

US and Chinese military aircraft in second close encounter in East Asia

Peter Symonds
9 June 2016

The United States has made unsubstantiated allegations of an “unsafe” close encounter on Tuesday between a US reconnaissance aircraft and a Chinese fighter jet over the East China Sea. The incident took place amid Washington’s increasingly aggressive stance toward Beijing over its maritime disputes with neighbouring countries in both the East China and South China Seas.

US Pacific Command declared that two Chinese J-10 fighter jets intercepted an Air Force RC-135 aircraft, supposedly on a “routine patrol” in an unspecified area of the East China Sea. One of the Chinese jets had “an unsafe excessive rate of closure” on the American aircraft, it stated. “Initial assessment is that this seems to be a case of improper airmanship, as no other provocative or unsafe manoeuvres occurred.” One US official told CNN the Chinese plane was never closer than 30 metres.

This account has been uncritically recycled and embellished in the US and international press to produce headlines such as: “US spy plane buzzed by Chinese jets in ‘unsafe’ intercept” (*Washington Post*); “Chinese jet threatened US intel jet” (*Washington Times*); and “Why is China intercepting American planes on routine patrols?” (*Christian Science Monitor*).

The incident is being exploited to again portray China as provocative and “expansionist” to justify the massive American military build-up throughout the region as part of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia.” Far from being a sign of Chinese aggression, the latest incident is a sign that Washington is preparing to escalate its provocations, using as a pretext a ruling due this month by the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration on a US-backed Philippines case challenging Chinese territorial claims.

The latest encounter follows a month in which the Pentagon claimed that two Chinese fighter aircraft unsafely intercepted a US surveillance plane in the South China Sea.

The real question is not why Chinese aircraft are intercepting US spy planes, but what are these American reconnaissance aircraft are doing flying “routine missions” off the Chinese mainland? If Chinese surveillance planes conducted even occasional patrols off the US West Coast, especially near sensitive naval bases, there would be an immediate media clamour for preventative military action, at the very least.

Pacific Command released no information about the nature of the latest “routine” mission or what it was targeting. The major naval bases on Hainan Island in southern China, particularly its submarine pens, have long been subject to US surveillance. The RC-135 can be configured to carry out a variety of electronic spying and jamming operations.

In a statement yesterday, China’s defence ministry accused the US of “again deliberately hyping” the incident. “Chinese military pilots always operate according to laws and regulations, and are professional and responsible,” it said.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei said the “crux of the problem” was the presence of US military aircraft close to the Chinese mainland. “The US continues to carry out closer reconnaissance missions against China, which severely undermines China’s maritime security,” he said.

The incident on Tuesday took place as top US officials were meeting their Chinese counterparts in Beijing for an annual economic and strategic dialogue. The two-day meeting ended in a stand-off over all the main issues, including US demands that China slash

“overcapacity,” especially in steel and aluminium, and further open up the Chinese economy to American investors.

At the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore last weekend, Chinese and US officials clashed over security and military issues. US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter accused Beijing of being responsible for regional anxiety “about China’s activities on the seas, in cyberspace, and in the region’s airspace.” In what amounted to a threat to China, he declared the US had the most advance weaponry in the Asia Pacific, which would take decades for any other country to match.

The constant refrain of Washington over the South China Sea is its insistence on “freedom of navigation and overflight,” which has been the pretext for the US Navy to make three provocative intrusions within the 12-nautical-mile limit around Chinese-occupied islets. While claiming to protect the vital sea lanes required for trade, the overriding US aim is to ensure the “freedom” of its warships and warplanes to operate in areas close to the Chinese coastline.

The Pentagon’s strategy for fighting a war with China—AirSea Battle—envisages a massive air and missile onslaught on the Chinese mainland, supported by a naval blockade that would cut crucial Chinese imports of energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa. All these trade routes pass through the East China and South China Seas.

The latest aerial encounter is another warning that a miscalculation or misunderstanding involving Chinese aircraft and warships has the potential to trigger a conflict. In 2001, a Chinese fighter jet crashed after a collision with a US spy plane, which was forced to land on Hainan Island. The incident produced a major diplomatic row, but, in the current climate of suspicion and tension, the result would be far worse.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact