

Japan scrambles fighter to intercept Chinese military aircraft

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The Japanese military scrambled a fighter jet yesterday as the Chinese air force sent more than 40 military aircraft into the western Pacific via the Miyako Strait near Okinawa Island in Japan's southern island chain. The Chinese exercise and the Japanese response are another sign of sharp tensions in North East Asia amid the US "pivot to Asia" and continuing military build-up in the region.

While Beijing described its exercise as routine, the number of aircraft involved is unusually high. A military spokesperson, Shen Jinke said various types of aircraft were involved, including H-6K long-range strategic bombers, Su-30 fighters and air tankers. The drill involved "reconnaissance and early warning, attacks on sea surface targets, and in-flight refueling to test the air force's fighting capacity on the high seas."

Japan's defence ministry acknowledged that none of the Chinese aircraft infringed on Japanese territorial air space but noted that a Japanese fighter was scrambled as eight Chinese planes flew over the strait. The aircraft passed between Okinawa Island and Miyako Island, which is one of Japan's southernmost islands. The Miyako Strait is one of the few international waterways through which ships and aircraft can pass from the East China Sea to the western Pacific.

The Chinese military is hemmed in by what it calls the first island chain: the string of islands off the Chinese mainland running from Russia's Kuril Islands in the north through Japan's islands to Taiwan, then to the Philippines and Borneo in the south. As part of its military expansion in Asia, the US has been strengthening its ties with military allies, Japan and the Philippines.

The US military formally occupied strategically-located Okinawa until 1972 when control was handed back to Japan. There are some 26,000 US military

personnel on the island, on 32 bases and 48 training sites that cover around 25 percent of the land.

Chinese air force planes first flew through the Miyako Strait in May last year. Sunday's exercise followed a drill earlier in the month in which Chinese bombers, fighters, early warning and refuelling aircraft flew over the Bashi Channel between Taiwan and the northern Philippine island of Luzon. After that exercise, the Chinese military announced that the air force would be conducting regular drills beyond the first island chain.

The latest Chinese flight appears to be aimed at sending a message to Japan after Defence Minister Tomomi Inada declared last week that the Japanese navy would carry out joint patrols with US warships in the South China Sea. The US has deliberately inflamed territorial disputes in the South China Sea between China and its neighbours over the past five years, encouraging the Philippines, in particular, to more assertively press its claims against Beijing.

Japan is already involved in a tense standoff with China over disputed islets in the East China Sea known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China. With US backing, Tokyo escalated the confrontation in 2012 by buying the rocky outcrops from a private Japanese owner. Since coming to power, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has refused to even recognise that a dispute exists with China over the islands.

As a result, Chinese and Japanese ships and planes are regularly involved in close encounters in the waters near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. In the fiscal year ending March 2016, the Japanese air force scrambled fighter jets 571 times in response to Chinese military and surveillance aircraft. Many of these incidents would have been around the disputed islands.

The danger of an incident leading to conflict was

highlighted in June when the Chinese defence minister accused Japanese fighters of “lighting up”—that is, locking on fire-control radar—Chinese SU-30 fighter bombers over the East China Sea. At the time, Ian Storey, an analyst from the Institute of South East Asian Studies, told the *Financial Times* that a radar lock was a “very dangerous move” because the targeted plane had just seconds to decide whether it was under attack and how to respond. Japanese officials denied the Chinese claim.

While a great deal of media attention has focused on the danger of clashes in the South China Sea, the standoff between Japan and China in the East China Sea is just as dangerous. US President Barack Obama has affirmed that the US-Japan Security Treaty would cover the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. In other words, the US and its nuclear arsenal would back Japan in any war with China over the small, uninhabited outcrops.

A recent poll by the Washington-based Pew Research Centre found that 35 percent of Japanese respondents were “very concerned” and another 45 percent “somewhat concerned” that the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands could erupt into open conflict with China.

In its annual report to Congress on China’s military in April, the US Defence Department claimed that Chinese air force flights into the western Pacific could place US forces on the island of Guam at risk of being targeted by cruise missiles launched by Chinese long-range bombers.

The claim stands reality on its head. Since Obama announced the “pivot to Asia” in 2011, the Pentagon has been rapidly proceeding with the deployment of 60 percent of its air and sea assets to the Asia Pacific region by 2020. The military build-up has been accompanied by the systematic strengthening of military ties and partnerships throughout Asia with the object of encircling China in preparation for war.

The response to Sunday’s exercise by Chinese aircraft underscores the danger that a miscalculation or mistake could precipitate a far broader conflict.



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