

Tensions escalate over Chinese air defence zone

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Tensions continued to rise in the East China Sea yesterday after Japan and South Korea dispatched military aircraft into China's newly demarcated "air defence identification zone" (ADIZ). Both the Japanese and South Korean governments, following the lead of the US administration, declared that their aircraft would ignore Chinese instructions to submit flight plans, identify their nationality and maintain radio contact.

Having provocatively declared the ADIZ last weekend, China is now confronting continuing challenges from the US and its allies. On Tuesday, the US flew two B-52 bombers into the zone from its air base in Guam without following Chinese procedures. US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel publicly declared that the US would back Japan in any conflict with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, which Beijing included in its ADIZ.

Facing nationalist criticism at home for failing to enforce the ADIZ, the Chinese government sent an early warning aircraft and several advanced Su-30 and J-11 fighter jets to patrol the air zone. A Chinese air force spokesman insisted the move was "a defensive measure and in line with international common practice."

While Chinese fighters were not scrambled to challenge the Japanese and South Korean aircraft, the situation could spiral out of control. All the governments involved have whipped up nationalist sentiment as a means of diverting sharpening social tensions at home. Miscalculations in such a heated situation, where no side feels it can back down, could quickly lead to an aerial clash involving Chinese warplanes with those from Japan, the US or South Korea.

Each party is taking a hard-line stance. South Korea claimed its military reconnaissance plane was

conducting a "routine" mission over a submerged rock, Ieodo (known as Suyan in China), also claimed by China. South Korean Vice Defence Minister Baek Seung-joo called on Beijing to reconsider the zone, a demand that Chinese military officials rejected yesterday.

The Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe regards the issue as a convenient pretext to press ahead with its plans to remilitarise the country. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga declared yesterday that Japanese planes "will continue the surveillance/patrol operation with strong determination to protect our territory against China's one-sided attempt to change the status quo by force."

The ruling Liberal Democratic Party approved a resolution demanding that China revoke the air defence zone. The resolution criticised the Chinese decision as a unilateral move and an expression of Beijing's "unreasonable expansionism." On government orders, Japanese airlines are not providing flight plans to Chinese authorities for aircraft flying through the zone.

Washington has not asked US airlines to inform Beijing their flight plans. Instead, State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki yesterday issued a safety warning to American airlines passing through the East China Sea region.

At a press briefing yesterday, Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Yang Yujun responded to Japan's demand by saying: "If they want it revoked, then we would ask that Japan first revoke its air defence identification zone." He criticised Japan for harassing Chinese surveillance vessels and aircraft entering the Japanese ADIZ around the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.

At the same time, Yang rather defensively explained that the Chinese ADIZ was not a "no-fly zone" and not

an extension of China's airspace. It was, he said, just an early warning zone. He played down the possibility that China would shoot down unauthorised aircraft in the ADIZ, even though on Saturday Chinese authorities warned of unspecified "defensive emergency measures."

The standoff is the product of steadily rising tensions stoked up by the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," involving a diplomatic offensive and military build-up throughout the region aimed against China. Washington has encouraged key allies like Japan and the Philippines to take a tougher stance toward Beijing over festering maritime disputes.

During the past year, the confrontation between Japan and China over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands dramatically escalated after Tokyo "nationalised" the rocky, uninhabited outcrops. The Abe government stepped up patrols of the area and even threatened to shoot down unmanned Chinese drones that entered Japanese air space.

China's declaration of an ADIZ last weekend was a calculated attempt to challenge Japanese control over the disputed islets, as well as Washington's backing for Tokyo. It was also aimed against the frequent US military reconnaissance in waters and airspace just off the Chinese mainland.

A *Financial Times* commentary today noted that the dispute appears to focus on China and Japan. It added: "A more worrying, and plausible, interpretation is that Beijing has decided to square up to the US in the western Pacific. East Asia is looking an ever more dangerous place."

The article continued: "Consciously or otherwise, Beijing has now turned control of the air space around the Senkakus into a litmus test of the US security commitment to east Asia. For Washington to accept the Chinese restrictions would be to send a signal to every other nation in the region that the US cannot be relied on to defend the status quo against Chinese expansionism."

The Obama administration has no intention of sending such a signal. It dispatched nuclear-capable B-52 bombers to the area to make that point in the most emphatic and reckless manner. Moreover, it is not "Chinese expansionism," but US determination to maintain its dominance in Asia that is fuelling tensions. Washington has every intention, not only of

maintaining the present status quo, which includes US bases in Japan and South Korea, close to the Chinese mainland, but of extending its military presence in Asia to encircle China.

The US response has placed Beijing in a quandary. The *Financial Times* article concluded: "Chinese policy makers are nothing if not assiduous students of history. The rise of Germany at the end of the 19th Century was long featured prominently in the curriculum of Beijing's foreign policy elite. China, these officials tell visitors, will not repeat the Kaiser's miscalculation in uniting Germany's neighbours in opposition to its rise to great power status."

Yet by announcing the ADIZ, Beijing has succeeded in doing precisely that. South Korea, which China has been seeking to woo, Japan and Australia have all chimed in against the decision. While the *Financial Times* does not spell it out, the reference to the rise of Germany is a clear warning that Asia in 2013 is increasingly resembling Europe in 1913. The global crisis of capitalism is greatly exacerbating the tensions between the rival powers that erupted in the barbarism of World War I.



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