

# China turns up heat in Japan's skies, less so in South Korea

Chinese overflights may be running Japan's pilots ragged, but their outcome could be strengthened Japanese defenses.



A Japan Defense Ministry photo shows one of two Chinese Su-27 fighter jets which flew 'dangerously' close to two Japanese military planes over the East China Sea. Photo: AFP/Defense Ministry via Jiji Press

While the world focuses on Chinese maneuvers in the South China Sea, an under-reported war of nerves is underway in the skies above and around Japan and South Korea.

A recent Rand Corporation report entitled *China's Military Activities in the East China Sea - Implications for Japan's Air Self-Defense Force*, suggests that China's People's Liberation Army Air Force, or PLAAF, is seeking to wear down the Japanese Air Self Defense Force, or JASDF, by subjecting it to high-frequency aerial intrusions into, or adjacent to, Japanese airspace.

But while the PLAAF is also buzzing the air space of the United States' other Northeast Asian ally, South Korea, the number of intrusions there are scarcer, indicating a milder political approach.

It is a standard operation for JASDF pilots to scramble to intercept either Chinese PLAAF aircraft or Russian military surveillance aircraft - whether the aircraft in question actually enters Japanese territory or not.

## Breaking point

Most JASDF intercepts of Chinese planes take place over the disputed Senkaku/Diayou Islands, which are administered by Japan. "Even a minor ramp up in flights per day could strain Japan's ability to respond to the breaking point," a recent Rand report on Chinese air intrusions warns.

Captain Yukiko Bito, Japanese Liaison Officer at the US Naval War College, told

Asia Times that JASDF fighter aircraft scrambled 561 times during the first half of 2018 - exactly the same number experienced in the first half of 2017.

According to an official report presented by Bito, Chinese PLAAF intercepts conducted by JASDF pilots accounted for 61%, or 345, of these missions, while Russian military aircraft accounted for approximately 38%, or 211, of the JASDF intercepts.

Overall, in comparison to 2017, numbers over the same initial six-month span of PLAAF incursions were up by 58 missions, while Russian incursions declined by 56 missions.

Historically, Rand presents 2016 as the peak year for JASDF intercepts, with a total of 1,168 scrambles - the largest number since record-keeping started in 1958. Of these 1,168 scrambles, 73% were in response to approaching Chinese aircraft, the report states.

## **Wear, tear and stress**

China has roughly six times more fighter aircraft than the JASDF: 1,700 fighter aircraft versus 288, according to Rand.

And while the JASDF total certainly includes its 201 F-15J/DJs and four F-35As - Tokyo's latest and most advanced aircraft - it is not clear how many of the JASDF's aging 52 F-4EJs and 92 F-2A/Bs are included. The operational readiness of these older planes is open to question.

With its superiority in the numbers game, the PLAAF dictates the JASDF's flight tempo. In addition to Japanese pilots' fatigue, intense operational activity means more maintenance issues, while overall, intercepts erode the force's time to train for other missions.

"The higher rate of activity has spurred Japan to adjust deployments and increase its acquisitions to keep pace with the growing Chinese presence and defend what Japan views as its airspace," Rand states.

"Although the real-world experience that JASDF pilots are gaining is useful, the increased incursions into Japanese airspace are also negatively impacting pilot training, as pilots are unable to devote this time to the study of other missions."

Some experts are urging Japan to adopt new guidelines.

Retired US Admiral Dennis Blair, chairman and distinguished senior fellow at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, recently commented that Japan's "intercept everything" policies are degrading JASDF readiness. Blair emphasized that unless steps were taken, China would continue to dictate how Japan allocates its defense budget.

Blair recommended that a certain limit should apply to the JASDF's operating budget in terms of what "should be spent on intercept and escort operations and how much should be spent on training for wartime missions." He suggested that a maximum of 10% of the current training budget should be allocated for the hundreds of PLAAF intercept and escort missions now undertaken by the JASDF.

This recommendation is reinforced by the Rand report, which questions the JASDF's ability to sustain a rate of what now amounts to two or three PLAAF intercept missions per day.

"In the long term, Japan's approach to responding to the higher level of Chinese military air activity is not sustainable. Japanese resources are already stressed," Rand stated.

