

Negotiations stepped up in US spy plane confrontation with China

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After initially adopting a belligerent posture, the Bush administration has moderated its tone over the past several days in an effort to defuse the confrontation with China over the detention of a US spy plane and its 24 crewmen on the Chinese island of Hainan.

On Wednesday US Secretary of State Colin Powell expressed "regret" over the loss of the Chinese fighter jet that collided with an American EP3 and the apparent death of the Chinese pilot. The collision occurred April 1 over the South China Sea. Powell's statement was followed the next day by a similar expression of regret from President George W. Bush.

Powell followed up his comments with a letter to Chinese Deputy Prime Minister Qian Qichen, who met President Bush at the White House last month, outlining ways that the United States and China could avoid an escalation of the conflict. The State Department also urged a congressional delegation scheduled to travel to Beijing this weekend to go ahead with the trip rather than cancel it as a gesture of protest.

While stopping short of the formal apology sought by Chinese officials, the statements by Powell and Bush set an altered tone for the negotiations going on in Washington and Beijing. After Bush's comments, Chinese authorities permitted US diplomats to make a second visit to the spy plane's crew, and promised a third session on Saturday. The US diplomats reported that the crew members were in good health and were being well treated.

Neither Bush nor Powell demanded the immediate return of the EP3 turboprop. Instead, US military and intelligence officials leaked comments to the press suggesting that the crew of the spy plane had destroyed most of its sensitive data and equipment during the 30 minutes between the collision and the plane's emergency landing at a Chinese air base on Hainan.

Nor did the top American officials reiterate the claim, made by US military spokesmen in the first hours of the incident, that the spy plane was sovereign territory and its personnel entitled to diplomatic immunity. This claim was especially provocative in Chinese eyes, since it recalls their country's century of semi-colonial domination during which the US, Japan and the European powers all imposed a policy of "extraterritoriality." This doctrine made foreign nationals on Chinese soil immune to Chinese law and authority, and sanctioned the carving out of imperialist-controlled enclaves along the Chinese coast.

In another gesture to lower tensions, the Pentagon announced that three Navy destroyers ordered to remain in the waters off Hainan were resuming their course to their home port in San Diego.

A spokeswoman for the Foreign Ministry in Beijing welcomed the statements by Bush and Powell as "a step in the direction toward resolving this issue." Chinese President Jiang Zemin left Beijing for a long-planned trip to Latin America. At his first stop, in Santiago, Chile he seemed to limit the scope of the demand for a US apology.

"I want to stress that the people leading these negotiations from China and the US are giving priority to the continuation of good bilateral relations," he said. "I have visited a lot of countries and seen that it is

normal for people to ask forgiveness or say 'excuse me' when they collide in the street. But the American planes come to the border of our country and do not ask forgiveness. Is this behavior acceptable?"

The Beijing government has banned public demonstrations over the Hainan incident, concerned that anger over US aggression could have explosive results, as it did after the US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during the NATO air war on Serbia.

At least in part, the more muted approach of the Bush administration is prompted by the circumstances of the incident itself. As the facts and background are explored in the international media, the Chinese account of events is being largely confirmed.

In the most significant admission, US sources have now retracted the initial Pentagon story of the EP3 flying on a slow, level and unchanging course until it was struck by the high-speed Chinese jet. Both sides now agree that the EP3 did veer sharply to the left in the seconds before the collision, as the Chinese have maintained from the start, although there remain conflicting accounts of the exact sequence of events.

According to the most recent US version, the Chinese F-8 was flying behind and below the EP3, shadowing it closely. When the EP3 veered left, according to one theory, the Chinese jet was sucked toward it by the larger plane's draft, in the same way that a small car on a highway can be drawn towards a tractor-trailer.

