



## Centre for Air Power Studies

### US China Aerial Confrontations in the East China Sea

*Gp. Capt. Vivek Kapur*

*Senior Fellow, CAPS*

#### **Introduction**

Reports are circulating in the media about a US maritime patrol P-8A Poseidon aircraft being intercepted by a Chinese fighter in international waters about 135 miles east of Hainan Island. The US claims that the Chinese fighter carried out ‘unsafe and unprofessional’ manoeuvres in very close proximity of the P-8A. The US claims that the Chinese fighter flew very close to the P-8 with 90 degrees bank to show its weapons carriage and then flew with its wingtip a mere 20 feet from that of the P-8A. This was allegedly followed by a roll over the P-8A at a distance of under 45 feet. The US is said to have lodged a diplomatic protest with China over the ‘unsafe and unprofessional’ conduct by the Chinese fighter. China has rejected the US criticism.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Background**

Hainan Island is no stranger to US interest and Sino-US confrontations. Firstly it is important to understand that the US promotes freedom of navigation over international waters and seas as a means of enabling it to use its strength in electronics to keep an eye on the activities of other nations, while stating and maintaining a position that it is not violating any international laws. This is done by operating its aircraft and ships in international areas but close enough to other countries’ borders to be able to snoop deep inside their territory. In this manner the otherwise apparently benign pursuit of “freedom

of navigation” in “international” spaces promoted by the US and widely accepted by other countries around the world assumes a sinister avatar. Such snooping missions enable direct US intervention at later dates through building up and updating a picture of the target country’s assets, their deployment and capabilities.

In recent times China can be seen to be apparently changing its policy from that espoused by Deng Xiaoping exhorting China to “Hide its strength and bide its time”.<sup>2</sup> There is increasing evidence of China now showing its strength and willingly stepping into confrontations with other parties in areas it considers to be under its influence by historical right. Thus we see its ongoing confrontation with Japan over the Senkaku islands, with numerous South East Asian states over its claims over the South China Sea and with Japan and South Korea over its recently declared ADIZ over the East China Sea. Keeping the US out of these areas has apparently been a Chinese priority for some time.

Hainan Island is purported to base important elements of China’s military. Important parts of the Peoples Liberation Army Navy’s (PLAN’s) fleet are located here including an underground submarine base that is exceptionally hardened against enemy attack.<sup>3</sup> Given the proximity of Hainan Island to the disputed regions in the South China Sea further adds to the area’s sensitivity in the Chinese perception. China in the process of growing economically and militarily and willing to take a stand for its perceived rights is apparently becoming less and less tolerant of foreign spying or surveillance, especially by US forces on its military capabilities given that China desires to keep the US away from its vicinity so that it can deny useful information to the US and other forces considered potentially hostile to China.

### **Progression of Incidents and Lessons**

On 01 April 2001 an US EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft operating about 70 nautical miles south east of Hainan Island was intercepted by Chinese fighters. The EP-3s operating in the area were quite accustomed to being intercepted by Chinese aircraft that would usually take close look at the EP-3, show their presence and then depart. On 01 April 2001 two Chinese J-8 fighters joined up on the EP-3 and thereafter one of the J-8s carried out close passed at the EP-3, colliding with the EP-3 on the third close pass. The fighter

involved in the collision thereafter suffered catastrophic damage, lost control and plunged into the sea, the pilot believed to be killed. The EP-3 was forced to land at Hainan Island due to the extensive damage suffered by it. The crew of the EP-3 were eventually returned by China to the US.<sup>4</sup> While the US claimed dangerous, aggressive and unprofessional flying on the part of the Chinese J-8 pilot leading to the accident over international waters; the Chinese side could be assumed to be trying its best through interceptions to make clear that they were not quite enamoured by the EP-3 intelligence gathering missions. As regular interceptions failed to change the US's behaviour the Chinese may have authorised more aggressive interceptions short of use of weapons. Such a scenario may have led to the J-8, EP-3 collision. Subsequently Chinese belligerence can be seen in other incidents also. Chinese government owned ships have been regularly sailing into waters around the Japan administered Senkaku Islands for several months, regularly confronting Japanese Coast Guard ships in the process.<sup>5</sup> Japanese aircraft in the airspace over the Senkaku Islands have been challenged by Chinese aircraft in the same period.<sup>6</sup> While China's first aircraft carrier the Liaoning was undergoing sea trials it was being shadowed by US ships keen to gain a better understanding of the Liaoning's capabilities and vulnerabilities. As the US vessels declined to sail away from the Chinese aircraft carrier, one of the Chinese escort ships is claimed to have cut across the bow of the USS Cowpens at a distance of less than 200 yards. Such a manoeuvre forced the US ship to take evasive action and presumably led the Chinese side to achievement of its aim of keeping prying eyes further away from its assets. This again appeared on examination to be an aggressive action by Chinese forces in a situation where less belligerent means had failed to achieve the objective.<sup>7</sup> In the same region the USS Impeccable on a surveillance mission off the Chinese coast while sailing in international waters was harassed by several Chinese ships. All these incidents clearly bring out an increasing Chinese intolerance to opposition to China's policies in the airspace and waters off its east coast. China is apparently gaining confidence in its own strength and appears more willing than before to use its new found strength to enforce a ban on intelligence gathering activities in its vicinity.

