

Indo-Pacific Command: US Must Improve Nuclear Deterrence

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On March 20, 2024, the House Armed Services Committee hosted a hearing on military posture and challenges in the Indo-Pacific. Assistant Secretary of Defense, Ely Ratner, [testified](#) that “China continues to present the most comprehensive and serious challenge to the United States’ national security.” He added, “That’s because China remains the only country with the will and, increasingly, the capability to dominate the Indo-Pacific region and displace the United States.”

Admiral John C. Aquilino, commander of US Indo-Pacific Command, testified, “The Chinese will continue to develop weapons that they believe have advantage and deliver vulnerabilities to the United States.” What is interesting here is how, in less than a year, Admiral Aquilino’s discourse evolved from a conciliatory stance vis-à-vis China, to downright alarmist, albeit realistic, warnings.

As the commander of Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Aquilino leads the nation’s oldest and largest combatant command, responsible for US military activities in the Indo-Pacific region. The command includes over 380,000 soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, guardians, coast guardsmen, and Department of Defense civil servants. When, back in May 2023, Admiral Aquilino delivered a [keynote address](#) to the National Committee on US-China Relations, his exchanges with the audience focused on Sino-American military policy in the context of the overall bilateral relationship. They followed the diplomatically conciliatory script “that conflict is not inevitable and that both countries seek peace and prosperity.”

Emphasizing peaceful relations and cooperation between the US and China, the admiral highlighted the importance of dialogue and adherence to international rules. He expressed concerns over China’s actions that undermine the rules-based international order, particularly regarding the law of the sea and attempts to replace it with self-defined rules.

While advocating for military exercises, Aquilino insisted on the need for collaboration and communication to manage competition responsibly and prevent potential conflicts. The discussion, which also covered surveillance flights and cooperation in humanitarian efforts and climate change, was replete with calls for transparency and adherence to international norms. The discussion on surveillance and military dialogue further underscored the importance of risk mitigation and crisis management to avoid escalations in regional tensions.

Fast forward to the March 2024 House Armed Services Committee hearing and Aquilino struck a much different tone. China, Aquilino suggested, is investing in military technologies to exploit American vulnerabilities and assert dominance. This is taking place while China focuses on assimilating Taiwan (peacefully, if possible, through force, if necessary). China is also actively attempting to displace the US as the world’s leading superpower.

China keeps increasing its defense budget despite a relative economic decline, further investing in nuclear and hypersonic weapons. There are concerns about China and Russia cooperating. This adds pressure on the US and its allies on several fronts. Aquilino warned Congress about potential challenges to American deterrence efforts against the combined Chinese and Russian nuclear arsenals.

Having assessed the intensifying competition between the US and China in military capabilities and strategic influence, Admiral Aquilino focused on the enhancement of US conventional and nuclear defense capabilities to counter hypersonic weapons and the rapidly growing Chinese nuclear arsenal. If diplomatic efforts are to succeed, strengthening alliances and partnerships mitigating the influence of the China-Russia cooperation, increased attention must be paid to Taiwan's security and to strategies to deter Chinese coercion without escalating into conflict.

While the continuous monitoring and adaptation of defense policies to address evolving threats from China and its partners is warranted, Admiral Aquilino concluded that “we need to negate those vulnerabilities, and we need to take advantage of our capabilities that outmatch theirs.” Indeed, China aims at more than 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030 and has already increased its arsenal from at least 300 to 500 weapons.

There is nothing particularly disruptive in what Admiral Aquilino advocates. He echoes what a congressional commission [concluded](#) in 2023: that the US should work to expand and enhance its nuclear arsenal to compete with the combined threat posed by China and Russia. The Biden administration and its successor need to respond positively to multiple recommendations to modernize and expand the American nuclear arsenal. While this in itself is not sufficient, it is absolutely necessary, lest the nation allow American deterrence in the Indo-Pacific to falter, and, ultimately, American global leadership to unravel. The clock is ticking.

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