

China flight route heightens tensions

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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China has unilaterally created a new flight route, M503, along the Taiwan Strait median line, originally due to come into effect today. Amid rigorous objections by the ruling and opposition parties in Taiwan, and protests by civic groups on Sunday, Taiwan and China reached a consensus to postpone the implementation of the new route, to use it on a trial basis and to maintain communication about progress.

Although the controversy has been set aside for the time being, the situation remains tense and Taiwan must remain vigilant.

In response to the strength of the reaction in Taiwan, Chinese officials initially proposed moving the new route 4 nautical miles (7.4km) west — an idea rejected by Taiwan. China subsequently agreed to move the flight path 6 nautical miles to the west, which the government found acceptable.

However, the opposition still has serious reservations about the route's implications for national security, concerned that after it is implemented, the ability of the air force to protect the nation will be compromised. Even if China is willing to move the line 6 nautical miles to the west, given the speed of flights these days, that distance will be covered in a matter of seconds, and the air force does not have enough tactical space for interception. Should Chinese fighter jets fly along that line, then suddenly fly east, interception time and ability will have been dramatically reduced.

China has said that M503 will only be used by civilian flights, for peaceful uses; that fighter jets will not use the route and planes will only fly in one direction. However, past experience tells us there is cause for alarm.

When China reacted badly to the “special state-to-state relations” (特別關係), it sent fighter jets along civilian air routes and, with the M503 route so close to the Taiwan Strait median line, Beijing's motivation for the new route gives rise for concern.

Perhaps the most worrying aspect of this is how China unilaterally announced the new routes without official cross-strait talks beforehand, demonstrating precious little respect for Taiwan.

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Had Taiwanese authorities not raised concerns, Beijing would have just implemented the route.

Even if China is willing to postpone the route's implementation, or move it 6 nautical miles to the west, these are piecemeal concessions. If Taiwan softens its approach, the new route will encroach on the median line and the nation will have to brace itself for possible future skirmishes in which its security measures might prove inadequate.

The rise of China's military strength is an uncontested fact. In spite of China's insistence that its rise is a peaceful one, neighboring countries — South Korea and Japan to the north and Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia and India to the south — are making preparations to protect themselves. Many of China's actions are clearly targeted and all countries in the region feel intimidated by what it is doing. Neighboring countries are on high alert, with regional tensions gradually being ratcheted up.

China is simply too big and everything it does is being watched. Everything it does, irrespective of its intentions or volition, will make the countries surrounding it anxious.

However, if China wants these countries to rest easy, it could simply achieve this by not doing anything to arouse suspicion. Instead of thrusting its intentions on others, giving them no choice but to accept, it needs to be completely transparent, informing any countries involved in advance.

If it had taken this approach with the new air route, or with recent events in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, the international community would be gradually accepting China as a superpower that can be trusted.

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