

Research note

The “East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone” of the People’s Republic of China: Its Strategic Significance in Light of Growing Regional Tensions

Jiagu Richter and Wolfgang Richter

Summary

China established the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ECS ADIZ) on 23 November 2013. It includes the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and its founding met with strong reaction from both Japan and the United States of America. In this context, the US has reaffirmed defense commitments toward regional allies while Japan continues to revise its constitution and strengthen its defense capabilities. The dispute on ECS ADIZ escalated the tensions within a regionally competitive environment characterized by the newly emerged assertiveness of China and Japan and by the US “pivot to Asia.” The geographical extension of the ECS ADIZ’s borders predominantly corresponds with Chinese military calculations. This paper shows that the establishment of the ECS ADIZ came about as a result of China’s longstanding regional security concerns and was of a military nature. It did not enforce territorial claims. Establishing a military presence in an East China Sea previously dominated exclusively by Japan and the US shows China’s new self-confidence in its own military capabilities. The controversy aroused by different views on the ECS ADIZ reflects the countries involved conflicting military strategies, as well as the potential that major powers in the region geared to deny or enforce access have.

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Jiagu Richter is a lecturer at the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of Vienna. Her research interests focus on China’s foreign policy (especially in multilateral fields), on security issues, and on the history of Chinese diplomacy.

Wolfgang Richter is a researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), working on such issues as the European Security Order, NATO’s strategy and NATO–Russia relations, arms control, and conflict management.

Introduction

On November 23, 2013 the People's Republic of China (PRC) established the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ECS ADIZ), announcing also its immediate enforcement. This zone is comprised of large swathes of the high sea, extending 370–500 kilometers east of the territorial waters of the People's Republic of China— with a north–south extension of about 900 km between the Socotra (Iedo/Suyan) Rocks (150 km southwest of the Korean Jeju Island) and a 36 km line close to the Japanese Yonaguni Island and the coast of Taiwan. The ECS ADIZ covers the airspace over the disputed Daoyu/Senkaku Islands and Socotra Rocks, overlaps to a large extent with Japan's own ADIZ, and to a smaller extent with the South Korean (3,000 km²) and the Taiwanese (23,000 km²) ones too.

Figure 1: Chinese and Japanese Air Defense Identification Zones



Source: Chinese Ministry of National Defence; Google.

In the first month after the establishment of the ECS ADIZ, 56 airline companies from 23 different countries were reported to have made 21,475 scheduled flights to China — while the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) oversaw the

aviation activities of the 800 foreign military aircraft that entered the ECS ADIZ during that period. On 51 separate occasions it scrambled 87 surveillance sorties, using early warning aircrafts as well as interceptors in order to police or patrol the ADIZ (Xinhua News 2013a; MoND 2013a). Subsequently, such operations became daily routine.

With the ready compliance of many countries and civil aviation companies, China’s control of air traffic passing through the ECS ADIZ was able to be effectively put into practice shortly after the zone’s inception. At the same time, China has demonstrated that it now has sufficient military capabilities to control a significant portion of the airspace existing over the East China Sea. In this regard, the military status quo ante in the region that prevailed for more than half a century has indeed changed.

The ECS ADIZ has by now been in place for more than twelve months already. Plenty of current affairs commentators and academics alike have written extensively about the motives behind this Chinese act. Many of them hold the view that it was targeted specifically at Japan, and that the underlying purpose is to strengthen China’s territorial claims over the disputed islands. Michael Swaine, for example, has stated that China consistently argues that the ECS ADIZ “is not directed at any particular country or target, in fact the vague language used to describe the zone as well as the extensive attention to Japan suggests that such assertions are incorrect and disingenuous at best” (2014: 27). The US–China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Report meanwhile viewed the zone as “an expansion of China’s attempt to exert legal and administrative control over the Senkaku Islands” (Hsu 2014: 1). Some Japanese media outlets have voiced similar sentiments, “The step was obviously designed to demonstrate [China’s] growing military power and bolster its territorial claim to the uninhabited islands in the East China Sea that are controlled by Japan now” (Nakayama 2014: 1). A senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, Eric Heginbotham, thought that “answering Japan’s ADIZ was almost certainly an important driver of China’s decision” (2014: 2). Other commentators are less assertive in backing this assessment, but have still held, for example, that “While the ADIZ may not be an expansion of its historic claims, China is nonetheless utilizing it as a means of solidifying its physical and legal control” (Forsyth 2014: 13).

However, by carefully analyzing the contradictions in Chinese official statements, the historical background, the sequence of events leading to the act, and the responses of different countries, the authors of this paper assess the issue differently. Thus it is attempted here to answer the question: what is the real intention of China in establishing the ECS ADIZ? Has China achieved its goal(s)? What are the implications of the establishment of the ECS ADIZ? Will China establish further ADIZs in the near future? In order to answer these questions it is necessary to examine international law and international practices concerning ADIZs, as well as

the already established ADIZs in the region. The security situation and the competition for influence in the region — especially between China, Japan, and the US — are hence analyzed, since they form not only the background to these issues but also provide clues regarding likely future developments both in the ECS ADIZ itself and within China's similar behavior elsewhere.

