



China's Defence Zone over East China Sea: Assessing the Regional Response

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The declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea, by China, on November 23, has exacerbated tensions between Japan and China. The two neighbours were already embroiled in a stand-off over the sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands (known as Diaoyu in China and Tiaoyutai in Taiwan). It may be mentioned that on December 13 last year, Chinese jet fighters had intruded into Japanese air space over the Senkaku Islands, which Japan had nationalised a few months earlier. Japan expressed its reservations regarding this and termed it as the first known violation of its air space by China; but the latter stated that the Chinese planes were within their own territory, over the Diaoyu Island. The Japanese government responded by noting that since then the Chinese planes had violated Japanese air space many times and Japan had scrambled its fighter jets. Seen in this context, China's enforcement of its own defence zone, on the basis of its internal aviation laws¹ and by citing "international practices" is a clear indication that it is seeking to assert its sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu group of island that are under Japan's effective control. In the aftermath of Japan's nationalisation of the Senkaku Islands, China has been sending its naval ships to the East China Sea off the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands to challenge Japanese sovereignty over the islands.

Since the Chinese ADIZ overlaps the Japanese and South Korean ADIZ, and some US bases in Okinawa, fall under the newly demarcated zone, it has brought the two players into the debate

and upped the regional tensions. Japan and South Korea claim that China's ADIZ encroaches upon their respective air space and have rejected Beijing's "unilateral" move. While Japan has asked China to roll back the plan; South Korea has asked it to redraw the defence zone. China's ADIZ also overlaps that of Taiwan but it has responded calmly over the Chinese move. Taipei merely stated that the "designation of China's ADIZ does not help cross-straits relations."² The message conveyed by pro-China political establishment in Taiwan to Beijing was construed as a weak-kneed response by the opposition parties, which argue that Taipei should cooperate with Tokyo, Washington and Seoul in its protest over China's move.³

Australia has also protested against the Chinese move and has expressed its reservations. The US, which so far had been maintaining a neutral stance over issue of the sovereignty of Senkaku/Diaoyu groups of islands, criticised China for its move. Washington believes that Beijing is attempting to change the status quo in the East China Sea which can potentially increase the "risk of inadvertent confrontation."⁴ It was the first to defy China and its B2 bombers from Guam, flew through the newly defined ADIZ. Japan and South Korea also flew their fighter jets through the air space and challenged China's new defence zone. China in turn scrambled its fighter jets and has claimed that it has been sending its surveillance planes to enforce its ADIZ and monitor the activities of other nations' planes. Due to the overlapping defence zones, the scrambling of jets by the four protagonists is likely to become routine phenomenon. The chances of accidental mishaps are high since the fighter jets are equipped with missiles and this could lead to military tensions. The situation warrants drafting of an international law for demarcation of air spaces over the seas, by a competent international body so as to avoid any such confrontation.

In the above context, the paper highlights the concerns and responses of regional countries regarding China's ADIZ and examines its possible implications for regional security.

China's Arguments for the Enforcement of ADIZ

The declaration of an ADIZ over the sea is not new and has been promulgated by many countries, including the US, Japan and South Korea. However, it is not recognised under the international law and this very aspect complicates the issue. China has dismissed concerns of regional countries and insists that its decision conforms to "international laws and practices."⁵ China also claims that its ADIZ is aimed at ensuring the transparency of flights and prevents misunderstanding and

miscalculation. The Chinese defence ministry through its official website has explained that it has established the ADIZ in accordance with the internal laws of China i.e.: “The Law of the People’s Republic of China on National Defence (March 14, 1997); the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Civil Aviation (October 30, 1995); and the basic Rules on flights of the People’s Republic of China (July 27, 2001).”⁶ China expects all flights including civilian flights which fly within its newly established zone, to follow certain rules such as sharing information regarding their flight plans, nationalities and identification logos. Moreover, it wants all aircraft flying in the zone to follow the “instructions of the administrative organ of the East China Air Defence Identification Zone.”⁷ The Chinese defence ministry has also stated that, “China’s armed forces will adopt defensive emergency measures to respond to aircraft that do not cooperate in the identification and refuse to follow the instructions.”⁸ It is this aspect that observers and analysts have reacted to and criticised. Japanese observers have pointed out that the eastern boundary of the Chinese ADIZ is about 500 kilometres from the mainland, and by imposing this kind of restriction across the wide area of East China Sea, Beijing is interfering with the “freedom of flight over the high seas.”⁹ China, however, says that the ADIZ is meant to deter those who have designs on China’s territory and the defence zone does not apply to civilian flights.¹⁰ A Chinese commentator has argued that “the ADIZ is not a no-fly-zone. China has been consistently respecting every country’s freedom of over-flight as long as they comply with the international law and can be legally identified by the management of the ADIZ.”¹¹ But these assurances have not assuaged the concerns of regional countries.

