

Chinese ADIZ in East China Sea: Posers for India

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China has enormous capacity to surprise the world. In the third week of November, China suddenly announced the creation of an Air Defence identification Zone (ADIZ) over the Senkakau/Diayou islands in East China Sea. The Chinese notification said all planes passing through the ADIZ should give prior information to the Chinese authorities of their flight.

Significantly, the notification added that in case of non compliance China would take "emergency defensive measures" hinting that it could use military measures to deal with those who do not comply with ADIZ requirements.

The Chinese announcement has raised the tensions several notches in the already tense East China Sea where there is a raging dispute between China and Japan over the sovereignty of the islands. China claims sovereignty over the uninhabited islands, while Japan has the administrative control over them. The South Koreans have also been affected because the Chinese ADIZ overlaps with a South Korean ADIZ in the area.

The Japanese, the South Korean and the US reaction was swift. In calculated defiance, the US flew two of its Guam-based unarmed B-52 bombers through the Chinese ADIZ disregarding Chinese stipulations of prior notification. The Japanese and South Koreans also sent their surveillance planes through the contested zone. Undeterred, the Chinese in turn sent their war planes though the zone and also naval ships to the islands.

The brinkmanship has already begun. Neither side is showing signs of backing off. This has raised the chances of conflict. Several civilian air lines, including the US, worried about passenger safety, have already begun to comply with the Chinese stipulations. The Japanese airlines initially said it would comply with the Chinese requirements but later on backed off under pressure from the Japanese government.

The Chinese have also pointed out that the Japanese and the US response to the Chinese ADIZ is hypocritical. The US, Japan and South Korea already have air defence zones in the region. These countries had never consulted China before setting up their own ADIZs. So why pick on Chinese ADIZ?

Why have the Chinese come up with unquestionable proactive move, at this point of time, when tensions between Japan and China have already been high?

No one can be sure of the Chinese motives. The world knows little about the decision making processes in China. But it is clear from various Chinese statements and media commentaries that the Chinese are trying to strengthen their claim of sovereignty over the disputed islands. They have taken a gamble to test out the reaction of the adversaries and also to send out a signal that China would back their claims on the islands with firm actions.

Second, by declaring an ADIZ, they have also taken a step towards keeping the US out of the region. They are conveying by their action that the US should keep off.

Third, China by testing the strength of the US security commitments to alliance partner Japan is also largely testing the efficacy of the US rebalancing strategy. Presently Japan and the US are carrying out joint naval exercises near Okinawa. The question is how long will the US and Japan keep sending warplanes through the ADIZ.

The Chinese seem to have calculated that the international community would not want a military conflict with China on such issues because this would be disastrous for the global economy. Ultimately, the opponents would come to accept the Chinese terms. The calculation seems to be right. Economic considerations are so powerful that the world would most probably adjust to the new situation created by the Chinese actions. The UK prime minister's high profile visit to China accompanied by 100 businessmen is an indication. The US vice president Joe Biden will also be in China soon.

The Chinese policy of taking calculated risks and testing the resolve of the opponents is now becoming common. In 2007, China had tested an anti satellite missile in space which has created enormous amount of debris causing safety issues to satellites of all countries. Every one was concerned but no one was able to take any action. This was because the others had also tested similar missiles earlier and so the China could not be criticised.

India got a taste of the Chinese unpredictable behaviour earlier this year. In April, the Chinese troops had come deep inside the Indian territory weeks before the Chinese premier was slated to visit India. It took three weeks for the explosive situation to resolve. The Chinese withdrew their troops and the two sides finally ended up signing a border defence cooperation agreement during Indian prime minister's visit to Beijing in October. The agreement is based on a draft which was initially given by the Chinese. It is not clear whether this would actually prevent incursions that have been routine in the past.

The poser for India is how would deal with the situation if the Chinese declared an ADIZ somewhere along the disputed border? Indian policy makers must be mulling over this eventuality.

How long will the tense stand-off in East China Sea continue is a moot question. But the Chinese will endure. They have already taken a number of steps, including sending their naval ships to the region, over the last year. The US cannot continue to fly military planes through the area indefinitely. It will have to reach some understanding with the Chinese to avoid the possibility of escalation. Ditto for Japan.

It is possible that in the case of the Chinese ADIZ, some agreement would be found between China, Japan, the US and South Korea to minimise the conflict potential. But, the Chinese ADIZ is likely to stay.

There is now little doubt that China is displaying a muscular and assertive foreign policy. Most countries in Asia would be wary of a hard military response because of the growing dependence of their economies on the Chinese economy. The third party plenum of the Chinese communist party indicted that China is setting the stage for the next round of ambitious economic reforms. The new reforms now under consideration will benefit the Asian countries greatly.

The lessons for the neighbours are that when it comes to sovereignty issues, China is unlikely to compromise. China reacted adversely to the recent visit of the Indian president to Arunachal Pradesh which it claims to be disputed territory. What if tomorrow the Chinese declare an ADIZ over Arunachal Pradesh? India would need to formulate its strategies taking into consideration the insights of the Chinese behaviour in East China Sea.

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