Other ADIZs in the region

The Japanese ADIZ was first established in 1969, when Japan inherited a US ADIZ originally created during the Korean War. Based on the Okinawa Reversal Treaty of 1971 and on a bilateral defense protocol, Japan extended its ADIZ in 1972 to further include the high seas around the chain of Ryukyu and Daito Islands lying between latitude 29° north and Taiwan (an area also including the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands). Japan's ADIZ extends close to the borders of territorial waters of China (110 km), Taiwan (90 km), South Korea (70 km), the Russian Far East Province (90 km), and Sakhalin Island (50 km).

The ADIZ of the Republic of Korea (ROK) was created in March 1951, with it covering the high seas close to the submerged Socotra Rocks in the south and far into Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) airspace in the north. In the Sea of Japan, it covers the airspace over the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands — the ownership of which is currently a matter of dispute between Japan and the ROK.

The ADIZ of Taiwan, meanwhile, was first established in the 1950s, adjacent to the regional US ADIZ that had been transferred to Japanese control in 1972. The two ADIZs connected along longitude 123° — about 40 km west of the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands — and were split over the Yonaguni Island. In 2010 Japan for the second time extended its ADIZ so as to cover a bulge of 26 km breadth west of Yonaguni Island (Shih 2010). Since then, it has overlapped with the Taiwanese ADIZ.

Reactions by regional powers to the newly established Chinese ECS ADIZ

The establishment of the ECS ADIZ met with sharp reactions, even protests. Underlying this opposition are essentially three issues of particular concern:

- That the ECS ADIZ includes the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and the Socotra Rocks (contested by China and the ROK).
- That it covers large swathes of the high sea and overlaps with the Japanese ADIZ.
- That China was asking all aircrafts entering the zone for identification without distinguishing between those bound for China and those just passing through the ADIZ, while starting to enforce mandatory identification throughout the zone.

Differences existed in the responses from regional powers to the zone’s founding. The US asked China not to request identification from aircraft not intending to enter Chinese airspace, stating that it would not change its conducting of military operations in the region, reiterating its defense commitments to regional allies, and reaffirming “that Article V of the US–Japan Mutual Defense Treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands” (US Department of Defense 2013b). Such statements were followed up with the flights of two US B52 bombers on November 26, 2013 in a south–north direction along the eastern boundary of the ECS ADIZ, about 200 km east of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, done without acceding to Chinese identification requests. On November 30, 2013 Japan and South Korea undertook similar military flights through the ECS ADIZ, also without responding to Chinese requests for identification. Such flights were meant to signify the nonrecognition of the ECS ADIZ. The observation of these actions by the PLAAF was confirmed by China’s Ministry of National Defense (via spokespersons Geng Yansheng and Shen Jinke 2013). At the same time, Washington advised US commercial airlines to comply with China’s newly created ADIZ (Swaine 2013: 30; US Department of State 2013a). The Japanese media meanwhile complained about US reluctance to condemn China, while Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel was reported to have commented that China’s ADIZ was “neither new nor unique” (Nakayama 2014: 1).

Japan denounced the ECS ADIZ as a one-sided infringement of the freedom to fly unimpeded through international airspace and as a dangerous attempt to change the status quo in the East China Sea, thus demanding that China revoke the decision (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2013). The resolution of Japan’s Lower House of Parliament on December 7, 2013 stated that by this act China had seriously violated Japan’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. The House of Councilors claimed that the ECS ADIZ was a threat to peace and stability in the region (Kyodo News 2013). The Japanese government made efforts to convince private airlines not to accede to the Chinese identification requests. Following the US example, however, the Japanese government subsequently decided to allow civil airlines to make an autonomous decision on the issue (Cao 2014: 30).

The ROK protested on November 25, 2013 against the ECS ADIZ, particularly on the grounds of the inclusion therein of the disputed Socotra Rocks. Defense Minister Spokesman Kim Min-seok stated that Korean aircraft would continue flying through the ECS ADIZ without informing China. This statement was followed by a joint air and sea forces exercise on December 3, 2013. After consultations with China, Japan, and the US, South Korea on December 8, 2013 announced the expansion of its ADIZ by 25,670 square miles to the south. Thereafter it also now covered the airspace over the Socotra Rocks and overlapped with the ADIZs of China and Japan (*Korea Joong Ang Daily* and *Korea Times* December 4, 2013).

Australia held that the timing and manner of China’s announcement would not contribute to regional stability, and declared its opposition to any coercive or

unilateral actions taken to change the status quo in the East China Sea (Australian Foreign Minister 2013). The Philippines also voiced concern that China might try to transform the area into its own “domestic airspace” and establish another ADIZ in a South China Sea where the two sides have competing territorial claims (*Washington Post* November 28, 2013), while Taiwan’s reaction to these events was remarkably calm (Republic of China, Press Release 2013).

The Japanese response adds some flavor of an island dispute to the issue, while the US response shows a paradoxical combination of opposition and acceptance. The latter does not object to China’s request for civil aircraft to identify themselves, but continues to insist — in both word and deed — on the unrestricted right of free passage for military aircraft. Logically its terminology of “aircraft not bound for entering China” is not meant to apply to civil aviation, since the US did not suggest only those “bound for China” abide by the Chinese identification request. US opposition obviously derives from its concern specifically for military aircrafts. The fact that the US is particularly dissatisfied with that aspect of the ECS ADIZ and China’s reaction thereto help us also to understand the real intention behind China’s setting up of the zone in the first place.

