

Cause and Effect of the ADIZ over East China Sea

Naval Jagota

December 6, 2013

China's recent establishment of the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the disputed island (Senkaku/Diaoyu) in the East China Sea has raised deep concern in the neighbourhood and beyond with worrying strategic escalation. This is the first time that the Chinese have designated an ADIZ off its territory, which overlap with the three neighbours –Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

ADIZ is established in an area from which an aerial threat is expected to originate. The designated zone is a finite area on the ground extending vertically upwards within the territory and may extend contiguously to littoral areas under state control. The established zone is then covered within the operational envelope of the Air Defence systems such as radars, interceptor aircraft, command and control and surface to air missiles. The objective is to ensure better control and knowledge of the aircraft entering and departing its area of concern. The primary aim of the ADIZ is to provide a lead time to the air force, in case of hostile aircraft intruding, and take appropriate actions to counter them. Japan, South Korea and Taiwan all have an ADIZ. The Japanese ADIZ was issued in 1969 and thereafter revised in 1972 and 2010. South Korea established its ADIZ in 1951. It is interesting to note that the US interpretation on what constitutes infringement of the ADIZ is stated in the code of federal regulations, which broadly states that as long as the aircraft has no intent to enter the territorial waters or air space of the country then they have no issues and the aircraft would not be subjected to the rules of the ADIZ. By this definition, the US would reciprocate similarly with other countries ADIZ.

A critical question that arises is who makes and regulates the ADIZ? The answer is not complicated. The ADIZ is designated individually by the country depending on its threat perception. The establishment of this zone is not regulated by any global/regional regime. Since there is no defined or accepted method for delineating ADIZ, some countries adopt the procedure of territorial airspace till 12 nautical miles off their coast. Some countries may want to extend it to their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which is 200 nautical miles from their coast. However the logical basis for the establishment of ADIZ is for early warning so as to enable the country to take appropriate counter measures.

On the face of it, China's sudden announcement to establish the ADIZ in the East China Sea to include the disputed island is not just a matter of perceiving a threat from this area but a signal of assertiveness and authority over the Senkaku/Diaoyu island and probably a readiness to escalate it. Japan, in order to protect its right over the islands, has been

scrambling fighters to guard the airspace around these islands and in its ADIZ. The face-off is unnerving and a cat and mouse game between the Chinese coast guard and the Japanese SDF is underway with a possibility of an all-out hot war. South Korea is equally rattled by these developments as the newly drawn ADIZ encroaches on the airspace west of Jeju Island and over the Ieodo Ocean Research Center, an unmanned station built atop a outcropping of rock 149 kilometres South of Mara Island. Although its reaction has been muted so far, South Korea has already flown a reconnaissance aircraft over the area without notifying the Chinese authorities.

China is within its right to designate such a zone, just like Japan has done, but the timing as well as the lack of consultation has raised the hackles. Further, with both the countries ADIZ overlapping, a challenging and conflicting situation arises over the non-scheduled flights and duality of control for the scheduled civil aircraft as well. With the Chinese zone becoming effective from 10 am on 23 November 2013, the Americans, the South Koreans as well as the Japanese, as defiance, have flown through this zone without informing the Chinese control. The Chinese have shown restrained response abiding by the rules of its ADIZ which states: “China's armed forces will adopt defensive emergency measures to respond to aircraft that do not cooperate in the identification or refuse to follow the instructions”. There is, of course, a thin line existing and could lead to snowballing into a major international incident.

The international community hopes that China and Japan exercise restraint. However, China's unilateral action is definitely a provocation and has increased the chances for miscalculation and accidental air engagement. If escalation is the game then one can expect China to next establish an ADIZ over most of the South China Sea. At the very least, China has demonstrated its seriousness about pressing its claim over the disputed islands but by asserting itself it also testing the resolve of Japan and its allies.

Naval Jagota is Research Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.