Spy plane standoff heightens US-China tensions

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The collision of a US spy plane and a Chinese fighter jet in the South China Sea has exacerbated political and military tensions between the two countries. The incident, while apparently accidental, comes in the context of US diplomatic provocations and on the eve of a decision by the Bush administration on whether to sell advanced US anti-missile and air defense systems to Taiwan.

The US EP3-C turboprop, a plane about the size of a Boeing 737 jetliner, crossed paths with two Chinese air defense jets while it was engaged in electronic spying southeast of the island of Hainan, China's southernmost province. The EP3 was monitoring Chinese military communications, while the two jets were monitoring it, in an exercise in mutual surveillance that was a staple of the Cold War and still continues between the United States and China.

There is no way to determine independently what actually took place in the collision. Chinese officials say that the EP3 suddenly veered to its left and struck one of the two F-8 jets, the Chinese equivalent of the Soviet MiG-21. US officials claim the collision was the fault of the Chinese, citing the greater speed and maneuverability of the F-8s compared to the slow and heavy EP3, with its load of sophisticated electronic gear and crew of 24.

The F-8 plunged swiftly into the sea, with the pilot presumably killed. The EP3 sustained damage, forcing it to make an emergency landing on Hainan, where the crew and the plane have been detained. Press reports indicate that none of the US crewmen was injured either in the collision or the landing.

The initial reaction of the Pentagon and the Bush administration was strident and aggressive, with President Bush demanding that US officials be allowed to meet with the crew of the captured spy plane and the military brass demanding that the plane be considered US territory, that the Chinese authorities refrain from boarding it and that they extend diplomatic immunity to the crew.

The likely death of the Chinese pilot was treated callously, with only a perfunctory statement that US ships and planes would be available to participate in the search for his remains. Meanwhile, in a saber-rattling move, the US Navy diverted three destroyers that were passing through the region en route to the US Pacific coast from the Persian Gulf, and ordered them to the waters off Hainan.

Subsequent statements toned down the harsh rhetoric, particularly after Beijing announced that US officials would be allowed to see the crewmen some time on April 3. State Department and Pentagon spokesmen both admitted that the collision was unintentional on the part of the Chinese.

In this incident the US has once again assumed its standard posture of the aggrieved party, even as it arrogantly asserts its "right" to deploy military and intelligence forces around the world, intruding into air space and waters claimed by targeted nations. In an unusually frank article published April 2 in the web edition of *Time* magazine, entitled "Is It Really Any Wonder that the Chinese are Sore Over Spy Plane?", writer Tony Karon presented a picture of how the incident would look to the US if the roles were reversed:

"Imagine a Chinese plane flying a surveillance mission off the Florida coast colliding with a Navy F-16 sent on an aggressive monitoring mission. The Navy fighter goes down and the pilot is lost; the Chinese plane is forced to land on US soil. The incident occurs at a moment when China is about to supply a package of sophisticated weapons to Cuba (possibly including the very same model spy plane now in US hands); is planning to deploy a missile shield that would neutralize the US nuclear arsenal; and has signaled that curbing US regional ambitions it to become the organizing principle of its military doctrine. Imagine further that the incident comes two years after Chinese bombs had destroyed (albeit inadvertently) a US embassy in Europe... It's unlikely Americans would feel in a particularly forgiving mood, either."

The region off Hainan and the mainland provinces of Guangdong and Fukien have long been a potential flashpoint. US spy planes regularly fly up and down the Chinese coast from Air Force bases in Okinawa, patrolling the Taiwan Strait and the northern part of the South China Sea, which contains a number of small islands whose sovereignty is disputed between China, the Philippines and Vietnam.

According to US press reports citing Pentagon officials, naval intelligence operations in the western Pacific were retargeted in 1992, with China supplanting the former Soviet Union as the top priority. The EP3 and similar spy planes collect data for US Navy aircraft battle groups. Hainan is a particular focus, since it is covered with military bases due to its strategic location at China's southernmost point.

There is an eerie resemblance between the military situation today around Hainan and that prevailing at the Soviet offshore island of Sakhalin in 1983, at the time of the KAL 007 incident. The Korean passenger jet was shot down by Soviet air defense fighters after it deliberately flew over Sakhalin, the site of numerous Soviet military bases, as part of an operation coordinated with US intelligence agencies. A US spy plane similar to the EP3 was flying on a parallel course, shadowing the KAL flight, and observing the responses of Soviet radar installations and air bases.

