



R-E-S-P-E-C-T!

by Ralph A. Cossa

The collision between a Chinese Air Force fighter and an American reconnaissance aircraft in international airspace over the South China Sea represents an unfortunate, unplanned, but nonetheless important test of the maturity of the Sino-U.S. relationship and of the Chinese leadership as well. Thus far, Beijing appears to be flunking the test.

While more information will no doubt further explain what actually happened, the most credible explanation to date is that the collision -- which clearly occurred in international airspace while the American plane was on a routine, unarmed mission -- was most likely caused by overzealousness on the part of the Chinese interceptor pilot. Chinese jets routinely conduct intercept training against these convenient American "targets" but have reportedly been more aggressive, if not reckless, in conducting these missions in recent months. The rules of the road call for the faster, more maneuverable Chinese F-8 jet to yield to the slower, less maneuverable, larger EP3E propeller-driven 737-sized aircraft. This, plus the U.S. tendency to actually admit when it is at fault in an accident -- witness Washington's response to the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in May 1999 and the more recent tragic collision between a U.S. submarine and a Japanese fisherman training ship -- would seem to give the benefit of the doubt to the U.S., pending more details becoming available.

The Chinese immediate handling of the incident -- to publicly blame the U.S. even before the facts were known and to protest the U.S. spy plane's "violation" of Chinese airspace (by flying to Hainan Island and landing without diplomatic pre-clearance, despite the obvious emergency nature of the "mayday" divert) -- was reminiscent of Beijing's handling of the aftermath of the Belgrade bombing, which China's leadership immediately branded as a deliberate act. It seems that Beijing's automatic reaction to any mishap is to immediately incite rather than mollify anti-American sentiments. This seems counterproductive to Beijing's stated desire to develop improved relations with Washington. Having portrayed the incident in a way that generated the type of protests (thus far peaceful) already occurring in Chinese streets, Beijing can now point to this public reaction to justify a more hardline approach toward the U.S. in dealing with the aftermath of the incident.

Equally disturbing was Chinese refusal to grant American diplomats immediate access to the crew or to the plane, which is loaded with sensitive surveillance equipment (although much of it was no doubt destroyed or rendered inoperable by the crew as it diverted to the closest, in this case, Chinese airfield). It will be interesting to see if China -- the self-proclaimed defender of national sovereign rights -- will treat the plane as the piece of American sovereign territory that it is, or (as already rumored)

board the plane and attempt to exploit the sensitive equipment on board. How China behaves will be an indicator of just how important maintaining good relations with Washington really are.

China has long accused the U.S. of harboring a "cold war mentality." But it is China today that is demonstrating such a mindset in the way it has reacted to this tragic accident, which resulted in the Chinese fighter's crash into the sea and apparent death of its pilot. In President Bush's recent meeting in Washington with Chinese Vice Premier Qian Qichen, Bush pledged to treat the Chinese leadership with respect. But respect must work both ways. The longer it takes for American diplomats to meet with the crew members and the longer their release is delayed, the more one must conclude that Qian's pledge to cooperate with Washington was an empty promise.

Statements by Chinese President Jiang Zemin, Qian Qichen, and others since Bush's inauguration have also sent mixed signals as to whether China plans to follow a more cooperative or more confrontational approach in its own future dealings with the U.S. Attempts by China to unnecessarily detain or seize the EP3E will lay this question to rest and will no doubt be played back in kind by Washington. As U.S. Ambassador to Beijing Joseph Prueher noted, "the downside potential if we do not resolve this well is fairly high because it can bleed over into some other areas."

However, press speculation to the contrary, this incident is not likely to play a large role in the Bush administration's final decision regarding future arms sales to Taiwan, although continued Chinese heavy-handedness will certainly result in more calls for increased arms sales by Taiwan supporters, and any attempt by Beijing to trade the crew or aircraft's release for a reduction in arms sales is sure to backfire. The U.S. decision to keep three destroyers in the South China Sea during this period of increased tension is likewise primarily symbolic and not a signal of an impending military showdown.

Nonetheless, poor handling of this incident by either side can result in a serious setback in the broader relationship and would magnify the impact of other decisions. Instead of merely asserting that the other is to blame, both sides should agree to cooperate in a full inquiry into the accident, aimed first and foremost at ensuring that this type of tragedy does not occur again in the future. The Chinese government also needs to ensure that a full, fair, and objective account of what actually happened reaches the Chinese people.

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