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## Playing Chicken in the East China Sea

by Gwynne Dyer

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Since Saturday, when China declared an “Air Defense Identification Zone” (ADIZ) that covers the disputed islands called Senkaku in Japanese and Diaoyu in Chinese, the media have been full of predictions of confrontation and crisis. On that same day Japan scrambled two F-15 fighters to intercept two Chinese aircraft that approached the islands.

“This announcement by the People's Republic of China will not in any way change how the United States conducts military operations in the region,” said US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, and on Tuesday the US Air Force flew two B-52 bombers from Guam into the ADIZ. A Pentagon spokesman said Washington “continued to follow our normal procedures, which include not filing flight plans, not radioing ahead and not registering our frequencies.”

But forcing incoming aircraft to do just that is the whole point of creating an ADIZ. Aircraft entering the zone must provide a flight plan, maintain two-way radio communications and clearly identify their nationality, said the Chinese Defense Ministry, and aircraft that ignore the rules would be subject to “defensive emergency measures.”

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told Japan’s parliament on Monday that the zone “can invite an unexpected occurrence and it is a very dangerous thing as well” – but on Tuesday Tokyo instructed Japan Airlines and All Nippon Airlines (ANA) to simply ignore the zone when flying

through it. It is turning into a game of chicken, and the East China Sea is just about the worst place in the world for that kind of foolishness.

China and Japan have been pursuing an increasingly angry dispute over the ownership of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which are under Japanese administration. They also have a long history of conflict (in which China was generally the victim), and they both have strongly nationalist leaders. Beijing is looking for a diplomatic victory here, not a war, but it is taking a very big gamble.

“The Japanese and US complaints that the ADIZ is a “unilateral” move that changes “the status quo” are inherently false,” wrote the China Daily. “The US did not consult others when it set up and redrew its ADIZs. Japan never got the nod from China when it expanded its ADIZ, which overlaps Chinese territories and exclusive economic zone. Under what obligation is China supposed to seek Japanese and US consent in a matter of self-defense?”

Fair comment, as far as it goes – but it would normally be prudent to discuss the matter with the neighbors before proclaiming an air defence identification zone that overlaps by half with one of theirs. (Japan already has an ADIZ that covers the Senkaku-Diaoyu Islands.) Moreover, ADIZs usually require only aircraft that intend to enter the country’s national airspace to notify the controllers, not all aircraft transiting the ADIZ.

Just how does China intend to enforce its new ADIZ? By shooting down a Japan Airlines 787 and a US Air Force B-52? If not that, then how? National pride and the personal reputation of new President Xi Jinping are both seriously committed to this game now, and if the foreigners ignore the zone China cannot just shrug its shoulders and forget about it.

Which brings us to the key question: did Beijing really game out this move before it decided to set the zone up? Did it set up teams to play the Japanese and the Americans realistically, look at what they might do to challenge the zone, and consider its own counter-moves? That’s what most great powers would do before launching a challenge like this, and maybe China did that too. But maybe it didn’t.

When you put yourself in the shoes of a Chinese navy or air force commander trying to enforce the new ADIZ, you can’t help feeling sorry for him. He can shoot something down, of course, but even his own government would quail at the possible consequences of that. Quite apart from the grave danger of escalation into a full-scale military confrontation with Japan and the United States, the economic damage to China would be huge.

On the other hand, if he doesn’t compel aircraft transiting the zone to accept China’s new rules, both he and his political superiors will be open to the charge of failing to defend national sovereignty. This is a lose/lose situation, and I suspect that the Chinese government and military really didn’t game it through before they proclaimed the ADIZ.

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are not worth a war, or even a single ship or aircraft. They are uninhabited, and their alleged connection with the seabed rights to a natural gas field around 300

km. (200 miles away) is extremely tenuous. This move is a deliberate escalation of an existing dispute, made with the intention of forcing the other side to back down and lose face.

It's quite common in games of chicken to block off your own escape routes from the confrontation, in order to show that you are not bluffing. And in almost all games of chicken, each side underestimates the other's will to risk disaster rather than accept humiliation. This could end quite badly.