US demands for diplomatic immunity for the crew of the EP3 contrast sharply with the American government's treatment of those it claims to have caught engaging in espionage. Just last month the Bush administration ordered the expulsion of 50 Russian diplomats and trade officials, an extraordinarily disproportionate retaliation for an

alleged Russian intelligence coup in the case of Robert Hanssen, an FBI counterspy arrested for working for the KGB and its successors.

As a matter of international law, the US claim is more than a little dubious, since diplomatic immunity does not apply automatically to all employees and agents of a foreign government. This is particularly the case when the agents, as in this case, did not enter China with the permission of the Chinese government.

Perhaps the most arrogant comment came from Senator John Warner, the Virginia Republican and former Navy Secretary who is chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "This is a tragic military accident that could have been avoided if Chinese pilots had respected the laws of international air space," Warner said. "China, as an emerging military power, appears in the eyes of military persons the world over very unprofessional, unless it comes forward promptly with an accurate explanation of the incident and returns our aircraft and crew."

The insinuation that the collision was the result of incompetence on the part of the Chinese pilots rings false after recent well-publicized disasters involving US military personnel and innocent civilians around the world: the killing of 20 Italian and German vacationers when a US jet cut the wires of a ski lift in the Alps; the ramming and sinking of a Japanese research vessel by the US submarine *Greenville* off Pearl Harbor only two months ago; the plane and helicopter crashes that kill US servicemen and women virtually every month.

The Hainan incident comes as the byproduct of an increasingly reckless and aggressive American policy on the whole periphery of China. Last month the Bush administration repudiated the joint US-South Korean policy of rapprochement with the North Korean regime of Kim Jong Il, a policy that had relied on Beijing to put pressure on Pyongyang. Bush's commitment to the establishment of a national missile defense system, while overtly targeting North Korea, is widely viewed as being directed against China as well, and there have been suggestions that Taiwan would be included under a US missile defense shield once it was deployed.

To this must be added unceasing US pressure over trade and human rights issues and provocations such as the charges, voiced as Bush was moving into the White House, that China was aiding Baghdad in developing Iraqi anti-aircraft defenses. The new Republican president has installed a whole group of senior advisers linked to a pro-Taiwan, anti-Beijing policy. Four top national security officials signed a statement in 1999 condemning the Clinton administration's policy as being too soft on China: Richard Armitage, the nominee for deputy secretary of state, Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy defense secretary-designate, Vice-President Richard Cheney's chief-of-staff and national security adviser, Lewis Libby, and the nominee for chief strategic arms negotiator, John Bolton.

While the incident near Hainan may be accidental, the heightened conflict that produced it is not. The provocative US policy was examined, in worried tones, in the March 15 issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, a business journal that can hardly be accused of a bias towards Beijing.

Under the headline, "Dangerous Brinkmanship," the magazine warned that the Bush administration was risking a major crisis with China. "Bush's rhetoric has been hawkish, not conciliatory; his administration's policy towards China has been more reactive than tactical. As contentious decisions ranging from military support for Taiwan to missile defence to human rights force their way onto the new president's agenda, Bush could well precipitate a crisis in relations with China even before he has had time to appoint a full contingent of advisers or spell out his goals toward Beijing."

A key decision comes this month, with Bush to announce whether he will approve a proposed sale of four high-tech destroyers equipped with Aegis radar and Patriot anti-missile systems to Taiwan. Since US shipyards are not scheduled to deliver these ships until 2006, such an announcement would serve no immediate military purpose. Its aim would be to humiliate China and appease the extreme-right elements in the Republican Party that still regard Beijing as a "communist" regime, despite the economic transformation of the past two decades and the country's integration into the capitalist world market.

After the US missile attack on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May 1999—aimed at punishing Beijing for its support to Yugoslavia against the US-led air war—Chinese officials announced a military buildup to upgrade Chinese forces for the kind of electronic and computerized warfare that prevailed in the Persian Gulf and Balkans wars.

A Chinese defense white paper released last October presented the country's military position in much gloomier terms than previously, and last month Beijing announced a 17 percent boost in military spending to counter the perceived US threat. As it is, however, Taiwan's military spending in the 1990s has increased far more rapidly than China's, and the island has become one of the most lucrative markets for the US war industry.

Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan, at a March 6 press conference, warned Washington against approving advanced new weaponry for the island when the sales come up for review in April. "The US should recognize the serious dangers involved" in the arms-sales question, he said sternly. "It should rein in its wild horse from the edge of the precipice."

Far from "reining in," however, the Bush administration's policy towards China seems driven by the desire to provoke a conflict of potentially disastrous dimensions. It is an open secret that Pentagon military planners have projected China as the most likely antagonist in a major US war in the opening decades of the 21st century.