

Close encounter between Japanese and Chinese military planes

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Two incidents last weekend have highlighted the danger of conflict in the East China Sea amid the sharp tensions generated by the US “pivot to Asia.” Chinese fighters and Japanese surveillance planes came within just 50 meters of each other on two separate occasions on Saturday, leading to accusations from both sides.

The two incidents took place over the East China Sea near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands when Japan sent military planes into China’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), which was established last November. The first, a P-3C reconnaissance plane, was met by a pair of Chinese SU-27 fighter jets that reportedly flew within 30 meters of the Japanese plane. The Chinese military responded similarly when a Japanese YS-11 reconnaissance plane entered the region later in the day.

The Chinese Defense Ministry released a statement saying, “Chinese military aircraft have the right to maintain air safety, and to take the necessary identification and prevention measures against foreign aircraft that enter the airspace of China’s air defense identification zone over the East China Sea.”

Both Japan and the US have refused to recognize China’s ADIZ. Within days of the announcement, the US flew nuclear-capable B-52 bombers into the area without notifying Chinese authorities. US and Japanese war planes have continued to ignore the ADIZ risking the danger of a miscalculation or a clash.

Japan’s Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera responded indignantly to Saturday’s incidents, saying, “An ordinary flight above open sea should never experience a close encounter like that. Apparently, these were proximate flights (by China) that were out of line.”

However, there was nothing “ordinary” about Japan’s provocations, which come with the backing of

the United States. From May 20–26, China and Russia held joint naval exercises in the East China Sea, dubbed Joint-Sea 2014. The Chinese had issued a no-fly notice in the area prior to the exercises being carried out.

“Japanese military planes intruded on the exercise’s airspace without permission and carried out dangerous actions, in a serious violation of international laws and standards, which could have easily caused a misunderstanding and even led to a mid-air accident,” China’s Defense Ministry stated.

The Joint-Sea naval drills have been carried out between China and Russia over the past three years, beginning in 2012, demonstrating the growing relationship between the two countries as a means of countering the threat posed by the US “pivot.” Taking part in the exercises were the Chinese navy’s latest Zhengzhou and Ningbo missile destroyers along with the flagship of Russia’s Pacific Fleet, the guided-missile cruiser, Varyag.

Japan’s reconnaissance flights were clearly aimed at monitoring the exercises and to challenge the Chinese navy. During the Joint-Sea exercise last year, the US and Japan held their own drills only a few hundred kilometers away, which Japanese officials admitted were used to observe the Chinese and Russian navies.

The other major US ally in North East Asia, South Korea, also stepped up reconnaissance in the area where the drills were held. The Chinese ADIZ overlaps South Korea’s own ADIZ and includes the disputed territory of Ieo Island. While not originally included in the South Korean ADIZ, Seoul extended the zone to cover Ieo Island after China’s announcement last year. Ieo is a submerged rock rather than an actual island, but South Korea has constructed the Korean Ieodo Ocean Research Station over it.

The Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” which

is aimed to undermining Chinese influence throughout the region and encircling it militarily, has greatly heightened tensions in the region over the past five years. The US has encouraged allies such as Japan and the Philippines to take a more aggressive stance in their territorial disputes with China in the East China and South China Seas. As a result, these disputes have been transformed into dangerous flashpoints where a mistake or misjudgment threatens to trigger a conflict.

During his trip to Asia in April, President Obama reaffirmed support for US alliances with Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, where a major basing agreement was signed giving American forces full access to Philippine military facilities. In Tokyo, Obama declared Washington's unequivocal backing for Japan in the event of war with China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. The statement effectively gave the green light to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to ramp up his provocations in the East China Sea.

Following the incidents on Saturday, Abe made clear that he had no intention of scaling back flights over the Senkaku Islands. "We need to continue our monitoring activities and protest firmly through diplomatic channels," he declared. This will only heighten the danger of conflict.

The close aerial encounters over the East China Sea were followed by a further escalation of the dispute between Hanoi and Beijing over a Chinese oil rig placed near the Chinese-administered Paracel Islands in the South China Sea earlier this month. There have already been a number of clashes between Chinese and Vietnamese patrol ships and commercial vessels.

On Monday, a Vietnamese fishing boat sunk after a collision with a Chinese vessel in the disputed waters. Both sides accused the other. According to China's state-owned Xinhua news agency, the Vietnamese vessel capsized after "harassing and colliding" with a Chinese boat. The Vietnamese state media claimed that the Chinese ship rammed the Vietnamese boat. All the crew was rescued.

The US and Japan are both seeking to build military ties with Vietnam. Using the tensions over the oil rig as a pretext, the US navy is seeking to increase the number of US ship visits to Vietnam. "We are interested in engaging with all our partners in the South China Sea and would welcome increased port visits

with Vietnam," Commander William Marks, spokesman for the Pacific Seventh Fleet stated. Currently, the US is limited to one visit of no more than three ships per year.

Japan is also deepening ties with Vietnam. Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida is due to visit Vietnam at the end of June. Talks with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh are expected to focus on speeding up an agreement for Japan to provide patrol ships to Vietnam as well as other measures to strengthen cooperation between the two countries against China.



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