

ISAS Brief

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Testing the Air: China's Defence-Move

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The steady procession of Chinese 'pressure tactics' to push its claims on disputed territories is strengthening the hands of new leadership in Beijing. The leadership's assertiveness is evident in recent announcements regarding China's controversial new air defence zone. This initiative suggests that President Xi Jinping supports an 'aggressive Chinese display of force' to assert his country's claims in its territorial disputes. On 23 November 2013, China declared the creation of an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea, which has magnified concerns among neighbours and added apprehensions regarding the Chinese approach towards territorial and maritime disputes. Undoubtedly, such moves from Beijing are fuelling insecurity, and escalating political tensions in the Asia-Pacific region.

An ADIZ is a section of international airspace over which a country declares its right to identify aircraft, in the interest of national security and to protect itself from potential foreign threat. Thus, the Chinese ADIZ over the East China Sea implies that aircraft passing over the disputed islands in that region must inform China in advance of their flight plans. According to a Chinese Defence Ministry spokesperson, this "is a necessary measure taken by China in exercising its self-defence right ... It is not directed against any specific country or target. It does not affect the freedom of over-flight in the related airspace".

In fact, an announcement of ADIZ is not a new phenomenon and is non-threatening in principle. Several countries, including the United States, Japan, and South Korea have such zones. Nevertheless, it is considered a matter of concern because the Chinese ADIZ overlaps

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with others including the Japanese and Korean ADIZ. Indeed, the declaration of ADIZ over contested territory is seen to be the first of its kind, and, therefore, it is a bone of contention.

China's assertiveness and perceived proclivity to unilaterally seek to change the status quo of disputed territories have escalated tensions, impinging upon peace and security in the region. The issue here is: why did China take such a measure? There could be a number of reasons for that.

Amidst increasing domestic challenges and rising nationalism, President Xi Jinping seeks to consolidate his power and strengthen his authority. There are enough 'tensions' within the Communist Party of China, between the party and society, and between the country and its neighbourhood. Mr Xi has a difficult task keeping the party's diverse factions together and interest groups contented. In addition, there is reportedly great discontent among people because of economic disparity and suppressed freedom of expression. A majority of people are said to feel that they do not get their reasonable share because they do not have their fair say. There is a proliferation of a variety of protests in China. So, the Chinese leadership seeks a unifying cause with which to divert the attention of its people.

It is important to note that China has previously employed violence in its territorial disputes with neighbours when it perceived neighbours as attempting to profit from the country's internal difficulties. Further, China has preferred to use violence to prevent a weakening of its position in any dispute or in regional relations and has rarely compromised on territorial issues that have strategic consequences. Hence, this could be a possible way for Mr Xi to reinforce his authority.

Meanwhile, the People's Liberation Army's influence over policy and its traditionally and relatively hard-line policy positions mean that the new leadership's ability to control the military will be a key to these disputes. Chinese President Xi Jinping has solid military experience and credentials, but it is not clear yet if he sees things from the military's point of view, thereby amplifying PLA influence in the policymaking machinery.

Another reason for taking such a step could be China's willingness to establish parity with Japan which has an ADIZ. China feels it has a right to an ADIZ to protect its sovereignty over both its territory as well as its claimed maritime spaces. By doing so, China attempts to underline its keenness to control the disputed islands.

Yet another reason could be about China's immense maritime security challenges vis-a-vis its neighbours and the United States. Many in China are apprehensive of the US security and strategic cooperation in the region. Hence, the announcement of the ADIZ could be an endeavour to test the US resolve in regional security. In response to the Chinese announcement, Washington, Tokyo and Seoul sent military or paramilitary planes into the zone in defiance of Beijing's rules, while the US reiterated its security pact with Japan. While the US has now advised its passenger airlines to follow the rules of the Chinese ADIZ, Japan and Korea have refused to do so.

As of now, there is a mismatch between the Chinese announcements and actions. Chinese PLA Air Force Major General Qiao Liang had stated that any aircraft violating the ADIZ would be shot down by the Chinese military. But China was much more measured and toned-down in its response to such violations. Even so, any ‘provocative action’ by China with regard to its territorial disputes needs attention. The difference between Chinese words and actions makes neighbours apprehensive of its intentions. Beijing’s test-drives in contested waters deserve careful appraisal to prevent miscalculations that could undermine peace, security and prosperity in the region.

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