

US escalates conflict with China at Shangri-la forum

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Events at the Shangri-la Dialogue security forum in Singapore over the weekend are a warning of how far the United States government is goading China to the brink of war, regardless of the risk of a catastrophic nuclear conflict, even as the US intensifies the war against Russia in Ukraine.

Speaking on behalf of the Biden administration, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin delivered an incendiary hour-long speech in which he accused China of “intimidation,” “provocations,” “destabilisation,” “aggression” and “coercion” around Taiwan and in the East and South China Seas.

In reaction, Austin’s Chinese counterpart, General Wei Fenghe, denounced the “hegemony and power politics” of the US and declared that China was ready for war, if necessary, to defend its sovereignty, including over Taiwan.

Austin’s diatribe was themed “Next Steps for the United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy.” The ex-US army general pointedly spelled out the centrality of the US confrontation with China, which the White House has this year explicitly nominated as the primary existential threat to US post-World War II global hegemony.

Austin called the strategy “our priority theatre of operations” and “at the heart of American grand strategy.” He specifically pinpointed Taiwan, which is internationally recognised as part of China, as a flashpoint. “The stakes are especially stark in the Taiwan Strait,” he said.

The US defence secretary insisted that the US and its allies would continue to sail through and fly over what it claims are international waters surrounding China, including the narrow, 160 kilometre-wide Taiwan Strait between the island and the mainland.

“We will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows,” Austin said. “And we’ll do so right alongside our partners.”

Austin drew a direct parallel with the Ukraine war, in which the US and NATO powers incited the Russian government of Vladimir Putin into a reactionary invasion by expanding the nuclear-armed NATO military alliance to Russia’s borders and organising a 2014 coup to install a fascist-backed regime in Kiev.

The “undefensible assault on a peaceful neighbour has galvanised the world,” Austin claimed, “and reminded us all of the dangers of undercutting an international order rooted in rules and respect.” He asserted: “We’ve witnessed a steady increase in provocative and destabilising military activity near Taiwan. That includes PLA [Chinese] aircraft flying near Taiwan in record numbers in recent months—and on a nearly daily basis.”

An editorial in *China Daily*, Beijing’s most authoritative media platform, put these accusations in the context of mounting US provocations, saying the US last year carried out more than 100 military exercises in the South China Sea and nearby waters, alone or with its allies.

To underline the alleged Ukraine parallel, the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, an imperialist military think tank, invited Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to deliver a virtual address to the forum. He provocatively called for greater international intervention in the Taiwan Strait and military support for the Taipei government, echoing similar calls in some NATO member states to further militarise the strait and ensure Taiwan’s continued separation from the mainland.

Reacting to the speeches by Austin and Zelensky, Wei stated: “Let me make this clear: if anyone dares to split Taiwan out of China, we will not hesitate to fight. We will fight at all costs. We will fight to the very end. This is the only choice for China.”

Wei warned that the US had violated its commitment to the “one China” principle as it applied to Taiwan. He

stressed the need for eventual peaceful reunification, adding that the division was a result of the 1945-49 Chinese Civil War.

On Sunday, Bloomberg reported that “Chinese military officials in recent months have repeatedly asserted that the Taiwan Strait isn’t international waters during meetings with US counterparts.”

But figures in the ruling party in Taipei, the Democratic Progressive Party, encouraged by the US moves, are indicating that a formal secession from China to declare a “Republic of Taiwan” could be under consideration. That could trigger military intervention by China, which the US and its allies could seize upon as a pretext for war against China.

Austin emphasised Washington’s support for inflammatory military operations by Canada and Australia, two close US allies, both of which have accused China of responding dangerously to their recent surveillance flights near Taiwan and Chinese-claimed islands.

Austin’s denunciation of China’s “unprofessional and frequent interceptions” only highlights the fact that Washington is orchestrating a build-up of intrusive military incursions around China.

Austin boasted of the “power of partnerships” and the US’s “unparalleled network of alliances” in the region. He said these had deepened, noting the recent Washington summit with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the growing importance of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) group of the US, India, Japan and Australia, and the trilateral AUKUS military partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom.

In response, Wei said Austin’s comments on Washington’s Pacific strategy reaffirmed Chinese suspicions that America was engaged in an attempt to “build an exclusive small group in the name of a free and open Pacific, to hijack countries in our region and target one specific country.”

Wei warned of the danger of nuclear war. He said China had made “impressive progress” in developing new nuclear weapons but would only use them for self-defence, and never use them first.

The seriousness of the escalating confrontation was emphasised by the *China Daily* editorial on June 11. It said Wei had taken the opportunity of a sideline meeting with Austin “to leave his US counterpart in no doubt that the People’s Liberation Army has no choice but to defend China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and it will fight to crush any act of seceding Taiwan from China,

whatever the cost, even by going to war.”

The editorial said the “strongest-ever warning from the Chinese side” demonstrated “its indignation at the US’ frequent moves to violate the one-China principle ... Washington clearly misjudges the situation if it thinks that China cannot afford to or will dare not engage in a war with the US and its allies.”

At last month’s Quad summit in Tokyo, for a third time since taking office, US President Joe Biden emphatically declared that the US had a “commitment” to back Taiwan militarily in the event of a conflict with China—overturning five decades of US policy.

When the US established diplomatic relations with China in 1979, and ended all formal ties with Taiwan, it adopted the One China policy—de facto recognising Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan. Accompanying that was the doctrine of “strategic ambiguity”—refusing to categorically commit to siding with Taiwan in a war with China.

While Austin again insisted that there has been no change of US policy, a series of top-level visits to Taiwan, the open presence of US military trainers on the island, stepped-up arms sales and increased transits through the Taiwan Strait amount to calculated affronts to China.

Alongside the stepped-up military conflict against Russia over Ukraine, the central aim of US foreign policy is to cripple, isolate and contain China, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a major policy speech last month.

Spearheaded by US imperialism, capitalism is lurching toward another, even more disastrous, world war.

The food and fuel crisis already triggered by the Ukraine war, however, is driving workers into struggle all over the world against the skyrocketing cost of living and the soaring military spending at the expense of essential social programs. This global upsurge provides the working-class base for the struggle to prevent a new world conflagration and overturn the ruling classes responsible for the danger facing humanity.



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