

## Speaking Softly and Carrying a Big Stick

**I**N LATE September, Gen. Mark A. Welsh III visited China—the first Air Force Chief of Staff to visit the communist nation in 15 years. When he gave his first extensive comments about the trip to the press Nov. 13, Welsh said he and his party were “beneficiaries, I think, of a charm offensive.”

There were a long series of high-level military-to-military meetings between top US and Chinese officials in 2013, and Welsh saw the opportunity for greater communication going forward.

Still, Welsh bluntly said, “I don’t know what their ambitions are.”

Ten days later, the Chinese government abruptly and unexpectedly instituted a new air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over a vast swath of the East China Sea, angering the US, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea in one fell swoop.

Air defense identification zones are not unusual. The United States has them, and they are used internationally as a defensive precaution. Aircraft approaching a nation’s airspace (but still over international waters) are typically required to remain in contact with the destination nation’s air traffic control network so governments know what aircraft plan on entering their airspace.

Although the Chinese government claimed its zone followed international norms, it is problematic for several reasons. The ADIZ was announced the same day it took effect.

The Chinese expect all aircraft traversing the heavily trafficked airspace of the East China Sea to submit flight plans and obey air traffic controllers, even if the aircraft have no intention of approaching China. According to the announcement, aircraft that fail to follow instructions are subject to unspecified “defensive emergency measures.”

The implied threat, of course, is that if aircraft do not comply, China might shoot them down. The ADIZ also overlaps with existing Japanese, Taiwanese, and South Korean air defense identification zones. One problem is that when military aircraft enter an ADIZ, a nation is likely to scramble its own aircraft to intercept the “intruders.” When ADIZs overlap, multiple nations may feel their sovereignty is being challenged.

There has been much talk about how China’s unknown military intentions increase the risk of “miscalculation.” Overlapping air defense zones clearly increase this risk.

China has some history here.

In April 2001, a series of increasingly aggressive aerial intercepts ended when a Chinese J-8 fighter jet collided with a US Navy EP-3 surveillance aircraft over international waters. The Chinese pilot was killed as his aircraft crashed, and the damaged EP-3 was

### **Bombers allow the US to defend its allies without going to war.**

forced to make an emergency landing on China’s Hainan Island. The 24 US crewmembers were held and interrogated by the Chinese government for 11 days.

China’s new ADIZ extends east beyond Taiwan and much of South Korea. In fact, aircraft flying a direct line from Taipei to Tokyo—heading away from China—will be in the ADIZ for a major portion of the trip. The direct path from Seoul to Taipei essentially bisects China’s new zone.

The Chinese carefully drew their zone to include the disputed Senkaku Islands, which are administered by Japan but also claimed by China, which calls them Diaoyu. The move is an attempt to bolster China’s claim to the islands, and may be a precursor to attempts to similarly seize authority in the South China Sea. In a statement, the Chinese government said it will “establish other air defense identification zones at the right moment after necessary preparations are completed.”

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel issued a clear statement the day the zone was announced, saying, “We view this development as a destabilizing attempt to alter the status quo in the region.”

The status quo, in this case, is Japan’s control of the Senkaku Islands. The US takes no position on which nation is the rightful owner of the islands, but recognizes Japanese administration of them.

To stave off any miscalculation on China’s part, Hagel emphasized this point: “The United States reaffirms its long-standing policy that Article V of the US-Japan mutual defense treaty applies to the Senkaku Islands.”

But the US was not limited to words. It carries a “big stick” in the form of its military forces in the Western Pacific, specifically, in this case, B-52 bombers staging out of Andersen Air Force Base on Guam.

Two days after China announced its ADIZ, the US flew two B-52s into the zone on a routine training mission. The bomber crews did not ask China’s permission for the flight, and China wisely did not attempt to stop them.

This was actually the second time in 2013 the US engaged in high-profile bomber diplomacy. Back in March, two B-2 stealth bombers flew a very public mission to South Korea. North Korea was the intended recipient of that message, and the message was received. The DPRK quickly scaled back what had been increasingly bellicose and provocative behavior.

On Nov. 29, two US and 10 Japanese aircraft, including Japanese F-15 fighters, flew through the ADIZ unannounced. China scrambled aircraft in response, but was unable to prevent the offended democracies from proving the impotence of China’s attempt to expand its territorial claims and intimidate its neighbors.

The US will continue to support freedom of navigation in the air and on the high seas, as it should, and the Air Force will continue to fly through the East China Sea without China’s permission.

“These flights are consistent with long-standing and well-known US freedom of navigation policies,” a Pentagon spokesman told Reuters. “The US has and will continue to operate in the area as normal.”

China may technically have the right to establish this zone, but it went about it in the wrong way. Bullying, intimidation, and military surprises are in no one’s best interest. China should immediately find a face-saving way to abandon its new ADIZ.

The US will defend its allies, and with the Air Force in the Pacific it can do so without ever having to go to war. ■