

US warns China over air defence zone

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In the wake of sharp tensions last November-December following China's declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, a Japanese newspaper last Thursday raised the prospect that Beijing was planning another ADIZ that would cover disputed waters in the South China Sea.

The article was short on detail and long on speculation. Based on unnamed Chinese government sources, the *Asahi Shimbun* claimed that "working-level air force officials have already worked out a draft plan for the prospective ADIZ," which was submitted to "high-level military officials in May 2013."

The *Asahi Shimbun* pointed to an ongoing debate in unspecified Chinese military circles over the extent of such an ADIZ. China has longstanding territorial disputes in the South China Sea with the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei. If Beijing announced an ADIZ that covered all of its claims in the South China Sea, it would provoke a reaction from these countries.

However, nothing in the article indicated that the Chinese government had made a decision, let alone was about to make an announcement. However, the lack of evidence did not prevent the *Asahi Shimbun* correspondent from speculating that "Beijing appears to be mulling when will be the best time to announce its new South China Sea ADIZ."

Far more significant than the threadbare article was the aggressive response in Washington. The following day, US State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf denounced any Chinese plan to announce an ADIZ in the South China Sea as "a provocative and unilateral act." She warned that it would "call into serious question China's commitment to diplomatically managing territorial disputes in the South China Sea."

Harf declared: "We've made very clear that parties must refrain from announcing an ADIZ or any other administrative regulation restraining [the] activity of others in disputed territories. We would urge China not

to do so."

Pentagon spokesman Colonel Steven Warren joined in, stating: "I am not aware that the Chinese have established a new ADIZ in the South China Sea. If they were to, our position on ADIZ is very clear. I do not think our position is going to change."

Last November, the US provocatively flew nuclear capable B-52 bombers unannounced into China's ADIZ in the East China Sea, greatly heightening the danger of a mistake or miscalculation that would lead to a clash with Chinese aircraft. US allies Japan and South Korea followed suit, making clear that they would not recognise Chinese authority over the air space.

The US reaction was in marked contrast to that of the Philippine administration, which, with Washington's encouragement, has taken an aggressive stance over its territorial disputes with China. Nevertheless, on this issue, presidential communications spokesman Herminio Coloma Jr. took an initially cautious approach, declaring the government would seek to verify the *Asahi Shimbun* report. "Since this is still in the realm of conjecture, it is best we await an official announcement," Coloma said.

The Obama administration is directly responsible for dangerously stoking up tensions in the South China Sea. Previously marginal territorial disputes were thrust into the international limelight by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. She told a summit meeting of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2010 that the US had "a national interest" in ensuring "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. Clinton's remarks cut directly across China's efforts to resolve the disputes bilaterally and encouraged ASEAN countries, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam, to more assertively press their claims against China.

The Obama administration has exploited the South China Sea disputes as part of its "pivot to Asia" that is

aimed at undermining Chinese influence in the region and encircling it militarily with bases and allies. Clinton's statement was the means for driving a wedge between ASEAN members. This was revealed most graphically when the organisation failed to agree on a final communiqué in 2012, for the first time in 45 years, amid bitter feuding over the South China Sea.

The US response to the *Asahi Shimbun* article is just the latest attempt to fuel tensions in the South China Sea. Last month, the Obama administration denounced new fishing regulations adopted by the provincial administration in China's Hainan province as "a provocative and potentially dangerous act" even though provincial authorities made clear that only seas immediately adjacent to islands under China's control would be affected. (See: "US inflames row with China over fisheries regulations")

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei responded to the latest accusations by dismissing the suggestions that China was about to declare an ADIZ in the South China Sea. "In a general view, the Chinese side has yet to feel any air security threat from the ASEAN countries and is optimistic about its relations with neighbouring countries," he said, warning "right-wing forces" in Japan "not to mislead public opinion with rumours and play up tensions for their own selfish interests."

Hong was silent on the US State Department's remarks, reflecting a futile attempt by the Chinese government to improve relations with Washington, and isolate Tokyo. As part of the "pivot," the Obama administration has not only been pressing for Japanese rearmament but has encouraged Japan to take a more aggressive stance on disputed islands in the East China Sea.

In comments to *Kyodo News* last Friday, Evan Medeiros, senior director for Asian affairs at the US National Security Council, declared that the Obama administration was working in "very strong coordination" with Japan on the ADIZ issue. After denouncing China over the *Asahi Shimbun* report, he added the menacing threat that establishing another ADIZ "would result in changes in our presence and military posture in the region."

In other words, the US will use the Chinese ADIZ issue as a pretext for advancing its own military build-up in the Western Pacific and preparations for war

against China.



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