

US adopts aggressive anti-China posture in aftermath of spy plane crisis

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The release of 24 US crewmen following a mid-air collision and emergency landing of an American spy plane on the island of Hainan has put an end to the immediate confrontation between China and the United States. But this incident was symptomatic of a larger issue—the increasingly bellicose policy of the US government, not only in the Far East, but throughout the world.

This is intertwined with a second political issue: the enormous influence of extreme-right, anti-democratic and militaristic elements within the Republican Party and the Bush administration. Pressure from this source was expressed in sporadic criticism during the course of the 11-day crisis, with claims that Bush was insufficiently hard-line, and more directly in the outburst of Pentagon saber-rattling and anti-Chinese propaganda in the US media once the captured airmen had been released.

On the Chinese side as well, the crisis has shed light on the political physiognomy of the regime. It is clear that the Maoist leadership in Beijing, both military and civilian, is completely committed to the policy of integrating China into the capitalist world market. Its major concern was how to manage the handover of the captured US spies without provoking an explosion of outrage at home.

The Beijing dictatorship sought to maneuver between the danger of US economic and diplomatic retaliation if it kept the spy plane crew any longer and the danger of popular opposition getting out of hand if it caved in too flagrantly to US pressure. The Chinese side accepted a letter of regret submitted by the US ambassador in English, without a Chinese translation, so that it could put the best face on the agreement and appease the justifiable anger of the Chinese people.

While the 11-day confrontation between the US and China arose from an unintended collision between an American spy plane and a Chinese air defense jet, only the form is accidental. Conflict between China, historically a nation oppressed by imperialism that is asserting its interests as a rising power in the Far East and Asia generally, and the United States, the dominant capitalist power in the region since defeating Japan in World War II, is inevitable. The military planning of both Beijing and the Pentagon presumes a war between the United States and China sometime in the first quarter of the 21st century, an event which would have potentially catastrophic consequences for the people of both countries, and for humanity as a whole.

The Bush administration has made hostility to China one of its foreign policy principles. Bush attacked the Clinton-Gore administration during the 2000 elections, declaring that China was a “strategic competitor,” not a “strategic partner” of the United States. A series of initiatives in the last three months have been directed against Beijing—moves toward a US missile defense focused on China, reversal of US policy for a rapprochement with North Korea, and plans to supply sophisticated naval and air weaponry to Taiwan.

No sooner had the US crewmen set foot on American soil than the Bush administration abandoned its posture of diplomatic caution towards China and sympathy over the death of Chinese pilot Wang Wei. American

spokesmen returned to the belligerent and provocative language of the first days of the crisis, when Bush appeared in the Rose Garden to issue peremptory demands to Beijing for the immediate return of the spy plane and its crew.

Bush struck an aggrieved tone and declared that reconnaissance flights by EP3 spy planes would continue along the Chinese coast. Talks on averting future incidents like the April 1 collision are to begin April 18. The president made it clear that this meeting would be the occasion, not of negotiations, but of an American ultimatum. US officials would raise “tough questions about China’s recent practice of challenging United States aircraft operating legally in international airspace,” he said.

Within the Pentagon pressure is mounting for an immediate resumption of the spy flights, which would likely provoke the Chinese into canceling the April 18 meeting. According to press reports, the US Pacific Fleet commander, Admiral Dennis Blair, proposed early last week, at the height of the crisis, to send the *USS Kitty Hawk*, a powerful aircraft carrier, to the waters off Hainan as a show of force.

The mood in the military brass was expressed at Friday’s press conference by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who was deliberately kept under wraps during the diplomatic negotiations over the spy plane. He railed against Chinese pilot Wang Wei, placing all the blame for the collision on the dead man, and dropping the pretense of sympathy for Wang’s widow and fatherless child. Rumsfeld played and released to the media a cockpit videotape purporting to show reckless conduct by Chinese fighter pilots.

Obviously chafing from the restraints imposed by the diplomatic negotiations over the release of spy plane crew, Rumsfeld complained that the public had only been given “one side of the story” over the previous two weeks. Now it was time for the American military to tell its side, he indicated—a curious claim, given that the State Department officials who conducted the talks with China, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Deputy Secretary Richard Armitage and Ambassador James Prueher, are all retired military officers or former Pentagon officials. Prueher was commander of the Pacific Fleet in 1996 when the Clinton administration sent two aircraft carriers through the strait of Taiwan in response to Chinese missile test launches near the island.

Throughout the 11-day standoff the Bush administration was under mounting pressure, from both Republican congressmen and a section of the right-wing press, to escalate the conflict.

