

Ignoring China's ADIZ; Senkakus in the spotlight; A worst-case budget pays off; Too many bases

CHINA GRABS AIR

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Soon after China startled its Pacific neighbors by unilaterally declaring most of the airspace over the East China Sea now under its control, Air Force B-52s delivered Washington's initial response. Just days after the Chinese announcement that it had created an air defense zone over thousands of square miles of international waters, two B-52 bombers flew into the new air defense identification zone without making any of the notifications demanded by China.

The B-52s were forward deployed to Andersen AFB, Guam, for US Pacific Command's ongoing rotational bomber presence mission.

The US State and Defense departments announced US aircraft would continue to operate in the Pacific as they always had. The US will not heed China's insistence that any aircraft wishing to transit the area file flight plans, declare (and display visually) their nationality, squawk with transponders, and stay in radio contact with Chinese controllers or face "defensive emergency measures."

China's Xinhua news agency announced the zone and said it became effective as of Nov. 23.

Since the B-52 flights, further, unspecified flights have been made into the area by US military aircraft daily, Pentagon officials said. Japan and South Korea also sent military aircraft into the zone. The Japanese press said F-15Js had entered the ADIZ and that E-2C airborne warning and control aircraft had been deployed to Naha, Okinawa, near Kadena Air Base.

Xinhua said China detected two US surveillance aircraft and as many as 10 Japanese fighters in the ADIZ in the days after the announcement. While some of these flights were apparently intercepted at a distance by Chinese Su-30 and J-11 fighters, there were no reports of targeting radars being used or shots fired.

BROUHAHA OVER THE SENKAKUS

The Chinese announcement of the ADIZ was met with a swift policy response from Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel. In a terse, same-day statement, Hagel said the US considered the ADIZ declaration "a destabilizing attempt to alter the status quo in the region" and presented an increased "risk of misunderstanding and miscalculations." He pledged, though, that the US would "not in any way change" the way it operates in the region.

The zone encompasses the Senkaku Islands—which China calls the Diaoyu Islands—which are claimed by China, Japan, and Taiwan. Located off the northeastern tip of Taiwan, the eight islands—uninhabited steep rocky pinnacles—sit astride rich fisheries and energy reserves. Held by the US after World War II, the islands were returned to Japanese control in the early 1970s and are now administered by the Japanese prefecture that includes Okinawa, where the US has its largest East Asian base at Kadena.

Though Japan has not permitted any development of the Senkakus, it did buy some land among them last year from a

private owner, a move Chinese state-controlled media railed against.

Japan has not previously acknowledged any dispute over ownership of the islands, but said China was trying to intimidate its way to changing the status quo. South Korean officials also voiced displeasure and said their nation may have to extend its own ADIZ in response.

Hagel's statement was unambiguous about the US position: "We remain steadfast in our commitments to our allies and our partners," he said. The US "reaffirms its long-standing policy that Article V of the US-Japan Mutual Defense Treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands."

In other words, any attempt to seize the islands from Japan would invite a military response from the US.

The State Department said, "Freedom of overflight and other internationally lawful uses of sea and airspace are essential to prosperity, stability, and security in the Pacific," adding that the US remains "deeply concerned" about the situation.

Hagel's message was seemingly a departure from previous signals sent by Washington that it takes no position on the various regional territorial disputes between China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, and some other countries in the region. However, the ADIZ was a challenge to unfettered US ability to operate in the area and demanded a US response.

In early December, Hagel told reporters that the chief US concern isn't with the ADIZ per se—the US, Japan, and Korea all have their own air identification zones off their coasts—but with "how it was done so unilaterally, and so immediately, without any consultation. ... That's not a wise course of action to take for any country."

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, at the same press conference, said the zone is destabilizing because it offers a new wrinkle versus other ADIZs around the world: China wants these notifications even if China is not the intended destination of the aircraft.

FILE UNDER "WHAT?"

Adding to the confusion, while the Japanese government advised its commercial airlines not to comply with the notifications, the US and South Korea told their airlines they should, and United Airlines said it would, in any case, continue its long-standing policy of filing flight plans with China.

Vice President Joe Biden made a long-planned visit to the region in December, with stops in Japan, China, and South Korea. The ADIZ was among the issues he discussed with Chinese President Xi Jinping, but in a post-meeting press appearance, he made no direct comments about it, and there was no indication that Biden had asked China to withdraw the ADIZ. Xi said simply that the region is seeing "profound and complex changes."

Biden met in Tokyo a day before with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, but press reports afterward suggested Abe had not asked Biden to demand Chinese rescission of the ADIZ.

In a later speech to US business executives in Beijing, Biden said he had been "very direct about our firm position and our

expectations” with Xi. Officials traveling with Biden told reporters that it’s now up to China what happens next.

Chinese media with a nationalistic bent urged the government to vigorously enforce the zone, and settle the issue of the Senkakus with force if necessary, while other elements of the Chinese media said unannounced US operations within the ADIZ could be tolerated if they were not provocative.

Two painful incidents from the region inform and haunt the situation. One occurred in September 1983, when a Korean Air Lines 747 was shot down by Soviet fighters after the airliner deviated from its flight plan and overflew Sakhalin Island. All 269 on board, including a US congressman, were killed.

