

US admiral calls for “six, seven or eight” aircraft carriers in the Pacific

Peter Symonds
1 December 2021

The commander of the US Seventh Fleet, based in the Pacific, concluded a major joint naval exercise on Tuesday with a call for a big increase in aircraft carriers for the region. The annual ANNUALEX exercise hosted by Japan is the latest in escalating US-led military drills that are clearly aimed at preparing for war against China.

Vice Admiral Karl Thomas declared that although the combined forces marshalled for the war games represented “an incredible amount of power,” the allies needed to go further. “When we think about how we might fight, it’s a large water space, and four aircraft carriers is a good number, but six, seven or eight would be better,” he said.

The ANNUALEX drills involved around 35 warships and 40 aircraft from the US, Japan, Australia, Canada and, for the first time, Germany. The 10-day exercises involved joint training to “enhance maritime communication skills, anti-submarine warfare operations, air warfare operations, replenishments-at-sea, cross-deck flight operations and maritime interdiction manoeuvres,” a US navy statement said.

The identity of the “enemies” in the ANNUALEX training scenarios is no mystery. Asked by the media about China and Russia, Thomas declared it was important to show a united face to “other nations that might be more aggressive and authoritarian.”

The US and its allies, Thomas said, should use joint exercises to “deter aggression from some of these nations that are showing burgeoning strength” and “tell these nations that maybe today is not the day,” to start a conflict.

In reality, the US has engaged in a huge military build-up in the Indo-Pacific over the past decade and mounted provocative naval operations in areas close to the Chinese mainland and in waters claimed by China

under the spurious pretext of “freedom of navigation.”

Beijing’s response has been relatively muted compared to how Washington would react if Chinese warships were appearing regularly near major US naval bases on Hawaii or the West Coast.

In the name of “defence,” the US is using the joint exercises to consolidate military alliances in the Indo-Pacific against China. Japan and Australia are already formal US allies and part of the so-called Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, that includes India. Canada and Germany are part of the NATO alliance, which is increasingly turning its focus to the Indo-Pacific.

US imperialism is targeting China in particular. Washington regards the huge growth in the Chinese economy as the chief threat to its dominant position in Asia and internationally. As Admiral Thomas noted: “This region is more vital to the world than almost any other region when you look at global domestic product, or container movement or populations.”

Just five days before ANNUALEX exercises began, Japan and the US held their first joint anti-submarine warfare exercise in the South China Sea. In early October, three aircraft carrier strike groups—two American and one British—joined warships from Japan, New Zealand and the Netherlands in large naval drills in waters to the east of Taiwan.

Britain is a NATO member and part of the AUKUS grouping—Australia, the United Kingdom and the US—announced in September, whose pact includes arming Australia with nuclear-powered submarines.

Far from easing tensions with China, the Biden administration has maintained all the aggressive diplomatic, economic and military actions of the Trump administration against China, and actively consolidated the Quad and AUKUS quasi-military alliances.

The US military build-up and restructuring of its

forces in Asia continues apace. This week the Pentagon completed a global posture review that includes plans for a further expansion of airfields and other infrastructure at US bases in Guam and as part of basing arrangements with Australia.

While the review remains classified, US officials told the *Wall Street Journal* that Australia and Guam were both key in Washington's strategy to counter China. Improvements to airfields in Guam and Australia would expand the ability of the US to ferry troops in and out of the region in the event of a conflict, they said. The Pentagon also plans to send more ground and logistics forces to Australia, which currently hosts up to 2,500 Marines annually in the country's north.

Biden has deliberately stirred up tensions with China over Taiwan—potentially the most explosive flashpoint in Asia. While accusing China of “aggression,” his administration has actively undermined longstanding diplomatic protocols by boosting ties with Taipei and revealing, for the first time, the presence of US troops on the island. Under the One China policy, adopted in the 1970s, Washington effectively recognised Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan.

Biden has encouraged US allies to take a similarly aggressive stance over Taiwan. Australian Defence Minister Peter Dutton recently reiterated that it would be “inconceivable” for Australia not to join a US-led war against China over Taiwan.

Yesterday former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told a conference in Taiwan: “A Taiwan emergency is a Japan emergency. That is, it's an emergency for the US-Japan alliance as well. It's imperative that people in Beijing not misjudge that.”

The remark is particularly significant. Under Japan's so-called pacifist constitution, the government would only go to war if the country were facing an existential threat. In that context, Abe's remarks amount to a threat to join a US war against China over Taiwan. Abe also provocatively called for a US-Japan security dialogue with Taiwan—a Japanese colony from 1895 until 1945.

Abe stood down as prime minister in 2020 for health reasons, but remains a powerful figure in the ruling, right-wing Liberal Democratic Party, which advocates overturning constitutional limitations on the Japanese military. Last weekend the LDP-led government

approved a major increase in military spending of 773.8 billion yen (around \$US6.8 billion), far exceeding any previous supplements.

There is nothing innocent or peaceful about Washington's marshalling of its military forces and allies in the Indo-Pacific. Having engaged in decades of illegal wars in the Middle East and Central Asia in a failed bid to dominate these energy-rich regions, US imperialism is determined to prevent China from challenging its global hegemony, even if it means plunging the world into a catastrophic war between nuclear-armed powers.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has immensely intensified the social and political crisis in the United States. Confronted with a growing wave of strikes and widespread political opposition in the working class, Washington is seeking to turn these internal social tensions outward against an external enemy by vilifying China.

The call by Thomas for a major expansion of aircraft carriers and their associated strike groups in the Indo-Pacific is one more indication that the US is planning for war in the not-too-distant future. Last month, General Mark Milley, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, declared that he did not expect war with China—in the next two years. After that, he did not say.



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