

Is The Chinese ADIZ Really Over The South China Sea Horizon?

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Declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) by China over the East China Sea (ECS) in November 2013 had raised wide spread speculations that Beijing might follow it up with a similar ADIZ in South China Sea (SCS) too. In less than three years thence, speculations are rife again that China may be preparing to declare an ADIZ in the South China Sea. The US, in response, has categorically asserted that it would not recognize such an ADIZ in the contested waters of South China Sea, if at all Beijing takes such a step.

ADIZ is the airspace over land or water in which the identification, location, and control of civil aircraft is performed by a country in the interest of its national security; they may extend beyond a country's territory to give the country more time to respond to possibly hostile aircraft. The concept of ADIZ, though, is not formally defined in any international treaty, nor is it regulated by any international body. It would be of interest to note that the first ADIZ was established by the US way back in 1950, when it created a joint North American ADIZ together with Canada. The US, however, does not apply its ADIZ procedures to foreign aircraft not intending to enter its airspace and does not recognize the right of a coastal nation to apply its ADIZ procedures to foreign aircraft not intending to enter their national airspace.

Post 9/11 attacks in 2001, wherein, civilian aircraft were used as weapons of destruction, the number of ADIZs increased manifold; the prominent ADIZs currently in vogue being those of Canada, China, Iceland, India, Japan, Pakistan, North Korea, Norway, South Korea, Russia, Sweden, Taiwan, United Kingdom and the United States.

Usually ADIZs are established over undisputed territory and do not overlap with ADIZs of other countries and normally, the restrictions of ADIZs do not apply to foreign aircraft not intending to enter territorial airspace of the concerned country. In case of the East China Sea, the Chinese ADIZ overlaps those of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Also, the zone includes the airspace over the Senkaku Islands, administered by Japan and contested by China (as Diaoyu Islands) and Taiwan (as Diaoyutai Islands). In addition, the ADIZ also covers the airspace over the Ieodo rock, over which South Korea asserts administration and contested by China (as Suyan Rock). Beijing also asserts that aircraft entering the ECS ADIZ must render flight plan identification, radio identification, transponder identification, and logo identification.

The possibility of the ECS ADIZ being replicated in the South China Sea could be assessed primarily on two counts; firstly, has Beijing been successful in implementing the ECS ADIZ so as to replicate the same in the South China Sea and; secondly, the stakes involved in the South China Sea, as compared to those which existed in the East China Sea.

Beijing has faced difficulty in enforcing the ECS ADIZ right since its initiation in 2013. The ADIZ was challenged within days of its origin and military aircraft from the Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and US flew through it, disregarding the ADIZ regulations. It has also been reported that Beijing might have already quietly stopped seeking to actively enforce the ECS ADIZ. The ADIZ thus remains only technically operational with PLA Air Force routinely patrolling the zone, but not undertaking any measures to enforce the promulgated regulations. It is also widely speculated that Beijing, in first place, might not have intended to enforce the ADIZ at all, but rather would have declared it to bolster its own position vis-à-vis Japan and Korea in respect of disputed islands. Even on that front, the ECS ADIZ does not appear to have accrued any tangible gains to China.

The ECS ADIZ is relatively much smaller and closer to the Chinese mainland and Chinese aircraft could be tasked from the mainland for its enforcement. In comparison, the zone that Beijing is supposedly considering implementing in the South China Sea, as is being speculated, would be much larger, presumably

stretching along the coast of Vietnam, Philippines and down to Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, and implementation of such an expansive ADIZ, far away from its mainland would be a huge tasking for China in terms of aircraft, airfields and related logistics.

In addition, the equations that Beijing shares with Tokyo, Seoul and Taipei vis-à-vis its claims in the East China Sea is quite different from those shared with other claimants of the contested areas in the South China Sea. Beijing's hard positioning in South China Sea by implementing an ADIZ over the contested waters would cause even otherwise ambivalent claimants and stakeholders in the region such as Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore and Indonesia inch closer to Washington. Can China afford to get further isolated on the South China Sea issue?

Beijing's 'Nine – Dash Line' claims in the South China Sea have largely been vague as officially it has never clearly defined the geographical coordinates of these claims. ADIZ, on the other hand, would have absolute geographical coordinates, and might logically nearly cover these claims. By declaring such as ADIZ, Beijing would end up giving out the geographical limits of its claims in the South China Sea, thereby abandoning its long held policy of keeping the claims ambiguous.

Chinese ADIZ over the South China Sea, therefore, appears to be more of rhetoric at this juncture. There has not been any announcement from Beijing indicating that it is actually planning to implement an ADIZ in the South China Sea. Mere responses occasionally from the Chinese officials that Beijing, as a sovereign state, is entitled to 'decide as to where and when to set up the ADIZs' have been construed to indicate that there is another ADIZ really on the South China Sea horizon. On the contrary, it might be the case that the US and its allies are propagating the likelihood of an ADIZ in South China Sea to unnerve the usually ambivalent players in the region.

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