China is the Biggest Challenge and Taiwan the Biggest Risk: INDO-PACOM Nominee Says



Adm. John Aquilino, Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet, speaks during the 79th Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day ceremony at the Pearl Harbor National Memorial in Honolulu, Hawaii, in 2020. Aquilino, nominated to be the next commander of Indo-Pacific Command, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee March 23, 2021. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Jessica O. Blackwell*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The Navy admiral nominated to lead U.S. Indo-Pacific Command says his immediate challenge is to deter China

from seizing Taiwan, while assuring regional allies and partners that the United States is serious about opposing Beijing's belligerence.

"This problem is much closer to us than most think," Adm. John C. Aquilino, currently commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, told the Senate Armed Services Committee at his confirmation hearing March 23.

"The Indo-Pacific is the most consequential reason for America's future and remains the priority theater for the United States," he said, adding that the region includes four of the five security challenges for the U.S. military: China, Russia, North Korea and violent extremist organizations.

But "of all the threats we face, [Defense Secretary Lloyd J.] Austin was very clear when he stated, 'China is our pacing threat,'" Aquilino added. The admiral said he agreed with the assessment of the departing INDO-PACOM commander, Adm. Philip S. Davidson, that the most dangerous concern with China was if it used "military force against Taiwan." To deter that, forward deployed U.S. forces rely on the support of "our allies and partners –those nations with common values," he said.

While the threat of a Chinese attack is not immediate, Aquilino said it was likely sooner than the six years Davidson projected in testimony before the committee March 9. If China seized Taiwan and subsequently based ships and aircraft there, "it would certainly extend their reach. It would extend the contested environment. It would threaten our allies and partners, think [of] the Philippines," he said.

Aquilino said conducting exercises with allies and partner nations, like Japan, Korea and India would complement the administration's focus on deterrence through diplomatic, development and economic means. He also said the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) a multibillion dollar fund created

by Congress last year, “is the foundational approach” to advancing capabilities and capacity in lethality, force design and logistics to help strengthen partnerships for an integrated joint force.

Reclaiming Taiwan, which broke away from the People’s Republic of China in 1949, is important “because the rejuvenation of the Chinese Communist Party is at stake,” the admiral said, adding “They view it as their No. 1 priority.” The fate of the island nation of 23 million, located about 100 miles from China, puts U.S. credibility on the line with regional partners. “The status of the United States as a partner with our allies and partners also is at stake should we have a conflict in Taiwan,” Aquilino said.

“The United States maintains its longstanding commitments as outlined in the Three Communiqués, the Taiwan Relations Act, and the Six Assurances. We will continue to assist Taiwan in maintaining a sufficient self-defense capability,” Aquino said in written answers to questions previously submitted by the committee.

A 1984 U.S. Naval Academy graduate and naval aviator since 1986, Aquilino was nominated in December 2020 by then-President Trump for the INDO-PACOM post but was not confirmed by the Senate before the change in administrations. He was nominated again by President Joe Biden, Austin announced March 5.

A graduate of the Navy Fighter Weapons School (TOPGUN), Aquilino made several extended deployments in support of operations Deny Flight, Deliberate Force, Southern Watch, Noble Eagle, Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. His flag assignments have included deputy director, Joint Force Coordinator on the Joint Staff; commander, CSG-2, director of Maritime Operations, U.S. Pacific Fleet and commander, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, U.S. 5th Fleet, Combined Maritime Forces.