China’s explanations for and understanding of the ECS ADIZ

The contents of the statement made by the Chinese MoND on the establishing of the ECS ADIZ on November 23, 2013 were confined to geographical descriptions and domestic laws concerning national defense, civil aviation, and basic rules on flight.¹ However, it neither explained its core purpose nor its necessity of being — or its conformity with international law for that matter. Only in reaction to the questions posed during a related press conference did Spokesman Yang Yujun provide further explanations. From these and subsequent official announcements the following reasons for the zone’s existence can be derived:

(1) China holds that the establishment of the ECS ADIZ beyond China’s territorial airspace was in conformity with international law and practices and did “not affect the freedom of overflight in the related airspace, also not the legal nature of related airspace.” More than twenty countries had already previously established ADIZs. On December 3, 2013 MoND Spokesman Geng Yansheng denied the “misunderstandings or even distortions” leading observers to believe that the ECS ADIZ was establishing a “territorial airspace” or a “no-fly zone.” It remained international airspace in conformity with international law, and served only legitimate purposes of early warning and identification so as to ensure the defense of China’s own sovereign airspace. “International flights that fly normally within the rules in the East China Sea ADIZ will not be affected.” These responses left open,

1 The ADIZ includes the airspace within the area enclosed by China’s outer limit of the territorial sea and the following six points: 33°11’N and 121° 47’E; 33°11’N and 125°00’E; 31°00’N and 128°20’E; 25°38’N and 125°00’E; 24°45’N and 123°00’E; 26°44’N and 120°58’E (MoND 2013c).

however, whether China considers flights by military aircraft through the ADIZ as “abnormal,” whether and if so how such military flights will be affected, and how China will react to those flights that choose not to accede to Chinese identification requests (all quotes from Press Releases of MoND Spokesmen November to December).

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) stipulates that beyond “territorial waters” (from the coastal “baseline” to a breadth of 12 nautical miles [22 km] toward the open sea) (UNCLOS Part I, Articles 1–4, 17–21), “High Sea,” “Contiguous Zone” (24 nm from the “baseline”), “Exclusive Economic Zone” (EEZ, 200 nm from the “baseline”), and “Continental Shelf” are — alongside their superjacent airspace — considered international space, where the freedom of navigation and aviation applies as a principle of the rule of law. Apart from some preferential rights for coastal-lying countries, the freedom of navigation or aviation may not be impeded in these zones (UNCLOS Part VII, Art. 87; Part II, Art. 33; Part V, Arts 55–58; Part VI, Arts 76–78).

However, international law does not prohibit the establishment of an ADIZ as long as it does not run counter to the abovementioned rules. It is part of the residual rights (neither provided nor prohibited) guaranteed by international law. The legality of an ADIZ per se is relatively well settled by now: in principle, the legal basis exists for states to declare an ADIZ adjacent to their own sovereign airspace (Roach 2012: 232). To date more than 20 littoral states have established such ADIZs beyond their own territorial waters.² They do not alter the legal status of international waters or airspace but instead provide a means of early identification of incoming aircraft bound to enter the sovereign territorial airspace of these coastal countries. Their purpose is to distinguish between routine civil aviation flights and potentially hostile military incursions, in order to either grant safe and unhindered passage or to prepare the necessary defensive measures to be taken. Such a distinction — as well as the obligation to ensure unhindered and safe passage for civilian aircraft — is enshrined in international law (International Civil Aviation Organization 1944).

From the abovementioned deliberations one might conclude that the Chinese claim is not unjustified, in that an ADIZ within international airspace is not contradictory to international law and is in line with current international practices.

(2) China argues that the original justification for the ECS ADIZ’s founding was national defense requirements, with it being designed to “timely identify, monitor, control, and react to aircraft entering this zone with potential air threat” so as to “safeguard state sovereignty and security and maintain flight order”. A combat aircraft can quickly “reach China from the easternmost point of the ADIZ”; consequently, it was necessary for China “to identify any aircraft from this point

2 Among others, Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, India, Japan, Norway, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan, United Kingdom, United States, and Vietnam.

[on] to assess its intentions and examine its identity so as to allow enough early-warning time for responsive measures in maintaining air security.” As to the exact actions liable to be undertaken as part of China’s air defense systems, beside identifying, monitoring, and controlling, the details remained vague: it depended, apparently, on “different situations”. However, it was made clear that China was fully capable of exercising effective control over the ECS ADIZ through reported flight plans, radar response and identification, as well as air patrol flights (all quotes from Press Releases of MoND Spokesmen November 23 and December 3, 2013).

There are two technical premises for establishing ADIZ regulations: first, the high speed of modern military aircraft, which requires early precautionary measures being taken so as to prevent a potentially hostile incident rapidly unfolding in a country’s airspace³; and, second, the current availability of the technological means that allow for early identification and effective defensive measures to be taken in the face of threats.

The US’ own military instructions provide illuminating insight into the general acceptance of the established interpretation of what constitutes an ADIZ, one that has hitherto not been contested:

The legal basis [...] is the right of a nation to establish reasonable conditions of entry into its territory. [...] US ADIZ regulations apply to aircraft bound for U.S. territorial air space and require the filing of flight plans and periodic position reports. The United States does not recognize the right of a coastal nation to apply its ADIZ procedures to foreign aircraft not intending to enter national air space nor does the United States apply ADIZ procedures to foreign aircraft not intending to enter U.S. airspace. [...] In the case of imminent or actual hostilities, a nation may find it necessary to take measures in self-defense that will affect overflight in international airspace (US Navy 2007: 2–13).