Reactions and responses from Japan

Japan has been the most proactive in protesting against China’s ADIZ as the Chinese defence zone overlaps the wider area of its own defence zone that was established in 1969. Japanese Foreign Ministry summoned the Chinese ambassador in Tokyo and lodged an official protest and demanded that the newly established zone be scrapped. However, the Japanese response was bit delayed and its airlines, including the national carrier, Japan Air Lines, submitted their flight plans to Chinese authorities which gave the impression that Japan had accepted Chinese zone.

China has rejected Japanese protests and claims that the zone has been established “to defend its sovereignty, territorial land and air space.”¹² The Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe

informed the Japanese Diet that Tokyo will not recognise the defence zone established by China.¹³ As regards the Japanese Self Defence Force (SDF) is concerned, they have not initiated any changes in its activities. The *Asahi Shimbun*, quoted Japanese defence forces sources as saying that, “while we will have to be more cautious than before, I do not believe we have to limit our activities... We have no intention of changing the SDF’s surveillance and training in the East China Sea.”¹⁴

The Japanese media has also denounced the Chinese move and is supporting the Japanese government but has urged caution and a “cool headed response.” The *Yomiuri Shimbun* in its editorial opined that, “China appears to be ramping up pressure on Japan by establishing new facts on the ground in connection with the Senkakus.”¹⁵ The Japanese daily also added that, “there are concerns that aircraft of the self defence Forces and the Chinese military that have scrambled could approach each other and accidentally trigger a clash. The danger is palpable.” The *Japan Times* was of the view that, “although Beijing said that the establishment of the ADIZ is not aimed at any country, it is clearly targeting Japan and its creation will increase regional tensions.”¹⁶ It further added that:

China should stop its provocative acts concerning the Senkakus, including intrusions into Japanese territorial waters around the islands. But Japan, for its part, must deal with the situation in a cool-headed manner. Self restraint on both sides is vital to avoid an accidental military clash.¹⁷

Similarly, the *Asahi Shimbun* opined that “China is indiscreetly expanding the scope of action into the air space over the uninhabited island.”¹⁸ The left leaning daily, however, advised the government not to get provoked; “Japan, for its part, should not let itself provoked into actions that can escalate the tension.” It asked Japan to make “tenacious effort to find a way to fix the broken channel of bilateral communications between the two governments. That is vital for preventing unexpected events that could have serious consequences.”¹⁹

The reactions and responses in the Japanese media, suggest that they do not want the government to be embroiled in yet another controversy with China, and would prefer to arrive at an amicable solution through dialogue. The Shinzo Abe government, however, is taking mileage out of it and is contemplating strategies to strengthen its defence to outlying areas closer to China which

includes deploying additional troops to Okinawa.

Response from South Korea

Relations between South Korea and China had been cordial ever since Park Guein-hye became President significantly bypassed Tokyo and visited Beijing to cement ties. However, Chinese ADIZ has irked Seoul as it encroaches upon South Korean ADIZ, albeit only slightly. According to South Korean sources, the Chinese ADIZ overlaps the South Korean ADIZ which is 20 kilometre wide and stretches for 150 kilometres. Seoul is also perturbed because Beijing announced its decision without prior consultation, and a few days ahead of scheduled bilateral defence dialogue between the two neighbours. The major bone of contention between the two is that the Chinese ADIZ covers Ieodo (known as Suyan in China), a submerged rock west of Jeju Island, on which Korea has built an ocean research centre in 2003. Seoul not only lodged its protest with Beijing but also raised the issue during the “Strategic Defence Dialogue” that took place between the two neighbours in Seoul on November 28. It demanded that China re-demarcate its ADIZ which China rejected.²⁰

Seoul is now expanding its own zone to include Ieodo to “protect” its “national interest.”²¹ This indicates that tensions between China and South Korea are likely to escalate over the ADIZ issue. South Korean domestic constituencies have been asking Seoul to take a tougher line in its response to the Chinese ADIZ, which undermines civilian flights, as well as surveillance and reconnaissance activities of its defence forces.

