

Japan Scrambling Jets at Historic Rate to Deter Russian Planes

April 15, 2015



Japan Air Self Defense Force F-2A taxis down the runway.

TOKYO — Japan's air force said Wednesday that jet fighter scrambles have reached a level not seen since the height of the Cold War three decades ago as Russian bombers probe its northern skies and Chinese combat aircraft intrude into its southern air space.

In the year ending March 31, Japanese fighters scrambled 944 times, 16 percent more than the same period the previous year, the country's Self Defense Force said.

That is the second-highest number of encounters ever recorded over the 12-month period since records began in 1958 and only one less than a record 944 scrambles in 1984.

"It represents a sharp increase," an SDF spokesman said at a press briefing. While not a direct measure of Russian and Chinese military activity, the numbers nonetheless point to an increase in operations by Japan's two big neighbors.

While coping with the growing military might of a more assertive China, which is increasing

defense outlays by more than 10 percent a year, Japan is also contending with a military resurgence of a Cold War foe that has gathered pace since Moscow annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine last year.

Japan too is upping defense spending, albeit by a smaller margin, to buy new equipment, including longer-range patrol aircraft, cargo jets, helicopter carriers and troop-carrying Boeing V-22 Ospreys and Lockheed Martin F-35 stealth fighters.

A non-fiscal boost to military capability will also come from plans by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to loosen constitutional constraints on his nation's defense forces that will allow them to operate more freely overseas and to deepen cooperation with U.S. forces.

Russian bombers and patrol planes often enter Japan's air space close to Japan's northern Hokkaido island and close to four smaller islands that are claimed both by Japan and Russia.

That territorial dispute has prevented Japan and Russia from concluding a formal peace treaty. The Russian aircraft commonly fly circuitous routes around the Japanese archipelago.

Chinese fighter incursions are concentrated in the East China Sea, close to disputed uninhabited islets near Taiwan that Tokyo claims as the Senkaku islands and Beijing dubs the Diaoyu islands.

In the past year, an increased number of Chinese planes have flown through Japanese air space into the Western Pacific, the SDF spokesman said.

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