Chinese officials downplay stand-off with US in East China Sea

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28 November 2013

After Tuesday's flight of US B-52 bombers into China's newly-proclaimed "air defence identification zone" (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, Beijing is seeking to downplay the incident and avoid a further escalation of the explosive military tensions in the Asia-Pacific.

Amid its dispute with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, China had provocatively demanded that all aircraft flying near the islands identify themselves to Chinese air defences and maintain radio contact, or face unspecified "defensive" military action.

Chinese forces did not take action against the B-52s, however. The Chinese defence ministry merely said that they had identified and monitored the US bombers as they flew 200 kilometres east of the islands. Had China responded by scrambling fighters to carry out "emergency defensive measures" against US aircraft, it could have led to a direct military clash with the US.

Yesterday, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang said: "We hope relevant countries do not make too much of a fuss about it, panic and read too much into it."

Asked about what China would do to future infractions of the zone, Qin indicated China would "make an appropriate response" depending on the "situation and degree of threat."

Some hard line elements in Beijing suggested that China had to adopt a tougher policy. Professor Shun Zhe at the Center for US-China Relations at Tsinghua University told Reuters: "If the United States conducts two or three more flights like this, China will be forced to respond. If China can only respond verbally it would be humiliating."

US imperialism has seized upon the Chinese ADIZ declaration to try to legitimize its own provocative military build-up in the region—the "pivot to Asia" aimed at isolating China. This policy encouraged Japan to assert its maritime ambitions, announcing a unilateral decision to "nationalise" the Senkaku islands in September 2012. Washington has repeatedly signalled that it plans to join the Japanese side in a war over the islands, should such a war break out.

In a conference call with reporters on Wednesday, Obama administration officials said Vice President Joe Biden would directly question top leaders in Beijing as to their "intention" over the air zone during a planned visit to China, Japan and South Korea next week.

One US official criticised China's ADIZ, saying it "causes friction and uncertainty, it constitutes a unilateral change to the status quo in the region, a region that's already fraught." The official said Biden would make the "broader point that there's an emerging pattern of behaviour that is unsettling to China's own neighbours."

The Western media echoed US accusations that China is causing the rising tensions. The *Financial Times* wrote, "As the world prepares to mark the centenary of the 'war to end all wars' [World War I], China would be better off learning how that conflagration started rather than dreaming up clever ways to antagonize and scare its neighbours."

China's proclamation of an ADIZ is playing into the hands of Japan's right-wing Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. He is pushing to overcome long-standing popular hostility to Japanese militarism and transform Japan into a "strong military power" by making constitutional changes allowing Japan to wage aggressive wars.

China frequently sends Coast Guard ships, planes and drones to patrol near the disputed Diaoyu/Senkakus islands, which in turn, has been seized by Tokyo as "intrusion" into its own air defence zone, to which it has often responded by scrambling fighters. The Japanese ADIZ is so large that even Chinese planes

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flying near the Chinese coastlines are in the Japanese air zone and trigger a response. Japanese media often portray such incidents as a Chinese "invasion" of Japanese airspace.

These events point to the extraordinarily tense and volatile situation in the region, which is only a few steps away from a military confrontation between the major powers.

The Obama administration is throwing its weight behind Japan. US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel phoned his Japanese counterpart yesterday to reiterate Washington's commitment under the Japan-US Mutual Security Treaty to support Japan, if war broke out over the Senkakus. Pentagon officials said that Hagel "assured Minister [Itsunori] Onodera that US military operations will not in any way change as a result of China's announcement" of the ADIZ.

A day earlier, US Secretary of State John Kerry also called Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, criticising the ADIZ as "an extremely dangerous act by China." He reiterated that "the US supports Japan's position."

The recently appointed US ambassador to Japan, Caroline Kennedy, criticised China yesterday, saying that its "unilateral" moves to establish the air defence zone "only serve to increase tensions in the region."

With this strong US backing, Japanese officials are discussing possibly expanding its own air defence zone into the West Pacific. According to the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Japan's defence ministry hopes to expand its air defence zone over the Bonin Islands, which include Iwo Jima.

Japanese media also reported that Abe's government will discuss establishing a mechanism of "avoiding air conflict" at a special December 13-15 summit in Tokyo between Japan and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). This is part of a broader diplomatic strategy to counter China.

Japan is gearing up for confrontation with China. Yesterday, the Abe government announced that its new National Security Council will come into operation on December 4. Then, new "National Defence Guidelines" will be released next month, focusing on maritime and air conflict with China, including island warfare and large-scale air/sea surveillance.

These plans underscore the profound political crisis facing the Chinese regime of President Xi Jinping. It has sought to counterbalance the explosive class tensions provoked by deepening social inequality and the super-exploitation of the Chinese working class by cultivating chauvinist, and particularly anti-Japanese, layers of the affluent middle class. They are now pushing Beijing to live up to its promise in confronting Japan. Journalist Ni Fangliu wrote on his microblog, "If the Chinese military doesn't do anything about aircraft that don't obey the commands to identify themselves in the zone, it will face international ridicule."

To the extent that Beijing tries to appeal to this layer with a provocative anti-Japanese policy, however, this threatens to provoke a direct conflict with Washington, which uses the military stand-off in the East China Sea to highlight its continued military dominance in the Asia-Pacific.

State Council advisor Professor Shi Yinhong of Renmin University told the *South China Morning Post* that the zone will stay there "forever." However, he said that China mainly aims to undermine Japan's position in the region and would interpret its rules liberally for US and Taiwanese aircraft: "The interpretation depends on the political reality. If a US or Taiwanese [military plane] enters the zone, we will be flexible."

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