Only days after the emergency landing on Hainan, top Republican congressional leaders, including Richard Shelby, chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, and Henry Hyde, chairman of the House International Relations Committee, began referring to the spy plane crew as “hostages,” language studiously avoided by the Bush administration itself.

Senator John McCain greeted the release by denouncing China for “inexcusable conduct, its reprehensible detention of our air crew as it dishonestly attempted to shift blame for the mid-air collision to the United

States from where it rightfully belongs—with the Chinese policy of dangerously challenging our lawful and essential surveillance flights in international airspace over the South China Sea.”

Without directly criticizing Bush, McCain declared, “We must avoid, at all costs, giving Chinese leaders the impression that they will profit by challenging America’s global responsibilities and substituting demagoguery and hostility for ... respect and understanding.”

The most strident attack on Bush’s policy came from the right-wing *Weekly Standard*, which on April 8 issued a front-page commentary by its editor, William Kristol, and foreign policy specialist Robert Kagan, headlined, “A National Humiliation.” Denouncing Bush in Cold War-style language for caving in to a “communist” government in Beijing, Kristol and Kagan called for full-scale retaliation short of war, including a curtailment of trade relations, massive arms transfers to Taiwan, and US opposition to holding the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

Other right-wing elements grumbled privately but held their fire in public, or, like the *Wall Street Journal*, tried to have it both ways: praising the administration’s handling of the crisis while advocating a more aggressive anti-China policy in retaliation for the detention of the spy plane crew.

Gary Bauer, a spokesman for fundamentalist elements and former candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, admitted that the right wing would have reacted very differently to a letter of regret to China sent by a Democratic administration. “I continue to believe that if President Gore had sent such a letter, a lot of my friends would be taking a different response,” he said.

The American media demonstrated, not for the first time, that in any serious international crisis it functions as an arm of the US national security apparatus. While American television networks and newspapers criticize China for its state-controlled media, the coordination between “news” and state propaganda in the United States is just as thorough, since the foreign policy of the US government largely coincides with the interests of the giant monopolies that control the media.

Television viewers and newspaper readers in America were saturated with an *Alice in Wonderland* view of the world, in which American spy flights on the edge of the Chinese mainland are presented as defensive, while Chinese monitoring of these flights is deemed aggressive and provocative. Similarly one-sided treatment is given to the vast US deployment of troops, warplanes and ships in the Far East, as well as US arms sales to Taiwan, a Chinese island. All these are presented as reasonable measures to “preserve the peace.” One can only imagine the US media response if China were to take analogous actions, for example, deploying a fleet in the Caribbean or supplying advanced weapons to Puerto Rico.

It should not be forgotten that the United States went to the brink of nuclear war with the Soviet Union in 1962 over the stationing of Soviet medium-range ballistic missiles on Cuba, a proverbial “90 miles from our shores,” about the same as the distance from Taiwan to mainland China. Khrushchev supplied those missiles to Cuba using the same rationale as the proposed US plan to supply destroyers equipped with Aegis radar systems to Taiwan—to deter a threatened invasion.

Even the most transparently false statement by US officials goes without challenge in the American media. Thus Bush declared that US spy flights “are a part of a comprehensive national security strategy that helps maintain peace and stability in our world.” No American journalist dared ask how such provocative and intrusive actions contributed to “stability,” or why only the United States, of all countries in the world, arrogates to itself the right to spy in this fashion on any target it chooses. It is taken for granted that “peace and stability” and US world domination mean more or less the same thing.

Also significant is what did not appear in the media. There was no demonization of Chinese President Jiang Zemin, along the lines of the

hysterical campaigns that painted first Saddam Hussein and then Slobodan Milosevic as Hitler reincarnate. There is, of course, no lack of raw material for such exaggerations in relation to the Beijing leader. Under other circumstances, the Tiananmen Square massacre and other crimes of the Maoist regime would provide plenty of grist for the mill. But the US government had determined that military action was not viable in this case, so the media dutifully refrained from overplaying its hand.

There is another significant omission in the US media. Press reports frequently referred to the prevalence of anti-American sentiment among the Chinese people, generally conceding that the Chinese government was seeking to restrain rather than inflame public opinion at home. But no explanation was ever given for why masses of ordinary Chinese people, workers and peasants, should resent the assertion of American power in the Far East. That would require some examination of the history of imperialist and semi-colonial domination of China, as well as of the US military interventions in Korea, Vietnam, and the strait of Taiwan.