In a 2001 incident, a Chinese J-8II fighter, aggressively shadowing a US Navy EP-3 electronic surveillance airplane, collided with it off the coast of China. The fighter pilot was killed, and the damaged EP-3 landed on China’s Hainan Island. The 24 crew members were seized and held for 11 days before being released, and China shipped the EP-3 home in pieces after dismantling and presumably exploiting it for secrets.

The situation was resolved when the US sent a letter, which it called an “expression of regret,” to China for the pilot’s death. China described it as an “apology.”

DEVOURING THE SEED CORN

If the ongoing budget sequestration continues, the Air Force will not see any new program starts in the next three years. There will be more cuts in end strength and force structure. And in a move that would certainly gain congressional attention, USAF may even be driven to try putting some bases in a legally unprecedented mothball status, acting Air Force Secretary Eric Fanning said in late November.

Fanning offered a candid peek into the details of USAF’s upcoming Fiscal 2015 budget proposal to attendees at an Air Force Association-sponsored Air Force breakfast in November. “It’s going to be very hard to do new starts” out to about Fiscal 2018 because of the continuing sequester—and maybe even if sequester is lifted, he said.

Because of the uncertainty, the Air Force built two budgets for Fiscal 2015. The first assumed sequestration will roll on into Fiscal 2014.

The second budget projects somewhat more money available, based on President Obama’s Fiscal 2014 defense budget request. Congress moved in December to approve something in between, with some small sequester relief.

Fanning said USAF was trying to be realistic and plan for the worst.

“The money just isn’t there” for anything but the programs USAF has identified as its top priorities—the F-35 fighter, KC-46 tanker, and Long-Range Strike Bomber—Fanning explained, and funding these will squeeze out anything new.

Sequester demands “instantaneous” savings that can’t be achieved fast enough by reducing people or cutting force structure, so initially, USAF must also loot its modernization programs—recapitalization accounts, research and development—to pay the sequestration bill.

To keep up with the furious ongoing pace of cuts, force structure and end strength also will be cut as soon as possible, to the tune of 25,000 Air Force personnel and perhaps 500 aircraft. All of this is in addition to reductions already taken over the last few years. Fanning told reporters he thinks the personnel reductions can be largely achieved through voluntary measures and incentives.

Fanning said that classified programs—typically those promising the greatest technological leaps—will take a “relatively proportional reduction” along with everything else.

The other services are in for a rude awakening, he predicted, since they seem to have planned for higher budget amounts. The Army, Navy, and Marine Corps will be scrambling to find sufficient funds if sequester rolls on, he said.

The sequester took 10 percent off the top of all USAF programs, with only personnel compensation accounts exempt. That immunity means acquisition, R&D, and other investment accounts actually will have to cough up more savings, making the procurement cuts deeper than face value.

Even with some sequester relief, USAF would be able to “buy back” some of the capabilities it will have to give up in 2014, but not all of them, because of the cost of implementing the cuts, Fanning noted.

Among the reductions, USAF would have to surrender “up to 24” F-35s—more than a squadron—from the next few years of production, even though it’s a priority program. “When I say ‘protected,’ I don’t mean 100 percent,” he said.

INFRASTRUCTURE INCREASINGLY OFF BASE

Voicing a common USAF leadership theme of the past several years, Fanning pleaded for the authority to close bases, saying that the service in all likelihood has about 20 percent more base structure than it needs. However, the Air Force is actually prohibited by law from studying the problem. Further, Congress has flatly refused to consider any base closures in the next couple of budget cycles.

Because it is wildly inefficient to spread small numbers of airplanes around too many bases, Fanning said USAF is “exploring” what it can legally do to put bases in “warm” or “cold” status. Its authority in this regard is limited, Fanning admitted, saying that even small realignments of people or aircraft can violate laws Congress has made to block such downsizing. Still, the service simply can’t afford to maintain a base at full capability if it has no weapon systems or personnel to put there.

“Cold” basing would be all but “padlocking” the facility, Fanning said, while a “warm” base might continue some functions but without the main mission.

The situation as it stands is the “worst of all possible worlds,” he observed, because a diminished base function means fewer people stationed there, and that would hurt a local economy. At the same time, keeping a base in a semi-closed status means its surrounding community wouldn’t have the chance to repurpose the land and facilities in some economically reinvigorating way.

The situation also torpedoes the work of two commissions trying to find a deliberate and rational way forward for the service through the shrinkage.

The National Commission on the Structure of the Air Force and the internal Total Force Task Force were meant to inform the Fiscal 2016 budget process, Fanning said. However, the instant cuts demanded by sequester means people, force structure, and facilities will be affected right away, long before the two panels finish their work, he pointed out.

Despite the scary news, Fanning said he’s pleased to see the contributions of airpower are being recognized by the other services in budget debates, and they have offered strong support for certain USAF capabilities they can’t do without.

He noted, for example, that Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond T. Odierno argued that while common sense suggests that with fewer ground forces, less strategic airlift is needed to move them, the opposite is true.

“If I have fewer soldiers,” Fanning quoted Odierno as saying in one meeting, “I’ve got to move them around with more agility. I need more Air Force lift.” ■