From the above review one might conclude that China’s claim is a necessary one due to security and safety considerations, and that it does not alter the legal status quo of international airspace existing over the high seas. However, the Chinese ADIZ has a special feature to it: it is not limited to only those aircraft bound to enter the country’s sovereign territorial airspace. The following information suggests that this stipulation by the Chinese was not the result of negligence:

1. As revealed by Japanese newspaper *Mainichi Shinbun*, PLA senior officers had informed their Japanese counterparts in May 2010 of their intention to establish the ECS ADIZ and invited Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) representatives for dialogue on managing the overlapping ADIZs so as to reduce the possibility

3 An aircraft flying at a subsonic speed of 600–800 km per hour can cross the ECS ADIZ within 28 to 50 minutes; a jet fighter flying at the supersonic speed of Mach 2 would need only 9 to 12 minutes for this. This small window leaves just enough time for interceptors to take off and ascend so as to identify any unknown aircraft approaching sovereign airspace and to carry out defensive actions if necessary. Modern “stand-off” weapons can further complicate such defense operations: for example, short- and medium-range air-to-surface missiles can be fired by aircraft flying in international airspace over a range of 80 to 600 km.

of mishaps occurring (SNA Tokyo 2014). Swaine also observed that “China’s establishment of an ADIZ has been actively under consideration for many years” (2014: 25). Actually, after the collision of a US reconnaissance plane and a Chinese jet fighter close to Hainan Island in 2001, China started studying the ADIZs of other countries with the possibility of establishing its own in mind (Jin Chaowu 2001: 145; Yu Mincai 2001: 53; Xue Guifang and Xiong Xuyuan 2007: 41; Zhang Lin and Zhang Rui 2007: December; Zhao Pengcheng 2009: 94; Li Wei and Wang Yaguang 2009: 47). As such, the zone’s eventual emergence can hardly be considered an accident after a decade of preparation for it.

2. The ECS ADIZ has by now been in existence for over a year already. Despite the strong criticism received, China still to this day sticks to its explanations for the ADIZ’s existence (specifically regarding it not being confined to aircraft “bound for China”).

This carefully prepared course of action might well suggest that those military aircraft that are not bound to enter Chinese airspace but rather are carrying out military operations in the area are the ones meant to be monitored and controlled under the auspices of the ECS ADIZ.

The other special feature of the ECS ADIZ is that China announced that it would actively enforce its implementation. Although China as well as certain coastal developing countries argue for the right to regulate and control military activities in EEZs (at present an unresolved debate), international law does not grant the right to enforce compliance with identification requests. The above analysis shows that this special feature of the zone was also intentional. Nevertheless judged according to its actual implementation, China’s ADIZ is not that different to the other ones in existence around the globe. China monitors the encroaching flights of those military aircraft that do not identify and report themselves; in response it sometimes scrambles planes, while sometimes it does not (Cao 2014: 33). “Enforcement of compliance” could well be just the Chinese means of expression on how it would implement its ADIZ, which might be in essence similar to the implementation methods for other ADIZs. However, this expression also reveals China’s intention to visibly demonstrate its determination and strength in the region.

- (3) Reciprocity was mentioned by the Chinese to justify the establishment of the ECS ADIZ: “some country” (obviously Japan) had established, as early as 1969, an ADIZ with boundaries as close as 130 km to the Chinese mainland. Reacting to Japanese protests against the ECS ADIZ’s founding, the MoND spokesman stated on November 24, 2013 that Japan had:

[...] frequently sent military planes in recent years to track and monitor Chinese military planes conducting normal exercises and patrols above the East China Sea in the name of ADIZ requirement, which severely undermined the freedom of over-flight and made safety accidents and unexpected incidents highly likely (Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang 2013, November 25).

With that statement China also admitted that in the past it had not conformed to Japanese ADIZ requirements, and that air incidents had already occurred before the ECS ADIZ was established.

The claim of a like-for-like reciprocity with Japan's own ADIZ was self-defeating, in the sense that the Japanese one was actually originally set up 44 years ago (with two subsequent extensions made to it in 1972 and 2010 respectively). There were strategic reasons for why China was able to live with that status quo for such a long time, such as the need for a united front with Japan during the Sino-Soviet confrontation and the need for economic cooperation during the first years of China's national opening up and reform processes. The reasons for why China responded as it did in 2013 also lie in the changes taking place both in the country's domestic situation and in the global order.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of the US as the only global superpower, and the economic and military rise of China changed strategic perceptions on both sides of the Pacific from the 1990s onward. The aforementioned collision incident of 2001 also contributed to changing risk assessments. China views the periodic intelligence missions undertaken by US planes close to its sovereign airspace to be provocative acts undermining its national security and dignity. It is now no longer willing to accept any unsupervised foreign military presence along its sea borders. By declaring an ADIZ, China has demonstrated its political will and military capability to monitor the regional seaways and airspace, detect potentially hostile flights, and undertake defensive operations.

The establishment by China of an effective military presence in and over the East China Sea, which previously had been the uncontested power domain of Japan and the US, has proven that the military status quo in the region has changed. China has become a potent regional military sea and air power, though still a secondary one to the US. Consequently, China making reference to its matching of Japan's own longstanding ADIZ has served ultimately as a rhetorical argument designed to underline the two country's equal rights in the region rather than to provide the actual reasons for the establishment of the ECS ADIZ in the first place. Such a wording could also be understood as a diplomatic effort to reduce the political cost of the establishment of the zone, since it came into being at a time of escalating tensions between China and Japan.

