

China 'monitored' US flights over disputed islands in East China Sea

China has said it is aware of two US B-52 bombers, which flew over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, 'in a direct challenge' to China's new air defence zone



A group of disputed islands, Uotsuri island , Minamikojima and Kitakojima, known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China is seen in the East China Sea Photo: REUTERS

By Tom Phillips, Shanghai and Julian Ryall in Tokyo

5:39AM GMT 27 Nov 2013

China's defence ministry has said it had "monitored" and "identified" two US B-52 nuclear bombers that flew through Beijing's controversial new air defence zone on Monday in defiance of the Asian giant.

China's self-declared "Air Defense Identification Zone" (ADIZ), which includes the skies over islands disputed by China and **Japan**, was unveiled on Saturday with Chinese military chiefs vowing to enforce it with "emergency defensive measures".

But on Monday the United States defied Chinese attempts to impose its new rules by flying two unarmed aircraft through the zone without identifying themselves to Chinese authorities as Beijing had demanded.

A Whitehouse spokesman labelled China's move, which has also been condemned by South Korea and Japan, as "unnecessarily inflammatory".

There was limited immediate reaction from the Chinese government on Wednesday after Monday's US flights were reported.

In a brief statement, Geng Yansheng, a military spokesperson said: "The Chinese air force monitored the entire course and identified [the aircraft] in a timely way, ascertaining that they were US aircraft."

"The Chinese side has the ability to effectively manage and control the relevant airspace," the statement added.

But Sun Zhe, the head of the Centre for US-China Relations at Beijing's prestigious Tsinghua University, condemned Monday's flights as an "open provocation from the US" that had been deliberately designed to "embarrass" China's leaders.

"The US' provocation threatens to turn the conflict between China and Japan into a conflict between China and the US," Prof Sun told The Telegraph, predicting that further "provocations" would compel China to "strike back" so as not to appear weak at home or abroad.

Professor Zhang Liangui, from the Communist Party School's International Strategic Studies centre in Beijing, also described the flights as a "provocation to China" but declined to speculate over Beijing's likely response.

"The US and Japan have no reason to criticize China on this matter," he said. "The US really shouldn't get involved."

Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, the Asia-Pacific Director at the US Institute of Peace, said she believed Beijing had "probably miscalculated the level of push-back" from Washington.

"I don't think they were doing it with a view to involving the US," she said, describing "consistent" and long-standing Chinese attempts to assert control over the East China Sea.

Kleine-Ahlbrandt warned that an almost total lack of effective communication channels between Japan and China meant there were now "many different scenarios" in which the ADIZ could cause the simmering dispute to escalate.

"An aerial encounter carries a much higher risk for incident than a maritime skirmish. That is

just the reality. If you are dealing with aerial incursions... mistakes can happen instantaneously.”

“The risk is not of a deliberate full-scale war between China and Japan so much as an incident ranging from miscalculation to a certain actor taking it too far to an accident that is badly handled and how that could spin out of control,” Kleine-Ahlbrandt added.

China and Japan have long been at loggerheads over the islands, referred to as the Senkaku by Tokyo and the Diaoyu by Beijing.

But under Xi Jinping, who has been president since March, Beijing appears to be taking a much tougher line.

“He has consolidated power much more quickly than other leaders and in foreign policy China is more pro-actively pursuing the protection of what they see as their vital interests in the region and beyond the region,” said Kleine-Ahlbrandt.

“So you are seeing a bolder approach to foreign policy than I think many had expected from Xi in his first year which is not only limited to the region but you are seeing it in other places as well from the Middle East to Africa to Myanmar and the like.”

Professor Zhang, from the Party School, admitted the ADIZ had been intended to “emphasise China's stance” over the disputed islands.

Concerns over what some see as China’s increasingly aggressive stance in the region grew further on Tuesday as Beijing’s only aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, was deployed to the South China Sea alongside two missile destroyers and two missile frigates. State media claimed it was on a “scientific and training mission” to the region, where Beijing is also locked in acrimonious territorial disputes.

Meanwhile a US Navy carrier battle group began joining up with a flotilla of Japanese warships off Okinawa in the second significant show of force to China this week.

Just hours after the two B-52 bombers challenged Beijing’s ADIZ, the USS George Washington and its associated battle group was preparing to start exercises with vessels of Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Forces.

The joint manoeuvres - which will simulate a response to a theoretical attack on Japanese territory by an unnamed enemy - will include fighter aircraft, long-range patrol aircraft and

submarines.

"I anticipate there will be some verbal reactions from the Chinese side to these exercises, but not a great deal more than that for now," said Go Ito, a professor of political science at Tokyo's Meiji University.

"The US was very quick to show its support for Japan and China will be far more hesitant to use aggression now that that America has made its position clear," he said.

"Economically and diplomatically, Beijing's relationship with Washington is very important and there are no incentives for China to provoke the US."

The ADIZ has also created tensions in the wider Asia-Pacific region.

China's Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday that it rejected Australia's concerns about the new zone, after Australia called in the Chinese ambassador to ask for an explanation.

"The Australian side's irresponsible remarks about China's air defence identification zone in the East China Sea are completely wrong and China cannot accept them," ministry spokesman Qin Gang said in a statement.

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