

US admiral warns China “we have the world’s greatest military”

Peter Symonds
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Admiral John Aquilino, head of the US Indo-Pacific Command, renewed his warnings of conflict with China over Taiwan at last week’s annual Aspen Security Conference. He expressed concern about China’s actions toward Taiwan, then reassured the audience that the US was in a position to take military action against China.

Asked about the US ability to defend Taiwan, Aquilino dismissed any suggestion that the US was in decline. “I want to be very clear—we have the world’s greatest military on the planet. We are here to continue to operate to ensure peace and prosperity through the region, and we have to be in a position to ensure that status quo remains as it applies to Taiwan,” he said.

General Charles Flynn, commander of US Army Pacific, made similar remarks during a press conference last week. Asked about the US ability to counter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, he declared: “The Army is always able to rapidly deploy. And we have a range of forces out here in the Pacific—from forcible entry forces to motorized forces to sustainment, communications, cyber, electronic warfare, intelligence, security-force assistance... that can move at speed and at scale.”

While Washington constantly accuses Beijing of potential aggression toward Taiwan, it is the US that is upsetting the status quo that has underpinned relations with China for the past 50 years. The establishment of US-China diplomatic relations following President Nixon’s visit to China in 1972 was based on Washington’s recognition of the “One China” policy—that Beijing was the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan.

Trump and now Biden have been ending the diplomatic protocols that limited contact between Washington and Taipei, in order to allow top-level contact between US and Taiwanese officials. Beijing

has repeatedly warned it would use military force to unify the island with China if Taipei made any attempt to declare formal independence. Yet by strengthening ties with Taiwan, Washington is encouraging the Democratic Progressive Party government in Taipei to do just that.

Last week, the Biden administration gave the green light for another sale of US arms to Taiwan, a \$750 million package that includes new artillery systems—40 M109A6 Medium Self-Propelled Howitzers—and related equipment. That latest sale comes on top of a \$1.8 billion arms deal for Taiwan involving sensors, rocket launchers and artillery proposed last October by the Trump administration.

In its statement, the Chinese foreign ministry “firmly opposed” the Biden administration’s proposed armed sales, warning that it sent the wrong message to advocates of independence in Taiwan, and “seriously damages Sino-US relations and peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.” It warned that China would take “proper and necessary countermeasures.”

The Biden administration has continued and intensified the US confrontation with China that began with Obama’s “pivot to Asia” and was stepped up under Trump, who mounted what can only be described as economic warfare. Despite its propaganda, Washington is not concerned about “peace” or “human rights” but rather is seeking to prevent China from threatening US global hegemony through all available means, including military.

The danger of war was highlighted in March, by both Aquilino and Admiral Philip Davidson, the outgoing head of Indo-Pacific Command. In arguing in congressional testimony for a doubling of the INDOPACOM budget, Davidson warned that the US could be at war with China over Taiwan in the next six

years.” Referring to Davidson’s remarks, Aquilino in his testimony declared that “this problem is much closer to us than most think.”

Unlike Trump, Biden has actively sought to marshal the support of US allies. The first overseas trip by Secretary of State Antony Blinken was to Japan and South Korea—Washington’s two key military allies in North East Asia that house major US military bases and more than 80,000 military personnel.

Japan also has been increasingly vocal over the “defence” of Taiwan, which was a Japanese colony between 1910 and 1945. Earlier this month, Japanese Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi, the younger brother of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, called on the “international community” to pay greater attention to the “survival of Taiwan.” Kishi, a right-wing militarist, is known for his close ties with Taiwanese politicians.

Last week Aquilino also lashed out at China over its “unlawful claim to the entire South China Sea” and its negative impact on “all of the countries in the region.... whether it be with fishing or access to natural resources.” He continued: “Those are the things that lead me to believe that our execution of integrated deterrence has to occur now, and with a sense of urgency.”

Washington has no concern about the fishing and economic rights of China’s neighbours. For decades, it ignored the festering territorial disputes in the South China Sea. However, as Obama announced his “pivot to Asia,” Secretary of State Hilary Clinton intervened to declare that the US had a “national interest” in the South China Sea.

Over the past decade, the Pentagon has mounted an increasing number of supposed “freedom of navigation” operations, provocatively sending warships and warplanes to directly challenge Chinese territorial claims. US strategists regard control of the South China Sea, which is adjacent to key Chinese military bases on Hainan Island, as critical to mounting military attacks and imposing an economic blockade of China in time of war.

Aquilino’s call for a “sense of urgency” to mount “integrated deterrence” in these contested, strategic waters is a call to arms not only to Washington, but to US allies. The danger of war is highlighted by the fact that last week, as Chinese and Russian warships engaged in joint exercises in the South China Sea, the

Pentagon announced that it had started its Large-Scale Exercise (LSE) 2021 in the area, along with British, Australian and Japanese naval forces.

Aquilino’s remarks last week were echoed again on Monday by Secretary of State Blinken, who told the UN Security Council that a conflict “would have serious global consequences for security and for commerce... When a state faces no consequences for ignoring these rules, it fuels greater impunity and instability everywhere.”

In reality, by provocatively mounting large-scale naval exercises close to the Chinese mainland, the US is creating the conditions for a military incident, whether deliberate or accidental, that could lead to a dangerously escalating conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers.



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