US vice president backs Japan over China's air defence zone

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During his visit to Tokyo yesterday, US Vice President Joe Biden maintained the pressure on China over its declaration of an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea on November 23. After meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Biden reiterated that the US was "deeply concerned" by Beijing's action, saying it had "increased the risk of accidents and miscalculation."

The Obama administration has seized on the Chinese ADIZ as a means of strengthening ties with its allies Japan and South Korea, as part of its "pivot" to Asia, aimed at encircling China and undermining Beijing's influence throughout the region. Biden reaffirmed that the US was "steadfast" in its commitment to the US-Japan alliance, echoing statements by US officials over the past week that the US would side with Japan in any conflict with China.

The US and Japan have both declared they will ignore the rules set by China for its ADIZ, which includes the airspace over the disputed islands known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China. Last week, the US air force flew two B-52 bombers into the air defence zone without notifying Chinese authorities. On Friday, China scrambled fighters in response to US and Japanese war planes entering the zone.

While China, the US and Japan have not released details, the Taiwanese defence ministry, which has closely monitored the air activities, told the media on Monday the US had intruded 13 times into the Chinese zone since it was declared, and Japan 85 times. According to Taiwan's monitoring, Chinese fighters appeared to have scrambled against US and Japanese planes on November 26, 27 and 29, and were getting "very close," or just one nautical mile from the intruding aircraft.

In a further escalation of tensions, the Pentagon is deploying the US Navy's advanced P-8 Poseidon aircraft to Okinawa in Japan, the first of which arrived on Sunday. The aircraft are designed to track and target submarines and small vessels in the open sea. Defence Department spokesman Colonel Steve Warren said the P-8 and other US military planes would continue "regular" air operations in the ADIZ. He made clear there were no plans to curtail or halt US military air operations in the zone during Biden's visit.

Unlike Japan, the US has advised its civilian airlines to submit flight plans to Chinese authorities for aircraft flying into the ADIZ, fuelling media speculation of a rift between Tokyo and Washington on the issue. China's foreign ministry spokesman told reporters that the US had showed "a constructive attitude" and condemned Japan's "erroneous actions."

However, a senior US administration official, cited by the *Guardian*, told the media there was "no daylight" between the US and Japan. Biden himself declared that he would raise the ADIZ issue with Chinese leaders today "directly" and with "great specificity." A senior official indicated that Biden would call on China to "exercise restraint" and avoid any other "destabilising actions," including the announcement of new air defence identification zones. Biden will no doubt make absolutely clear that the US will tolerate no restriction on regular operations by military aircraft in the air space close to the Chinese mainland.

The US "pivot" to Asia has directly encouraged Japan to take a more aggressive stance toward China and play a greater military role in the region. Since Abe came to power last December, tensions over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands have risen sharply. The Abe government is expanding the Japanese military, especially its capacity to carry out operations

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in the southern islands adjacent to China.

At a joint press conference, Abe said he and Biden had “confirmed we should not tolerate any attempt by China to change the status quo by force.” The comment refers in particular to any move by China to challenge Japan’s administration of the Senkakus. The Obama administration has repeatedly declared that its military alliance with Japan specifically covers the disputed islands.

Biden, who will be in Beijing today, has sought to posture as a mediator. Speaking in Tokyo, he urged Japan and China to create a crisis-management mechanism and open channels of communication to reduce the risk of conflict. In fact, the US has sought to use the tensions over the ADIZ to put China on the back foot and extract concessions, while consolidating its own alliances in the region.

Biden, who will also visit South Korea this week, will be seeking to overcome friction between Japan and South Korea over their own maritime dispute and Abe’s downplaying of the war crimes of Japanese imperialism during the 1930s and 1940s. China has played into Washington’s hands by including in its ADIZ, a submerged island claimed by South Korea. Seoul has responded by flying its own military aircraft into the Chinese zone.

In Tokyo, Biden made a specific call for “closer cooperation between our allies, Japan and South Korea.” The US has been pressing for an intelligence-sharing agreement between the two countries to facilitate their closer integration into the Pentagon’s military build-up in Asia in preparation for conflict with China.

The continuing tensions in the East China Sea have raised fears in ruling circles about a slide to war. *Financial Times* columnist Martin Wolf yesterday drew the parallels with the situation in Europe immediately before World War I, demonstrating how “seemingly minor events can quickly escalate to catastrophic proportions.”

Wolf continued: “Today, with China under the leadership of Xi Jinping, an assertive nationalist, Japan under the leadership of Shinzo Abe, a no less assertive nationalist, and the US committed by treaty to defending Japan, the risk of a ruinous conflict again exists. Such an event is far from inevitable. It is not even likely. But it is not impossible and it is more likely than it was a month ago.”

While Wolf, like the rest of the international media, sheets the primary responsibility to China, rather than the US determination to maintain its hegemony in Asia, the comment does underscore the mounting risk that heightened rivalries, arising from the deepening crisis of global capitalism, can precipitate a global conflict.

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