

Washington's "Asian Pivot" and China's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). US-China Power Play in the South China Sea

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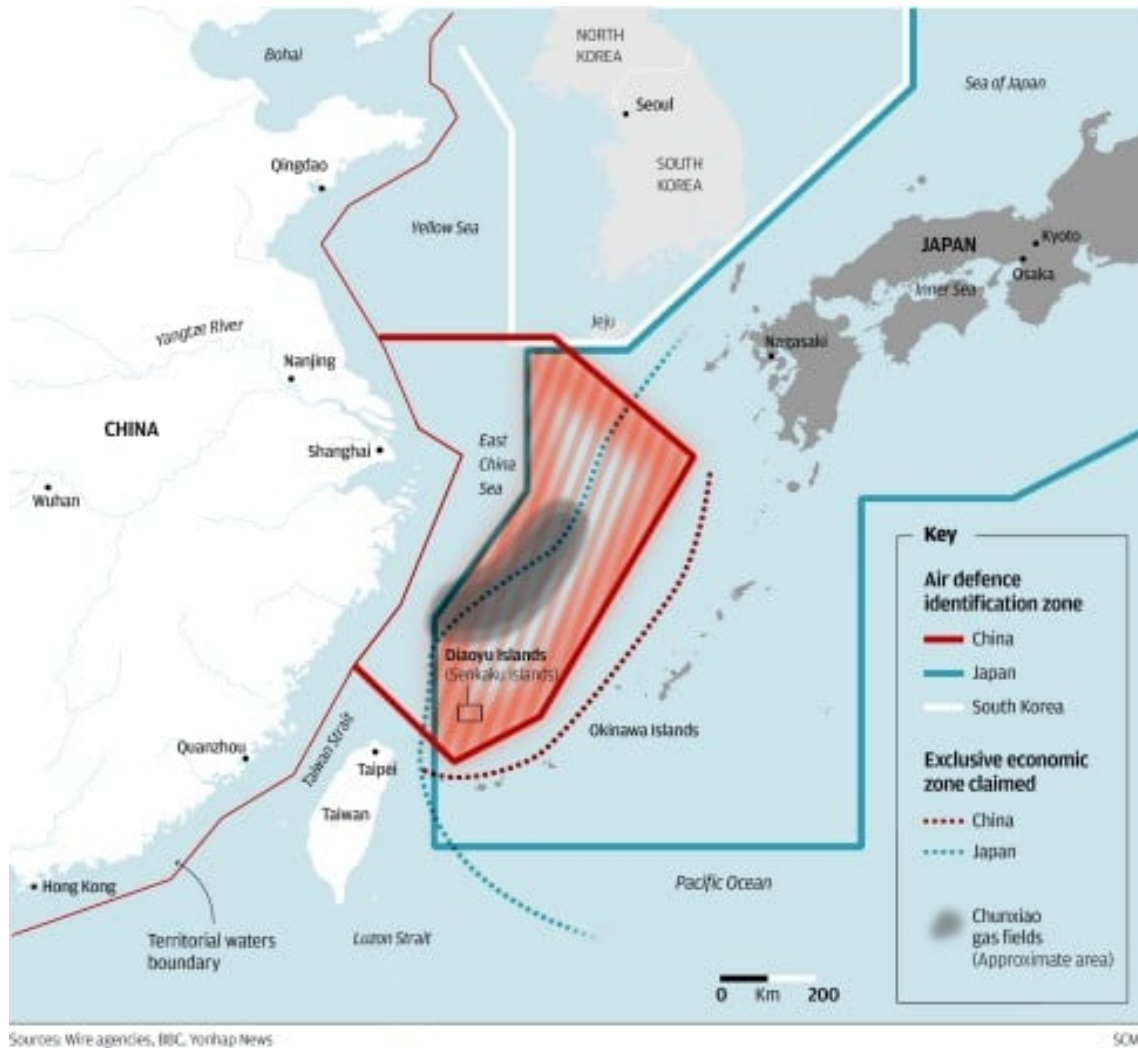
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China's decision last month to announce a new Air Defense Identification Zone, and the near-collision of U.S. and Chinese ships in the South China Sea, are only the latest moves in East Asia to bring the reality of a new strategic competition and regional arms race out into the open. The game of chicken being played in the Pacific has very real consequences, and threatens to destroy that ocean's namesake.

In practice, the ADIZ put in place by China means that international aircraft flying through the particular airspace are required to report their flight plans to China, maintain radio communications and transponder identification, and identify their aircraft with appropriate logos. Aircraft that deviate from these rules become subject to "defensive emergency measures." [1] Ostensibly, the zone would serve to "reduce military misjudgment, avoid aerial friction and safeguard the flight order and safety." [2]



The problem, however, is that the ADIZ encompasses islands whose sovereignty is disputed between China, Japan, and Taiwan. Unfortunately, “in contrast with the usual defense zone — which helps build stability by reducing the chances of accidents based on mistaken identity — the unilateral and assertive nature of the new Chinese effort increases the risk of conflict.” [3] The ADIZ also overlaps those of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. As a result, China’s move seems to have shot itself in the foot, and “will be used as an example of China’s status as a revisionist state and will further strengthen the China threat narrative.” [4]

