

How could the bombing of the Chinese embassy have been a mistake?

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After two days of varied official accounts, the least credible explanation for Friday night's NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade is that it was a pure accident. On Sunday, a US official in Washington told news agencies that the CIA had simply supplied inaccurate information, wrongly identifying the embassy as a Yugoslav weapons warehouse. It was the fourth version of events produced within several hours.

Initially NATO's spokesman Jamie Shea told reporters on Saturday that NATO pilots had mistaken the building for a legitimate military target and then hit it with precision-guided weapons. But several hours later, at possibly the most hostile NATO news briefing in Brussels since the bombing began, Major General Walter Jertz said the error had been made in the initial target selection process.

Jertz said the embassy had been mistaken for the Yugoslav Directorate of Supply and Procurement, a military supply facility. When pressed, he said there was no evidence that NATO maps were inaccurate or out of date, neither was there any evidence that NATO intelligence was inaccurate. Asked if NATO knew where embassies were located in Belgrade, he replied: "Yes, of course we know where the embassies are."

Shea then switched his story, saying a "review of procedures" had identified a "mistake" in the target selection process. He quoted a joint statement issued at midnight Saturday US time by US Defence Secretary William Cohen and CIA Director George Tenet, which exonerated the pilots and NATO equipment. "The extensive process in place to select and validate targets did not correct the original error," the statement said.

Finally came the claim of CIA culpability. Another unnamed US official referred to "stale information" as the source of the error.

It is virtually impossible to give any credence to these accounts. The Chinese embassy has been housed at its

present location for four years. Its site was clearly marked on tourist maps that are on sale internationally, including in the English language. The embassy was well known to many journalists, diplomats and other visitors to Belgrade. Its address is listed in the Belgrade telephone directory. For the CIA to have made such an elementary blunder is simply not plausible. Apart from publicly-available maps, US intelligence agencies have access to satellite reconnaissance and other high-technology surveillance, for which some \$29 billion is budgetted annually.

Furthermore, one is meant to believe that such an error went unchecked through an exhaustive target selection, verification and authorisation process. Published accounts indicate that targets are largely identified by the US military, sometimes using information supplied by the CIA as part of its validation process. Targets are nominated at the Aviano airforce base in Italy, verified at NATO headquarters in Belgium, designated on lists sent to the Pentagon for confirmation and then sent to Washington and other NATO capitals for authorisation. By some reports, US President Clinton personally approves targets in Belgrade.

Numerous military experts have told Western news outlets that the CIA could not have been the sole source of target information. Robert Gaskin, a US air force officer who helped select targets during the 1990-91 Gulf War, told the *Los Angeles Times*: "We would always make sure we had at least two sources of information on the targets. You can't afford to make a mistake like this."

Other sources said planning each target involves dozens of officers in Europe and the US who collect intelligence, calculate the risk of civilian casualties, decide which munitions to use and mark the Designated Mean Point of Impact (DMPI) where the bomb would do the most damage.

Moreover, if the attack on the embassy were a "tragic mistake" as Clinton and other NATO leaders insisted, one

would expect at least a pause in the bombing or even a narrowing of targets to ensure that the error was not repeated. More so, perhaps, because the embassy tragedy was the latest in a strong of supposed "collateral damage" incidents, including the dropping of cluster bombs that killed more than a dozen people at a hospital and market in Nis on Friday.

Instead, the bombing of Belgrade and other major Yugoslav cities reached a new intensity on Saturday and Sunday nights. NATO jets hit targets in Kragujevac, wounding 13 people in the city 100 km south of Belgrade, targetted a railway station near Kraljevo in central Serbia, fired two missiles at the main highway between Belgrade and Nis, and attacked another bridge over the Danube in downtown Nis.

One aspect of the official accounts of the embassy bombing has remained unexplained. If the embassy building were indeed mistaken for the Directorate of Supply and Procurement, why was it only selected as a target last Friday, in the seventh week of NATO's air assault? If it were an identifiable military target why had it not already been hit during one of the 18,000 bombing missions against Yugoslavia?

The question has to be asked: given that the targetting was almost certainly deliberate, why was the embassy bombed? It came just days after the G8 foreign ministers summit had produced a draft agreement ostensibly aimed at cutting short the war, and amid intensive activity by the German and Russian administrations to fashion a deal that could be concluded with the Milosevic government. An agreement based on the G8 model was due to be put to the UN Security Council, where China holds a veto vote.

Just a day after the bombing, one US newspaper, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, published a report that Pentagon planners feared that the Clinton administration was so eager to settle the Yugoslav war that it may accept a "dangerously flawed deal". The newspaper's Washington bureau cited anonymous Pentagon officials expressing concern about the inclusion of non-NATO forces in an international force for Kosovo and restrictions on heavy US weaponry in such a force. It also quoted unidentified White House officials predicting that an acceptable deal would be worked out between Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and Russian envoy Viktor Chernomyrdin.

The bombing directly cut across such efforts. Russian President Boris Yeltsin denounced it as a "barbarous and inhuman act" and ordered Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov to cancel a trip to London for negotiations.

Chernomyrdin noted that the bombing "does not help the conflict settlement and may weaken the negotiating process," but proceeded to meet German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and newly-appointed UN representative Carl Bildt in Bonn.

Beijing's embassy was also hit at a time of heightening Sino-American tensions, fuelled in part by belated intelligence claims that a Chinese spy obtained US nuclear secrets. China is in the final throes of applying for membership of the World Trade Organisation, despite concerted Washington criticism in recent months over threats to Taiwan, the jailing of political dissidents and a widening trade gap (China recently surpassed Japan as holding the biggest surplus with the US).

For their part, Chinese officials accused the US of striking the embassy to punish China for representing Yugoslav diplomatic interests in Washington. Whatever the precise motivation, the attack was certainly designed to send a blunt message to China: the devastation being wreaked upon Yugoslavia can be applied to China or any other country that obstructs US economic and military policy.

While everything points to a pre-meditated attack on the embassy, it is entirely conceivable that President Clinton personally had no knowledge of the plan. Given the Byzantine nature of the struggles between the White House, the Pentagon, the CIA and other elements within the US political and military establishment, it is quite possible that the bombing was designed to embarrass the Clinton administration, escalate the war and pursue an even more militarist agenda. Sections of the military have hardly disguised their loathing for Clinton. Key factions within the ruling elite have demanded a far more unilateral US military and diplomatic policy, and were prepared to remove Clinton by impeachment to achieve it. Of one thing there is no doubt: the most reckless and aggressive elements are exercising enormous influence over American foreign policy, with incalculable consequences for world affairs.



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