

US vice-president begins Asian tour as tensions with China continue

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Continuing tensions over China's newly-proclaimed "air defence identification zone" (ADIZ) in the East China Sea will head the agenda as US Vice President Joe Biden begins a trip to Japan, China and South Korea today. The US has joined Japan and South Korea in declaring it will ignore China's zone, and in flying military aircraft into the area.

Before Biden's departure, the Obama administration made clear the tour would be aimed at bolstering the credibility of its "rebalance" or "pivot" to Asia—a comprehensive strategic, diplomatic and economic campaign to isolate China. "The trip will reaffirm our enduring presence as a Pacific power, promote our economic and trade interests, and underscore our commitment to rebalancing US foreign policy towards the Asia-Pacific," a White House statement declared.

According to the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Biden will issue a joint statement after meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, calling on China to retract its ADIZ, on the grounds that it is dangerous and unilateral. In Beijing, Biden will question the Chinese leaders about their "intention" in creating the zone. In South Korea, Biden will deliver a keynote speech on US Asia policy.

In return for backing Japan over the ADIZ, Biden will look for concessions as he seeks agreement from Tokyo on the 12-nation Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), which is aimed primarily at undermining China's economic clout. Sections of Japanese business fear they will lose out in the trade deal, however.

The Obama administration had been on the back foot as a result of the president's last-minute cancellation of visits to key Asian summits in October, due to the US government shutdown. Abe, who has backed the TPP, exploited China's announcement of the ADIZ to highlight the "Chinese threat" and press for support for

unity with the US, including on the economic front.

Meiji Institute for Global Affairs analyst Jun Okumura told *Bloomberg* yesterday: "America's muscular approach to China adds meat to its Asia pivot, and may add impetus to the TPP talks. The more resolute the US behaves on issues with China, the more it will be positive for the TPP."

The US responded to China's ADIZ by sending two B-52 strategic bombers into the zone last Tuesday, delivering a clear message that it remains the dominant military power in the Asia-Pacific. Since then, the US, along with its allies, Japan and South Korea, has continued to fly military aircraft into the area on a daily basis, without notifying China.

The Chinese ADIZ overlaps with a Japanese ADIZ and includes the disputed islands known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China. A major US-Japanese military exercise took place last week in waters east of Okinawa, not far from Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. The drill involved 25 warships, including the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS George Washington. It was a show of force designed to demonstrate that the US will back Japan in a conflict with China over the territorial dispute.

Beijing began dispatching fighter jets and early warning planes to patrol or monitor its ADIZ last Thursday, increasing the danger of miscalculation and accident. China had threatened unspecified "defensive military measures" if intruders failed to comply with its rules for submitting flight plans, identifying nationality and maintaining radio contact.

Over the weekend, the US State Department advised American airlines to notify the Chinese authorities and submit flight plans if operating in the East China Sea. At the same time, it insisted that this "does not indicate US government acceptance of China's requirements for

operating in the newly declared ADIZ.”

Japan is the only country to have explicitly instructed its airlines not to submit flight plans to China. On Saturday, Tokyo also called on the UN’s International Civil Aviation Organisation to investigate whether China’s air defence zone threatened aviation in the region.

The Abe government, encouraged by the US “pivot,” has aggressively asserted control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and exploited the dispute to press ahead with plans to remilitarise Japan. Since taking office last December, Abe has increased Japan’s defence budget and deepened its collaboration with the US military build-up. Abe flatly dismisses any suggestion of a dispute over the Japanese-administered islands and recently indicated that Japan might shoot down Chinese drones entering the islands’ airspace.

The Chinese leadership of President Xi Jinping has responded with a nationalistic, anti-Japanese campaign at home to promote a false sense of national unity amid growing anger over the widening social divide between rich and poor. Beijing announced the ADIZ as part of its efforts to claim sovereignty over the disputed islands.

Yesterday, China’s state-run media commemorated 70 years since the signing of the Cairo Declaration on December 1, 1943, between US, Britain and China, which formed part of the post-World War II settlement. Chinese commentators argued that the post-war agreements stripped Japan of its rights to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, and the entire Okinawa island chain.

A Hong Kong-based magazine, *Asia Weekly*, published an article over the weekend, pointing out that the decision to set up the East China Sea ADIZ was made following the 18th Chinese Communist Party congress, which installed Xi as the new general secretary. The report noted that the zone had been extensively discussed within the top military circles, and was finally decided by Xi four months ago. Xi reportedly declared that the Sino-Japanese disputes in the East China Sea were no longer about the sovereignty of Diaoyu islands, or even the undersea oil and gas resources, but a “strategic struggle.” China is seeking access to the Western Pacific to develop its blue water navy.

The Obama administration’s “pivot” has deliberately

stoked up tensions throughout Asia as the means of asserting continued US dominance over the region. Now that Washington has united South Korea and Japan against China’s declaration of the ADIZ, Biden will no doubt seek to press China for concessions when he arrives in Beijing later this week.



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