(4) China's announcement on November 23, 2013 did not specifically make mention of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Only in response to Japanese protests on the following day did MoND Spokesman Yang stress that these islands were "China's territory" and reiterate China's determination to safeguard its national sovereignty. On December 3, 2013 Geng Yanshang added that China had not changed the status quo unilaterally, but rather that Japan had tried to do so with the "purchase" by its government of the Diaoyu Islands.

While the MoND spokesmen focused on the defensive nature of the ECS ADIZ’s founding, China’s Foreign Ministry — in response to Japanese complaints — put more emphasis on the inclusion of the Diaoyu Islands within the ADIZ on the grounds of them being “integral parts of China’s territory” and of China’s “resolve and will to safeguard sovereignty” over these islands (Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang: November 27). The Foreign Ministry also held Japan responsible for changing the status quo on the Diaoyu Islands, and rejected Japan’s attempts “to reverse the history of aggression [...] and challenge the postwar international order” (Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hong Lei 2013, December 15).

As we can see, the Chinese explanations for the establishment of the ECS ADIZ did not actively link it to the islands dispute, but addressed these territorial claims only in response to questions later posed about them. As often is the case, though, “Beijing did a poor job of explaining its move” (Heginbotham 2014: 1). With good reason Swaine has suggested that “[the] military authorities that originally proposed, developed, and presented the zone probably did not consult sufficiently with the foreign affairs system during this process” (2014: 26). This information discloses also the military nature of the zone and underlying intention of China in even participating in this endeavor in the first place.

The implications of the inclusion of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the ECS ADIZ

In December 1971 China condemned the inclusion of the Diaoyu Islands in the Okinawa Reversal Treaty as a severe violation of China’s territorial integrity and national sovereignty and denied the US any right to “return” to Japan territories that were Chinese property.⁴ In the same vein, China responded to the 1969 US–Japanese agreement on the principles for the return of Okinawa and on future Japanese defense commitments (Archiv der Gegenwart 71: 16,939), and in this context criticized the publication of the first Japanese White Paper on Defense in October 1970.⁵

Beijing’s calm reaction over the coming into force of the Okinawa Reversal Treaty on May 15, 1972 mirrored the beginning of both a Sino–US rapprochement and of the fundamental shift that would thereafter occur in Sino–Japanese relations. First

4 The PRC Foreign Ministry on December 30, 1971 specified the disputed islands as follows: Behsiao, Chiwe, Diaoyu, Huangwe and Nanshiao (among others). It recalled that already on June 28, 1950 then Foreign Minister Chou En-lai had condemned the US occupation of these islands, as well as of Taiwan (cf. Archiv der Gegenwart, 10/72, March 2, 1972: 16,941).

5 The first Japanese Defense White Paper of October 20, 1970 specified the planned procurements, holdings, and funding of the Japanese SDF, making them the seventh-largest force globally after the USSR, US, PRC, UK, France, and (West) Germany. The target figures for 1976 were 317,000 personnel, 1,000 battle tanks, 8 missile battalions, 480 army aircraft, 380 army helicopters, 1,300 naval and air force aircraft, and 247,000 tonnage of naval forces (including 14 missile boats and 18 submarines) (cf. Archiv der Gegenwart, 34/71, August 21, 1971: 16,479).

put forward by Zhou Enlai,⁶ the concept of “set aside disputes and pursue joint development” was later further promoted by Deng Xiaoping — with it guiding Chinese policies toward Japan in the late 1970s (Statement of PRC Foreign Ministry 2000).

While China did not pay much attention to the unilateral extension of Japan’s ADIZ in 2010, its return to utilizing a sharp tone in Sino–Japanese communications was seemingly triggered by the government of its counterpart purchasing in September 2012 three of the five Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands from so-called “private owners.” China and Taiwan perceived such an action to be a unilateral changing of the regional status quo. Nevertheless, the ECS ADIZ established 14 months later was obviously not a direct reaction per se to the purchase of these islands.

China has continued to claim that the ADIZ it created has not changed the territorial status quo of the East China Sea. The exclusion of sovereign airspace over the territorial waters of mainland China (and Taiwan) from this ADIZ is the logical consequence of such an interpretation. However, the inclusion of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the ECS ADIZ contradicts the claim of definite Chinese sovereignty over them: if these islands were indeed unambiguously Chinese national territory, there would have been no need to include the airspace over them and their territorial waters in the newly created ADIZ.

As such, the Chinese decision to create this zone did not put the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands clearly under sovereign airspace control but rather merely denies Japan’s own claims to sovereignty over them. Thus, the parameters of the ECS ADIZ demonstrate China’s insistence that their status remains unresolved at present. By putting competing claims on an equal footing, China is countering Japan’s position that a territorial dispute does not exist. In summary, it seems rather doubtful that China regards the establishment of the ECS ADIZ as a primary means by which to enforce a permanent solution to this ongoing dispute.

Implications of ADIZs’ overlaps in the light of growing strategic tensions in the region

In cases of overlapping ADIZs, competing identification requests complicate civil aviation and communication practices. Such competition involves the risk of misunderstandings and air incidents if states do not exercise restraint when they carry out escort and enforcement by interceptors. However, precedents do exist for the handling of such precarious situations.

