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Pentagon trying to stop Chinese air defense zone in disputed sea: Gertz

BY BILL GERTZ

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Amid signs China will soon impose an air exclusion zone over the South China Sea, the Pentagon is trying to head off another destabilizing action by Beijing in the increasingly tense region.

Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work last week made clear the United States would not recognize China's imposition of an air defense identification zone over the sea.

"We will not recognize the ADIZ in the South China Sea," Work told the Washington Post.

The deputy defense secretary noted that a similar Chinese strategic move in the nearby East China Sea also remains unrecognized by the United States.

Of plans for the creation of a new ADIZ in the South China Sea, Work said such a declaration "does not have a basis in international law and we've said over and over we will fly, sail and go wherever international law allows."

Pentagon officials said there are troubling indicators the Chinese are planning to impose a new ADIZ in a region where Beijing's military has reclaimed some 3,200 acres of disputed islands and has begun adding missiles – both air defense and recently anti-ship missiles – to Woody Island, in the Paracels chain.



Chinese Su-27 fighters

China has not denied it is considering the new air zone. Government spokesmen have said whether an ADIZ is declared will be based on threats – a not so subtle insinuation that recent US Navy freedom of navigation operations within 12 miles of disputed islands is a rationale behind the air zone

Asked if China will impose an ADIZ, Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman Sr. Col. Yang Yujun, signaled the declaration could be made in the future.

“For the ADIZ in the South China Sea, we have repeated our position on many occasions,” he said Thursday. “What I need to underscore here is that to set up an ADIZ is the right of a sovereign state and we don’t need other countries to make suggestions.”

According to Pentagon officials, if China declares an ADIZ, not only will regional tensions sharply increase but the chance of a military confrontation between US forces – both air and sea – could become more likely.

The language used by the officials is that once imposed, China would demand that all aircraft that transit over the South China Sea would be required to notify Chinese authorities in advance of any flights.

Creeping Chinese hegemony?

Thus, the an ADIZ declaration could signal the next stage of creeping Chinese hegemony in the region, something US Pacific Command commander Adm. Harry Harris has said is part of China’s goal to “change the operational landscape” of the region.

US intelligence agencies are closely monitoring Chinese actions and statements and concluded last month that Beijing is incrementally moving to impose the air zone.

One key indicator, according to US officials, will be whether China perceives its air security over the sea to be impacted negatively by U.S. warplanes and reconnaissance aircraft that regularly patrol what the Pentagon considers unrestricted, international airspace.

Last November two B-52 bombers flew close to the disputed Spratlys islands, despite warnings from Chinese ground controllers to leave the area in what appeared to be a show of force.

Days after the bomber overflight, however, the Pentagon apologized for the aircraft incursion, claiming the bombers went off course by mistake.

The mixed message of asserting freedom to fly anywhere but then claiming the saber-rattling bomber mission was unintended sent a sign that some analysts say shows the United States is not really serious when it asserts that its ships and aircraft will fly or sail anywhere in the sea.

State-run Chinese media, always a clear reflection of Beijing's strategic influence programs, since October have begun steadily stepping up calls for imposing a Chinese ADIZ over South China Sea ADIZ.

The uptick in rhetoric coincided with the Navy's first destroyer exercise of a freedom of navigation operation in the sea after a halt of several years.

Officials said that if the same pattern used in 2013 to impose the East China Sea ADIZ declaration is followed this year, China likely will announce that its air security in the South China Sea is threatened, and then announced ADIZ shortly after.



One key trigger for the move is likely to be the expected ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague in late April or early May in favor of the Philippines' legal challenge to Chinese claims in the sea.

US response to shutdown weighed

Another troubling sign appeared in an official Chinese publication last month. A military researcher, Wang Hongliang, identified as an official at the National Strategic Research Center in Shanghai, published an article outlining how the United States would respond to the shutdown of a US aircraft over the South China Sea.

Wang stated Washington would respond in one of three ways: rapid military retaliation followed with diplomatic and military deterrence; an increase in diplomatic pressure through military deterrence without the use of armed force; and the launching of lightning attacks against Chinese military and strategic targets in the South China Sea and then quickly deescalating to prevent a full-blown war.

The Chinese researcher concluded that since China has not imposed an ADIZ, "the PLA lacks any safe flight regulations in so-called "contested airspace which it can declare to foreign parties."

"If US planes enter this airspace, Beijing will naturally have the right to shoot them down, according to its own understanding of the ownership of the islands," he wrote. "This does not violate international law, though the United States and some [South China Sea] countries will not see things this way. This is actually the greatest risk of an accident happening in the airspace of the SCS."

Harris, the PACOM commander, has made clear that militarily the disputed Chinese military facilities in the South China Sea, currently airfields, HQ-9 air defense missiles and YJ-62 anti-ship cruise missiles, could be easily destroyed by superior US military forces with precision strike capabilities in a conflict. But he said the problem is the incremental way China is moving to take control.

Thus China is seeking to avoid an head-on military confrontation with the United States and instead is using legal, psychological and media warfare to achieve its objective of turning the sea into a Chinese lake.

The provocative article discussing the shoot down of a US military aircraft is clearly is part of China's war of nerves with the United States and its efforts to solidify control over the South China Sea.

Things could come to a head soon. "The Chinese could declare an ADIZ at any time," said one Pentagon official in the know.