It is important here to glean through opinion expressed in Korean dailies to assess reactions from South Korea. The South Korean daily, the *Chosun Ilbo*, in its editorial criticised the Korean government for its “feeble” response to China’s demarcation of its ADIZ. It stated that “US and Japanese governments dealt with China’s announcement immediately, but it took the government two full days to respond.”²² It added that government’s “low key approach” to the Ieodo issue is being interpreted as “weakness” of South Korea.²³ *The Korea Times* however welcomed government’s low key approach vis-à-vis the Ieodo issue. It observed that “it was right for the government to refrain from issuing an unduly agitated response to China’s inclusion of Ieodo in the newly imposed zone...”²⁴ It however insisted that Korea must secure its aviation rights and added:

Seoul needs to make it clear the latest Chinese move should never infringe on South Korea's aviation rights. It also has to warn Beijing against any such one-sided action in the future.²⁵

It also demanded that the government must include "the undersea rock in its own air defence zone." The *Korean Herald* highlighting the strategic importance of the Ieodo stated:

Ieodo and the sea around it are in a key maritime route through which nearly all of our imports, including crude oil and raw materials, pass. In addition to their economic value arising from potentially abundant natural resources, the area is also strategically important.²⁶

The daily went on to criticise Seoul for its weak-kneed response and said that, "there is no need to be so emotional about territorial issues; the government must show its strong resolve when our interest is at risk of being compromised by big powers."²⁷

The common thread in the three editorials is that the Korean government has already delayed incorporation of Ieodo in its ADIZ, and that it should not delay the matter further. Amid domestic pressure, South Korea announced the expansion of its Defense Identification Zone and has also incorporated the southern Islands of Marado, Hongdo and Ieodo. It has notified its decision to Japan and China that the expanded zone will come into effect from December 15, 2013.²⁸ Japan has responded calmly to South Korea's defence zone despite the fact that the zone overlaps with its own defence zone. Japan said that they do not see the expanded Korean ADIZ developing into a "problem" adding that "what is different from China's action is that the zone does not cover our territory, sea or airspace,"²⁹ China, however, has expressed "regret" over South Korean move to expand its ADIZ towards South³⁰. This suggests that the issue will create diplomatic problem between the two neighbours.

Assessing the American Response

The US has criticised the Chinese move and US Secretary of State, John Kerry said that the move "risks an accident." According to the US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel the ADIZ is "a destabilising attempt to alter the status quo in the region." He also added that it "increases the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculations."³¹ The strong response by the US followed by the flight of B-2 bombers through the newly enforced Chinese air space came as a surprise to China. The US,

so far had been neutral with regard to the sovereignty of Senkaku. The US maintained its ambivalence regarding the sovereignty of Senkaku Islands during Vice President Joseph R. Biden's visit to East Asia, first ever visit by a US official following China's announcement of ADIZ. Biden did not give a clear response to Abe's request when he called on the US to "send a clear message to China" to rescind the ADIZ. Biden responded to Abe saying that he agrees with him and would raise this issue during his meetings with Chinese authorities.³² But when Biden raised the issue with Chinese President Xi Jinping, he told him that China's position was "principled" and rejected the charge that its action was reckless.³³

The changing realities following the Chinese ADIZ may compel the US to change its ambivalent stance on contested ADIZ because some of the training facilities provided by Japan to the US, fall under the Chinese demarcated ADIZ. The *Asahi Shimbun* reported that the firing and bombing ranges at Sekibisho and Kobisho in Senkaku Islands fall in the Chinese announced ADIZ.³⁴ These developments have led to speculation that the Chinese ADIZ is targeting not only Japan, but also the US. Since part of northern Okinawa falls under China's ADIZ, it is likely to hinder US reconnaissance and surveillance activities. The changed scenario can potentially alter the East Asian power balance that has so far has been in favour of the US and its regional allies.

Conclusion

Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the US are concerned over the Chinese ADIZ and consider it to have wider security implications for the East Asian region. It could also have ramifications for the disputed islands in the South China Sea over which some ASEAN members and China have competing claims. China has hinted that it is contemplating a similar defence zone for the South China Sea as well. If China does so, it would extend its defence zone across a wider area of the East and South China Sea. Various security analysts have pointed out that China is working towards the "first Island Chain" linking East China Sea to South China Sea, and the Chinese navy wants to maintain effective control of the waters within this island chain. The regular forays made by Chinese ships in the East China Sea, following Japan's nationalisation of the Senkaku Islands, suggest that China has been successful, though partially, in strengthening its grip on this naval zone. The next likely scenario would be that China would try to strengthen its control in the airspace over the East and South China Seas.

There are speculations that China is working on an Anti Area Access Denial (A2AD) strategy. Against this background, it will not be surprising that China will declare a similar ADIZ around South China Sea. The new scenario would invite the displeasure of the ASEAN members and could interfere with their freedom of flights over South China Sea. As has been mentioned earlier, various littoral states have enforced their defence zones citing international practices in the absence of an international law for demarcating the air space over the high seas. The Chinese ADIZ has highlighted the fact that most ADIZs, especially in East Asia, overlap with each others; and there are chances that if the competing nations try to forcefully enforce their defence zones it might lead to a military confrontation.

The emerging scenario warrants the immediate intervention of the international community. They must formulate a protocol for sharing of air space over the high seas or keep it open as has been the case of navigations on the high seas. This will certainly ease tensions and end the encroachment of air space over the high seas by various powers.

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