In 2010 Japan shifted its ADIZ boundary further to the west, causing it to now overlap with the Taiwanese one. Japan had informed Taiwan of the planned ADIZ extension on May 21, 2010, and then on June 25 of the same year advised that it was

6 Zhou En-lai, on the occasion of a farewell banquet for Prime Minister Tanaka on September 28, 1972; see also, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (2000).

coming into force. The Taiwanese Foreign Ministry on May 29, 2010 expressed its “regret” about the Japanese practice of informing but not consulting. Foreign Minister Timothy Yang stated that the Taiwan–Japan ADIZ demarcation line would “remain unchanged.” According to this Foreign Ministry official, the two countries had achieved an “understanding [...] on how to handle the sensitive matter” (Shih 2010: 1).

The overlap between the Korean and Japanese ADIZs in the Sea of Japan has also been handled cautiously, and has not hitherto destabilized the status quo. Similarly, the extension of the Korean ADIZ in December 2013 — leading to it subsequently overlapping with the Chinese and the Japanese ones — met with remarkably calm reactions from both China and Japan (Tiezzi 2013). Obviously, competing flight information requests can be handled in tandem. That is particularly true if the states with overlapping ADIZs give priority to those flights that are bound to enter their own national territories, and also exercise restraint regarding the dispatch of interceptor escorts in all other cases.

In sum, any overlaps in ADIZs per se do not inevitably provoke clashes — if they are handled with caution. However with growing mistrust recently emerging among the different countries concerned, the ECS ADIZ has become another object in and symbol of a geopolitical power struggle. It is characterized by three major trends, ones that will significantly influence the future strategic situation in the region. In fact, these trends explain why China intended to establish the ECS ADIZ in the first place:

China’s naval fleet build-up and anti-access strategies

During the last two decades China has developed into the largest naval power in Asia, revealing a remarkable potential to control the high seas beyond traditional coastal defense and cross-straits operations. Such new capabilities are based on more than its 220 ocean-going warships, an increasing number of submarines, a capable coast-based missile system (US Department of Defense 2013a; Erickson 2013; Mahnken 2011),⁷ and advanced naval air components. The recent commissioning of its first aircraft carrier, “Liaoning,” demonstrates the future ambitions of the PLA. Though for the next two decades at least such growing maritime capabilities on the part of the Chinese “fleet in being” will probably not match US naval power projections, they can nevertheless still put at risk foreign fleets approaching the East and South China Seas — with the objective of denying access or limiting naval operations to the west of the “first chain of islands” (US Department of Defense 2013a; Erickson 2013; Mahnken 2011). That the area of operations also covers the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands reveals their strategic significance to China. Though

7 Apart from 1,100 short-range missiles located on the straits opposite Taiwan, maneuverable warheads — in the form of the DF-21 D medium-range anti-ship missile — are capable of attacking carriers and large combat ships at a range of up to 1,500 km.

historical or economic arguments might be supported by nationalist feeling over the issue of the islands, these arguments mainly serve to legitimize the presence of the PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy) in the area.

Nevertheless, China's strategy does not seem to be aimed at achieving general naval superiority in the West Pacific. The main rationale of the strategy obviously derived from the political objective of preventing Taiwan from declaring independence. In 1996 the US sent two carrier battle groups to the region to demonstrate defense commitments at a time when cross-strait tensions were growing over a looming independence referendum. Advancements in Chinese maritime capabilities are designed to thwart such naval interventions should political disputes over Taiwan's independence ever escalate again in future. Extended area defense capabilities are also required to counter modern long-range stand-off munitions, which could be fired against Chinese mainland targets from ships or aircraft operating at long distance.

On the 60th anniversary of the PLAAF's founding, the *People's Daily* published the interview with the commander of the PLAAF, Xu Qiling by Xinhua News Agency entitled "Building a Great Wall in the Blue Sky" (November 1, 2009). Although Mao Zedong intended to establish a "Great Wall at Sea" already in the 1950s (Cole 2001), up until the beginning of the last decade such ideas were pure fantasy — or slogans at best. The establishment of the ECS ADIZ is part of the efforts to now make these a reality. It demonstrates the new military capabilities of China to exercise effective control in the East China Sea by means of naval and air power. Against this background, the MoD stated that China's naval forces made their first patrol in the ECS ADIZ on November 24, 2013 (CCTV News 2013a), which was certainly not a maneuver necessitated by civil air traffic control requirements.

China is currently pondering whether to establish further ADIZs. A Defense Ministry spokesman declared on November 23, 2013 that: "China will establish other Air Defense Identification Zones at the right moment after necessary preparations are completed". Fleet movements seem to support that statement.⁸ In the Yellow Sea, any such developments would concern only South and North Korea; however, they would fuel the conflict between China and South Korea over the disputed Socotra Rocks. Although North Korea was the only country to have supported the ECS ADIZ's creation (Chen Guangwen 2014: 21), when it comes to a geographical area that is of concern to its own national interests it might react to the issue differently. For the South China Sea, the overlapping territorial claims of several stakeholders would make the case even more complicated. Here China could face opposition from ASEAN countries, which would undermine its years of efforts

8 On November 27, 2013 the aircraft carrier "Liaoning" left its home port of Qingdao for a training mission heading toward the South China Sea, being escorted by two missile destroyers ("Shenyang," "Shijiazhuang") and two missile frigates ("Yantai," "Weifang") (CCTV News 2013b).

to pursue a good neighbor policy.⁹ Politically, establishing an ADIZ here would push other South China Sea claimants to form a united front against China. Technically, “while the PLAN is by far the strongest regional navy in terms of both the quality and quantity of its assets, both it and its sibling service, the PLAAF, would likely find the task of enforcing an ADIZ over the entirety of the South China Sea an unmanageable task given the current realities” (Panda November 27, 2014). That is the case despite, practically speaking, the fact that it “likely would yield lesser operational tensions than in the ECS, due to the more limited range of state aircraft in the South China Sea region” (Hus 2014: 5).

