



## **Can Sino-U.S. Relations be Salvaged?**

By Ralph A. Cossa

The accidental U.S. cruise missile attack against the PRC embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia will have long-term negative consequences for Sino-U.S. relations, especially if both sides continue to mishandle the tragic affair. Ten days of talking with Chinese scholars, students, officials, and ordinary citizens in Shanghai, Nanjing, and Beijing have convinced me that their shared sense of frustration, confusion, suspicion, and anger toward the U.S. is genuine. The Chinese government seems more intent on exploiting these feelings than on addressing them, however, and the U.S. seems more focused on Chinese reaction to the incident than on providing a full accounting of the tragedy.

It is true that the Chinese government orchestrated the demonstrations that followed the missile attack, demonstrations that resulted in considerable damage and a virtual state of siege at the American embassy in Beijing. The American Consul General's residence in Chengdu was burned.

But even if the demonstrations could not have occurred without official blessing, they were not contrived; the outpouring of anger was, by most accounts, real. Were Chinese citizens allowed the same freedom of assembly and protest that students in many other Asian countries enjoy, my guess is the damage in Beijing would have been considerably worse. Despite disturbing images of Chinese police standing idly by as protesters hurled rocks (or worse), Chinese authorities in most instances drew clear lines as to just how far the protesters could go and called things to a halt long before the genuine anger and frustration had subsided.

(At Fudan University in Shanghai, for example, students boarded buses for a planned protest at the American Consulate. But while selected demonstrators were brought to what proved to be a quiet, orderly protest, others were merely driven around the city and then deposited back on campus, an action that so infuriated the students that they attacked one of their professors and refused to get off the bus until the next morning. At that time, they tried to organize a march on the Consulate but finally gave up after several miles of walking tempered their enthusiasm.)

Again, one can assert with some accuracy that biased Chinese official accounts of both the embassy attack and the broader air war in Serbia played a major role in generating the Chinese peoples' anger. Reporting about Serbs driving almost a million Muslim Kosovars from their homes and villages has been denied to Chinese. But even among students and professors who were getting their updates from CNN and the world wide web — friends I have previously considered to be extremely open-minded if not pro-American — a sense of anger and frustration prevailed.

To them, the embassy attack was not an isolated incident, it was the straw that broke the camel's back. It came after months of American accusations regarding Chinese spying (based on assessments by the same U.S. intelligence analysts who could not identify the Chinese embassy), and after Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji came home embarrassed and empty-handed from Washington despite making politically-risky, significant concessions in order to open the door for Chinese membership in the WTO — which forward-thinking Chinese realize is essential to sustain the momentum for economic reform.

Most importantly, it came after China was "thoroughly humiliated" by Washington, not only by dismissing Beijing's complaints against NATO actions and lack of UN involvement or approval, but most specifically by the "U.S.-led NATO" decision to commence the bombing while Chinese President Jiang Zemin was in Europe. As far fetched as this notion may seem to Americans, it was seen in China as a deliberate insult. Jiang was reportedly so furious about this personal affront that he almost canceled Zhu's visit to the U.S.

The Chinese government had been ritualistically complaining about America's post-Cold War "interventionist" tendencies, but deep down inside did not believe that the U.S. would directly challenge China. Only small, weak, relatively defenseless (i.e., non-nuclear) states were at risk. The embassy attack, accidental or not, further personalized this issue in a way no Chinese could ignore. The perceived U.S. lack of remorse further exacerbated the affront.

As one with first hand knowledge of how the American government and intelligence community operate, I have always argued that one should never attribute to deviousness that which can be more simply explained by mere incompetence or stupidity. However, the Chinese have considerably more faith in American technological prowess and capability than do I. "How can an organization that could find terrorist camps in the middle of nowhere in Afghanistan not be able to identify the distinctive Chinese embassy in Belgrade?" they continue to ask.

