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The East China Sea ADIZ: New Flashpoint in Regional Maritime Security

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Synopsis

Regional maritime territorial disputes have expanded beyond the surface of the seas into the airspace above them, marking a significant enlargement of the theatre of conflict. Why has China established the East China Sea (ECS) Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ)?

Commentary

ON 23 NOVEMBER 2013 China unexpectedly declared the East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), defining it to include the Chinese Exclusive Economic Zone but also the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Within this zone, which is 130km from Japanese territory at its closest point, China requires the ready identification, location, and control of all civil and military aircraft from any nation, whether over land or sea.

This strikingly assertive measure will likely impact regional maritime security calculations in the years ahead. The Chinese move has been immediately defied by the United States, South Korea and Japan with military overflights through the ADIZ without notifying China while Japanese civilian airlines, initially complying, were told to ignore the new Chinese flight rules. These have so far provoked only muted response from Beijing.

What is an ADIZ?

An ADIZ is a defence concept concerned with controlling the airspace surrounding a nation for military purposes; there is no essential linkage with territorial claims or sovereignty issues. Given the high speeds of modern aircraft, prior authorisation allows planned flights to be identified as such, rather than being treated as an enemy aircraft which could result in interception by fighters and accidental conflict.

Thus civil airliners entering an ADIZ are required to radio planned course, destination, and other details about passage through the ADIZ, typically to a military air traffic controller. The role of ADIZs has diminished significantly since the end of the Cold War; the emphasis is on inflight safety after long-range aircraft were used against domestic targets in the 9/11 attacks.

Why has China declared the ECS ADIZ now?

There appear to be three calculations underlying this declaration. Firstly, the Chinese People's Liberation Army seems to be trying to force a reappraisal of China's claim to the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, the legal status of

which is entangled with the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty between the US and Japan, following the end of World War II.

During the last few years, Chinese naval forces have been involved in tense and aggressive confrontations with the Japanese coastguard and Maritime Self-Defence Force around the disputed waters, and China is seeking to expand its influence in the area by using maritime patrol aircraft, and also drones, for surveillance and reconnaissance of Japanese air activities over the disputed seas.

Secondly, this declaration is a response to the recent nationalisation of three of the five Diaoyu/Senkaku islands by the Japanese government, and also to its perceived militaristic resurgence. Japan has just launched its first helicopter-carrying destroyer, the *Izumo*, and plans to establish a naval intelligence base near the disputed islands. China is making a preemptive strike, and trying to deter Japan from increasing its air operations in the area.

On the first day that the ECS ADIZ was in force, China sent two electronic reconnaissance aircraft, a Y-8 and a Tu-154, to conduct administrative and monitoring operations in the disputed waters, and Japan scrambled two F-15s to "intercept" them.

Thirdly, China is making a more subtle move to influence South Korea. The ECS ADIZ overlaps South Korea's ADIZ in an area which includes Leodo, a submerged rock southwest of Jeju island, and also an uninhabited maritime scientific observatory established by South Korea in accordance with the United Nations Convention Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Seoul has expressed its concern about this unilateral declaration, but Beijing's response to Seoul has been different from that toward Tokyo.

The Chinese are attempting to drive a wedge between South Korea and its allies, the US and Japan, in the knowledge that Seoul is already distancing itself from the current Japanese administration.

Why is the ECS ADIZ inflammatory?

Whatever hopes there may have been to make progress in resolving regional maritime disputes, all such opportunities are rapidly receding. Technological advances mean that the airspace over the high seas has become a primary theatre in which both offensive and defence postures are unstable. To ensure the freedom of navigation and overflight, upon which their economies depend, the regional states are pursuing a general and competitive militarisation of East Asian waters.

Even South Korea has deployed about 50 Spike NLOS guided missiles to the West/Yellow Sea to deter long-range artillery attacks by North Korea, especially to protect Yeonpyeong Island from a repeat of the 2010 shelling.

In recent times the Asia-Pacific region has failed to generate any new initiatives to maintain common maritime security, with the result that the potential maritime battle space has expanded beyond the surface into the airspace, and potentially into the underwater domain in the near future with many East Asian nations now in the process of acquiring underwater assets.

The establishment of the ECS ADIZ is a further reason for the nations of the region to rearm, and especially to invest in building up their air power. China's neighbours cannot afford to ignore the fact that the Chinese defence budget continues to enjoy extraordinary double-digit growth.

What does the region really need?

It is time to develop a new overarching maritime security structure to ensure maritime peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Firstly, action-reaction situations should be defused through discreet bilateral negotiations between the quarreling parties. Individual nations should avoid taking any destabilising measures which seek to enforce ownership, the ECS ADIZ being just such a case.

Secondly, multilateral forums should urgently consider the regional applicability of international law, assessing ambiguous provisions of UNCLOS and extending or amending these as appropriate; and the US must ratify UNCLOS as soon as possible so that they can actively contribute to building a new maritime regime instead of being a mere observer.

Thirdly, the best way to avoid dangerous accidents in East Asian waters is to define clear Rules of Engagement (ROE) for maritime forces and law enforcement agencies. Recent clashes involving coastguards and fishery agencies, such as those between China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, and between China and the Philippines over the Scarborough Shoal, have demonstrated the importance of establishing ROE which

cover non-military maritime threats.

Fourthly, bilateral discourse on maritime cooperation should become the standard approach to such matters, rather than relying upon military assets. The establishment of the ECS ADIZ at a time of heightened tension between China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands is a perfect example of how *not* to behave.

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