Already, other Asian countries and the United States have proven themselves willing to test the integrity of China’s ADIZ, carrying out a series of daring and provocative moves in response. Japan, South Korea, and the United States have all carried out overflights of the islands using military planes, and defying China’s new required protocol. In the lead-up to Vice President Biden’s trip to Asia, some even encouraged this dangerous dynamic, saying that, “If Biden doesn’t encourage Japanese and South Korean military planes to fly with the U.S. Air Force and Navy through the contested zones, it will be a missed opportunity. If he displays any indecision, it will be a signal that U.S. resolve may not be as strong as has been presumed so far.” [5] These tit-for-tat flights are already a dangerous and far too common move, with Japan scrambling fighter jets 306 times in the previous fiscal year in response to Chinese aircraft. [6]

In addition to these overflights, South Korea has taken additional steps to push back against Beijing. The country’s navy conducted a sea and air military drill in an area within the ADIZ,

[7] and also expanded their own ADIZ more than 300 kilometers to the south. [8]

By making the announcement of its new ADIZ, China is making a three-sided gamble: First, that the U.S. will not deviate from its stated position of neutrality on the island issue. Second, to test the limits of the United States' support for its most important regional ally, Japan. And thirdly, Beijing intends to test the United States' commitment to its new "Asia pivot" foreign policy strategy, in which the U.S. gives greater importance to developments in this part of the world. So far, aside from its overflight using B-52 bombers, the United States' response has been to denounce the move and tell U.S. commercial airlines that, "the U.S. government generally expects that U.S. carriers operating internationally will operate consistent with NOTAMs (Notices to Airmen) issued by foreign countries." [9] To many hardliners, this cautious move amounts to nothing more than acquiescence.

The dispute over the islands has, stunningly, become little more than a symbolic piece of world politics. The islands will have only modest strategic significance to whomever ends up claiming them. The real question for all the stakeholders is, who will become the Asia-Pacific's hegemon? In this context, it becomes difficult for any of the actors to back down without losing face. The islands have therefore become a dangerous, and extremely stupid, flashpoint.

Some have pointed out that China's ADIZ is likely a response to the United States' operational concept for the Asia-Pacific of "Air-Sea Battle," seen as a possible threat to China. "Chinese and U.S. military planners," one analyst says, "are already engaged in a conceptual arms race to produce frameworks for controlling access to the Near Seas." [10]

Conceptual arms races aside, a very real arms race is developing in East Asia, with each country bringing forth new strategies and weapons. China's ADIZ has added momentum to the Asian arms race and increases the chances of strategic miscalculation — an unwelcome combination. Japan unveiled its first-ever national security strategy this week, a momentous inflection point in Japan's history that shows the country's concern about its security environment and competition with China.

In the strategy, Japan lists China's activities as one of two "national security challenges" in its immediate environment, referencing China's activities around Japan, the Senkaku Islands, and the ADIZ. "Such an external stance and military activities by China," the strategy reads, "have become an issue of concern to the international community including Japan; therefore, the Government of Japan needs to pay careful attention to this situation." [11] Japan's strategy means it will begin acquiring drones, amphibious assault vehicles, the new F-35 plane, and other weaponry. Meanwhile, South Korea is building a new naval base and will also buy the F-35, [12] and China's defense budget continues to grow at double-digit rates. If China decides to put in place another ADIZ in the South China Sea, the countries of Southeast Asia will be sucked further into the dispute.

All this makes it seem as if the Pacific is on the precipice of something terrible. With so many other crises ongoing around the world, the dispute needs to be dealt with before another unnecessary military and diplomatic crisis breaks out.

Notes

[1] "Announcement of the Aircraft Identification Rules for the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone of the P.R.C." Ministry of National Defense. Ministry of National Defense of the

People's Republic of China, 23 Nov. 2013. Web. 20 Dec. 2013.

[2] Cohen, David. "East China Sea Air Defense Moves: What for and Why Now?" The Jamestown Foundation. The Jamestown Foundation, 27 Nov. 2013. Web. 20 Dec. 2013.

[3] Steinberg, James, and Michael E. O'Hanlon. "China's Air Defense Zone: The Shape of Things to Come?" Reuters. Thomson Reuters, 16 Dec. 2013. Web. 20 Dec. 2013.

[4] Wang, Zheng. "China's Puzzling ADIZ Decision Making." The Diplomat. The Diplomat, 18 Dec. 2013. Web. 20 Dec. 2013.

[5] Auslin, Michael. "US, China Scoreless after One." American Enterprise Institute. American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 30 Nov. 2013. Web. 20 Dec. 2013.

[6] Blumenthal, Dan, and Michael Mazza. "Japan: Land of the Rising Gun." American Enterprise Institute. American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 20 Dec. 2013. Web. 20 Dec. 2013.

[7] Keck, Zachary. "South Korea Conducts Military Drill in China's ADIZ." The Diplomat. The Diplomat, 4 Dec. 2013. Web. 20 Dec. 2013.

[8] Sang-Hun, Choe. "South Korea Announces Expansion of Its Air Defense Zone." The New York Times. The New York Times Company, 8 Dec. 2013. Web. 20 Dec. 2013.

[9] "China's Declared ADIZ - Guidance for U.S. Air Carriers." U.S. Department of State. The Office of Website Management, Bureau of Public Affairs, 29 Nov. 2013. Web. 20 Dec. 2013.

[10] Kazianis, Harry. "AirSea Battle and ADIZ: A Reaction to a Reaction." The Jamestown Foundation. The Jamestown Foundation, 5 Dec. 2013. Web. 20 Dec. 2013.

[11] "National Security Strategy." Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet. Cabinet Secretariat, Cabinet Public Relations Office, 17 Dec. 2013. Web. 20 Dec. 2013.

[12] Sanger, David E. "In the East China Sea, a Far Bigger Test of Power Looms." The New York Times. The New York Times Company, 1 Dec. 2013. Web. 20 Dec. 2013.

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