

## Vocal rally over China's contentious flight routes

Written by Lai Chung-chiang 賴昌強

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Beijing has unilaterally decided to draw up four new air routes, including the M503 route hugging the median line of the Taiwan Strait. However, the President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) administration was clueless about how to react.

Civil Aeronautics Administration Director-General Lin Tyh-ming (林德福) carelessly said: "Without consensus, the new flight routes are probably not going to be put to use."

This was followed by an unbelievable remark made by Deputy Minister of Transportation and Communications Tseng Dar-jen (曾德全), who said: "Since the flight routes are within Chinese territory, our government cannot rule out that China might begin to use the new flight routes on March 5."

That remark is complete nonsense, and confuses the flight information region (FIR) with airspace. It would be correct to say that the west side of the Taiwan Strait is part of the Shanghai FIR, but an FIR is not the same as "territory" or "airspace." The Taiwan Strait is absolutely not a part of Chinese territory.

The FIR was created by the International Civil Aviation Organization for the purpose of maintaining flight safety and specifies each nation's regions of responsibility for flight management and flight information services. The FIR covers a country's airspace and often also includes its neighboring international waters or even other countries' airspace for special reasons. For example, the Japanese island of Yonaguni is within the Taipei FIR, but that does not make Yonaguni a territory of Taiwan. Tseng's remark severely harms Taiwan's interests, for which he should tender his resignation.

It is not simply that the M503 flight route and the three other routes that China unilaterally drew up will jeopardize flight safety. The point is that they were conceived out of Beijing's regional strategic consideration of gradually adopting more of the Taiwan Strait and turning it into Chinese territorial waters, greatly reducing Taiwan's air defense response time.

Historically, the Taiwan Strait has been a buffer protecting the inhabitants of Taiwan, just as it has been the channel through which the Taiwanese interact with the world. During the 1996

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Taiwan Strait missile crisis, the People's Liberation Army conducted missile tests just off Taiwan's northern and southern coasts. After then-president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) expressed his idea that Taiwan and China have "special state-to-state relations" (特別關係) on July 1999, Chinese military aircraft flew over the Taiwan Strait numerous times, to show the airforce's hand, so to speak.

This time, China has gone even further, unveiling regular flight routes just seven or eight kilometers from the median line of the Taiwan Strait. In future, it could even use protecting its commercial flights as an excuse for dispatching military aircraft to conduct air patrols. Five minutes is all it would take for China's Chengdu J-10 fighter aircraft to reach Taiwan's airspace.

Taiwanese must not remain silent and let the Taiwan Strait slowly become Chinese territorial waters. Taiwanese must not allow the M503 flight route to become the onset of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Silence will be misinterpreted as concurrence.

The Economic Democracy Union (經濟民主連合) civic group will borrow from the Baltic states' "singing revolution" to protest against the Chinese creeping invasion at noon tomorrow at the Taipei branches of China Southern Airlines and Xiamen Airlines, demanding that Beijing and Chinese airlines relinquish the idea of using these controversial air routes. Although a workday, we urge students and workers to take one hour off to join the demonstration.

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Translated by Ethan Zhan

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