

Questions over the crash of China Airlines Flight 611

John Chan
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Last Saturday's horrific crash of Taiwan-owned China Airlines Flight 611 has once again raised questions about management decisions to cut costs at the expense of safety standards and ultimately of people's lives.

The airline's 22-year-old Boeing 747 disintegrated into four pieces within 20 minutes of taking off from Taipei's Chiang Kai-Shek airport and plummeted 31,000 feet into the ocean. All 225 crew and passengers lost their lives, including 190 Taiwanese, 14 people from Hong Kong and Macau, nine from mainland China and one Swiss citizen.

Throughout the week, emergency personnel and officials of the Taiwanese Aviation Safety Council (TASC) have been searching the waters near the Penghu Islands—some 300 kilometres from Taipei. To this point, only 97 bodies have been found and about one percent of the aircraft. On Wednesday, searchers located the flight data recorder and cockpit voice recorders or “black boxes”, as well as a large piece of wreckage believed to be the front end of the plane.

Over the past 48 hours, experts from the American Underwater Search and Survey joined the search effort. But fierce winds and choppy seas yesterday have dashed hopes of any quick recovery of the black boxes, more bodies or aircraft parts.

Last weekend's disaster is the fourth involving China Airlines since 1994. A 1999 crash in Hong Kong involving a Mandarin Airlines flight—a wholly owned subsidiary of China Airlines—cost three lives. In 1998, a China Airlines flight from Indonesia crashed while landing at Taipei airport, killing 202, while in 1994, a flight crashed at Japan's Nagoya airport killing 264 people. A crash-landing by a Boeing 747 at Taipei in 1991 killed five. In the 1980s, four other China Airlines disasters cost 72 lives.

This appalling record triggered immediate denunciations by the families and friends of those killed on Flight 611 and demands for a far-reaching investigation. The airline's share value has plummeted by 25 percent amidst the cancellation of tickets. US Delta Airlines has withdrawn from a proposed partnership; the entire board of directors has resigned and the Taiwanese government—which owns 71 percent of the airline—has taken over day-to-day management.

Faced with public outrage and huge financial losses, the airline initially tried to divert the anger away from the company and towards mainland China. The press repeated company speculation that the sudden disintegration of the plane could have been due to a Chinese missile. China maintains missile batteries on the coast opposite the Taiwanese-held Penghu islands, in case of war in the Taiwan Strait.

To give credence to the claim, communication transcripts between the flight and ground control were released by TASC showing that the crew had no indication or warning of impending trouble. James L.S. Chang, a vice president of China Airlines assigned to defend the company's safety record, told *Associated Press* the day after the accident: “At such a high altitude... to have something go wrong and the pilot didn't even have time to send a distress signal. Now, that's a big question mark.”

Within 48 hours, however, both the Taiwanese and Chinese authorities announced that no military activities by either side were underway at the time of the crash. On Monday, the National Security Bureau of Taiwan (NSB) rejected the speculation of a missile attack saying there was absolutely no evidence. Other possible explanations suggested by the company, such as bad weather, have also been rejected as the flight and weather conditions were normal.

As the week has gone on, attention has focused on the possibility that company decisions and aircraft design flaws were to blame. China Airline's four other Boeing 747-200s have been grounded pending safety inspections. On May 27, an unnamed Taiwanese pilot told the *Taipei Times*: "Talking to several other pilots after we heard about the crash, we all agreed it suffered the same fate as TWA Flight 800—a centre fuel tank explosion."

There are several parallels between last weekend's disaster and the crash of TWA Flight 800—also a Boeing 747-131—off the coast of New York on July 17, 1996. In that case as well, there was intense speculation that a bomb or a missile had caused the crash due to the rapidity with which the plane fell from the sky.

However, a major investigation that was finally completed in 2000 found that the crash was caused by a cost-cutting measure—flying the aircraft with just 50 to 100 gallons of fuel in the centre fuel tank. It was highly likely that a short circuit ignited gases that had built up in the near-empty tank.

Following the investigation, Boeing recommended that airlines end the practice of flying with empty fuel tanks on all older 747 models. The pilot told the *Taipei Times* that China Airlines had ignored the recommendation "because here in Taiwan everything is about money".

China Airlines vice president of flight safety Samson Yeh admitted that Flight 611 had taken off with a virtually empty fuel tank. Though admitting a fuel-tank explosion was "one of the possibilities", he justified the airline's actions on the grounds it had "put some insulation on the wiring [of the fuel pumps]". Even though the aircraft was mainly doing short flights and did not need the centre-tank, the airline had not removed it for cost reasons.

The pilot alleged that many other pilots in Taiwan knew China Airlines was ignoring Boeing's recommendation but did not report it to the state Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) as the government has a major stake in the airline. Every six months pilots must pass a precision check by the CAA. "If we said anything," he told the *Taipei Times*, "they'd fail us for sure".

A detailed investigation is yet to take place. Boeing has dispatched two specialists to Taiwan, with a Boeing spokesman telling the May 29 *Seattle Post-*

Intelligencer that the investigation into the Flight 611 tragedy "could be a long one". But the evidence so far points to the fact that China Airlines, like others, was prepared to gamble with peoples lives in order to cut costs and boost profits.



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