



Dealing with the Ehime Maru Tragedy

by Ralph A. Cossa

Honolulu: Did prospects for improved U.S.-Japan relations sink with the Ehime Maru off Waikiki last week? Probably not, but the reaction to what all agree was a tragic accident demonstrates the fragility of the alliance and the growing need for the more sensitive "American leadership without arrogance" promised by President Bush upon his inauguration.

While the U.S.-Japan relationship got off to a positive start -- one of President Bush's first calls upon assuming the presidency was to Prime Minister Mori, who is expected to be one of Bush's first overseas visitors, probably early next month -- it did not take long for a dose of reality to burst the bubble of euphoria over the declared end of "Japan passing."

The first blow came from the leaked (but nonetheless inexcusable) e-mail to the troops from the commander of Okinawa-based Marines, Lt. Gen. Earl Hailston, referring to his hosts as "wimps" and "nuts." This has since been compounded by what is viewed as a lack of responsiveness by General Hailston in turning over into Japanese custody a U.S. Marine accused of arson. But it is the collision of the U.S. nuclear submarine Greenville with the Japanese training ship, which resulted in nine students and fishermen missing and presumed dead, that has most fully captured the news and revealed the increasingly tarnished image of the U.S. military among the Japanese populace.

In reality, the U.S., in most respects, seems to have responded appropriately in the wake of the accident. The sub remained on the scene, directing U.S. Coast Guard ships and helicopters to the accident site. The Navy immediately launched its own investigation and relieved the captain of his command, even as National Transportation Safety Board investigators -- highly-respected for their comprehensive, objective analysis of accidents -- rushed to Honolulu. A Navy search vessel is also exploring the wreckage and attempting to account for the missing. President Bush, Secretary of State Powell, and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld have also all made personal calls to their counterparts expressing America's sincere apology and deep regret and promising a thorough investigation.

But, the Japanese public and media seem to be growing increasingly critical, fed as much by rumors and innuendo as by the facts at hand. Prime Minister Mori's failure to cut short his golf game, underway when he first received news of the tragedy, has helped further politicize coverage of the event (and disproved the theory that Mori's popularity rating could not possibly get any lower).

Most disconcerting was the U.S. Navy's delayed announcement that civilian guests aboard the ship were seated at control stations (albeit under close and constant supervision) during the sub's surfacing. The delay in revealing this fact has helped prompt accusations of a cover-up, while casting doubt on the Navy's (apparently accurate) assertion that civilian actions in no way contributed to the accident. The fact that the surfaced submarine did not attempt to rescue survivors -- an action which would have likely caused many who at the time were safe and secure in rubber rafts to be placed at extreme risk, given that submarines (specially in choppy seas) are ill-suited for rescue operations -- has been inaccurately portrayed by some as evidence of callousness, further fanning the flames.

If the long-term impact of this tragic accident is to be minimized, U.S. authorities must be as forthcoming as possible in revealing the facts of the accident as they unfold. The U.S. Navy, consistent with security constraints, must be equally forthcoming in explaining submarine operations in fine (but understandable) detail -- in this regard, the Navy's actions (and the media's reporting) have been commendable thus far but more is needed, perhaps including simulator demonstrations. Every effort must also be made to recover any remains that may be discovered on board the sunken ship.

The Navy's continued refusal to identify the civilians on board -- aimed at protecting their privacy and avoiding a media feeding frenzy -- should be reconsidered and more of the civilians involved should be encouraged to voluntarily identify themselves. More details surrounding how and why this particular group was chosen and allowed to sit at the controls are also needed. Also required is more information on the procedures that should be followed to determine if the surface was clear, along with an explanation as to why the Ehime Maru was not detected. Disciplinary action against any (on board or in the chain of command on shore) whose actions are determined to be negligent should be fair but appropriately severe, given the extent of the tragedy.

Commanders on the ground in Japan, General Hailston most specifically included, must be more sensitive to public attitudes and more forthcoming in response to Japanese requests in instances like the current arson case. (A decision by Hailston to seek early retirement would not be inappropriate, given the damage his thoughtless remarks have caused.)

Finally, while President Bush has already demonstrated great sensitivity, a call for a moment of silence during his upcoming State of the Union address in memory of those lost during the tragic accident would send another clear signal not only of America's deep regret but also of Bush's commitment to strengthen "America's most important bilateral relationship, bar none."

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