part of its broader military build-up in the region.

In his confirmation hearing, Aquilino applauded steps taken by Taiwan to develop its own missiles. On Thursday, Taiwan's defence minister, Chiu Kuo-cheng, declared that the country was now mass producing long-range missiles—that is, offensive weaponry—capable of striking deep inside the Chinese mainland. The missile program is developing three more models as "a priority."

On the same day, Taiwan and the US signed their first agreement under the Biden administration, establishing a joint Coast Guard Working Group to collaborate on maritime security. The excuse for the move was new powers granted by the recent National People's Congress in Beijing to authorise the Chinese coast guard to use force when necessary. Taiwan is expanding its own coast guard, which is armed and can be drafted into naval service in the event of war.

Underlying the sharpening tensions over Taiwan is the island's strategic and economic significance. Situated about 150 kilometres off the Chinese mainland, the island was described by US General Douglas MacArthur in the early 1950s as "an unsinkable aircraft carrier"—that is, a major military asset. A number of Taiwanese-controlled islets, all heavily fortified, lie just kilometres off the Chinese coast. Any move by the US to establish military ties or a military presence on Taiwan would be regarded in Beijing as a major threat to its security. Economically, Taiwan plays a central and highly sensitive role in the production of the world's semiconductors.

By heightening tensions with China over Taiwan, the Biden administration is pouring petrol over what is correctly regarded as the most dangerous flashpoint in Asia, threatening to not only trigger war between the US and China, but drag in the entire world.



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