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No. 219/2013 dated 2 December 2013

China's ADIZ: South China Sea Next?

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Synopsis

China's establishment of an air-defence identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea has been criticised as destabilising to the regional status quo and a threat to freedom of navigation. Beijing's inability to enforce the ADIZ only underscores its weakness; on the other hand, using military force to impose it could precipitate a crisis.

Commentary

CHINA'S CREATION of a new air-defence identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea is quickly turning out to be a no-win situation for Beijing. On the one hand, it has become a diplomatic disaster for China. On the other, it could either provoke a dangerous military crisis – the blame for which would lie entirely with Beijing – or else turn out to be a toothless gesture highlighting the country's feebleness as a regional great power.

China announced its new East China Sea ADIZ on 23 November 2013. It extends out more than 500 kilometres from the country's coastline and covers a wide swath of the East China Sea. China's new ADIZ overlaps with similar air-defence identification zones established by Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. In particular, it includes the disputed islets – known by Japan as the Senkaku Islands, and by China as the Diaoyou Islands – which are claimed by both Tokyo and Beijing.

ADIZ not a territorial claim

It is critical to note that an ADIZ is not a territorial claim. National airspace only extends out twelve nautical miles over open water, the same as a country's territorial waters. Air-defence identification zones are intended to provide a country with early notification, location, and control of foreign civilian aircraft entering national airspace.

ADIZs are not new; more than 20 countries have created such zones around their countries. The United States established one of the first such zones in the early 1950s, and in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks it also created a special new ADIZ around Washington, DC. Japan also established a national ADIZ – including around the Senkaku/Diaoyou Islands – back in the late 1960s.

Moreover, most ADIZs are unilaterally declared. They have no basis in international law, but are usually adhered to by other nations.

Nevertheless, China's new ADIZ seems purposely constructed so as to be contentious. In the first place, it overlaps with similar air-defence identification zones established by three Asian neighbours, as well as the contested Senkaku/Diaoyou Islands.

Just as controversial, however, it requires all civilian aircraft entering the ADIZ to identify themselves, even if they are only passing through the zone and have no intention of entering Chinese national airspace; no other ADIZ requires this kind of notification.

Finally, China demands that all *non-commercial* flights – in particular, military aircraft – entering the ADIZ must also identify themselves, or else face “defensive emergency measures” by Chinese armed forces.

Given these constructs, it was little wonder that the establishment of this ADIZ has been so universally condemned. Japan and South Korea quickly denounced the new move. Tokyo has termed the ADIZ “totally unacceptable,” while the South Korean defence ministry declared it would not notify China of flights made within its own ADIZ.

For its part, the US has criticised the creation of the new zone as both destabilising to the fragile status quo in the East China Sea and an affront to freedom of navigation in international airspace. US Secretary of State John Kerry has declared that “freedom of overflight and other international lawful uses of sea and airspace are essential to prosperity, stability, and security in the Pacific. We don't support efforts by any state to apply its ADIZ procedures to foreign aircraft not intending to enter its national airspace.”

Chinese ADIZ in South China Sea?

Overall, China's efforts to use the new East China Sea ADIZ as a means to strengthen its claims in the region have backfired – in some cases, quite embarrassingly. To underscore the US' refusal to accept China's new ADIZ, on 26 November 2013 it sent two unarmed B-52 bombers into the zone without pre-notification. Nothing happened. The message here is that China may be unwilling or unable to enforce its ADIZ with military might.

Moreover, China's actions have united its neighbours in opposing the zone. Seoul and Tokyo, for example, are in the uncommon situation of both criticising the establishment of the new ADIZ. Sino-Korean ties, which have traditionally been quite good, have been particularly hard-hit.

China's East China Sea ADIZ could have wider implications for the Asia-Pacific, especially in Southeast Asia. Tensions have been riding high in the South China Sea for several years now, and recent efforts by Beijing – including offers of billions of dollars in new business deals – to assuage concerns about Chinese “creeping assertiveness” in the region could all be undone by an aggressive enforcement of the new ADIZ.

These efforts look even less convincing given that China has declared that it might create further identification zones in the future, leaving open the possibility of a Chinese ADIZ in the South China Sea.

US pivot the beneficiary

One beneficiary of these developments could be the US. Washington's “rebalancing” back to Asia has hit some bumps since its promulgation nearly three years ago. Growing Chinese aggression in the region – or even just the appearance of it – could greatly aid Washington in revitalising this pivot and in bringing new regional partners into the effort.

On the whole, therefore, China's effort to create a new ADIZ in the East China Sea has boomeranged on it – up to now. An even more perilous outcome could result if it decides to aggressively enforce this zone. Increasingly, Chinese foreign policy has been driven by a “populist nationalism” fueled by an “official narrative of [Western] humiliation” (to quote a recent BBC report).

This sense of “victimhood” could spur Beijing into becoming ever more intransigent in pressing its territorial claims in the adjoining seas, up to and including military action. Ultimately, the only thing worse – not just for China but for the entire Asia-Pacific – than not enforcing its new ADIZ would be if Beijing decides to use brute force to put it into effect.

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