

China's Monroe Doctrine—or Escalation in Asia?

What America's Far East "pivot" and Beijing's new Air Defense Identification Zone mean.

By: John Glaser - December 10, 2013

China's recent move to establish administrative control over the airspace of a disputed island chain in the East China Sea underscores the heightened and costly risks of miscalculation as the U.S. "rebalances" toward the Asia-Pacific.

Late last month China's defense ministry announced that aircraft traveling within the Air Defense Identification Zone or ADIZ would have to inform Beijing of their purpose and flight plans, lest "defensive emergency measures" be initiated.

The U.S. and its Asian allies seemed to be caught off guard by the development.

Secretary of State John Kerry condemned the "unilateral action" as "escalatory." Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel reiterated the U.S.'s concern that this "destabilizing" action "increases the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculations," referring to the possibility of an outbreak of conflict. Hagel then publicly reminded China that America's mutual defense treaty with Japan applies to the disputed Senkaku islands.

Washington's cheeky response was to fly B-52 bombers through the ADIZ without notifying Beijing, a move that could surely be considered "escalatory" rather than "stabilizing". The U.S. then demurred, though it has called on China to rescind its declaration of administrative control over the area.

The Senkaku islands, or what the Chinese call the Diaoyu islands, are a largely uninhabited chain of islets that have been disputed territory for generations. The discovery of significant oil and natural gas deposits beneath the islands in the 1970s only amplified the stakes. In 2012, Japan took provocative unilateral action when it formally purchased and nationalized the islands, sounding off alarms in Beijing, which claims that the islands belong to China. The dispute represents something of an ongoing outlet for nationalist tensions between China and Japan.

The official policy of the U.S. with regard to the islands isn't necessarily coherent. First, U.S. officials maintain that they have no opinion about who the rightful owners are—although Hagel's claim that the mutual defense treaty with Japan includes the islands in dispute quite literally negates that position. Second, the U.S. "stands firmly against any coercive attempts to alter the status quo," as Hagel insisted in June.

“Of course, resorting to coercion and the use of force to change the status quo are defining characteristics of U.S. foreign policy,” retorts Micah Zenko of the Council on Foreign Relations, and “they are widely embraced among pundits and officials.”

China’s maneuver in the days before Thanksgiving was the latest in a series of escalations, but the notion that China’s expansive claims are wholly “destabilizing” neglects America’s own role in aggravating tensions in the Asia Pacific.

China’s increasingly muscular foreign policy stems from its unprecedented economic growth and resurgent geopolitical influence, coinciding with domestic anxieties. Its expanding claims to various land and maritime territories in the region have frequently been likened to America’s own Monroe Doctrine, which declared in 1823 that any attempt by European powers to further colonize the Americas would elicit military intervention by the United States to expel them.

The Monroe Doctrine was actually far more audacious and combative than China’s putative ambitions for the Pacific but the analogy of a booming regional power becoming aware of its own sphere of influence is not without merit.

As renowned international relations theorist and University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer noted at a lecture in March: “The Chinese are going to imitate the United States. They’re going to try to dominate Asia the way we dominated the Western hemisphere, and they’re going to try to push us out.”

Chinese actions criticized by the U.S. as “dangerous” or “escalatory” are in part a response to recent policies carried out by Washington that are interpreted in Beijing as deliberately confrontational.

In the fall of 2011, the Obama administration made a series of public announcements indicating plans to invest more focus and resources into the Asia-Pacific region, with China a clear target.

“China is the only country widely seen as a possible threat to U.S. predominance,” Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell explain in *Foreign Affairs*. “Indeed, China’s rise has led to fears that the country will soon overwhelm its neighbors and one day supplant the United States as a global hegemon.”

What came to be known as the “Asia pivot” is widely understood as an effort to check a rising China by expanding military assets in the region, redoubling bilateral ties with China’s neighboring rivals, and excluding China from increased trade throughout the Pacific.

“The U.S. military is encircling China with a chain of air bases and military ports,” reported John Reed at *Foreign Policy*. Plans for new or expanded military bases are being pursued in the Philippines, Singapore, Australia, Thailand, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia. This is in addition to the approximately 40,000 U.S. troops permanently stationed in Japan, nearly 30,000 in South Korea, 4,500 in Guam, and the fleets of U.S. navy warships that regularly patrol the seas.

America “is the most intrusive outside actor in China’s internal affairs,” Nathan and Scobell explain, “the guarantor of the status quo in Taiwan, the largest naval presence in the East China and South China seas,

the formal or informal military ally of many of China's neighbors, and the primary framer and defender of existing international legal regimes."

Avoiding what Pentagon policymakers call a "peer competitor" has been long-standing U.S. policy. It was reiterated in the 2002 National Security Strategy, which insisted our forces must "be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States."

Similarly, in former Secretary of Defense William Cohen's 1999 annual report to President Clinton, the crucial task was to prevent "the possibility that a regional great power or global peer competitor may emerge." Under the subheading "Additional Security Concerns" was discussion of China and its "potential to assert its military power in Asia."

Ultimately, whether China or Japan holds sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands is inconsequential to the United States. But America's security treaty with Japan obligates America to go to war in Japan's defense.

"History will not be kind to U.S. leaders if a security treaty causes this country to end up in a military confrontation with China over such meager stakes as the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands," writes Ted Galen Carpenter at the Cato Institute, adding that "it is folly to risk such a war merely to back an ally in a murky territorial dispute over some uninhabited rocks."

The ADIZ contretemps illustrates the risks of over-involvement in East Asia, where the U.S. should be disengaging from symbolic territorial disputes in favor of a policy of restraint and strategic engagement. Clearly, more long-range thinking about how to secure American interests while containing nationalist tensions and sustaining regional order is required.