

US Indo-Pacific commander in provocative flight over South China Sea

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In a calculated provocation staged for the media, the head of the US Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral John Aquilino, on Sunday flew in a Navy reconnaissance plane deliberately close to Chinese-controlled islets in the Spratly group in the South China Sea.

Aquilino used the occasion to denounce China for militarising the islets and ominously warn that his mission was to be prepared to “fight and win” should conflict with China arise.

The unprecedented publicised flight by the Pentagon’s top commander in the region has a wider significance. Even as the US and its NATO allies escalate the conflict with Russia in the Ukraine, the Biden administration is deliberately heightening tensions with China over dangerous flashpoints in Asia—Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Aquilino pointed to the construction of missile sites, aircraft hangers and radar systems on Mischief Reef, Subi Reef and Fiery Cross Reef, saying it appeared to be completed, and speculated as to whether China would construct military infrastructure elsewhere in the South China Sea.

“The function of those islands is to expand the offensive capability of the PRC [People’s Republic of China] beyond their continental shores,” Aquilino claimed. “They can fly fighters, bombers plus all those offensive capabilities of missile systems.” The missile systems posed a threat to military and civilian aircraft, he said. “They threaten all nations who operate in the vicinity and all the international sea and airspace.”

According to Associated Press, “As the P-8A Poseidon flew as low as 4,500 meters near the Chinese-occupied reefs, some appeared to be like small cities on screen monitors, with multi-storey buildings, warehouses, hangars, seaports, runways and white round structures Aquilino said were radars. Near Fiery

Cross, more than 40 unspecified vessels could be seen apparently anchored.”

The two Associated Press reporters on board breathlessly reported the Chinese radio messages to stay clear of the islets that were ignored by the US aircraft. Neither they nor the media outlets that published their report in any way challenged Aquilino’s remarks or even questioned what they were looking at on the screen monitors.

In fact, Aquilino’s comments stand reality on its head. While accusing China of aggressive intent, the Indo-Pacific commander was flying in a military aircraft within view of Chinese-claimed territory and thousands of kilometres from the nearest American territory. The South China Sea is immediately adjacent to the Chinese mainland and sensitive Chinese military installations, including key submarine bases on Hainan Island.

Over the past decade, the US has deliberately inflamed tensions in the South China Sea as a means of sowing divisions between China and neighbouring countries. In 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told a regional forum of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) that the US had a “national interest” in the South China Sea.

Having previously largely ignored the various territorial disputes, Clinton’s remark signalled an aggressive intrusion into the region and the onset of an intensifying US confrontation with China. The following year, Obama formally announced the “pivot to Asia” to challenge China diplomatically, economically and militarily across the region. On the pretext of ensuring freedom of navigation and flight, the US has repeatedly sent warships and warplanes into waters and airspace claimed by China.

US preparations for war with China have proceeded

apace. The Pentagon has completed repositioning 60 percent of its air and naval forces to the Indo-Pacific, and restructured and expanded its military bases. US military alliances and strategic partnerships aimed against China have been beefed up throughout the region.

Given the three decades of US wars of aggression in the Middle East and Central Asia, China is bolstering its military position in the strategic South China Sea. American military strategists regard US control of key waters close to the Chinese mainland, such as the South China Sea, as critical in any US war with China.

In congressional testimony last year, Aquilino warned that war with China was “much closer than most think.” His predecessor Admiral Phil Davidson had only days earlier told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the US could face conflict with China, particularly over Taiwan, within six years.

Speaking on last weekend’s flight, Aquilino claimed that Washington’s main objective in the region was “to prevent war” through deterrence. However, the real intent of the US military build-up throughout Asia is precisely the opposite, as was indicated in Aquilino’s threat: “Should deterrence fail, my second mission is to be prepared to fight and win.”

The Indo-Pacific commander accused China’s military expansion of being “destabilising to the region,” saying: “I think over the past 20 years we’ve witnessed the largest military build-up since World War II by the PRC.”

The “threat” posed by China is simply the pretext for the US preparations for war. The US military budget not only dwarfs that of China, but is larger than the military budgets of the nine next largest military powers. The Pentagon has been expanding its anti-ballistic missile systems in the Pacific and, following the US abrogation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty with Russia, is stationing offensive intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe and preparing to do the same in Asia.

In its historic decline, US imperialism is determined to use every means, including its massive military, to maintain its global hegemony and regards Russia, and particularly China, now the world’s second largest economy, as its chief threats. The provocative flight by Aquilino in the South China Sea once again underscores the sheer recklessness of Washington’s

foreign policy.

Having provoked a war in Ukraine aimed at mirroring Russia in an Afghanistan-type quagmire, the Biden administration is also inflaming tensions with China. Top White House officials, including Biden himself, have warned China of “consequences” if it provides material support to Russia in the Ukraine conflict. While “consequences” have been widely interpreted as punitive economic sanctions, US imperialism has a long track record of resorting to military provocations.



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