Another theory attributed to Pentagon officials is that "the collision occurred because the F-8's cockpit or tail rose into the aircraft's left wing or propeller, or that it moved close enough to cause an aerodynamic effect that would have caused the American aircraft to lose lift and dip slightly." In either case, the collision would not be the result of a reckless decision by the Chinese pilot to cross the front of the American EP3, as the US media first claimed.

The fact that the damage to the EP3 was in its nose and propellers also supports the theory that the larger aircraft rammed the smaller, rather than the reverse. *New York Times* columnist William Safire, who has high-level connections in the national security apparatus, suggested that the Chinese jet was going too slowly, not too fast: "The jet plane in front slowed to obstruct the Americans' observation of what may have been a new destroyer purchased from Russia. But the F-8 was not designed for such slow speed, and probably stalled; the U.S. plane behind then ran into it."

As for the legal position, it has now been revealed that the United States imposes far stricter limitations on military flights near its borders than does China. The Pentagon requires all foreign military aircraft passing within 200 miles of the US coast to identify themselves or risk interception. China has declared a more limited 200-mile zone off its coasts, largely of economic significance.

The Chinese 200-mile zone is based on the provisions of the International Law of the Sea, a treaty negotiated under the Clinton administration but never ratified by the US Congress. As a result, the US government has no standing under international law to sue China, even if the Chinese jets did overstep their legal authority.

For all the US fulminations over the supposedly outrageous Chinese action of scouring the EP3, the American military conducts itself in a more aggressive fashion. The best known such incident took place in 1975, when the pilot of a MiG-25, the most advanced Soviet fighter, flew his plane to Japan and defected. The Soviet Union demanded the immediate return of its plane. The US response was to send the jet back to Moscow in packing crates, after aeronautical experts had dismantled it piece by piece and studied every part.

There is no reason to believe, however, that the US government has apparently pulled back from the brink merely because its legal and factual position was so weak. More important political and material factors are at work, above all the interests of American big business, which would be sorely affected by any protracted disruption of US-China relations.

The Beijing regime and corporate America have collaborated for more than a quarter century to make China a lucrative outlet for investment and a vast reservoir of cheap labor. The Maoist dictatorship suppresses all democratic rights for the working class and peasantry, putting down strikes and other forms of resistance to exploitation by the foreign capitalists who have flocked to China. Foreign investment in turn has enriched the ruling bureaucracy, which has, directly or through its offspring, fostered the creation of an indigenous capitalist class.

Many of the biggest US corporations have billions at stake in China, and their interests, combined with the ongoing stock market turmoil on Wall Street, certainly shaped internal administration discussions. The market plunged Monday and Tuesday, when bellicose statements from Washington suggested that a major crisis, or even military action, were in prospect. The more conciliatory language of subsequent days helped spark a record 402-point rise in the Dow Jones Industrial Average Thursday.

The most authoritative spokesmen of the US foreign policy establishment were trundled out to rebuke the White House and suggest that its harsh line towards Beijing was ill conceived. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who initiated Nixon's "opening to China" in 1971-72, and former Carter administration National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who pushed through formal recognition of the Peoples Republic in 1980, appeared together Wednesday on the Public Broadcasting System evening news to urge caution and restraint.

Kissinger called the Chinese declaration "basically a conciliatory statement," noting that the US crew members were not described as prisoners and suggesting, "We could propose some sort of a fact-finding mechanism which would enable both sides to say that the issue is being studied as to who flew into whom and thereby defer the issue."

Brzezinski criticized the initial claims of sovereign immunity for the spy plane and its crew and the failure of Bush and other US spokesmen to express any sorrow over the death of the Chinese pilot. "Under those circumstances those in China who want to dig in their heels and who want to make an issue of it and who may even want to humiliate us had an argument, and given their historic sensitivity to foreign concessions, foreign imperialism, I see how they might have dug themselves in," he said.

Brzezinski added that Bush could have brought the incident to a conclusion rapidly if he had called Jiang Zemin right away with a statement of regret similar to the one issued four days after the fact. He expressed concern that right-wing elements in the US could push for retaliatory actions such as a huge arms deal for Taiwan or renewed trade sanctions on Beijing. Both former officials warned that the stability of the whole Far East would be threatened if the crisis spun out of control.

