

The Threat of War in the Northern Pacific

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Lines and Portents

The Rising Sun also rises

The present strategic situation in East Asia, and concerns over its potential trajectory, has been linked to the geopolitical dispositions and sentiments in Europe as that continent stumbled into war in August 1914.

While historical analogies contain as many traps and 'false positives' as they do insights, there is a striking and worrying similarity between some specific events and actions that occurred almost a century ago and those now evolving.

On 8 December South Korea's defence ministry announced the expansion of its existing Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) to include leodo, a submerged rock about 150 km south of Marado island and some 280 km east of Shanghai. The declaration of an extension to the existing ADIZ was the first time the zone had been increased since 1951 at the height of the Korean War. Seoul's decision to expand the zone was directly linked to China's decision to declare its own ADIZ in late November as part of Beijing's efforts to pressure Japan over its contested claims to the disputed Senkaku/Daiyo islands.

As a result, on 15 December, when South Korea's defence zone goes 'live,' there will be three overlapping ADIZs covering a small section of the East China Sea - all backed with the implicit threat of force.

The speed with which the establishment of ADIZs by China and South Korea increased an already high level of tension in the region shares characteristics with the mobilization of European armies following the assassination of Austria's Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in late June 1914.

Intricate layers of mistrust and grievances grown and nurtured over centuries, manifested through huge military establishments and massive investments in communications had reached an apogee in 1914. Mass armies equipped with modern weapons, supported by dense skeins of railways and newly developed radio communication, raised the threat of a country being suddenly overwhelmed in the event of war unless robust counter measures were prepared well in advance.

All major European powers relied on military reserves in times of war to supplement relatively small standing armies. This made the question of when or whether to mobilize forces absolutely crucial as it was impossible to conceal the movement of hundreds of thousands of men, horses and transport – or credibly suggest such a great undertaking had any other purpose other than to move troops to a country's frontier, or beyond it. Further, the economic cost of mobilization was immense as it instantly took up millions of men from the land and industry.

As a consequence any move towards mobilization had to be treated as a precursor for conflict, initially by triggering a counter-mobilization – thereby making the likelihood of hostilities more probable. Historians of the First World War, who may agree on little else in terms of the origins of that conflict, accept that mobilization among the Central Powers - Austro-Hungary and Germany - and the Allies - Britain, France and Russia - served as a de facto declaration of war.

The reason was partly technical – any effort to reverse mobilization orders would effectively render a country defenseless as military formations became entangled and carefully constructed supply lines fell apart – as well as political and psychological. Few elected political leaders would survive ordering a halt to mobilization when the decision to call up the reserves had engendered populist and nationalist sentiment. Even fewer would be likely to risk the wrath of a population steeled for conflict only to be told to go back home.

In an age where the physical mobilization of armies has been replaced by rapid reaction formations and air and missile forces capable of near instant attack or response such overt displays of political policy or military intention among major powers are now rare.

China's and South Korea's ADIZs are overtly political and intended as a signal to domestic and external audiences an intention to – literally – draw lines that cannot be crossed, albeit without so far defined consequences. A century ago the very threat of mobilization, perhaps emphasised through some initial moves along a distant frontier, carried a similar message.

The first phase of the ADIZ gambit has been marked by a mixture of challenge and pragmatism. The US decision to send a pair of B-52 bombers through China's declared zone while advising civil aviation to meet Beijing's demands that aircraft obey its instructions combined threat with reconciliation, no doubt creating some confusion among proponents of the zone. Japan, who is at present China's principal target, has ignored the imaginary lines while officially barely noting the zone's existence.

The next phase will be an unlikely reset to the pre-ADIZ status quo, a studious silence by all parties on who is complying and who is not with the self-proclaimed rules, or an 'incident.'

The second and third options are the most credible outcomes – with the likelihood of an event that triggers potentially destabilizing, or even unmanageable, responses by military personnel increasingly strained by the tensions involved in such intricate operations. It would be at this point that the hasty creation of the ADIZs moves beyond a relatively passive signal into the far more complex and 'kinetic' realm of movement and action.

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