

Bigger Issues Posed by Hainan Island Affair

by Jeffrey Steinberg

The April 11 announcement by the U.S. and Chinese governments, of an understanding releasing 24 American crew members whose EP-3E surveillance plane had made an emergency landing at the Chinese Air Force base on Hainan Island following an April 1 collision with a Chinese F-8 fighter jet, was the result of exhaustive back-channel and formal diplomatic and military negotiations. These negotiations ultimately saw sane forces prevail over confrontationists, preempting a major rupture in relations that would have gravely destabilized the Asia-Pacific region.

The preliminary resolution of the affair, with the release of the Americans and the convening of a joint investigative commission on April 18, represented a significant pull-back from the kind of brinkmanship and abrasive unilateralism that has characterized the Bush Administration's early diplomatic forays on the Korean Peninsula and with respect to Russia. It is too early to say that the "fix-it" solution to the Hainan Island incident represents a more profound change in the Administration's foreign and national security policy outlook. But the resolution of the incident, including President Bush's statements of sorrow, showed that, under certain conditions, Mr. Bush can be swayed by more experienced and thoughtful advisers.

It was noteworthy that, as the President signalled his willingness to allow Secretary of States Colin Powell to take the Administration point in resolving the potential crisis, some leading neo-conservatives, led by William Kristol and Robert Kagan, launched their first abrasive attack against the Administration. In a signed editorial in Rupert Murdoch's *Weekly Standard* magazine, they branded the President a "China appeaser." On April 4, the day the President issued his first public "regret" at the death of the Chinese F-8 pilot, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice was ambushed by another group of enraged neo-cons at a banquet sponsored by Hollinger Corp. chairman Conrad Black, according to news accounts.

Public Diplomacy — The Right Way

Secretary of State Powell's efforts to reach a diplomatic solution that would bring the 24 American crew members home, was backed up by extensive military-to-military back-channel discussions, at least one of which took place in front of TV cameras and a live audience.

On April 5, the Atlantic Council of the United States sponsored a seminar, "After the Collision: The Implications of the Hainan Island Incident on U.S.-China Relations." The event was attended by at least two representatives of the Chinese embassy, along with diplomats from most other Asian countries, and several Chinese academics. Three of the four speakers at the two-hour seminar were retired senior U.S. military officers, with years of experience in China. Adm. Eric A. McVadon was the Senior Military Attaché in Beijing from 1990-92, and, as he reported in his opening remarks, he flew earlier versions of the EP-3E in the China Sea during the 1960s. Dr. Alfred Wilhelm was the Army Attaché in Beijing from 1985-87. The panel chairman, Maj. Gen. John L. Fugh, a Chinese-American, was the former Judge Advocate General of the U.S. Army. The fourth panelist, G. Eugene Martin, was Deputy Chief of Mission in Beijing from 1999-2000.

During the presentations and a frank question-and-answer period, certain crucial facts were spelled out, concerning the events surrounding the April 1 incident, and the collision and emergency landing itself.

- For nearly a year, prior to the April 1 collision, the United States had been expanding its EP-3E electronic surveillance flights over the South China Sea, to gain critical intelligence on China's expanded naval capabilities that would be deployed in any confrontation over Taiwan. As the flights became more frequent and more intrusive, moving within 50 miles of Chinese coastal waters, the Chinese began dispatching fighter jets to "jump" the American surveillance planes—i.e., force them further out from China's restricted air space. While the American flights were conducted inside China's 200-mile "exclusive economic zone," under various law-of-the-sea treaties, all international ships and planes have free access to these zones, as distinct from the 12-mile sovereign coastal waters that are exclusively, in this case, Chinese territory. But, by December 2000, an estimated 4-5 flights a week were being conducted, and the Chinese filed formal protests with Washington. On Christmas Day, a near-collision occurred, when two F-8s were dispatched to drive the American surveillance plane further out to sea. The U.S. filed a Dec. 28 protest over China's aggressive tactics.

- Subjective factors also contributed to the near-inevitability of an incident. Many within China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) are still smarting painfully from the May 7, 1999 U.S. bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo War, and this was widely believed by senior U.S. military analysts to have been a factor in the minds of the pilots of the two F-8s. More generally, the memory of 150 years of British occupation of Hong Kong, which ended just four years ago, the Japanese conquest of Manchuria, and other 20th-Century experiences with imperial and colonial aggression, are vivid in the minds of most Chinese, especially in the PLA, and shape a strong Chinese sensitivity to issues of



The Navy's EP-3E spy plane (above) and crew are being released because more experienced heads on the U.S. side imposed an "Eisenhower" response, rather than the initial "sole superpower" hardline of Bush (lampooned by LaRouche organizer in Chicago, at right).

national sovereignty. Hence the importance of both the Tibet and Taiwan issues, and China's commitment to aggressively prevent any new attempts to challenge its ability to secure its territory and its borders.

- The United States and China have no in-depth back-channel system, through which to deal with crises. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union always maintained extensive military-to-military contacts, through a range of agreements and joint commissions, which, on more than one occasion, helped avert a needless showdown. Furthermore, the December 2000 defection of a PLA colonel, who was in charge of U.S.-China military-to-military contacts, disrupted the limited lines of communication that had been established in recent years. The pending April 24 U.S. decision on sales of advanced weapons systems to Taiwan—including Aegis seaborne radar—is another point of deep contention between Washington and Beijing. Furthermore, over the next 12-18 months, China will go through a major leadership change, with the majority of members of the Chinese Communist Party Politburo, including President Jiang Zemin, expected to step down, and be replaced by a "fourth generation" leadership. This adds a further dimension of uncertainty.

Cautious Optimism

All of the speakers at the seminar, despite these factors, expressed "cautious optimism" that the affair would be resolved without causing a deep tear in U.S.-China relations. General Fugh told the audience that he had already proposed convening a joint U.S.-Chinese commission of inquiry into the Hainan Island incident. He and Dr. Wilhelm sharply criticized those who were using inflammatory rhetoric, such as referring to the 24 American crewmen as "hostages," and denouncing Chinese interviews with them as "interrogations." Both men pointed out that, in the past, the Chinese had been accused of violating the "rule of law" by failing to investigate similar incidents, before issuing sharply rhetorical "conclusions." Now, the same critics were chastising China for conducting an investigation—by interviewing the Americans.

Within 24 hours of the seminar, the Bush Administration reported that there was progress towards a resolution of the affair, and that just such a joint commission was being explored, under the 1998 Military Maritime Consultative Agreement, which established a bilateral mechanism for reviewing disputes at sea.