In addition to the concerns aroused within the American ruling elite, Bush's hard-line policy found virtually no support from the other major capitalist powers, either in Europe or Asia. As a columnist for the British business newspaper *Financial Times* observed, "If truth be told, there have been one or two grim chuckles in Europe at the new president's discomfort.... The Pentagon's injured innocence meets with a certain

scepticism in Europe. Sure, the US has a big strategic interest in the South China Sea. It acts as the guarantor of Taiwan's independence and of broader regional security. But there has long been a question about the intrusive intelligence-gathering operations of the EP-3s. These aircraft fly in international waters. Just how would Washington respond if China, playing by the same rules, decided to eavesdrop from the air on US military facilities? The words 'provocation' and 'unacceptable' would undoubtedly loom large."

The European Union's top diplomat, former NATO Secretary General Javier Solana, responded to an inquiry on the spy plane by saying, "International law must be complied with." Later a spokesman emphasized that the EU "does not have a position on the incident."

The Milan daily *Corriere della Sera* carried a front-page column by Sergio Romano, a former ambassador to the United States, saying the incident would be "part of the apprenticeship of a young president who rules the world, but is only truly knowledgeable about Texas."

Romano continued: "His character and somewhat rash style, along with the requests of his Republican electors, suggest that he should show muscle, speak forcefully and proclaim that America's interest comes before all other considerations. He will realize soon that others also have their interests and that even the president of the United States must take them into consideration."

Reaction in Japan and South Korea has combined doubts about the Bush administration with a distinct nervousness over the possibility of military conflict so close to home. These concerns were underscored by the publication of a report in the Beijing press of an earlier incident involving US spy planes and Chinese fighter jets over the Yellow Sea, which lies between China, the Korean peninsula, and Japan.

According to the account published in the *Peoples Daily*, two US EP3s were spying on Chinese naval exercises March 6, held at the time of the National People's Congress in Beijing. Four MiG fighters were dispatched to chase them away. The next morning the US spy planes came back, this time a little further south, over the Eastern Sea, which lies between Taiwan and Japan, this time accompanied by four F-15 fighters. Again four Chinese fighters were mobilized to intercept them, and the US jets turned back.

The growing tensions in the region, the most heavily militarized in the world, are underscored by another report in the *South China Morning Post*. The Hong Kong-based English-language daily newspaper cited a British estimate that Russian air defenses in the Far East had intercepted planes approaching their airspace over a thousand times last year.

Despite the apparent diminution in tensions by Friday, there is still the possibility that the spy plane conflict could mushroom into an explosive diplomatic and even military confrontation. A sizable faction of the Republican congressional leadership is howling for blood.

Typical was the comment of Sen. Richard C. Shelby (R-Ala.), chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, who said Beijing's stance confirmed the belief that "China is not our strategic partner, and never was." He did not explain why, if the United States has considered China a strategic partner, US warplanes were engaged in electronic spying up and down the Chinese coast.

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi dismissed China's demand for an apology as "absolutely ludicrous." Congressman. Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.) introduced a bill Wednesday to revoke China's most-favored-nation trade status, granted only last year. "A favored trading partner with our country would follow proper protocol and not continue to hold our servicemen and women, along with our equipment, after being asked for their return," said Hunter. "The fact is, while we trade with China, they prepare for war."

Whatever the immediate outcome of the US-China standoff over the American spy plane, the incident has underscored the potentially cataclysmic implications of the militaristic, unilateralist and belligerent

orientation of the Bush administration, which expresses in a concentrated form the global designs of the US ruling elite.

See Also:

Bush administration ratchets up tensions on the Korean peninsula

[6 April 2001]

Spy plane standoff heightens US-China tensions

[3 April 2001]



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