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China's Recent Worrisome Moves in East Asia: Rising Regional Tensions

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China's unilateral decisions to launch the East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone and Hainan province's new fishing measures in the South China Sea have triggered concerns about the country's intentions in the region. The PRC's more assertive posture is aimed at affirming its sovereignty over disputed islets. They are also a means to highlight China's political clout and test its room to manoeuvre in the region. Both decisions increase mutual apprehension, create risks of an incident, and hinder regional rapprochement. It is high time for the EU to be more present in the region, not only economically but also in the political and security dimensions.

In recent months, China's leaders have given a high profile to security and military issues. Xi Jinping, who is also chief of the Central Military Commission, which commands the People's Liberation Army, seems to be willing to elevate security to the top of the list of state priorities. The decision to establish the National Security Commission, the ongoing modernisation of the military, an intensification of drills, and demonstrations of new equipment are only a few examples vindicating this premise. Recently, two PRC unilateral decisions are being viewed as provocative steps aimed at securing China's maritime sovereignty over disputed areas in its neighbourhood. These are the establishment of the East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone (known as an ADIZ) and Hainan province's new fishing rules in the South China Sea.

The Zone. In late November 2013, China announced the establishment of its first-ever air defence identification zone. Such zones, which are not territorial airspace or a "no-fly zone", but a space beyond a state's territory, are neither regulated nor prohibited under international law. There is a practice of establishing such zones, and about 20 countries (including the U.S., Canada and Iceland) already have them in place, and their rules apply to aircraft heading to the country not just those crossing the zone.

China's decision has raised concerns about Beijing's intentions. The ADIZ is located over a part of the East China Sea and encompasses the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, which are claimed by both China and Japan. The ADIZ overlaps the Japanese ADIZ established by the U.S. and transferred to Japan in 1969 (since 2010, the zone has also included Yonaguni Island near Taiwan), as well as zones established for Korea and Taiwan. The PRC's decision indicates that there are four rules that aircrafts approaching the zone must abide by, even if they are not flying to China. These rules are: each aircraft should provide the Chinese MFA or Civil Aviation Administration with its flight plan, maintain two-way radio contact and timely respond to requests, keep its radar transponder switched on, and clearly make its nationality known. The plane must follow all instructions from the zone's administrative organ. If the aircraft refuses to cooperate or obey instructions given by the administrators, Chinese armed forces may adopt emergency defensive measures.

China claims that the zone was established to protect state sovereignty and land and air security. Notwithstanding this explanation, its ADIZ has met with protests. Japan has lodged the strongest protest, demanding the withdrawal of the PRC's ADIZ, while the U.S. announced that the Chinese zone is an attempt to change the status quo. South Korea, in response to China's move, extended the limit of its ADIZ. Later, the U.S., Japan and Korea dispatched aircraft into China's zone to see how it works.

New Fishing Rules. Apart from the new ADIZ, on 1 January 2014, Hainan province's measures for implementation of China's Fishery Law (a state-level law adopted in 1986, amended in 2000 and 2004) took effect. It promulgates fishing rules in the South China Sea—the region where the PRC has territorial disputes with Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei and

Malaysia over the Spratly and Paracels islands, Scarborough Shoal, and Macclesfield Bank. The measures require foreign fishing vessels to ask China for permission to enter the waters as it views them to be under Hainan's jurisdiction. According to China, this jurisdiction embraces an area of the sea of about 2 million sq. km. and includes the disputed islands. China's Fishery Law states that in case a ship is found to have been fishing without a license obtained legally, vessels will be ordered to leave the waters or be driven out, while its equipment or the ship itself might be confiscated and fined. Due to the unsolved territorial claims and ongoing jurisdictional disputes in the region, China's actions are being questioned by other claimants.

The PRC argues that this decision is in line with international law and that China, as a coastal country, has the right to manage and protect its resources. Therefore, Hainan's decision is only a technical amendment that does not change the status quo. Nevertheless, the U.S. called the decision a "provocative" step, while the Philippines denounced the new rules and called on its fishermen to ignore them.