Japan’s shift to collective self-defense based on a reinterpretation of its constitution

Japan has become increasingly alert to the currently shifting power balance in the Asia-Pacific region (as evident, for example, in the Japanese National Security Strategy, Government of Japan 2013). It assesses the improved cross-straits relationship between China and Taiwan primarily as a dangerous shift in the military balance rather than as a political opportunity. According to a statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on May 6, 2014, the “number of times that SDF aircraft scramble in response to military aircraft approaching our territorial airspace has now reached the same level as during the height of the Cold War” (2014: 4). By its aforementioned purchasing of three of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the Japanese government demonstrated its determination to exert tight national control over these disputed islands while simultaneously continuing to also assert that a territorial dispute over them does not even exist.

Japan has stepped up its efforts to reestablish its regional power status through diplomacy, military means, and domestic legislation. Strengthening US–Japan defense cooperation is the centerpiece of its new strategy. Japan’s government believes that the legal interpretation of Article 9 of the country’s pacifist constitution restricting military action only to self-defense against a direct attack should now be amended (Japanese Cabinet decision July 1, 2014).

In an attempt to bolster NATO–Japan relations, Prime Minister Abe and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen on May 6, 2014 agreed that Japan and NATO were “natural partners” (Abe, May 6, 2014). Abe illustrated the revised interpretation of the constitution by way of two new options now available: first, when the SDF were engaged in common peacekeeping operations they could now assist NATO forces should they come under attack; second, the SDF were now able to join in with the defensive operations of US naval forces, for example by supporting an Aegis vessel should it suffer an armed attack while on guard against a

9 China first formulated the good neighbor policy from the end of the last century. In October 2003 Premier Wen Jiabao formally put forward the policy of “Amicable, Secure and Prosperous Neighborhood” at the ASEAN Summit for Commerce and Investment (see also Li Baojun 2012).

possible missile launch (Cabinet decision 2014). Such new premises for military action allow for joint operations with US forces, not only to intercept North Korean missiles but also to counter the anti-access and area denial strategy of the PLAN that relies to a large extent on missile technology.

Furthermore, the Japanese government perceives that “even an armed attack occurring against a foreign country could actually threaten Japan’s survival” and that the “use of force [...] should be [...] permitted under the Constitution” (Cabinet decision 2014). With the recent approval of such policy interpretations by the country’s parliament, Japan’s government has paved the way for the SDF to henceforth engage in coalition warfare outside of the country’s borders.

Japan’s first ever “National Security Strategy” of December 17, 2013 (Abe 2014: 4) identifies the likely outcomes of making such a change toward joint and combined military operations.

In its “National Defense Program Guidelines for the Financial Year 2014 and Beyond” (Japanese Ministry of Defense 2013; hereafter: *The Guidelines*), Japan sets out the objectives for future national military capabilities: namely building a dynamic joint defense force capable of carrying out coalition warfare and achieving air superiority and command of the sea based on advanced technology, information, command and control, interoperability, mobility, flexibility, sustainability, readiness, and responsiveness and mutual presence in the Western Pacific will be strengthened and more balanced henceforth. Particular importance is attached to “ensuring the security of the sea and airspace surrounding Japan” and “responding to any attack on offshore islands” (*The Guidelines*). The SDF Navy will, over the next decade, increase the number of destroyers in its fleet from 47 to 54, of Aegis-equipped (Ballistic Missile Defense) destroyers from 6 to 8, and of submarines from 16 to 22. The SDF air force will increase the number of air warning and control units, aerial refueling, and transport and combat aircraft (*The Guidelines*).¹⁰ With that revision of concepts and programs the SDF will be able to significantly contribute to joint US–Japanese efforts to contain the PLAN and thwart its anti-access and area-denial strategies. In summary, a regional arms race occurring is not just a possibility but actually a hard fact.

The US’ “pivot to Asia”

The US has observed with concern the political, economic, and military rise of China. Such developments challenge its regional supremacy and the perceived reliability of its defense commitments, with unpredictable repercussions for regional stability. Since 2011 the US has embarked on a policy of rebalancing the situation, specifically by reassuring regional allies of its commitments and by increasing its

10 Japan’s Defense Guidelines for 2014, Annex Table. Additional interceptors introduced will bring the SDF’s number of combat aircraft up from 340 to 360.

military presence in the Asia and Pacific region. However, given their significant mutual financial and economic dependencies, the US is obviously not willing to risk open confrontation with China — choosing rather to oscillate between engagement and containment.

