



U.S.-China Relations: The Crew's Home; Now What?

by Ralph A. Cossa

The release of the crew of the American EP3E reconnaissance plane from Chinese "protective custody" may have removed the atmosphere of crisis but hardly represents the end of this affair. Meetings are now underway (as of 18 April) between U.S. and Chinese officials to deal with the aftereffects. While both sides agree that much remains to be resolved, each sees the problem differently.

From a U.S. perspective, issue number one is the return of the EP3E and its sophisticated intelligence collection hardware, followed closely by Chinese agreement to abide by the "rules of the road" regarding intercept procedures against reconnaissance aircraft operating over international waters, to reduce the prospects of future incidents. Even before the accident, the U.S. had been complaining about increasingly aggressive Chinese intercept techniques (which appear to be the most probably direct cause of the April 1 mid-air collision). The U.S. would no doubt also like to reach some agreement with China over the cause of the accident but this appears impossible, given that Beijing has already anointed its ill-fated pilot, Wang Wei, as a "revolutionary martyr." As a result, the prospect of acknowledging that its pilot was even partially, much less principally, to blame seems remote. Meanwhile, unless Beijing can release convincing evidence to the contrary, there is no reason not to believe the American pilot's version of the story, which has the Chinese F-8 accidentally colliding with the EP3E during its third close pass by the American plane, as the EP3E was flying straight and level on autopilot. Even if the U.S. Navy plane had been making a turn, as the Chinese allege, this should not have been a problem unless the Chinese pilot was flying too close and behaving too aggressively.

China, who appear in no rush to return the damaged American aircraft, also have a much simpler and more direct solution to avoid future incidents -- it is demanding a complete halt to all American intelligence collection flights against China (even though many other nations, including China, conduct similar missions). The U.S. is not likely to give up these routine surveillance missions, however, given the lack of military transparency that exists today in China. This does not mean that a review of this U.S. practice is not in order, however. If it is true, as reported by various media sources, that the U.S. now flies more than 400 reconnaissance missions a year around China -- an average of over one per day -- one should logically ask "why?"

I spent enough time in and around the intelligence community during my 26 years of military duty to understand the value of these type of missions. My experience also causes me to question why so many flights are needed during peacetime, especially given the availability of less intrusive collection methods. In addition to being unnecessarily provocative, an excessive number of missions appears neither cost-effective nor

necessary. Chinese demands that such missions cease completely may provide more incentive for them to continue, but should not preclude a serious assessment as to the wisdom and operational necessity of quite so many flights.

Then there is the question of prior notification, a procedure normally frowned upon by the U.S. military, both for operational security reasons and out of fear that it could represent the first step down the slippery slope toward "prior approval," a very different and (rightfully) unacceptable precondition. The fact that a country has a right to fly surveillance missions in international waters adjacent to another country without prior notification does not preclude them from providing such notification as a military confidence building measure, however. Recently, Beijing and Tokyo reached such an agreement pertaining to naval activity in disputed waters in and around one another's exclusive economic zones (EEZs). This could provide a useful model for Washington and Beijing to study, although such an agreement should apply to Chinese as well as American reconnaissance activities and should be part of a larger agreement which includes the return of the American plane and a halt to dangerous tactics on the part of the Chinese fighter pilots. Developing a multilateral prior notification regime for surface and air reconnaissance missions, as well as for military exercises and other types of events, is a suitable task for the ASEAN Regional Forum to consider as well.

As was the case during the accidental U.S. bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999, Beijing has also used this incident to drum up anti-American sentiment. The U.S., in its own handling of this incident, must avoid playing into this Chinese game. Beijing's leaders are rightfully concerned about their own diminished mandate and about the growing fascination among the younger generations in China for the Western (and particularly American) values, culture, and ideas permeating China via the Internet and through other means. Highlighting instances of American arrogance or callousness toward the feelings of the Chinese people is a time-honored Chinese method of dealing with this phenomena.

This brings me to the drive by several members of Congress to work against China's bid to host the 2008 Olympics, a drive already underway before the incident but which has been further fueled by it. While there are 100 good reasons why China did not get the nod for the 2000 games, ask anyone in China why and the odds are they will tell you that "America blocked China's bid." The amount of ill-will generated by the previous Congressional resolution to support Sydney over Beijing is impossible to measure but still readily apparent. It is simply not in America's long-term interest to alienate the next generation in China through "feel good" legislation that has little, if any, practical impact. In fact, given the low regard that most in the international community hold for the U.S. Congress -- a degree of disdain that inexplicably appears to be a source of pride to some in the Congress -- such resolutions are likely to gain China more votes than it costs. But, such actions still feed anti-American sentiment

among the general population in China (and elsewhere) that would be generally disposed to work with, if not emulate America, absent such counterproductive measures.

As the follow-on discussions proceed, both sides need to stop playing the blame game and focus on how to avoid such incidents in the future. Washington, which always keeps a watchful eye on American public opinion, also needs to avoid feeding the flames of anti-Americanism in China, if it hopes to have a more stable relationship with the next generation of Chinese leaders.

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