"China's air activities already have spurred Japan to extraordinary measures, such as reorganizing its air defense structures, including establishing new units in all domains, doubling the number of fighters in the sector to respond to Chinese aviators and increasing its defense spending."

## **South Korean skies quieter**

In South Korean airspace, China appears to be exercising a degree of restraint compared to its activities in Japanese clouds.

"The number of actual intercepts are unknown, but it was reported that Chinese aircraft entered the Korea Air Defense Identification Zone around 100 times just in the first half of 2018," said Ryo Hinata-Yamaguchi, a visiting professor at South Korea's Pusan National University.

This less aggressive intrusion rate - compared with the 561 scrambles performed by the JASDF in the same period, albeit, against Russian as well as Chinese

aircraft - may be linked to Beijing's political outreach to Seoul.

"Chinese relations with Japan are adversarial and are unlikely to change much. However, South Korea is more divided in its assessment of China. For some in South Korea, good relations with China are essential, given the economic opportunities and the need to have Beijing's help in dealing with North Korea," said Professor of National Security Affairs Terry Roehrig, who directs Asia-Pacific studies at the US Naval War College.

"For [other South Koreans], there is a growing wariness of China's behavior and a fear that Beijing will have no hesitation to use its economic leverage as a cudgel to pursue its interests at South Korea's expense."

China's tourism boycott and virtual blacklisting of Lotte Group in 2016-2017 following South Korea's deployment of a US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system left a deep mark on the South Korean consciousness. Beijing might now be rethinking its heavy-handed reaction towards its neighbor.

"Chinese leaders believe there may be an opportunity to pull South Korea away from the alliance with the US if they play their cards right," Roehrig said. "Though China sometimes shoots itself in the foot, as it did with its harsh response to THAAD, it has reason to treat South Korea differently than Japan."

Chinese overflights tend to be lower key in South Korea than Japan. "Korean media do report these incidents, but the attention is somewhat minor compared to the bigger domestic or external affairs," said Hinata-Yamaguchi. Seoul "... has frequently communicated their concerns and protests toward the Chinese government, though they are also careful to not upset bilateral ties," he added.

What appears to be missing is cooperation between the Japanese and South Korean air forces. Although Japan and South Korea are both Northeast Asian democracies and US allies, there is no trilateral alliance, as Seoul and Tokyo are constantly at diplomatic odds with one another.

## **Japan ups its spending**

China's intrusions could be spurring upgrades in Japanese defense spending.

Retired Japanese Admiral Tomohisa Takei, former chief of staff of the Japanese

Maritime Self-Defense Force, told Asia Times that Japan was taking the necessary steps to address the Chinese challenge and that the JASDF was entering a phase whereby “so-called outdated fighter aircraft will be replaced by next-generation aircraft.”

Takei credits Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as enabling an increasing defense budget for seven straight years. “This fall, Tokyo will increase its consumption tax from 8% to 10%. And this additional revenue should ensure that as ‘Abenomics’ enters its next phase, the replacement of existing JASDF fighters will proceed as planned under the new Defense Program Guideline,” Takei said.

This includes a massive purchase of F35s.

Although some critics say Japan needs to recruit and train more JASDF fighter pilots and ground support personnel, while retaining experienced troops. Takei disagrees. “The JASDF possesses a sufficient number of pilots who can competently conduct a very high number of intercept and escort flights,” he said.

And just as China’s aggressive response to THAAD backfired in South Korea, PLAAF actions over Japanese skies may add momentum to a possible US and Japan joint development of a fifth or sixth-generation F-22/F-35 hybrid fighter, with Japanese technological input and domestic production.

Meanwhile, Takei questions the viability of China’s plans for the PLAAF in terms of achieving true air superiority via the rapid integration of advanced fighter aircraft.

“The PLAAF’s plans to increase – as well as maintain – what is a growing mix of multi-generation and increasingly sophisticated military aircraft could prove to be far more challenging to implement than Chinese military planners expect,” said Takei.

“The possible result might well be that the PLAAF will have no other option than to revise the timetable, and put the brakes on its ambitious and rapid proposed rollout of advanced fighters.”

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