

US Sends B-52s to China's Air Defence Zone

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In a deliberately provocative move, the US announced yesterday that two B-52 strategic bombers conducted a training mission over the disputed Senkakus islands (known as Diaoyu in China) in the East China Sea, just days after Beijing declared an "air defence identification zone" (ADIZ) covering the area.

The Pentagon's claim that it was a routine planned mission lacks any credibility. The overflight was clearly designed to challenge China, in line with US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel's statement that the US Air Force would simply ignore the Chinese rules in the zone.

The two B-52 bombers, which are designed to carry nuclear bombs and nuclear cruise missiles, flew from and returned to Guam, the key US base in the Pacific. The flight was aimed at sending an intimidating message to Beijing that the US would support Japan in a war against China over the Senkakus. In his statement, Hagel also reaffirmed Washington's commitment to the US-Japan Security Treaty.

In announcing the ADIZ, China stated that any foreign aircraft passing through the zone had to submit flight plans, indicate nationality and maintain radio contact, or they could face emergency military measures.

Pentagon spokesman Colonel Steve Warren told the media that the two B-52s deliberately defied the air zone rules: "We have conducted operations in the area of the Senkakus. We have continued to follow our normal procedures, which include not filing flight plans, not radioing ahead and not registering our frequencies." The Chinese government's initial reaction is to downplay the incident, simply claiming it had monitored the entire flight.

The dangers of the B-52 overflight are all too obvious. If China responded by scrambling fighters to the area and the US military called in fighters from nearby Japanese bases, the incident could have led to an aerial clash with far-reaching and potentially catastrophic ramifications.

American allies in Asia backed Washington's decision to ignore China's ADIZ. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared in the Diet on Monday: "We demand China revoke any measures that could infringe upon the freedom of flight in international airspace."

Putting civilian aircraft at risk, Abe's government intervened to stop Japanese airlines submitting flight plans to Beijing. Transport Minister Fumio Kishida declared: "I believe it is important for the public and private sectors to cooperate in showing our firm resolve to China."

The South Korean defence ministry indicated its aircraft would also not obey Chinese directives. Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop summoned the Chinese ambassador to

criticise the ADIZ, saying: “Australia has made clear its opposition to any coercive or unilateral actions to change the status quo in the East China Sea.”

China’s decision to declare the ADIZ was also provocative. In part, the announcement was a response to Japanese remilitarisation under the Abe government, encouraged by the Obama administration, and rising tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands following their “nationalisation” by Tokyo last year. Over the past two months in particular, the US and Japan have strengthened their military alliance, including proposals for Japan to develop “pre-emptive strike” capabilities and additional deployment of US warplanes to Japan.

At the same time, the new Chinese leadership under President Xi Jinping is seeking to appease its nationalist constituency among layers of the affluent middle classes. Xi is seeking to portray himself as a “strong” leader who will not back down before foreign “bullies.” Fearful of social unrest, the isolated regime—representing a tiny layer of billionaires and multimillionaires—relies on Chinese nationalism as the ideological means of suppressing class differences and containing the opposition of working people to its pro-market agenda.

The B-52 intrusion came after Chinese media reports yesterday of a large-scale Chinese air drill involving several dozen fighter jets in the newly proclaimed ADIZ. At the same time, the Chinese navy said its Liaoning aircraft carrier would conduct a training exercise in the South China Sea, accompanied for the first time by a battle group of four escort warships.

Two US nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, the USS George Washington and USS Nimitz, and their battle groups are also in the South China Sea, in the name of providing humanitarian relief to the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan. The US has encouraged the Philippines and Vietnam to assert their claims against China over the Spratly and other islands in the South China Sea, where China is also considering the establishment of an air defence zone.

Washington’s escalation of tensions with China over the East China Sea ADIZ is in stark contrast to the claims that the recent nuclear accord with Iran is a step toward global peace and stability. In reality, the US is attempting to cut a deal with Iran in order to focus its diplomatic and military resources on its prime concern—the “pivot to Asia,” aimed at isolating and containing its main potential rival, China.

The US decision to back off imminent strikes against Syria in September, followed by Obama’s absence from the key Asian summits in October due to the US government shutdown, raised concerns across the Indo-Pacific about America’s commitment to the “pivot.” This situation is unacceptable to the US ruling elites, which have identified the Indo-Pacific region as the 21st century’s global economic axis and an area that they must dominate.

Vice President Joe Biden is scheduled to visit Japan, South Korea and China next week in order to re-assure key allies in the region. Obama himself will carry out a major trip to Asia next April. Announcing Obama’s tour last week, US national security adviser Susan Rice declared: “Rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific remains a cornerstone of the Obama administration’s foreign policy... No matter how many hotspots emerge elsewhere, we will continue to deepen our enduring commitment to this critical region.”

Like yesterday’s B-52 overflight, Rice’s comments are a warning that the US will not hesitate to use every means to ensure its continued hegemony in Asia.

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