Within such ambiguous policies the US pursues four main objectives: (1) ensuring free access to global commons such as freedom of navigation and aviation in international waters and airspace; (2) strengthening existing alliances and promoting new partnerships with countries in the region; (3) increasing its military presence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and bolstering US Army and Marine Corps units stationed in Okinawa, Korea, and Darwin, Australia; and, (4) a gradual reassignment of US naval forces from the Atlantic to the Pacific (US Department of Defense 2012a). By 2020 the US Navy’s deployment ratio of 50 percent in each of these two regions will be revised to a 60 percent deployment in the Pacific. That would result in a shift to the Pacific of approximately 20 major combat ships (including one additional carrier battle group), as well as a number of submarines, littoral combat ships, and support units. Such measured changes are geared toward reassuring allies and underlining the country’s defense commitments — while also avoiding openly provoking Beijing.

According to former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, maintaining a stable and long-term military relationship with China on the basis of sustainable and convincing dialogue is the key to regional stability. The objective of US is to improve mutual capabilities for cooperation and prevent any kind of misunderstanding (Panetta 2013: 64). Despite such conciliatory remarks, however, the concrete US positions adopted and actions taken leave little room for doubt on the true purposes of the “pivot to Asia.”

The US has welcomed the recent shifts in Japan’s stance on defense policy (US Department of State 2014). Thus, Japan’s new policies complement the military dimension of the “pivot to Asia” and indeed were probably harmonized bilaterally long before they were actually made public. They are naturally not a response to the establishment of the ECS ADIZ. Already the “Air–Sea Battle Concept” of 2011 outlined the premises for joint operations in the Pacific in cooperation with regional allies (Armitage and Nye 2012: 11, 17; US Department of Defense 2012b, Joint Operational Access Concept). This concept also involves enforcing access to certain sea areas, including those that might be subject to access-denial operations by the PLAN.

Conclusion

The dispute over the ECS ADIZ has highlighted the strategic competition currently existing between China, Japan, and the US in Asia and Pacific region. The core purpose behind the zone’s creation and enforcement has been to demonstrate the newly emerged Chinese military capability to effectively control the high seas and

the superjacent airspace between China and the “first chain of islands” in the context of the PLAN’s anti-access and access denial strategies. The creation of the ECS ADIZ provides a peacetime framework and rationale for such aspirations, as it aims at identifying both civil aviation activities and potentially hostile military movements. By establishing air traffic control routines in international airspace over the high seas, China seeks to gain military experience and to accustom countries in the region to the presence of the PLA in an area that hitherto was the uncontested power domain of Japan and the US. The announcement of the zone’s enforced implementation was a declaration made specifically to support this new Chinese stance.

The establishment of the ECS ADIZ as such does not contravene international law and practices, as long as it does not infringe on the sovereign airspace of other countries, claim sovereignty over the high seas, or implement identification requests in international airspace by means of military coercion. Two elements that feature in the Chinese announcement of this ADIZ — namely the scope of which aircraft are obliged to identify themselves (in other words, those not bound for China as well as those that are) and the enforcement of implementation — are not there by accident. These consciously planned actions help to reveal the real motives behind China’s decision to establish the ECS ADIZ in the first place.

Though overlaps with other ADIZs are not unprecedented, their existence might complicate the regional situation further: while the coming into being of the ECS ADIZ has not altered the legal status of international airspace or in principle a politically agreed status quo (although currently nonexistent), it has changed longstanding civil aviation identification and air defense practices in the region. In this sense, we could say that China has achieved some of its wider goals by establishing the ECS ADIZ. The inclusion of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the ECS ADIZ reflects China’s protracted territorial dispute with Japan, but the zone has as its main purpose neither the desire to resolve this nor is it a pertinent means to enforce sovereignty over such islands. China treats the airspace over the disputed areas as international, and thus contests Japan’s territorial claims without firmly including the islands within China’s own national borders. The islands dispute rather serves as an additional argument to justify a Chinese military presence in the region.

This inherently unstable situation harbors the potential for escalatory developments to unfold in the near future that may go far beyond the question of how parallel civil air control requirements can be best coordinated. The ADIZ dispute rather reflects the conflicting military strategies and the capabilities of the major powers in the region, who are all geared toward denying or enforcing access to the area — with the express objective of exercising command over the high seas and their superjacent airspace. However, although the number of encounters between scrambled interceptors has risen in recent months so far the parties involved have steered away from deliberately instigating military clashes. China has also recently

announced its intention to establish further ADIZs (most probably in the South China Sea); this might only be a question of time. However, the greater complexity of the political situation in the South China Sea will make this action happen rather later than sooner.

For regional harmony to continue the US’ “pivot to Asia” will henceforth have to increase its efforts to promote dialogue and cooperation, and also help maintain the precarious balance between reassuring key allies of defense commitments and preventing them from unilateral escalatory steps driven by nationalist sentiments. The country should not allow itself to be dragged into military conflict in the form of one-sided action in support of a party or parties to a particular territorial dispute. Instead, maintaining stability will require strategic restraint and a careful handling of competing territorial and airspace control claims.

Confidence-building measures could have a stabilizing effect also in regard to ADIZ procedures. They could include practical rules for the interstate coordination of air traffic control and identification measures, with priority given, for example, to: the entry procedures of those countries to which incoming aircraft are ultimately bound; information sharing on routine flights and planned military activities, which would increase transparency and avoid surprises and overreactions; and, establishing better direct communication links between the operational headquarters of all sides involved, which could help to prevent misunderstandings and deescalate any tense situations that arise.¹¹

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11 A positive example has already been given by the adoption of the “Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea” (CUES) at the 14th Western Pacific Naval Symposium held in Qingdao, China in April 2014. It contains regulations on the rights and obligations of warships and aircraft in and over international waters (see MoND 2014).

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