The spy plane crisis also demonstrated the supine character of the Democratic Party and liberalism in general, in any serious test of the Bush administration. Not a single representative of the bourgeois “opposition” actually opposed the actions of the White House and State Department.

Some Democrats, like the corrupt and reactionary senator from New Jersey, Robert Torricelli, openly sided with the extreme right and military elements who were demanding more belligerent measures. Torricelli raised the possibility of recalling Ambassador Prueher from Beijing, saying, “There’s a point at which it becomes inappropriate to have our ambassador in a country holding our military personnel as virtual hostages,” he said.

Democratic Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware, a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, said Bush and his team had done “a first-rate job.” Senator Tom Daschle of South Dakota, the Democratic minority leader, criticized China, saying, “We have many important issues facing us. Progress on this agenda depends on rebuilding the trust that was damaged over the last 11 days.”

House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, who opposed renewing normal trade relations with China last year on protectionist and human rights grounds, declared, “The manner in which the Chinese government has handled this incident reinforces my concerns about China’s lack of adherence to the law.”

Gephardt’s allies in the AFL-CIO bureaucracy joined in whipping up anti-Chinese chauvinism. The United Association of Plumbers, Pipefitters and Sprinkler Fitters bought \$500,000 in radio advertisements during baseball games around the country urging a boycott of Chinese goods, claiming the US spies were being “held hostage by the Chinese government.”

Equally wretched was the level of commentary in the liberal press, where anti-Chinese racism vied with Cold War-style anti-communism. Liberal *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen wrote: “In some ways, this crisis has been about words—‘sorry,’ ‘regret,’ ‘apology’ and so on. I have some different words to offer: ‘irrational,’ ‘nuts,’ ‘unpredictable’ and just plain ‘weird.’ One or all of these applies to the way Beijing has conducted itself since its hot dog of a pilot, Wang Wei, got too close to that lumbering EP-3E spy plane.”

Both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* editorial pages hailed Bush’s handling of the affair, at least from the time that Colin Powell and the State Department were put in charge of finding a solution through diplomatic negotiations. As for the *pro forma* expressions of sympathy over the death of the Chinese pilot, the *Post’s* diplomatic columnist, Jim Hoagland, summed up the prevailing cynicism, writing: “Personally, I am able to restrain my weeping over Wang’s self-inflicted fate.”

The spy plane incident showed how reckless and light-minded is the Bush administration’s overall approach to foreign policy. Not a single

member of Bush's foreign policy team has significant China experience. Only Ambassador Prueher, a Clinton appointee and career navy officer, has spent much time in China.

By contrast, no less than four top Bush foreign policy aides have supported pro-Taiwan lobbying campaigns, and one, arms negotiator nominee John Bolton, represented Taiwan before Congress, although he did not register as a lobbyist because he was retained as an attorney.

Bush's initial response to the collision of the fighter jet and the spy plane caused great offense in China. He did not pick up the hotline and call President Jiang Zemin, as Clinton did in 1999 after US planes bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. In fact, during the entire course of the crisis Bush never spoke with a single Chinese official, either by telephone or face to face.

He did not have much contact with American officials either, despite subsequent—and ludicrous—efforts by the White House staff to portray him as a hands-on crisis manager. By one account, Bush actually met face to face with Colin Powell twice during the 11-day standoff. Most contacts between the White House and the State Department passed through national security adviser Condoleezza Rice.

The actual decision-making group included Powell, Armitage, Rice and their deputies, as well as Vice President Cheney's Chief of Staff Lewis Libby. According to one extraordinary press account of the “inside story” of the crisis, “Rice served as liaison to the president, conveying the group's decisions to Bush ‘in real time,’ as one adviser put it.”

It is, however, largely irrelevant whether Bush, Cheney or Powell is the man in day-to-day charge of American foreign policy. The extremely aggressive and militaristic posture of American capitalism is a time bomb. The US ruling elite, intoxicated by its seeming invulnerability to significant military challenge, is throwing its weight around in a manner that will inevitably produce a great disaster.

If American imperialism runs true to form, the response to the standoff with China could very well involve lashing out violently, either at China itself, or, perhaps more likely, at some other target of opportunity. The next country to run afoul of American foreign policy, especially if it is small and relatively weak militarily, can expect a vengeful battering out of all proportion to the purported offense.

Or the victim of round two for the Bush administration could be a domestic antagonist. It is not an accident that two columnists for the *Wall Street Journal*, writing on successive days, raised the example of Reagan's smashing of the PATCO air traffic controllers' strike in 1981 as a useful precedent for how Bush could demonstrate his credibility and determination in the wake of the letter of regret to China.



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