

US response to China's ADIZ biased

By Ted Galen Carpenter (China Daily)

December 23, 2013

Beijing's announcement of a new Air Defense Identification Zone over the East China Sea on Nov 23 has evoked an angry response from the United States and its principal East Asian allies, Japan and the Republic of Korea. On Dec 17, US Secretary of State John Kerry said that Washington will not recognize China's ADIZ.

Some observers might fault the Chinese government for not fully discussing the plan with the affected countries before making the announcement, but the ADIZ itself is certainly not an outrageous measure. It merely requires aircraft transiting the zone to submit their flight plans to the Chinese authorities, maintain radio contact and respond promptly to any radio queries.

Under ordinary circumstances, the establishment of such requirements for the air and oceanic approaches to the Chinese mainland would seem to be unobjectionable. But there were two aspects to the new ADIZ that immediately led to controversy. First, the new zone overlapped with existing zones that Japan and the ROK had enforced years ago. Second, part of the zone included the airspace over China's Diaoyu Islands, which Japan occupies and insists on calling the Senkaku Islands.

The reactions from Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington were immediate and uncompromising, if not belligerent. Japanese and ROK leaders denounced the new zone, and emphasized that neither their civilian nor military aircraft would respect it or comply with any of the requirements. Indeed, the Japanese and ROK governments instructed their countries' airlines to ignore those requirements.

Washington's response regarding civilian aircraft was milder and more sensible. US officials suggested that civilian flights comply with the identification rules for safety reasons. On the other hand, the Barack Obama administration joined its Japanese and ROK allies in a clumsy, insensitive gesture that greatly increased tensions. Just days after the announcement of the ADIZ by China, the US, Japan and the ROK dispatched unannounced military flights through the zone. In Washington's case, the flight consisted of B-52 bombers.

That was a wholly unnecessary, provocative act. The overlapping ADIZs are a sensitive diplomatic issue that cries out for sober dialogue among relevant parties. A grandiose, defiant show of military power does not help matters in the slightest.

The creation of China's ADIZ admittedly puts the US in an awkward position. Japan and the ROK are the US' long-standing allies, and they fully expect it to support their stance on the issue. The Obama administration is reluctant to disappoint them, even though it wants to maintain friendly relations with China.

The minimum that US officials should have done is to urge Washington's allies not to take confrontational steps. Instead, Washington joined them to exacerbate an already tense situation.

US policy regarding China's ADIZ is more than a little hypocritical. Washington insists that it remains neutral on the substance of the dispute over the Diaoyu Islands, but a key objection that Tokyo has expressed about the new ADIZ is that it intrudes into Japanese airspace over the islands. Washington agrees, and has previously stated that the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty covers those islands. That is hardly maintaining a neutral position on the underlying territorial dispute.

The US bias goes further. Japan and the ROK have maintained air identification zones over parts of the East China Sea for many years, without US officials voicing any objection. Indeed, both The Wall Street Journal and Taiwan-based China Post have reported that Japanese authorities have repeatedly warned aircraft, including commercial flights, to comply with Tokyo's identification requirements or risk interception by Japanese fighter planes. On several occasions, such intercepts have actually taken place, creating considerable apprehension among airline pilots. There is no evidence that US officials have ever objected to those practices, despite the obvious danger such intercepts create. They certainly have not expressed public criticism. Yet US leaders denounce a similar Chinese zone as intolerable.

Indeed, Washington's double standard has become even clearer since the ROK government extended its ADIZ on Dec 8 to overlap further with the Chinese zone. To date, the Obama administration has remained silent about that action, apparently not considering it a step that escalates tensions.

US leaders need to adopt a more even-handed policy. Since the various air identification zones include airspace over disputed territories, the potential for nasty incidents is especially high. Instead of being a partisan supporter of Japan and the ROK, the US should endeavor to be an honest broker facilitating a diplomatic compromise.

Decisions need to be made on how to handle flights from all sources that transit the overlapping zones and contested airspace. All parties should endorse procedures that minimize the danger of a tragic incident, and China's desire for a wider application of identification standards is reasonable. Working out the details poses a diplomatic challenge that requires the relevant governments to rein-in their emotions and do what is best for air safety.

And Washington has the opportunity to take the lead in this process and should do so instead of engaging in biased condemnations of one party.