US Indo-Pacific commander Admiral John Aquilino has recently complained about China’s militarization of the South China Sea. He has accused China of placing anti-aircraft and anti-ship systems along with other military facilities on islands scattered throughout the South China Sea.

The Guardian in an article titled, “China has fully militarized three islands in South China Sea, US admiral says,” would claim:

“Over the past 20 years we’ve witnessed the largest military buildup since world war two by the PRC,” Aquilino told the Associated Press in an interview, using the initials of China’s formal name. “They have advanced all their capabilities and that buildup of weaponization is destabilizing to the region.”

The article would go on to explain how the US has positioned its own military in the region, challenging Chinese territorial claims despite having no claims over the South China Sea itself. The Guardian would note that nations like the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei have overlapping claims with China, along with the current breakaway administration of Taiwan.
The Guardian notes that approximately $5 trillion in trade passes through the South China Sea but fails to note which nation above all others would benefit least from disrupting trade in the region - and which nation would benefit most.

The US, Not China Threatens Trade in the South China Sea

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) - a policy think-tank funded by the US government, its allies, as well as large corporations including weapons manufacturers - maintains the China Power project. In an article published on the project’s website titled, “How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?,” it would be revealed that China above all other nations depends on the safety and stability of the South China Sea regarding trade, noting that $874 billion in Chinese exports transit the region accounting for over a quarter of all trade through it.

Nations including South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam also account for significant trade through these waters and it must also be kept in mind that each of these nations count China as their main trade partner.

China’s military build-up in the South China Sea isn’t just in reaction to America’s unwarranted and significant military presence in the region, thousands of kilometers from American shores, but also in reaction to the specific threat America’s military presence poses to maritime trade for China and the rest of Asia (who primarily trades with China).

The threat the US poses to Chinese maritime trade is not a figment of Beijing’s imagination but a threat articulated explicitly in US policy papers regarding potential war with China within a closing window of opportunity the US has to use its remaining advantage in military might to fight and win a conventional war with China and thus prevent it from surpassing the US economically, militarily, and diplomatically.

The 2016 RAND Corporation paper, “War with China,” specifically mentions deliberately transforming waters through which China’s trade flows into a war zone. The paper notes that amid a US-Chinese conflict:

…much of the Western Pacific, from the Yellow Sea to the South China Sea, could become hazardous for commercial sea and air transport. Sharply reduced trade, including energy supplies, could harm China’s economy disproportionately and badly.

The disruption of China’s economy, in fact, is seen as the only realistic way for the US to “win” in a conflict with China. The RAND Corporation paper would note:

The prospect of a military standoff means that war could eventually be decided by nonmilitary factors. These should favor the United States now and in the future. Although war would harm both economies, damage to China’s could be catastrophic and lasting: on the order of a 25–35 percent reduction in Chinese gross domestic product (GDP) in a yearlong war, compared with a reduction in US GDP on the order of 5–10 percent. Even a mild conflict, unless ended promptly, could weaken China’s economy. A long and severe war could ravage China’s economy, stall its hard-earned development, and cause widespread hardship and dislocation.

The paper also notes that the US need not even specifically blockade various straits Chinese shipping depends on. The paper points out:

This suggests very hazardous airspace and sea space, perhaps ranging from the Yellow Sea to the South China Sea. Assuming that non-Chinese commercial enterprises would rather lose revenue than ships or planes, the United States would not need to use force to stop trade to and from China. China would lose a substantial amount of trade that would be required to transit the war zone.

Since this paper was written in 2016, the US has incrementally implemented policies to prepare for the conflict described by the RAND Corporation.

By 2021, US State Department-funded media Radio Free Asia in an article titled, “US Indo-Pacific Command Proposes New Missile Capabilities to Deter China,” would note (emphasis added):
The assessment calls for “the fielding of an Integrated Joint Force with precision-strike networks” along the so-called first island chain -- referring to missile strike capabilities -- and integrated air missile defense in the second island chain, USNI News reported. The document also calls for “a distributed force posture that provides the ability to preserve stability, and if needed, dispense and sustain combat operations for extended periods.”

Extended military operations is precisely what the RAND Corporation called for in its 2016 paper. Additionally, the US has transformed its Marine Corps into a “ship-killing” force equipped to deny China naval access to various territories across the Indo-Pacific region including straits vital for trade.

Defense News in its 2020 article, “Here’s the US Marine Corps’ plan for sinking Chinese ships with drone missile launchers,” would report:

*The US Marine Corps is getting into the ship-killing business, and a new project in development is aimed at making their dreams of harrying the People’s Liberation Army Navy a reality.*

The article also cited Lieutenant General Eric Smith, chief of the US Marine Corps’ requirements and development, noting:

“They are mobile and small, they are not looking to grab a piece of ground and sit on it,” Smith said of his Marine units. “I’m not looking to block a strait permanently. I’m looking to maneuver. The German concept is ‘Schwerpunkt,’ which is applying the appropriate amount of pressure and force at the time and place of your choosing to get maximum effect.”

What the US has prepared to do across the Indo-Pacific is implement the RAND Corporation’s “War with China” policy recommendations, implementations aimed at crippling Chinese maritime shipping, strangle its economy, and eventually collapse its government. In other words, the US is creating in the Indo-Pacific region, an existential threat to China’s continued existence as a nation-state.

US Marines are also currently present on Taiwan, according to Voice of America - Taiwan being territory considered by Beijing to be part of China - a fact even the US itself recognizes through the “One China Policy.” Thus, the positioning of US missiles across the region, the navigating of US naval vessels near territory claimed by China, and the placing US military personnel on Taiwan, are all meant to incrementally encircle and encroach upon China - pushing ever closer to, or even crossing over red lines established by China in the interest of basic self-preservation.

Just as the US has done to Russia through Ukraine it is now doing to China through the South China Sea and Taiwan. When conflict eventually breaks out between China and either the US itself or one of its proxies in the region - most likely the administration of Taiwan - it will be a conflict provoked entirely by the United States on the other side of yet another ocean, yet again thousands of kilometers away from American shores, and again endangering the lives of hundreds of millions of people toward the preservation of American hegemony and at the expense of another region’s sovereignty and perhaps even self-preservation.

US Indo-Pacific commander Admiral John Aquilino left all of this very important context out of his observations that China is overseeing a major military build-up - ignoring entirely the major military threat the US has placed at China’s doorstep.

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