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China just flew long-range bombers deep into the Pacific — and it's sending a message about what its military can do

By Armin Rosen
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A Chinese military H-6 bomber flies between Okinawa prefecture's main island and the smaller Miyako island in southern Japan, out over the Pacific, in this handout photo taken on October 27, 2013, by Japan Air Self-Defense Force and released by the Joint Staff Office of the Defense Ministry of Japan.

The East China Sea is one of the most potentially volatile flash points in East Asia. China, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Japan all have islands in close proximity to one another, while China has made vast territorial claims in the region at its neighbors' potential expense.

Beijing has also tried to demonstrate its military superiority in the East China Sea in ways that appear calculated to unsettle its rivals. On November 27, China carried out an aerial exercise in which two bomber groups flew within a few miles of Japanese airspace before proceeding hundreds of miles deep into the western Pacific, according to IHS Jane's 360.

The bomber groups were traveling within China's extensive Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, which Beijing declared in December 2013.

Aircraft are required to submit flight plans and reply to Chinese identification inquiries within the ADIZ, which does not represent a claim of sovereign airspace. Still, the ADIZ was controversial because of its proximity to disputed islands and natural-gas fields, as well as the totally unilateral nature of the ADIZ's creation.



A map of various Air Defense Identification Zones in East Asia. The ADIZ China declared in the East China Sea in December 2013 is outlined in pink.

According to Jane's, the exercise "affirms" China's ADIZ. And while the ADIZ doesn't reflect any kind of additional territorial or even administrative claim on Beijing's part, the bomber flights nevertheless show how China has succeeded in dictating some of the region's security dynamics.

According to Jane's, "An unusually large ... formation of eight bombers supported by three surveillance and electronic intelligence (ELINT) aircraft" flew over the East China Sea within the ADIZ on November 27.

The eight bombers split into two groups of four bombers west of the Japanese island of Okinawa, which is home to a large US Marine base. One group of bombers then flew over the Miyako Strait, a body of water near the Japanese island of Miyakojima, before proceeding some some 620 miles (1000 KM) into the western Pacific.

The flight path put the aircraft within Japan's own ADIZ, after which the four bombers flew into the general area of what's known in Chinese strategic parlance as the "Second Island Chain": the string of Pacific islands, including the US territories of the Mariana Islands and Guam, beyond the so-called First Island Chain, which consists of Alaska's Aleutian Islands and Japan:



China is seeking enhanced military operability in the "Second Island Chain" as part of a larger geostrategic plan. Beijing believes that the key to its long-term national security is projecting power far beyond its coastline, using blue-water vessels like aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines, long-range aircraft, and even ballistic missiles to establish undisputed maritime superiority throughout its region.

This power projection is intended as a strategic hedge against future instability, and Beijing's policy of "offshore defense" explains China's efforts to establish a naval presence in places like the Indian Ocean — and perhaps even as far away as Djibouti and even the Azores, in the Atlantic.

But within East Asia, "offshore defense" can take on a more confrontational character, through the construction of artificial islands, provocative naval deployments, and military operations that establish just how far from the Chinese mainland Beijing's military is capable of operating.

Peter Dutton, a strategic researcher at the Naval War College's China Maritime Studies Institute, says that operations like the one on November 27 aren't unusual for China, and he stresses that there was no violation of any other country's sovereign airspace during the operation.

At the same time, the operation showed off Chinese capabilities in a way calibrated to advance its strategic objectives and perhaps put its neighbors on alert.

"Really this is something that is becoming more common," Dutton told Business Insider. "It's the kind of exercise that demonstrates that the Chinese are developing the long-range airpower component of their anti-access, area-denial capability."



Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy recruits chant slogans during a parade to mark the end of a semester at a military base of the North Sea Fleet, in Qingdao, Shandong province, December 5, 2013.

China now has an "evolving military capability to project power farther into the western Pacific, and to seek to influence the outcome of events farther away from its shores," Dutton added. Beijing believes that this kind of power projection can prevent China from "having to engage in conflict either in the East China Sea or South China Sea."

It's possible the flight path of the November 27 exercise might have been aimed at reminding Taiwan of China's military capabilities in the run-up to the breakaway island's January elections.

And the aircraft involved in the exercise may be significant as well. According to Jane's, China flew bombers during the exercise that only entered service in in 2011.

According to Jane's, the Xian H6-K has a combat radius of nearly 2,200 miles, and can carry a compliment of wing-mounted cruise missiles — some with an over 1,200-mile range — along with antiship missiles