

Dangerous encounter of warplanes from four nations over Sea of Japan

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A dangerous incident on Tuesday over the Sea of Japan, involving war planes from Russia, South Korea, China and Japan, has highlighted the growing risk of a major conflict that could engulf the region, one of the most strategic in the world.

According to Seoul's Defense Ministry, the incident began when two Russian Tu-95 bombers and two Chinese H-6 bombers entered South Korea's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) between the Korean Peninsula and Japan without notice around 8:40 a.m. for 24 minutes. Shortly after that, an unarmed Russian A-50 early warning and observation aircraft allegedly twice entered airspace claimed by South Korea around the Dokdo/Takeshima Islets. Japan also claims the islets.

In response, South Korea dispatched F-15 and F-16 fighter jets. After sending 30 warning messages which went unanswered, according to Seoul, its fighters fired warning shots at the Russian A-50, 80 on the first incursion and 280 on the second.

Russia, which does not recognize Seoul's ADIZ, initially said its planes were over international waters and that South Korean jets "conducted unprofessional maneuvers by crossing the course of Russian strategic missile carriers, threatening their security." It added: "This is not the first time the South Korean pilots have unsuccessfully tried to prevent Russian aircraft from flying over the neutral waters."

An ADIZ is different from a country's 12-nautical-mile territorial limit. ADIZs have been declared unilaterally to justify a country demanding aircraft from foreign countries to identify themselves and to make known their flight paths despite being in international airspace. An ADIZ has no basis in international law. Japan's ADIZ covers a large portion of the Sea of Japan, but does not include Takeshima/Dokdo.

Tokyo claimed that both Russian and South Korean aircraft had violated its airspace over the Dokdo/Takeshima islets and scrambled its own fighter jets. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga denounced both countries on Tuesday.

Suga stated: "We protested strongly based on the recognition that a Russian military aircraft flying over the Sea of Japan violated the territorial airspace near Takeshima in Shimane Prefecture twice." He added: "In view of our stance on the sovereignty of Takeshima, it's totally unacceptable and extremely regrettable that warning shots were fired by a South Korean military aircraft."

Moscow later expressed regret for the A-50's incursion over Dokdo/Takeshima and blamed the incident on a technical glitch. South Korea's presidential secretary for public communication then downplayed the incident, saying: "Moscow said if the aircraft flew according to an initially planned route, this incident would not have occurred."

According to Moscow, Russia and China were conducting their "first joint air patrol using long-range aircraft in the Asian-Pacific region." The drills were "carried out in order to deepen and develop Russian-Chinese relations" and were "not aimed against third countries."

Beijing took a more muted approach. At a media conference, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying rejected a questioner's use of the word "intrusion." Hua said: "I'd caution against using such terms, considering China and South Korea are friendly neighbors and the situation is not clear yet."

This incident highlights the very sharp tensions in the Asia-Pacific. Carl Schuster, a former director of operations at the US Pacific Command's Joint Intelligence Center, told CNN that firing warning shots

in the air was “very, very serious” and “very, very rare.”

Allegations and misunderstandings could easily ignite a conflict. Despite Russia’s statement of regret, Peter Layton, an analyst at the Griffith Asia Institute in Australia, accused it of aggression, claiming: “This mission will have given them a comprehensive map of the (South Korean) national air defense system.”

While US fighter jets may not have been directly involved in the incident, Washington’s aggressive military build-up in the region created the conditions for the dangerous aerial incident. Both Beijing and Moscow have been denounced by Washington as “revisionist powers” and are targets for future US attack.

After a trip to Japan, US National Security Advisor John Bolton, one of the leading hawks in the Trump administration, arrived in Seoul for talks with South Korean officials the same day as the incident occurred. Bolton addressed the growing animosity between Seoul and Tokyo in an attempt to shore up the US alliances against China and Russia. Bolton and his South Korean counterpart Jeong Ui-yong discussed closer collaboration between the US and South Korean militaries in case of a future incident involving Russia or China, which would allow Washington to exploit the situation as it sees fit.

A statement yesterday on talks between Bolton and Defense Minister Jeong Gyeong-du declared: “The two sides shared an understanding on continued security cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo, and agreed to cooperate closely for the development of such bilateral ties, as well as trilateral relations involving the US.” As usual, they claimed the trilateral relationship was necessary to counter the North Korean “threat,” the pretext for the military buildup against China.

Beginning under Barack Obama’s administration, Washington has exploited long-festered territorial disputes in the Asia-Pacific to justify the military buildup against China and Russia in the region. This campaign has been stepped up under President Donald Trump, and now includes regular military provocations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, thus raising tensions with Beijing.

Moscow and Beijing are deepening their military alliances in preparation for an attack by Washington or one of its allies. Last September near Vladivostok, the

militaries from the two countries, alongside troops from Mongolia, held what Moscow described as the largest such exercise since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The joint drills involved in Tuesday’s clash over the Sea of Japan were carried out in the same vein.

Washington’s destabilization campaign however has had the unintended consequence of fueling growing animosity between Japan and South Korea, two key US allies. Both Seoul and Tokyo have been emboldened to press their own longstanding territorial and economic disputes against one another. It is not out of the question that a clash between South Korean and Japanese militaries could take place in the Sea of Japan, particularly as both governments whip up national sentiments to divert growing social tensions at home.



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