

On November 23, 2013, the People’s Republic of China unilaterally declared an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea. The zone encompasses the highly disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, to which Japan also lays claim, and South-Korean claimed Socotra Rock. China’s parameters on the defense zone were explicitly set to require aircraft to identify themselves to the Chinese Air force and await permission to enter.

An ADIZ is a three-dimensional zone surrounding a country’s standard controlled airspace in which all aircraft entering must establish their location and identity through a transponder (a small identification beacon), have a two-way radio and be on an internationally recognized flight plan. The purpose of an ADIZ is to “[facilitate early aircraft identification of all aircraft in the vicinity of US and international airspace boundaries](#)” to respond to a potential threat or hostile aircraft. Maintaining an ADIZ is a standard procedure for many coastal countries whose airspace borders international airspace. While China’s ADIZ is new, [South Korea](#) and [Japan](#) have both maintained them since 1951 and 1969, respectively. What is significant is that China established their zone to overlap with both Japanese and South Korean ADIZs without consulting either government, and the day it was [announced was the day it went into effect](#). Generally, ADIZs are established so they do not overlap disputed territories, but this unilateral action by China did not take this into account and is seen as an attempt by China to throw-off the [balance of power in the region](#).

✘ China has taken their ADIZ to a new level—requiring two-way radio communication in a timely manner with all aircraft passing through the ADIZ, including following all instructions given by the controller, in addition to the transponder and flight plan requirements. This introduces more complicated planning procedures for pilots. While in flight, it increases the workload on the pilot when transitioning through these zones; when ADIZs overlap, this compounds the work on the pilots while they are required to maintain radio communication with multiple agencies. Additionally, ADIZs normally only apply to civil aircraft; [in China’s case, it applies to both civil and military aircraft](#).

The United States Air Force responded to these Chinese territorial claims by sending two allegedly unarmed B52 bombers to fly over the area without informing Beijing. The Chinese Air Force responded in turn by sending fighter jets to patrol the zone. Japan’s main airlines have also continued to [ignore the zone](#). The US has since called for Beijing to suspend the ADIZ, though to no avail. These events were the latest in a series of escalations that have unfolded between Tokyo and Beijing since 2012 over disputed territory of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.

The geopolitical rationale for China’s decision to declare the ADIZ during a visit by American Vice President Joe Biden is somewhat unclear. Such an aggressive move has the

potential to unite countries, with otherwise shaky relations, against China. This would be a counter-productive move at a time when the country has a vested interest in exercising influence in the region via soft power and is certainly at odds with the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) narrative of fostering a "peaceful rise". Asserting control over the region as such has certainly only served to degrade relations between the People's Republic, and its neighbors.

Contradictory as this move may seem, it serves as part of China's long term strategy to exercise influence in the region running counter to the current geopolitical status quo. [The declaration of a ADIZ at this time](#) would likely serve as a means to test the United States during a time with low presidential ratings, the announcement of the resignation of current US Ambassador to China Gary Locke, and with John Kerry's hands tied with the Iran Nuclear deal announcement. Some experts go so far as to claim that the move was intended to bring a wedge between US/Japanese relations.

The Chinese government claims that the [ADIZ is consistent with international law](#), though this is highly debatable considering the method of implementation by the Chinese military and the reactions of the surrounding countries as well as the US.

In February, Japanese [press outlets claimed](#) that, Beijing was considering acting on further territorial claims by launching an additional ADZ in the South China Sea. Beijing subsequently released statements denying the validity of these allegations.

The People's Republic of China currently holds multiple land and maritime territorial disputes with eight surrounding countries. Beijing often justifies its position in such disputes by sighting antiquated maps, using the logic that such territory has historically belonged to China. Though the CCP often claim that China is pursuing a peaceful rise, China is second only to the United States in military expenditure annually, and is [generally seen by foreign policy experts](#) as being a non-status quo country.

War over these islands is highly unlikely however, as China has far more to lose than to gain from a direct conflict. Japan is protected militarily by the United States, who stand as China's largest single country trading partner. So while China takes aggressive geopolitical action in the region to stake its claims, war, at least over this dispute, is an unlikely outcome.