Reasons. Both decisions raised questions about China's rationale behind these moves. They seem to be the first in the implementation of a decision made at the 3rd Central Committee Plenum (November 2013)—the party meeting focused on a roadmap to reform. The adopted document mentions the need to deepen national defences and adjust China's sea and air defence system.

Supposedly, it is a manifestation of the PRC's growing ascendancy, highlighting China's political and military clout. Xi, who is not entirely convinced to continue Deng's "keep a low profile" strategy, might feel that China's strong economic and military position in the region predestines the PRC to show off its power and go a step further. In that sense, China draws on its sense of *fait accompli*, that is, it makes a unilateral extension of its jurisdiction over disputed areas, then waits for the reactions of its neighbours, especially Japan, Korea, the Philippines and Vietnam, and apparently also the U.S. Therefore, these moves might be seen as testing China's room to manoeuvre in the region.

China's decisions are seen as aimed at the U.S. and its "pivot" to Asia-Pacific. Under Xi, China promotes a "new model of a great power relationship". Concisely, China wants the U.S. to acknowledge the PRC as a great power, having the same status as the U.S. Launching the zone after the APEC and EAS summits in U.S. President Barrack Obama's absence and just before Vice President Joe Biden's visit to China, is an attempt to highlight China's stronger position in the region and undermine the U.S. role in Asia.

The Chinese moves should also be seen as particularly against Japan. Beijing is showing its dissatisfaction with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's policies. The PRC is, in fact, trying to change the status quo of the control of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. Beijing wants Tokyo to admit first that there is a dispute over the islets as a precondition to restoring a high-level dialogue with Japan, suspended after Japan's nationalization of the three islands in September 2012.

China also is attempting to exert pressure on Taiwan to take a clear position on maritime disputes. The island is in an awkward position, taking into account that Taiwan is both one of the islets' claimants and since 2008 has improved relations with China. One China–Taiwan voice on the issue would be PRC's way to move forward with political talks with Taipei—a short-term goal of Xi's Taiwan policy.

Finally, China wants to protect major trade routes, including the transport of raw materials from Australia, Africa and the Middle East. Beijing also aims at extending *de facto* control over abundant fishery grounds and rich gas and oil deposits in the East and South China seas.

Implications and Recommendations. China's decisions, made without consultations with its neighbours or prior notice, create feelings of apprehension about the PRC's aims and increase tensions in East Asia. Apart from political and economic calculations over territorial spats, the region is marked by mutual distrust based in part on a sense of injustice and national humiliation due to unsolved historical issues. All of these factors create a mix that makes tensions difficult to defuse. There is no doubt that tensions will be increasing, and that Asia-Pacific maritime disputes will be high on the agenda in 2014 (there is also the unsolved Japan–Russia row over the Kuril islands).

It remains to be seen how China's decisions will be implemented. It is doubtful if Beijing has the ability or will to fully follow up on its decrees. It seems that the PRC currently is analyzing other countries' reactions and is taking a wait-and-see attitude. The declaration that the PRC would create another ADIZ (probably in the South China Sea) "at the right moment" confirms this premise. But the sense of uncertainty about the Chinese intentions might create a desire in other countries to check the relevance of its recent decisions. Tensions may lead to misconceptions and incidents that might be transformed into military-level vicious circle.

The rising economic interdependence of the EU and Asia means that the increasing tensions in the region have an impact on the EU. The escalation and potential clashes with the U.S. could force Brussels to adopt a clear stance on the issues. In that sense, the EU might become more involved in East Asia maritime disputes. To date, Brussels' laconic statements of concern are not enough. It is high time it become more engaged in the region, and not only economically. A greater presence in the political and security spheres, for example, by enhancing political ties with Asia, developing military exchanges and contacts with Asian states, and the promotion of strong and highly effective OSCE-like multilateral structures for cooperative security in the region, might vindicate the EU's role as a real global power. Also useful for diffusing tensions could be European reconciliation experiences, which are still not well-known or understood in Asia, such as that between Poland and Germany. With the necessary conditions to launch such a process, along with the right mechanisms and tangible solutions, these could serve as potential inspiration for rapprochement in East Asia.