Intercepts & Shoot Downs:

an international policy overview

An intercept training excercise near the Falkland Islands in 2005 (Credit: Air Atlanta Icelandic)

For many years, well pre-dating 9/11, it has been the standard procedure in many countries to scramble fighter jets to trail and intercept aircraft suspected of having been hijacked. Post-9/11, in an era in which the use of a commercial airliner as a weapon of mass destruction is a distinct possibility, governments have been forced to consider the unthinkable – shooting down an aircraft, killing innocent passengers in the process, in an attempt to prevent greater loss of life should those at the controls be intent on targeting a city centre or critical infrastructure installation. **Anna Costin** *reviews some of the outcomes of the deliberations.*

When discussing interception and shoot down policies, it is important to understand that these are not interchangeable terms; they are two distinct courses of military intervention.

Interception refers to such measures as investigating why an aircraft is not responding to air traffic control, not identifying itself and/or is off course; identifying flight deck activity to ascertain whether a hijack is actually in progress or whether some other incident has occurred (as undertaken by the Greek air force in 2005 when the crew and passengers of a Cypriot Helios plane had all succumbed to oxygen deprivation after a fall in cabin pressure leading to unconsciousness and its eventual crash) and attempting a rescue if possible; forcing an aircraft onto a particular course; and forcing it to land at the nearest suitable point. In the US in the year leading up to 9/11,

67 routine interceptions of suspected hijacked craft took place, all of which were purely investigatory and found that none had actually been hijacked.

The focus of this article is on policies and criteria for shooting down hijacked or suspected hijacked civilian airliners believed to have hostile intent i.e. as in 9/11, where they are to be used as a weapon and killing all those on board in so doing. Shoot downs can be brought about either by fighter jets

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