There are two important take aways from these incidents. Firstly, the instigator of the confrontations as per the Western media is China. The Chinese military is accused of “dangerous” and “unprofessional behaviour. There appears to be quite some bias in this reporting. If the US were not indulging in surveillance activities in the area, none of these confrontations may have taken place as in each instance the Chinese action was a reaction to an initial US or Japanese action. The second takeaway is that China s becoming more confident about its economic and military strength and is willing to shed its sheep clothing to show its fangs where it feels that its national interest may be adversely affected. In view of this India could expect to meet a more aggressive PLA along disputed parts of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) that separates India from Tibet.

### Conclusion

The latest confrontation between a Chinese fighter aircraft and an US P-8A east of Hainan Island is the latest in a series of such confrontations between Chinese military forces and US missions carrying out surveillance off the Chinese coast. These indicate a persistent US attempt to maintain updated information on China’s military capability off its eastern sea board. The Chinese side is seen to be becoming increasingly willing to take harsher action in denying information to potential enemies. This could be construed as a progressive Chinese shift away from the old strategy to hide its capability and bide its time. China’s other neighbours, such as India, that have disputes with China, could expect a more

### ARTICLES BY SAME AUTHOR

[COOPERATION IN DEFENCE OFFERS FROM USA: BOON OR BANE](#)

[TECHNOLOGY FOR NATIONAL SECURITY: India’S SPACE CAPABILITIES CONTINUE TO IMPROVE](#)

[SOLAR IMPULSE AND E-FAN: TECHNOLOGY ADVANCES TOWARDS REDUCTION OF GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSION IN AVIATION](#)

[GLONASS FAILURE: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA](#)

[PROGRESS TOWARDS INDIAN SELF SUFFICIENCY IN SATELLITE NAVIGATION TECHNOLOGY](#)

[\*More Articles\*](#)

belligerent response from China and would be well advised to proceed with greater caution.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

---

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Chinese fighter jet 'buzzed' US patrol aircraft over Pacific, Pentagon says”, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/23/chinese-fighter-jey-buzzed-us-patrol-aircraft-pentagon>, accessed on 25 Aug 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Watkins, “Is China Still Following Deng Xiaoping's Axiom, "Hide Your Strength, Bide Your time?“, <http://www.echinacities.com/expat-corner/Is-China-Still-Following-Deng-Xiaopings-Axiom-Hide-Your-Strength-Bide-Your-time>, accessed on 25 Aug 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Harding, “Chinese nuclear submarine base”, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/1917167/Chinese-nuclear-submarine-base.htm>, accessed on 27 Aug 2014.

<sup>4</sup> “Interview, Lt. Shane Osborn”, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/china/interviews/osborn.html>, accessed on 25 Aug, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> “China's coastguard confronts Japanese ships near disputed islands”, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/26/china-coastguard-confronts-japan-disputed-islands>, accessed on 27 Aug 2014.

<sup>6</sup> “China sends warplanes into disputed airspace over East China Sea”, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/28/japan-south-korea-chinese-air-zone-islands>, accessed on 27 Aug 2014.

<sup>7</sup> [Jane Perlez](#), “American and Chinese Navy Ships Nearly Collided in South China Sea”, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/15/world/asia/chinese-and-american-ships-nearly-collide-in-south-china-sea.html>, accessed on 25 Aug 2014.