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China's ADIZ over East China Sea: Implications for ASEAN

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Synopsis

China's decision to set up an ADIZ over the East China Sea has attracted strong criticism from major powers in the region but ASEAN's response has been relatively muted. What implications does the ADIZ have for ASEAN?

Commentary

CHINA'S UNILATERAL declaration of an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea has ruffled the feathers of Japan, the United States, South Korea and Australia. They have all criticised or registered their displeasure at the move which is widely viewed as stoking the embers of an unsettled East Asia.

The way in which the ADIZ was declared by Beijing has caused countries in the region to be more uneasy with China. The announcement of the ADIZ was made without any prior consultation with neighbours or the US. This confirms the willingness and capacity of the Chinese to act independently and unilaterally to advance their own interest particularly in their frontyard.

Ominous statement from China?

Southeast Asian analysts were interested to know if China would establish similar ADIZs in the South China Sea. Anticipating their question, a Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman, Yang Yujun, said that "China will establish other Air Defence Identification Zones at the right moment after necessary preparations are completed". Three days after the declaration of the ADIZ, China sent its aircraft carrier the *Liaoning* on a training mission in the South China Sea. It has also not ruled out an ADIZ over the South China Sea as it has done over the Indian-Chinese border. All these seem to indicate that China is on a trajectory towards establishing an ADIZ over the South China Sea.

Notwithstanding these signals ASEAN states seemed surprisingly quiet. The only response from the region after the ADIZ announcement was that Singapore Airlines, Qantas Airways and Thai Airways would oblige with the Chinese directives. Five days after the ADIZ declaration Philippines Foreign Secretary Alberto del Rosario warned that China would seek to control the airspace over South China Sea.

Eventually at the 40th anniversary commemoration of the ASEAN-Japan partnership a joint statement was

issued that only referred indirectly to China's action but did not address the ADIZ issue. It stated that ASEAN and Japan "agreed to enhance cooperation in ensuring the freedom of overflight and civil aviation safety, in accordance with the universally recognised principles of international law".

Potential implications for South East Asia

Why are ASEAN countries slow to react? Firstly, it is likely that ASEAN states are adopting a 'wait and see' approach to assess if the ADIZ would be enforced and if it could be legitimately accepted. The logic among ASEAN members seem to be: Why risk the ire of China and get drawn into the episode unnecessarily when there are bigger, more influential countries willing to 'take the hit' and do the pushing back? Secondly, some ASEAN countries might also perceive the impact of the ADIZ on ASEAN to be minimal – and hence no cause for concern - because the dynamics of the East China Sea disputes are evidently different from the South China Sea. Thirdly, the structure of ASEAN – particularly decision making by consultation and consensus the 'ASEAN Way' - discourages attempts to make quick, concerted responses. Therefore, any collective response is difficult considering the divergent views on China amongst ASEAN countries.

But ASEAN's sluggish reaction could be interpreted by China as a sign of acquiescence which may embolden Beijing even more. Surely, if China can successfully wrest control of the skies through the ADIZ in the East China Sea - where tensions are higher and relationships more strained - there would not be any real obstacles to implementing an ADIZ in the comparatively calmer South China Sea? Moreover, despite the differences between the East China Sea and the South China Sea disputes, parallels in behaviour can certainly be drawn. For example, patterns of aerial and marine incursions into contested territory in the South China Sea regularly mirror those in the East China Sea.

ASEAN's muted reaction also hints at the lack of a broad and coherent response mechanism to deal with and manage extraneous incidents that might have a destabilising effect on ASEAN as it has not (yet) cultivated the required cultural, diplomatic and institutional capacities to collectively deal with the South China Sea issue. Nevertheless it might only be a matter of time before China sets its eyes over the skies of the South China Sea.

What can ASEAN do?

It would be helpful if ASEAN states can make known their concerns, in no uncertain terms, about the ADIZ and seek clarifications, collectively, of Chinese intentions over the South China Sea. This would allow ASEAN to seize the initiative and, potentially, compel an answer from China. If the reply from Beijing is vague or less than positive, at least it would afford ASEAN some leeway in planning to manage such an eventuality. It would serve ASEAN's interest to send a signal that an ADIZ over South China Sea will not be welcomed and that it would be a problem, not only for disputant countries but for the whole of ASEAN.

Next, a response framework should be initiated to deal specifically with external events that might be deemed a threat to regional stability. Although an Emergency Rapid Assessment Team (ERAT) exists within ASEAN, its primary purpose is for disaster and emergency relief operations in ASEAN states - events of a non-disaster nature that do not fall under its purview.

The response framework should be vested with certain limited powers – such as the ability to respond on behalf of ASEAN – to give it some latitude to act in matters that are unravelling and are of significance to ASEAN. This response framework or mechanism, at the very least, would allow ASEAN to react swiftly to sudden and significant extra-ASEAN events without being hamstrung by excessive consultations.

For this to happen, ASEAN will need to look beyond their differences and show genuine political will to unify their stance over the South China Sea. This is easier said than done but it is something which ASEAN will need to confront in the face of increasingly aggressive manoeuvres by the Chinese.

Although dispute settlement mechanisms already exist within ASEAN such as the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation which extra-regional powers such as China, Japan and the US have acceded to, these were initially created with member states in mind and have never been utilised by any party. Moreover, despite the 2002 Declaration of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, it has not been effective in lowering tensions or in getting China to act more benevolently in the South China Sea.

Until ASEAN can start acting collectively, more nimbly and display more solidarity, there is little within the capacity of ASEAN to deter China from trying to dominate the airspace over the South China Sea and beyond.

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