



# CARVING UP THE SKIES: CHINA'S NEW AIR DEFENSE ZONE

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*China's establishment of a new Air Defense Identification Zone has heightened tensions in Northeast Asia, with Japan, South Korea, and the United States having been swift to react to Beijing's announcement, seen to be a signal of China's increasing assertion of its interests in the face of the United States' "Pivot to Asia" policy. Further, with maritime and territorial disputes over islands in the East China Sea, the countries of the region are seeking to dissect the skies above them to help legitimize their claims. However, this also runs the risk of the unintended escalation of conflict.*

China announced on November 23 last year the establishment of its first Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) to identify, monitor, and control foreign aircraft entering the zone. This announcement has triggered tensions with its Northeast Asian neighbors, including placing in jeopardy the already-fragile regional security framework. Indeed, the Japanese and the South Korean governments have refused to recognize China's ADIZ, which overlaps substantially with Japan's own ADIZ, while also overlapping by about 3,000 square kilometers with that of South Korea.

China's announcement of its ADIZ has provoked much international debate on the motivations behind the move, its timing, and the repercussions of such. It would appear that the decision on the ADIZ had been planned well in advance. A leading Japanese newspaper, *Mainichi Shimbun*, has recently disclosed that Chinese military officials had in fact informed a Japanese government delegation about its plans to establish an expanded air defense zone encompassing the skies above the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands—the islands are controlled by Japan which refers to them as Senkaku, but contested by China which refers to them as Diaoyu—over three years ago.

As tensions mounted during 2013 in the East China Sea, with Chinese and Japanese planes flying at close quarters over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Japan objected on a number of occasions that Chinese planes were trespassing on its own air defense zone. It is clear therefore that China is attempting to use its officially announced ADIZ to legitimate its own air presence over the islands—and that it had been waiting for the right strategic moment to make public

the news of its ADIZ whilst preparing the groundwork for such.

Indeed, the recent establishment of the ADIZ came immediately after the meeting of the third Plenary Session of the 18th Party Congress on November 13, 2013, which affirmed new diplomatic concepts which underlined that China will resolutely safeguard its national sovereignty, security, and core interests. In this regard, China's ADIZ is seen as setting the stage for a long-term exercising of China's strategy to serve its national interests in the region—which is also aimed at countering the U.S. over its "Pivot to Asia" policy that has seen increased military exercises in the East China Sea and closer ties being established with Japan and South Korea.

## Regional Reactions

Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. have been swift to react, condemning China's announcement. Immediately afterwards, on November 26, the U.S. sent two B-52 bombers from Guam to fly through the Chinese ADIZ. U.S. defense secretary Chuck Hagel has also affirmed that the Chinese ADIZ will not in any way change the United States' conducting of military operations in the region. In addition, he reiterated that the U.S. would support Japan under the U.S.-Japanese Security Treaty in the event of a war with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

The Japanese Self-Defense Forces are, meanwhile, planning to set up a new amphibious military unit and deploy unarmed surveillance drones in the area of the Senkaku/



Diaoyu Islands, which lie in the south-west of its own ADIZ. Furthermore, the first ever joint naval exercise between India and Japan was conducted on December 19-22, 2013, as the countries took steps to tighten military ties at a time when both are facing territorial disputes with China.

China's unilateral declaration over its ADIZ has also put a dent in Sino-South Korean relations, which had been improving subsequent to Park Geun-hye becoming president. Indeed, President Park had visited Beijing last June and relations were officially upgraded to that of a strategic cooperative partnership. However, on December 5, Seoul announced a southward expansion of its own air zone to encompass the nation's two southernmost islands of Marado and Hongdo as well as Jeodo, a submerged reef and source of tension between China and South Korea. Estimated to contain mineral and natural gas deposits, the latter lies within both countries' overlapping Exclusive Economic Zones and which is now incorporated within China's expanded ADIZ, in spite of presently being in control of South Korea.

## Implications

The fact of the new Chinese ADIZ, which entails that foreign civilian and military aircraft must identify themselves to Chinese authorities, should by no means be seen as a signal that China is willing to shoot down planes that fail to report. Further, China cannot prohibit foreign aircraft from entering its ADIZ.

Nevertheless, in the short term, the most pressing problem is the increased risk of unexpected accidents between military aircraft in the ADIZ. Beijing has been sensitive to the U.S. and its allies' military exercises in the East China Sea as they have challenged China's airspace by sending fighters over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island group. In the future, when military aircraft from either country fly in this overlapping area, the other side is likely to send fighters to intercept them. However, due to unclear rules of engagement by both sides, such intercepts could also bring the potential for mishaps sparking an escalation of tensions.

In the long run, moreover, Japan and South Korea fear that the ADIZ will strengthen China's territorial and maritime claims in the East China Sea. These disputes undermine the betterment of relations between the countries of the region, with air defense zones being another arena in which all countries of the region seek to legitimize their

presence and control by dissecting the skies in such a way so as to bolster their claims.

The skies and seas of Northeast Asia have become highly charged with a lack of hotlines or other effective channels of communication to defuse any potential conflict from spiraling out of control. Of pressing need, therefore, is the initiation of a strategic dialogue between all relevant parties on establishing a regional communication mechanism regarding the air zones in order to reduce the chances of an unintended escalation of conflict, as well as agreements reached on early warning and notification systems concerning military exercises conducted in the disputed areas.

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