



Centre for Air Power Studies

INTERCEPTIONS BY PLAAF: MERE ADVENTURISM OR SHOW OF AIR POWER?

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On August 19, a Chinese PLA Air Force fighter jet intercepted a US Navy reconnaissance aircraft in what US officials have called a “provocative” manoeuvre. Reports suggest that the Chinese fighter jet flew with the US aircraft with a gap of less than ten metres between them and performed few dangerous ‘stunts’¹. This latest incident adds to the list of several similar incidents that have occurred in East and South China Sea involving Chinese air and naval assets. In May, earlier this year, two Chinese jets had intercepted two Japanese reconnaissance aircraft over East China Sea. This was the first time China scrambled fighters to intercept Japanese aircraft over East China Sea since its declaration of ADIZ in November last year. What could be China’s intention behind conducting such close interceptions and enhancing its presence in East and South China Sea airspace?

To explain the Chinese actions in East China and South China Sea airspace, two conflicting theories have emerged. The explanations have naturally come from the US and Japan who appear to be the prime target of these provocative interceptions. US officials maintain that the incidents could have been carried out by one rogue pilot or a group of rogue pilots who are seeking adventures². To emphasise its point, US disclosed reports of three similar incidents that have occurred earlier this year involving Chinese interceptions of US navy aircraft³.

However, the Japanese media experts believe that the frequency of such incidents has increased drastically not just accidentally but there is a deliberate attempt by the Chinese

side behind this. The intention behind carrying out such dangerous manoeuvres could be to demonstrate China's air power and confidence vis-à-vis Japan and the US⁴. Every now and then it scrambles its jets to intercept maritime reconnaissance and surveillance aircraft of Japan in East China Sea and US in South China Sea. China's strategy in both the Sea's airspace appears to be similar. China has increased the air patrolling and reconnaissance mission in both the areas.

Experts have tried to explain the increased patrolling of the claimed airspace as well as international airspace by the Chinese forces in context with the territorial disputes. They say that China's increased air and naval patrolling are its attempt at flexing muscle to push its claim on the contested territories. To understand the Chinese ploy, the interceptions in the China declared ADIZ over East China Sea and the international airspace above South China Sea should be viewed in coherence with China's maritime strategy in these regions. To assert its claims in both the areas, China has now decided to exert its control in the airspace along with the maritime claims that it already maintains. For instance along with the air interceptions, Chinese Navy has also been involved in stand-off on several occasions with Japanese MSDF and Coast Guards as well as US Navy ships. The February 2013 incident where a Chinese ship locked its firing radar on a Japanese coast guard ship is a case in point. In a similar manner, the US has also reported about several incidents involving Chinese and

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US navy ships wherein Chinese ships deliberately tried to obstruct the path and sometimes came too close to its ships in international waters. Incidentally there were reports in 2011 that a Chinese ship had warned an Indian Navy ship to get out of Chinese waters when it was on its way to a Vietnamese port.

Reports in February earlier this year indicated that China is planning on declaring ADIZ over the South China Sea as well but is hesitant due to US presence and support to the ASEAN in the region⁵. Perhaps China has put the declaration on hold for the time being as it is seeking to promote its ties with the Southeast Asian nations in order to isolate Japan and also, it does not wish to antagonise the US any further. If other countries gradually get accustomed to Chinese Air Force fighters patrolling the airspace on a regular basis, China might attempt to declare ADIZ over South China Sea.

These incidents of close and provocative interceptions act as reminder of the April 2001 collision between a Chinese fighter jet and a US reconnaissance plane. The possibility of another such mishap occurring due to Chinese pilot's adventurism cannot be ruled out. China's constant denial about any faults of its pilots in these incidents certainly points to the organisation's tacit approval and support for these risky missions. Chinese MoD stated that the aircraft maintained safe distance. It is possible that the interceptions that are repeatedly occurring under the garb of adventurism could be a well thought out strategy to showcase Chinese air power and also to assert its claim in the region. For China establishing its supremacy is essential for securing its national maritime interests.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

End Notes

¹ "Chinese jet 'flew within 10 metres of US plane'", *South China Morning Post*, accessed on August 23, 2014 at http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1579522/chinese-jet-flew-within-10-metres-us-plane?utm_source=outbrain&utm_medium=outbrain&utm_campaign=OutbrainCampaign-Generic-Desktop

² "Are Chinese Fighter Pilots Going Rogue?", *The Wall Street Journal*, accessed on August 24, 2014 at <http://live.wsj.com/video/are-chinese-fighter-pilots-going-rogue/138B9F85-0AA8-435D-BDC6-D94F88664477.html>

³ “Chinese fighters intercepted U.S. aircraft in three more incidents: report”, *The Japan Times*, accessed on August 26, 2014 at http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/08/26/asia-pacific/chinese-fighters-intercepted-u-s-aircraft-three-incidents-report/#.U_wOnsWSw4V

⁴ “Beijing intercepted U.S. plane to display air power”, *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, accessed on August 25, 2014 at <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0001519095>

⁵ “Beijing hesitant on setting ADIZ in South China Sea”, *The Asahi Shimbun*, accessed on August 26, 2014 at <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/china/AJ201402260057>