Even among scholars who had studied (and in some cases taught) in the U.S., there was a belief that this was a "planned accident." Not by the Clinton Administration, most hastened to add, but by "rogue elements" in the CIA or U.S. military out to embarrass both the Administration and China and to further damage already strained Sino-U.S. relations. "How could anyone be so sure that the same CIA that assassinated President Kennedy would not also conspire to launch missiles at the Chinese embassy?" one Chinese professor opined (he had seen the movie). Once American conspiracy theorists start delving into this incident, things will only get worse; another reason for a comprehensive U.S. accounting now.

(Convincing Chinese conspiracy theorists that their logic is faulty is no easier than reasoning with their American

counterparts. This was especially true after one Chinese newspaper reported that an American presidential candidate had also announced that the attack was deliberate. The candidate: Lyndon Larouche, a perennial third party candidate with a dubious history who has never received above one percent of the popular vote.)

None of this excuses the Chinese decision to stand by and let the demonstrators trash the U.S. embassy. Through their inability/lack of desire to fully control the crowds and their totally biased reporting of the event and the Kosovo conflict in general, Beijing has managed to turn what should have been wide-spread American sympathy into even greater U.S. anger and intolerance toward China.

But those in the U.S. who are now treating the whole incident as a "contrived" Chinese affront to America need to remember that U.S. actions precipitated this crisis and that our weak initial statement of regret (which included the standard "don't blame us, blame Milosevic" retort) has caused hurt feelings even among those current and future leaders who want to be our friends. The delay in President Clinton's issuance of a sincere, personal apology (vice regret) has been as inexcusable to the Chinese as their delay in subsequently reporting that apology to their public has been to the U.S. The absence of any U.S. talk of reparations or compensation — no doubt to avoid messy precedents that could open the door for countless other claims — is to China further evidence of America's dismissive, condescending attitude.

Many young students and scholars that I talked with wanted very much to believe that the attack was an accident but argued that the longer the U.S. waits in providing a full accounting of exactly what happened \* it's been over two weeks and still counting \* the more it becomes apparent that it must have been done on purpose. The country that many had hailed as a bastion of democracy is now being viewed as a rogue superpower, an uncaring bully that places high value on American lives but casually dismisses its own killing of innocent Chinese citizens, sending the message that non-American lives are not important.

The U.S. must take seriously China's demand for a comprehensive explanation of what went wrong, not only as a face-saving measure to allow the Chinese government to take positive steps to put the relationship back on track but, more importantly, to limit and hopefully reverse the crisis of confidence among those Chinese people who previously considered the U.S. its friend. Like it or not, the next generation of Chinese leaders will consider the embassy attack, and how America responds to it, as a defining moment in much the same way the current generation of U.S. leaders have been influenced by Tiananmen. This is not an overstatement!

Meanwhile, Chinese leaders must understand that constant references to the tragedy as "the barbaric U.S.-led NATO air attack" send a strong signal to Washington that Beijing is not interested in promoting and sustaining a constructive future relationship. Legitimate demands for a better explanation would be better received if the outcome were not already being prejudged.

The administration may not want to confess the story that is a core part of the explanation for the embassy bombing. It is that NATO did not anticipate a long bombing campaign, and found itself expanding the target list under the heat of battle. The Chinese embassy building was apparently a hastily-drawn addition, without the thorough intelligence work afforded the earlier target list. That this demonstrates a lack of strategic planning by NATO's political leaders may not assuage Chinese concerns — it certainly does not assuage many American citizens' concerns about how the air campaign is being waged. But it helps put the tragic error into the broader perspective of the whole nature of this war — and away from the personalized way that the Chinese people are perceiving the tragedy.

A respected Chinese scholar pointed out to me that U.S.-China relations need two elements to succeed: a willingness to build upon our common national interests and sufficient mutual trust to permit this effort to proceed. The absence of the latter makes progress in the former difficult if not impossible. Rebuilding trust and confidence will require a concerted effort by both governments, but the ball is currently in the U.S. court. Washington must move forward with a comprehensive explanation of the tragedy now.

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