

India walks fine line over China's air defence zone

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India's government has to date avoided taking sides in the tense dispute over China's announcement last month of an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea. The US and Japan have challenged China's declaration by flying military aircraft into the zone, which overlaps the Japanese ADIZ and includes the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, leading to the danger of conflict provoked by a miscalculation or mistake.

Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid first commented on December 5, nearly two weeks after China's ADIZ was announced. Speaking at an energy event in New Delhi, he declared India's "standard position" was that "any issue must be resolved between concerned parties through dialogue." Saying India did not support "threats" or the "use of force," he added: "When you ask key people to do a dialogue, then you are on both sides."

In comments cited in the *Hindustan Times*, former foreign secretary Lalit Mansingh spelled out the rationale behind the "standard position," saying: "India has its own set of problems with China. It's better not to take positions on other countries' problem with China." India and China have strained relations in their decades-old border dispute over Arunchal Pradesh, Ladakh and Sikkim, which led to war between the two countries in 1962.

Suspicion remains between the two regional rivals, exacerbated by the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," which is aimed at undermining China diplomatically and encircling it militarily. Washington is building a strategic partnership with New Delhi as a counterweight to Beijing in South Asia. The US is encouraging India, like Japan, to more aggressively assert its interests against China.

Facing a crisis in the East China Sea, China has

sought to avoid tensions with India. Foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang said Beijing would not declare an ADIZ along the border between India and China. "On the concept of an ADIZ, it is an area of airspace established by a coastal state beyond its territorial airspace," he said. So establishing an ADIZ along the border with India "does not arise," he added.

Despite Beijing's efforts to avoid a row with New Delhi, Indian President Pranab Mukherjee last month toured the northeastern state of Arunchal Pradesh, which is claimed by China. Mukherjee declared that the area was an "integral and important part of India," provoking an immediate reaction from China.

Chinese foreign affairs spokesman Qin urged India not to "take any measures that could complicate the problem," adding, "together we can protect peace and security in the border regions." He called for a continuation of "special envoy meetings and amicable discussions to resolve the border dispute."

Significant sections of the Indian establishment are pushing for New Delhi to take a harder line toward China.

Arvind Gupta, an analyst for the Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, a leading defence think-tank, commented: "The poser for India is how would it deal with the situation if the Chinese declared an ADIZ somewhere along the disputed border? Indian policy makers must be mulling over this eventuality."

The right-wing journal, *India Today*, published an article by Samir Saran and Abhijit Iyer-Mitra of the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi entitled, "China aggression is a global threat." They declared: "This [ADIZ] portends trouble for India. Today if China declares an ADIZ in the east, what prevents it from declaring the same over Arunchal, Sikkim or Ladakh?"

The authors criticised India for not having the close relations with the US that would allow basing rights for the B-52 bombers recently flown by the US air force into the Chinese ADIZ. “India must urgently explore a variety of options to restore deterrence vis-à-vis China,” they stated, by enhancing its economic clout, developing its air force and forging a close alignment with Japan.

In comments to the *Express News*, Indian naval chief, Admiral D. K. Joshi, downplayed China’s “unilateral announcement” of an air defence zone, saying it “hasn’t bothered the Navy much.” He expressed particular concern, however, that the ADIZ could be extended to the South China Sea.

The Indian company, ONGC Videsh Ltd, is involved in joint ventures with the Vietnam Oil and Gas Group, to explore for oil and gas in areas of the South China Sea claimed by both Vietnam and China. China has called on India to end its involvement. Last December, Admiral Joshi threatened to deploy Indian warships to the area to protect exploration vessels from the Chinese coast guard.

Commenting this month, Joshi said: “We do have units with integral air elements and sometimes they do operate [in the South China Sea]. Therefore, this particular issue [China’s ADIZ in the East China Sea] is under close examination.”

India and Japan are also forming closer relations, as highlighted by the six-day visit by Japan’s emperor Akhito and his wife to India from November 30. The Indian media hailed the tour as a “defining moment” in relations between the two countries.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pushed for the visit as a means of strengthening strategic ties with India. According to media reports, the emperor’s visit followed “a pressing request from the Japanese Prime Minister” for Akhito to tour India. Abe, a right-wing nationalist, is calling for the formation of a “democratic security diamond,” which would include Japan, Australia, India and the US, to counter the alleged threat posed by China.

While India has not joined the “security diamond,” New Delhi has entered deals with the Abe government to develop the Indian economy and military capabilities. In May, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Tokyo amid sharp tensions in India’s border dispute with China over Arunchal Pradesh. Abe

has been invited to India as the chief guest at Republican Day celebrations in New Delhi in January.

Stronger ties between India and Japan, particularly in defence cooperation, will only heighten suspicions toward New Delhi in Beijing and lead to a deterioration of relations. Just as the US “pivot to Asia” has created a dangerous flashpoint in the East China Sea, so it is greatly heightening volatility and the risk of conflict throughout Asia.



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