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US Indo-Pacific military chief warns of conflict with China over Taiwan

In an interview with the *Financial Times* last Friday, Admiral John Aquilino, head of the US Indo-Pacific Command, again hit out at China over Taiwan, declaring that the Russian invasion of Ukraine signalled that “hey, this could really happen” in this region. The lesson, he declared, was “don’t be complacent... We have to be prepared at all times.”

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



US Navy admiral John C. Aquilino, April 2021 (United States Department of Defense)

Aquilino, who heads the largest US command comprising some 380,000 military personnel armed to the teeth with warplanes, warships, submarines and the latest weaponry, was in Australia to further integrate its military into US war plans. His focus on the “threat” posed by China is simply the justification for a massive US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific and the forging of closer alliances, strategic partnerships and basing arrangements across the region.

Aquilino told the *Financial Times* that China had displayed a “boldness” over the past year, citing its “increased maritime and air operations” near Taiwan, the “very steep increase” in China’s nuclear arsenal, which the Pentagon projects will surpass 1,000 warheads this decade, and the test firing of a new hypersonic weapon last July.

China’s military expansion, however, is dwarfed by that of US imperialism, whose military budget is greater than that of the world’s next nine largest combined, including China. The Pentagon already has thousands of nuclear warheads and is spending hundreds of billions of dollars to upgrade its nuclear weapons and delivery systems. It pulled out of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia in 2019 and is planning to station such weapons in the Pacific within range of the Chinese mainland.

Over the past year, the Biden administration has deliberately escalated tension with China over Taiwan by conducting high-level US visits with Taipei’s civilian and military officials—actions that call into question the One China policy that is the basis of US-Chinese diplomatic relations. While flights by Chinese aircraft have increased into the Taiwanese Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ)—a designation that has no standing in international law—the Pentagon has boosted the passage of its warships through the Taiwan Strait as well as the size and number of war games in waters close to China.

In a particularly provocative move before arriving in Australia, Aquilino flew aboard a US navy reconnaissance aircraft close to Chinese-controlled islets in the South China Sea in a direct challenge to Chinese authorities. While flying in a military plane thousands of kilometres from the nearest American territory, the Indo-Pacific commander accused China of establishing an “offensive” military capacity in the South China Sea.

Hypocrisy abounds! The US insists on its “right” to send warships and warplanes through the strategic area close to sensitive Chinese military bases, but when China seeks to

counteract the threat posed by American military forces it is accused of preparing for “aggressive” actions.

Aquilino’s six-day visit to Australia, which has not been publicised in the Australian press, is clearly linked to Washington’s preparations for conflict with China. Before arriving in Canberra for several days of joint planning talks with Australian military chiefs, Aquilino visited US Marines stationed in Darwin in the country’s north.

A contingent of US Marines has been deployed to Darwin yearly on a “rotational” basis under an agreement signed between Australian Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard and US President Obama in 2011. This year the contingent of 2,200 US Marines is being further enhanced by a Marine “command element” and a US Army detachment—signs that the US intends to station a fully operational unit in northern Australia.

Aquilino subsequently flew to Amberly air force base near Brisbane to meet the crew of a B-2 stealth bomber that, as the *Financial Times* (FT) put it, “had flown in from the US to demonstrate American long-range military power to potential adversaries.” The stealth bomber is to conduct “complex integrated training” with Australian fighter aircraft.

The nuclear-capable B-2 bomber is able to carry 18 tonnes of ordinance, including B61 and B83 nuclear bombs. Aquilino told the FT that his Indo-Pacific Command was working closely with the Strategic Command which controls the huge US nuclear arsenal, to provide an “integrated deterrence” against the threat posed by China.

Aquilino spent several days in Canberra in closed-door talks with top Australian military chiefs. Discussions focussed in particular on the AUKUS pact reached last year between Australia, the United Kingdom and United States that includes the provision of nuclear-powered attack submarines to the Australian navy. Australia and the US have both signalled the need to deploy the submarines as soon as possible. Their chief purpose is not “defensive,” but to operate alongside the US Navy in any war with China.

Asked by the FT what role Australia and Japan would play in any conflict with China over Taiwan, Aquilino said they would have to decide for themselves. In reality, both US allies would automatically be involved in a US-led war with China.

Japan hosts huge American military bases as well as anti-ballistic missile sites that would immediately be activated in such a conflict. Australia is home to vital US communication bases, including the Pine Gap base in Central Australia, which is crucial to the US military's electronic spying and targeting systems.

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